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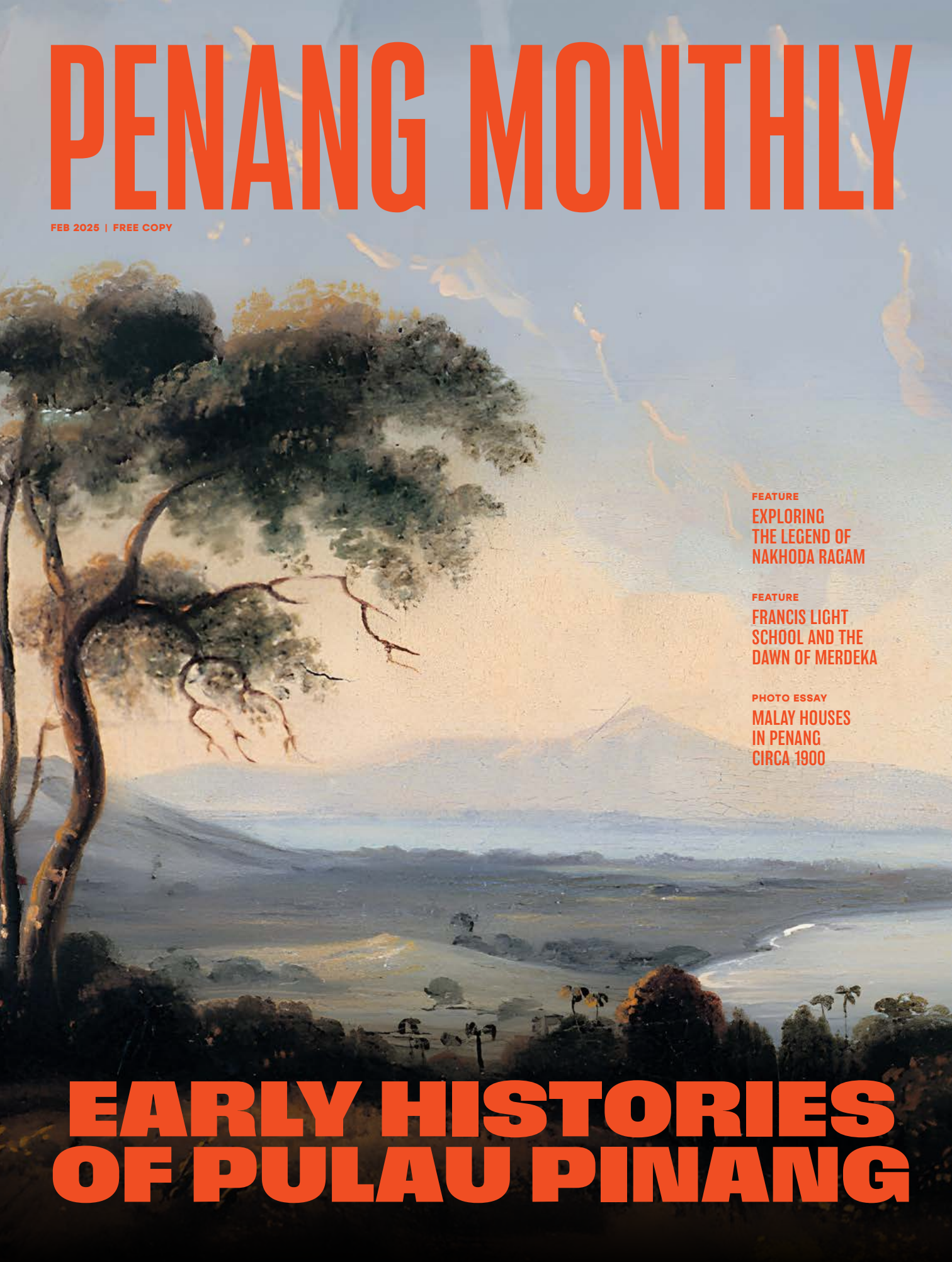

