

# The Images of “Keling” in Sulalat al-Salatin

Abdur-Rahman Mohamed Amin and Ahmad Murad Merican

**Abstract**—The word “keling” in Malaysia has become a socially undesirable term and it has a derogatory connotation for Malaysians of Indian origin. Though the word existed in the Malay vocabulary since 15th century, there was an attempt to remove it from the Malay dictionary due to its negative connotations. Therefore, this study was conducted to analyze the images of “keling” amongst the Malays circa 14th to 15th centuries. The analysis on the discourse is to discover the semantics of the word “keling” in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Malay epic *Sulalat al-Salatin*. From this study, it was found that the historical relationship between Malacca and “keling” started early than 15<sup>th</sup> century. “Keling” played a very important role to help the administration of the Malacca Malay Empire. Generally, the word “keling” has been used mostly with a positive connotation in *Sulalat al-Salatin*.

**Index Terms**—Keling, Malacca, Malay Annals, *Sulalat al-Salatin*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiracial country comprising three major identities and ethnicities, namely Malay, Chinese and Indian. The dominant race is the Malay. The existence and interaction between all of these races can be seen clearly during the existence of the Malacca Empire in 15th century. Since that time, the Malay used the term “keling” to describe people coming from the Indian subcontinent. It has been used widely in many classical Malay books such as *Sulalat al-Salatin*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and *Hikayat Raja Pasai*.

Nowadays, the term “keling” has been received in derogatory manner in Malaysia especially among Malaysians of Indian origin. Though the word existed in Malay vocabulary since the 15th century, many attempts have been made over the years to erase it from the Malay vocabulary. One was by a group of Indian Muslim community in Malaysia to remove the word “keling” from the third edition of *Kamus Dewan*, a Malay dictionary which was published by the Malaysian government agency, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP). It happened in July 30th 2003 when the chairman of Angkatan Pelopor India Muslim Selangor and Wilayah Persekutuan (APIM), filed the summons in High Court against Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and five others

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over the use of the term “keling” which, according to them, was offensive and humiliating to Malaysians Indians. He said that the word was in conflict to the Federal Constitution, National Principles (*Rukun Negara*) and the Publication and Printing Presses Act 1984 (Amended 1987) [1]. This phenomenon is not only happened in Malaysia, but also happened in Singapore. On 1st August 1921, *The Straits Times*, one of the newspapers in Singapore carried out a notice from Municipal Office entitled “Kling Street-Change of Name”. In the advertisement, it was announced that the name of the Kling Street will be changed to Chulia Street starting from 1st January 1922 [2]. It was believed that the name had been changed due to the suggestion by the Indian Association of Singapore [3].

In the modern Malay dictionary, the word “keling” is used to describe merchants coming from the South Indian subcontinent including Kalinga and Telingana to the Malay Peninsula as early as 3rd century [4]. In Northern Malay Peninsula, it also has been used to refer to the Indian people in Malaysia who are Muslims. Shellabear, in the early 20th century, refers the word “keling” in his dictionary as “the native of the eastern coast of British India, especially the Telugus and Tamils” [5]. Winstedt added that this word has been taken from the old kingdom of Kalinga in India [6]. Though both of the dictionaries agreed that “keling” refers to the people coming from Indian subcontinent, Shellabear does not specify the religion for this people, which, before the 7th century, were Hindus. The Malay dictionary mentioned that this word, especially in the Northern area of Malay Peninsula, refers to the Indians who are Muslims. Therefore, in Shellabear’s dictionary, he used the term “*Kling Islam*” specifically to describe the Tamil who is a Muslim [7].

The existence of Indians in Malaysia can be traced back to the ancient times when Hinduism and Buddhism were religions of the ruling elites and the population. The discovery of Bujang Valley with the temples, which is situated near to the Muda River in Kedah, showed that the area was the earliest Malay kingdom and it had been greatly influenced by the Hindu-Buddhist religion. Inscriptions found at the area was in Pallawa script, dated around 5th century AD. Thousands of ceramic pieces from many places including India, Middle East, China and Europe were also discovered, showing that from the ancient time, the Malay Peninsula was one of the strategic locations for maritime trading route between China, India, Middle East and Europe [8].

Later, when the Malacca Empire was established in early 15th century and gradually developed into the greatest emporium in the known world, traders from all over the world were attracted to come to Malacca. This cosmopolitan society was a polyglot of languages - more than 80 - comprising Achinese, Burmese, Javanese, Minangkabaus,

Bugis, Arabic, Persian, Gujerati, Chinese, Siamese, and Tamil. Traders as far as the Ryukyus in the proximity of Okinawa and Southern Japan also called upon Malacca. They were populated in Malacca especially in Upih, Bandar Hilir and Tanjung Pasir [9].

The migration of Indians to the Malay Peninsular was very active during the time of British colonization in Malaya. According to Kernial, the total number of Indian immigration into Malaya under the British rule between 1786 and 1957 was 4 245 990 people [10]. The existence of the Indian migrants in the country was very important. During the time of British rule in early 20th century, the Indian community helped in the plantation, agricultural as well as in the transportation sectors.

Many studies had been conducted to study the history of Indian community in Malaysia. It also includes their sub-community like “*Jawi Peranakan*” and “Indian Muslims”. The “*Jawi peranakan*” refers to the family where the father was a migrant from South Indian – mainly from the Coromandel Coast, and also the Malabar, and the mother was Malay. The intermarriage between these two races created another type of community which is famous in Penang. The study about this community and how they assimilated into Malay society has been done by Helen Fujimoto, and Halimah Mohd Said and Zainab Abdul Majid [11], [12]. The existence of the community mostly in Penang was expected because of the location of Penang as an important entreport during the British rule where all of the immigrants from India will first arrive there before they moved to the other states. A study by Ahmad Murad Merican about “*keling*” focused on the Malay consciousness of the Indian and “*jawi pekan*” in socio-historical and journalistic narratives. This study was based on Malay journalistic and socio-historical narratives. It also made reference to the Malay Annals – the *Sulalat al-Salatin* [13].

This study picks up and presents a more focused investigation of the used of “*keling*” in one of the classical Malay epics, *Sulalat al-Salatin*. In the previous study about this Malay epics, many scholars have discussed about its genesis and originality [14]-[17], but most of the studies focused more toward the literature and linguistics point of view [18]-[21], and some of the other studies discussed about it from the context of socio-cultural, politics and historical perspectives [22]-[25]. Therefore, this study has been conducted to analyze the context of using the word “*keling*” among Malay in *Sulalat al-Salatin*.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study examines the Malay discourses on the word “*keling*” as used in *Sulalat al-Salatin* or also known as *Sejarah Melayu* or *Malay Annals*. Originally, this manuscript was written using classical Malay language in *Jawi* script. The main theme of this manuscript relates to the genealogy and the history of Malacca Kingdom that began in early fifteenth century until it was conquered by the Portuguese in 1511. Since there are many versions of *Sulalat al-Salatin*, the version which has been transcribed by Samad Ahmad is used in this study. The word count of “*keling*” has been done and the context of using it is analyzed in details. Consequently,

after the results have been systematically analyzed, it leads to the discussion on the Malay discourses and consciousness towards the word “*keling*” during the Malacca Empire in 15th century.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In *Sulalat al-Salatin*, the word “*keling*” was used 66 times in different contexts [26]. Based on the story in *Sulalat al-Salatin*, there were many episodes where the encounter between Malay and “*keling*” has been narrated. The word has been combined together with the other word as a phrase and the phrase which has been used most frequently was “*benua keling*”. Literally, the phrase refers to the continent of the “*keling*” or the country where the “*keling*” comes from. Nowadays, it is well known as India. It also has been used as “*hulubalang keling*” which means warrior of Kalinga, the Indian Empire, “*rakyat keling*” which means citizens of Kalinga, “*raja keling*” which means King of Kalinga, “*kain keling*” and “*belanga keling*” where both phrases refers to the specific textile and pot which originated from the Indian Empire.