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2. Encourage discussion about various aspects of Penang's fate and fortune;
3. Profile Penang personalities who have contributed, sometimes in very unassuming but critical ways, to the reputation and wellbeing of the state;
4. Put the spotlight on ordinary Penangites who otherwise go unnoticed, but who nevertheless define the culture of the state in essential ways;
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By Azmi Hussin

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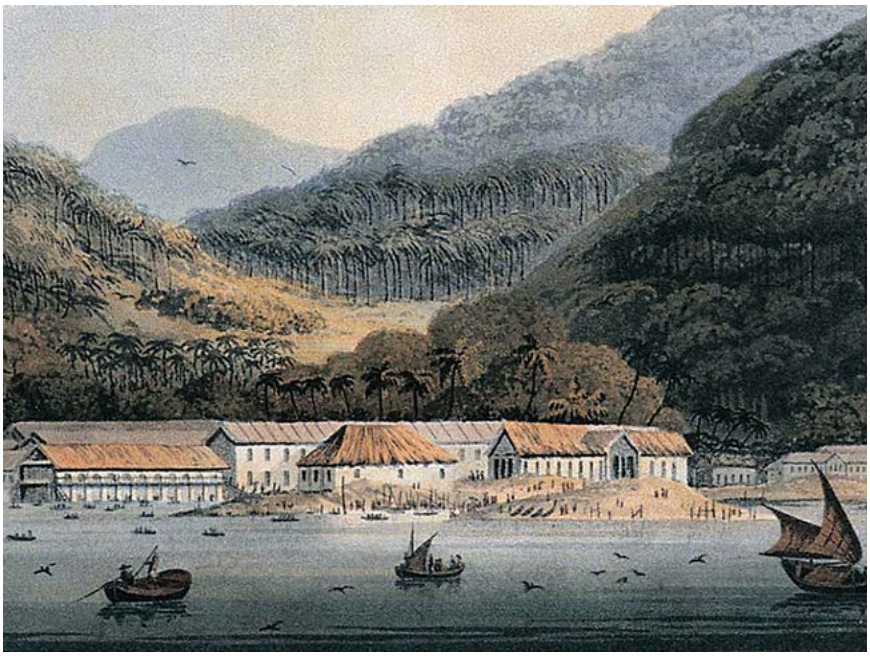
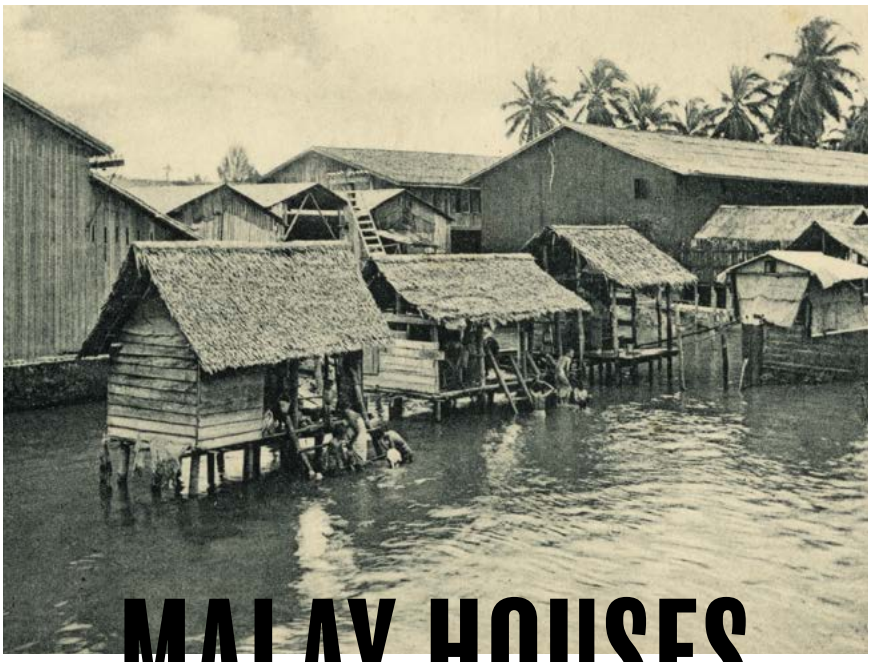
PULAU PINANG AND ITS MALAY BEGINNINGS





MALAY HOUSES
IN PENANG CIRCA 1900

> **"... the adage that History is told by the Victor holds more truth if we also accept the fact that those considered victors can change over time. The narrative can evolve... New agendas, new political needs, new interpretations, new sources... all these come into play over time, altering stories to suit new needs."**
>
> **—OOI KEE BENG (IN "HISTORY: MANKIND'S PURSUIT OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE")**

PENANG MONTHLY GOES BRAILLE

AHMAD NAWAB
A DOMINANT FORCE IN MALAYSIA'S WORLD OF MUSIC

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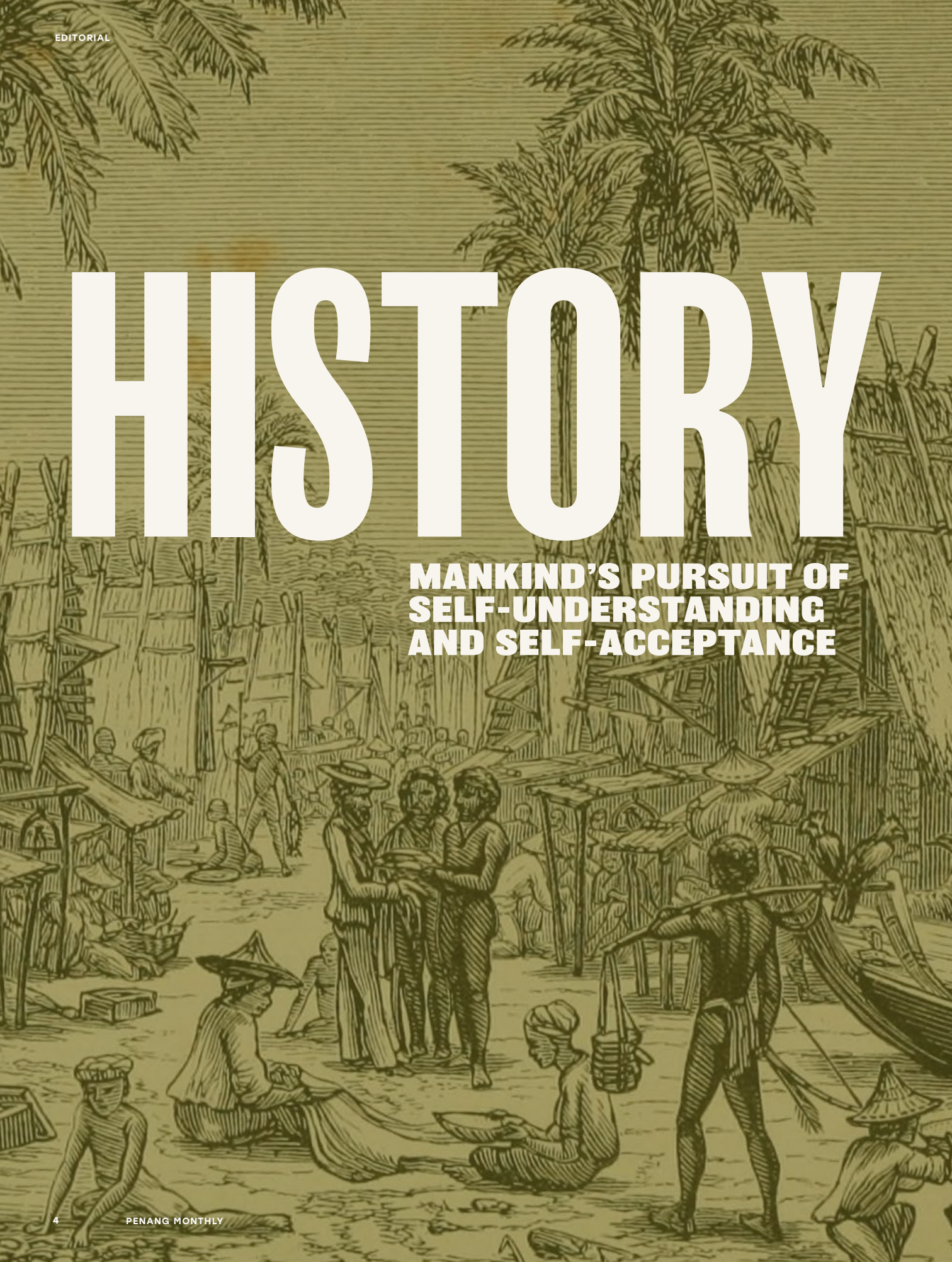