### A. “*Keling*” Before the Empire of Malacca

Initially, the story about “*keling*” appeared before the existence of Malacca Empire. It was about Raja Suran, who was the King from India, came to the Malay Peninsula in his military expedition with his soldiers. His army, together with large numbers of elephants and horses, fought hard with the military from Siam and finally, the King succeeded to kill Raja Chulan, who was the King for Siam. Later, Raja Suran married with Prince Onang Kiu, the daughter of Raja Chulan, and the army marched towards Temasik, or well-known today as Singapore.

The journey of his military expedition stopped at Temasik. But Raja Suran has the ambition to continue his journey until they reach China. When the news arrived at the Kingdom of China, in order to avoid the war and to protect his country, the Emperor of China sent a ship filled with rusty and small needles with old sailormen to Temasik. When the ship arrived at Temasik, Raja Suran ordered his men to get the information from the Chinese ship on the distance between Temasik and China. The old sailors explained that the distance was very long due to the fact that when they started the journey, they were at the young age. In addition, the big steel in their ship had changed to a small one due to the long journey. When Raja Chulan heard about this information, he thought that China was still very far away from Temasik and he suggested that they should end their military expedition and return back to their homeland in India [27].

From the story above, the term “*keling*” has been used since long time ago to refer to the people coming from the Indian subcontinent. It has been described that they were skillful fighters from the great Kingdom in India and were involved in the process of colonization and expansion of Indian Empire until it reached Southeast Asia. The armed forces were formidable in both land and sea warfare and won against the Kingdom of Gangga Nagara in Perak, Langgiu in Johore and Temasik in Singapore. In addition, the author mentioned that Raja Suran built a kingdom at “*benua keling*”

or at the Indian subcontinent namely Bijaya Negara. According to the translation of *Sulalat al-Salatin* by Brown, the word “*keling*” in Malay was translated as “Kalinga men.” Keling King has been referred to as the King of Kalinga. Thus, from Brown’s translation, he believes that the word “*keling*” specifically refers to the “Kalinga” empire in India [28].

#### *B. The Intercultural Marriage of “Keling”*

According to *Sulalat al-Salatin*, Tajitram Shah, the King for “*benua keling*” or Indian sub-continent, was a descendent from the King of Alexander Zulqarnain. At one time, his ship was stranded at Belambang Majut or known today as Bangkahulu in Sumatera, Indonesia. Later, whenever the King at Belambang Majut knew that Tajitram Shah was a prince from India, he offered his daughter, Raden Sendari, to marry Tajitram Shah. They were blessed with four children namely Ratna Dewi, Seri Dewi, Maniaka and Nila Karna. He stayed in Belambang Majut until his people came from Canda Kani to save him and bring him back to India. He brought back with him both of his sons. Before that, after the Emperor of China heard about the famous King from “*benua keling*” who was at Belambang Majut, the Emperor wanted to have a relationship with him through marriage. He sent his envoy from China to propose to marry his daughter. Tajitram Shah agreed and he sent his eldest daughter, Seri Dewi to China. The other daughter, Ratna Dewi, was proposed by Majapahit in Java [27].

In this story, the word “*benua keling*” has been clearly used as a reference to the sub-continent of India. It is believed that there was a great Kingdom in India and it was so famous until the Emperor of China also wanted to have the inter-monarch relationship with this Kingdom through marriage. The “*keling*” rulers also sent envoys with tribute to the other rulers with special gifts. As a result, the image of the “*keling*” becomes better due to the diplomatic relationship with the other great kingdoms. In fact, the diplomatic relationship at this time between the kingdoms is full with prestige and status and it only belongs to the elite class in that society.