HISTORY

MANKIND'S PURSUIT OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

BY OOI KEE BENG

> **… the adage that History is told by the Victor holds more truth if we also accept the fact that those considered victors can change over time. The narrative can evolve… New agendas, new political needs, new interpretations, new sources… all these come into play over time, altering stories to suit new needs."**

IT IS OFTEN SAID–way too often—that "History belongs to the Victor". There is of course a lot of truth in the dictum. But it faults for being glib, and for being a discussion stopper.

What I find more fruitful to consider is that "History belongs to the writer of History". This also means that History is lost for those who do not write, be that as a matter of culture, propensity, or in disregard of useable meaning in passing experiences and events.

Different civilisations have tended to treat the passing of time differently. And largely, History has involved the whim and will, and the fate and folly of the powerful. At a superficial level, History has been about the powerful, but given the stature of representing the collective. Without stories about the powerful, there has been little History to access.

Events and experiences lost in time are of course a trillion times more than those which get recorded. How the recording happens, how truthful is the recorder… these are of course vital elements to consider.

And then there is also to be deliberated upon wherein the very recording of change and the workings of power amount to criticism of the powerful given the ideology that rulers are the stabiliser of the body politic. Within such a stability—and feudalistic philosophies would often hold to that belief—society repeats itself from day to day in an unchanging cosmos assured by the legitimately powerful. No news is good news. All is well if there is nothing to report.

Even in China, a civilisation known for its fervent recording of emperors and their governance, the Ruler having Heaven's Mandate—*tianming*—brought peace and harmony to all under heaven. Chaos reigns when that Mandate is missing.

But that was but an aspiration, a theory, something to seek. And so, the records of each dynasty would document for later dynasties what pitfalls to avoid when reigning, and what rituals bring good cosmic favour. Governance by a literate class—by pedantic mandarins—probably worked against the ability of emperors to keep mistakes and misfortunes under wraps.

Going further, one can imagine other traditions of dynasticism, where the ruling class would understand that keeping disharmonies and unrest unrecorded would suggest to all and sundry—and to future generations—that good governance had prevailed. Perhaps this tendency—towards non-history, towards ahistory, towards an undocumenting regime, as it were—was a much more common practice than we would assume.

HISTORY FOR WHOM?

There is also the question of the reader. Who is History often written for? As purported lessons for rulers and imperial servants of the future, as in a mandarinate? As propaganda providing rationales, excusing faults and megaphoning virtues and achievements? As a didactic move in a struggle between narratives made in order to overshadow and outshine unfavourable narratives being told by other scribes?

Focusing on the last query above, we would have to realise that the adage that History is told by the Victor holds more truth if we also accept the fact that those considered victors can change over time. The narrative can evolve. This would also be more common, one would assume, the larger the literate class in the relevant society. New agendas, new political needs, new interpretations, new sources… all these come into play over time, altering stories to suit new needs.