#### *C. “Keling” in the Kingdom of Singapore*

The relationship between the Kingdom of India and Singapore started when the ruler of Singapore, Seri Teri Buana wanted his son, Raja Kecil Besar to marry Princess Nila Pancadi, the daughter of Jambuga Rama Mudaliar, the ruler of “*benua keling*”. When Seri Teri Buana sent his envoy to “*benua keling*”, headed by Aria Bupala and Maha Indera Bijaya, the proposal had been accepted and they went back to Singapore to inform the good news to their ruler. The King of “*benua keling*”, Jambuga Rama Mudaliar, told the envoy that he will go and send his daughter to Singapore for the marriage. Later, Jambuga Rama Mudaliar together with his family and forty warriors headed by Andul Nina Mara Kulina, board on the ship to send the princess for the marriage in Singapore. There were around 500 hand-maiden accompanying the princess. The marriage between Raja Kecil Besar and Princess Nila Pancadi was successfully completed. In the other episode, the King of “*benua keling*” sent his warrior, Nadi Bija Niakra to Singapore to challenge

the famous warrior, Badang. They sailed from India with seven ships and if their warrior lost in the challenge, all of the ships will become the property of Singapore kingdom [27].

Based on the story, the great kingdom of India was clearly referred to as “*benua keling*” or the continent of “*keling*.” The relationship was so close with the other kingdoms in Southeast Asia especially through intercultural marriage. The “*keling*” Empire has their own language which is totally different with the language of people from Singapore. Therefore, these two Kingdoms needed a translator to translate the letter from each other when it was read in the court. In addition, it showed how international relations between the “*keling*” Empire and Singapore develop in the past. The exchanges of envoys, gifts and letters were normal to establish an international network between the regions. In short, the image of “*keling*” was portrayed positively based on the good relationship they have with the other kingdom like Singapore.

#### *D. “Keling” in the Malacca Empire*

During the reign of Sultan Muhammad Shah, an Indian prince, who was a Muslim came from the Indian subcontinent to Malacca together with his soldiers in his fleet of seven ships. His name was Mani Purindan and his father was the ruler for a kingdom where they call it as Pahili, located in the Indian subcontinent. Sultan Muhammad Shah was very impressed with him and appointed him as one of his ministers. Later on, he married with the daughter of Seri Nara Diraja and was blessed with two children, namely Tun Ali and Tun Ratna Wati. It was believed that Mani Purindan was the first “*keling*” or Tamil-Muslim to be appointed as one of the ministers in the Malacca court. In the story, it was also mentioned that Sultan Muhammad Shah was married to Tun Ratna Wati, the daughter of Mani Purindan, and they were blessed with a son named Raja Kassim. After Sultan Muhammad died, Raja Ibrahim was appointed as the Sultan, but later on he was replaced with Raja Kassim who was supported by Seri Nara Diraja Tun Ali and *Bendahara*. Raja Kassim used the title Sultan Muzaffar Shah after he became the Sultan. Therefore, Sultan Muzaffar Shah was the first Malay King where his mother was a daughter from Tamil-Malay mixed marriage [27].

From this important story, Mani Purindan was a prince coming from the “*benua keling*” or Indian continent and he was a Muslim. He had been given the opportunity to serve as one of the ministers in the court of Sultan Muhammad Shah, where Malacca at that time had adopted Islam as official religion. He got married to the daughter of Seri Nara Diraja, one of the ministers in the Malacca Court and his family had been accepted as part of the Malacca society at that time through the process of assimilation with local culture, which deprives the family of a separate Malay identity. As a result, the people of Malacca can accept Raja Kassim or also known as Sultan Muzaffar Shah as their King even though his mother was not from “pure” Malay family but from *Keling*-Malay mixed marriage.

This story was very important to prove that the prince from “*benua keling*” had been accepted as the minister in the court of Sultan Muhammad due to their ability and charisma as a leader. As a result of the appointment as the minister in

Malacca Empire, they were socially accepted and respected as the upper levels of the society and after the assimilation through marriage, they had been totally accepted as part of the elite people in Malacca.

#### E. "Keling" Before the Fall of Malacca Empire

During the reign of Sultan Mahmud, he sent one of his warriors, Hang Nadim, to sail to the "benua keling" to buy a special textile made in India. At the end of the story, Hang Nadim failed to bring all of it back to Malacca due to the shipwreck which happened near Ceylon. During this time, it can be understood that India was very famous with high quality textiles. The Indian people or "keling" have the creativity as textile designers to design cloth according to the request from the customer.