What the original victor may have accomplished when writing his story, and deciding what should be "historical facts"—knowledge relevant to his story—is often to limit for good the sources available for later re-interpretations.

Simply put, History belongs to the historian, the narrator, the storyteller. If you don't take the trouble to narrate your story, you have no History. The historian, the narrator, the storyteller, even if they do not ever emerge victors in the dialectical development of History, are at least in the running. They stake a claim by putting pen to paper. They propose twists and turns to the story, as it were.

As stated by the highly respected historian Edward Hallett Carr when delivering the George Macauley Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge University in 1961:

"The historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate." —*What is History?* (Vintage Books, 1961:11).

Now, in 2025, having gone through much globalisation, and having been faced with the inevitability of relativism in understanding mankind and cultures, we—Modern Man—should find this reminder much easier to accept: That history is necessarily an interpretation limited by necessarily incomplete and therefore potentially misleading sources, written to forward some contemporary aim, and as a continuation of a dialectic with other interpretations, and perpetually tentative in its truth contents.

For all its flaws as a discipline, History remains to modern humans—caught as we are in faster and faster changes in our lives—a phenomenon that attracts most of us. It entertains us, it challenges whatever we have taken for granted so far, and it offers layers of meaning where the default experience of life is often a state of chaos and a flow of disjointed experiences, and a threat of ignorance and irrelevance.

Put another way, History is our problematic pursuit of self-understanding and self-acceptance.

EXPLORING THE LEGEND OF NAKHODA RAGAM

BY MUHAMMAD FITRIE

MUHAMMAD FITRIE holds a Bachelor's degree in History and Civilization from the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). He has a strong interest in sports history and social history.

WHEN I WATCHED *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* at the cinema, I was pleasantly surprised by the inclusion of Nakhoda Ragam, a legendary figure in Penang folklore. Les' Copaque Production, the creators of this beloved animated series, subtly introduced him as a "historical" figure, sparking my curiosity. Who exactly was Nakhoda Ragam? My knowledge of him was limited, but the film piqued my interest. The movie, while entertaining, had planted a seed of intrigue, prompting me to delve deeper into Malay myths to uncover the fascinating stories that shaped the nation.

Nakhoda Ragam, a name synonymous with maritime prowess and legendary seafaring in the Malay world, is said to be a skilled navigator and a renowned musician, earning him the affectionate epithet "Singing Captain". According to legend, his melodious voice could charm the very winds and waves. Nakhoda Ragam also commanded immense respect within the Sultanate of Brunei, where he is believed to have reigned as Sultan Bolkiah from 1458 to 1524.

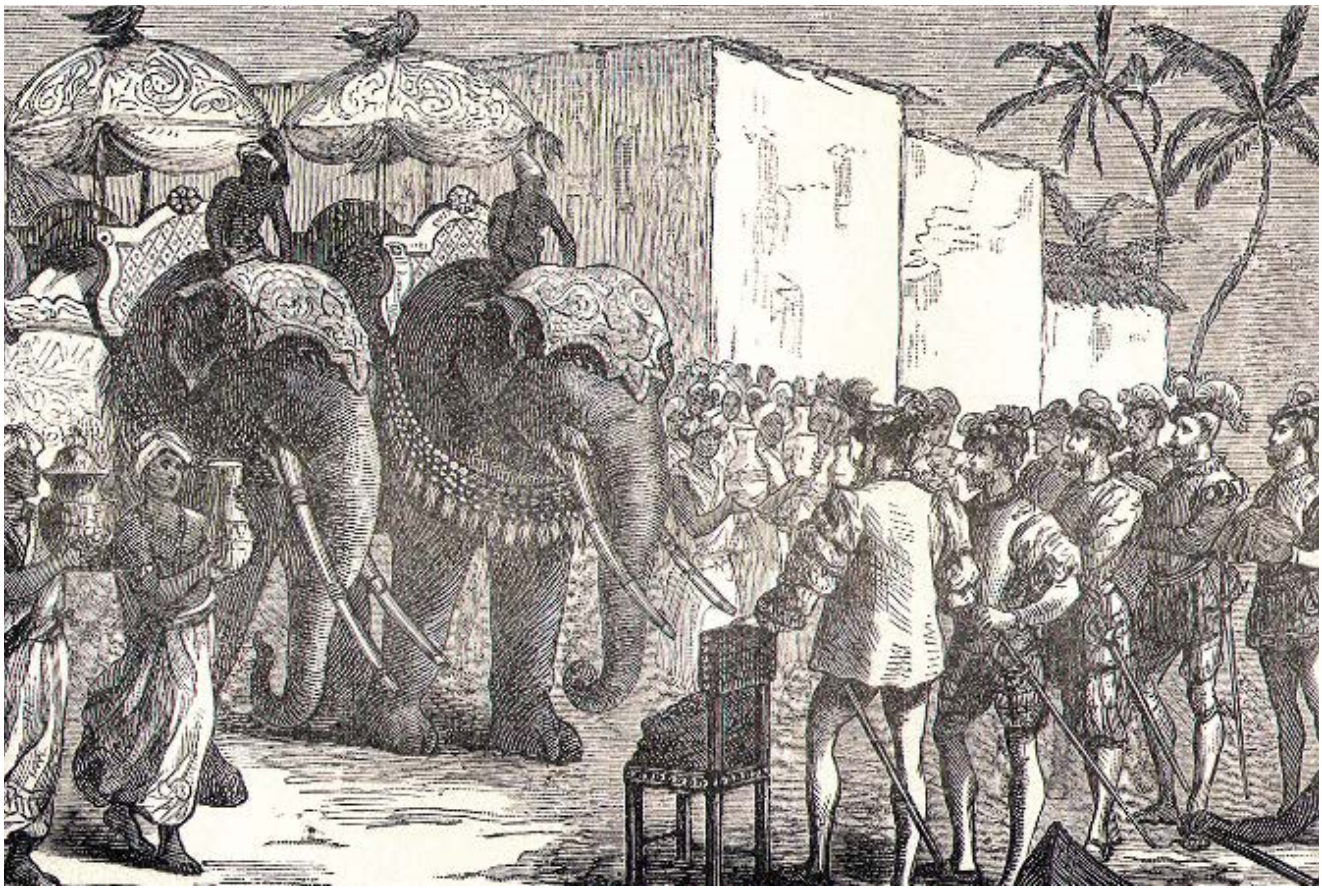
Penang has long held a significant position as a key trading hub within the Malay Archipelago, a role it had played since the dawn of Malay history. As I dug into my curiosity, I discovered a fascinating connection to the legendary figure of Nakhoda Ragam. I began to see that stories of his voyages had a profound impact on Penang's Malay society, shaping its cultural and commercial landscape.

> "The presence of a shared cultural heritage, rooted in Brunei, may have fostered a sense of connection and resonance with the figure of Nakhoda Ragam."

STUMBLING UPON PARADISE ISLAND: A KEDAH VOYAGE

A seasoned voyager of the seas, Nakhoda Ragam is said to have embarked on numerous maritime expeditions, regularly traversing the waters between the Lingga Islands and the Kedah coast. During one such voyage, his keen eyes and astute navigational skills led him to an island of captivating beauty. Enchanted by its allure, he bestowed upon it the name "Pulo Ka Satu". This Pulo Ka Satu was in reference to Pulau Pinang or Penang (see Cover Story for why this is thought to be unlikely). The island's strategic location, with its natural harbours and abundant resources, deeply impressed Nakhoda Ragam, who recognised its immense potential for trade and settlement.

Beyond his fabled discovery of Penang, Nakhoda Ragam's maritime endeavours extended to the establishment of several other significant locations within the region. Legend has it that he also landed at "Pulo Kindi" (Pulau Kendi), "Bayan Lepas",



"Gerattah Sangkol" (Gertak Sanggul), "Pulo Bittong" (Pulau Betong) and "Puchut Muka" (Muka Head), each of which has played a vital role in the historical and geographical landscape of the region.