In addition, during the reign of Sultan Mahmud, there were two people who had been referred to as "keling", namely Raja Mendaliar and Kitul. Raja Mendaliar was a *Shahbandar* or port administrator or harbor master in Malacca, one of the important ministers in the court of Sultan Mahmud and was very rich. The *Shahbandar* was the official in charge of the shipping systems and commercial transactions including the tax collection. He was also the chief of all the sea-captains [27]. Based on the story, Raja Mendaliar had been appointed as one of the officials in the court of Sultan Mahmud to represent traders from India. In fact, the *Shahbandar* was the representative of the foreign traders from the various communities in Malacca. Therefore, many *Shahbandar* were needed to represent different groups of traders including the traders from India. In addition, Malacca at that time was very busy with so many ships coming to the port. It was so prosperous until the *Shahbandar*, who is not among the highest rank officials in Malacca was declared as among the richest people in Malacca [27].

Kitul was another "keling" who was mentioned in *Sulalat al-Salatin*. He was from the family of Nina Sura Dewana. Kitul has a debt amounting 600 gram of gold with Raja Mendaliar. In the story, Kitul was a man who spread slander to Raja Mendaliar that Nina Sura Dewana together with the *Bendahara*, who was the chief executive for Malacca officials, wanted to kill Raja Mendaliar. As a compensation of this important information, Raja Mendaliar eliminated all of the debts from Kitul. To stop the conspiracy, he went to meet Khoja Hasan with his gold and jewels to bribe him. Khoja Hasan, the *Laksamana* who was responsible for the civil and military duties of Malacca, was bribed to spread the new slander to the Sultan that the *Bendahara* wanted to seize the power of the Sultan. As the result, after the Sultan knew about the news from *Laksamana* Khoja Hasan, he ordered Tun Sura Diraja and Tun Indera Segara to execute the *Bendahara* and his family members including Seri Nara Diraja, Tun Hasan Temenggung and Tun Ali due to the false information from *Laksamana* [27].

The story about Kitul was among the factors that lead to the downfall of Malacca Empire. Malacca lost its *Bendahara*, together with the other important great lords namely Seri Nara Diraja and Tun Hasan Temenggung. Raja Mendaliar and Kitul were also executed after the Sultan knew about the slander. The empire became unstable with so many slanders spread among the officials in the court of Sultan Mahmud and

at the end the Sultan had the difficulty to control and trust his officials.

Before the fall of Malacca Empire to the Portuguese in 1511, the internal problem of leadership in administration contributed greatly to its downfall. The images of "keling" represented by Bendahara Tun Mutahir, Raja Mendaliar and Kitul were negatively displayed in this story. We find the image of the "keling" has evolved. The "keling's" later representation differed from the earlier ones.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, the word "keling" has been used regularly in *Sulalat al-Salatin* mostly in a positive way. "Keling" has been portrayed as the people coming from Indian sub-continent who have a very great Kingdom. They existed before the empire of Malacca was founded in early 15th century. They have a very long relationship with the Malay Archipelago through commercial trading, migration and expansion of their Empire. The people who migrated from this Kingdom to Malacca in 15th century were mostly from the higher social status such as merchants, sailors, warriors and elites and they also became part of the administrators in Malacca Empire. Eventually, through inter-cultural marriage and assimilation, they became part of the Malay aristocracy especially in the office of the *Bendahara* and extremely influential in Malacca administration. Furthermore, the "keling" people have been reported as the largest immigrant communities in Malacca at that time. Unfortunately, at the end of the story, the characters of "keling" have been narrated negatively due to their political mischief of spreading slanders in the court of Sultan Mahmud. Their actions gave a very high impact to the stability of Malacca Empire and not long after that, the Malacca Empire was conquered by the Portuguese in 1511. That episode was to be clearly etched in the Malay consciousness throughout centuries to come.

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