One of the stories includes the captivating tale of the origin of Bayan Lepas. The narrative recounts a poignant incident during one of Nakhoda Ragam's voyages. While his vessel lay peacefully anchored at the mouth of the Sungei Permatang Damar Laut, his pet parakeet, known affectionately as *burung bayan* in the Malay tongue, escaped from its cage. The vibrant creature took flight and soared towards a nearby village. This seemingly minor incident, however, would be told over and over again. The area where the parakeet found its liberty was subsequently named Bayan Lepas, a name that means "where the parakeet escaped".

Beyond Bayan Lepas, Nakhoda Ragam's maritime adventures also reached as far south as Pulau Betong, an island nestled off Balik Pulau. This intrepid seafarer, with an eye for detail and a penchant for nomenclature, is credited with bestowing names upon numerous locations across the island.

THE POSSIBILITY OF THE BRUNEIAN SULTANATE INFLUENCE IN PENANG

Oral tradition suggests that the Bruneian ties with Penang may have originated from Haji Mohammad Salleh, also known as Haji Brunei, a pilgrim returning from Mecca who was stranded on the island in the 16th century. Over the following three centuries, the arrival of successive waves of Bruneian *perantaus* (migrants) gradually integrated into the island's social fabric.[1]

This likely contributed to the dissemination and evolution of the Nakhoda Ragam legend. As Bruneians settled and integrated into Penang society, they would have brought with them their own oral traditions and cultural narratives.[2] These stories, potentially including variations of the Nakhoda Ragam legend, may have intermingled with existing Penangite folklore, enriching the legend and contributing to its enduring popularity. The presence of a shared cultural heritage, rooted in Brunei, may have fostered a sense of connection and resonance with the figure of Nakhoda Ragam.

A significant milestone in the enduring Brunei-Penang connection occurred in 1955 with the state visit of Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III (1950–1967) to Penang. This royal visit held profound significance, as the Sultan was said to have sought to pay homage to the historical maritime voyages undertaken by his ancestors between the two regions. As a gesture of goodwill, the Sultan presented gifts to the Penang Al-Mashoor Islamic School, which in turn expressed their gratitude by offering a Holy Quran to the Sultan.[3]

The legend of Nakhoda Ragam, a charismatic seafarer, remains shrouded in mystery. The alleged link between Nakhoda Ragam and the renowned Sultan Bolkiah of Brunei adds an intriguing layer to the tale.

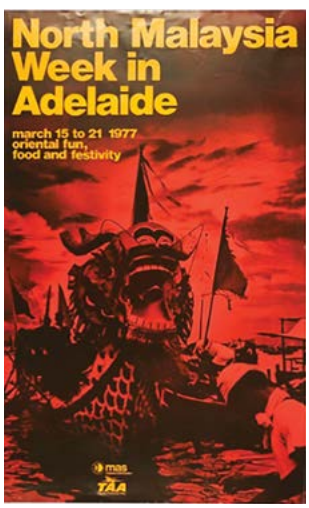
FOOTNOTES

1. https://eprints.usm.my/37653/1/Orang_Brunei_di_Pulau_Pinang_1820an_keluarga_Pengeran_Shahabuddin.pdf

2. https://www.melakahariini.my/the-brunei-connection-genealogies-and-perantaus-in-pulau-pinang/

3. https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/

PENANG MALAYS: THE FOUNDERS OF MODERN SEPAK TAKRAW



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CAPTIONS

1. North Malaysia Week Adelaide Poster in 1977. Source: State Records of South Australia; https://www.flickr.com/photos/state-records-sa/48254544762

2. Khir Johari (R) presenting the Khir Johari Gold Medal to Hamid Mydin (L), who was recognised as the creator and founder of Sepak Raga Jaring in 1977. Photo from infotakraw.com

3. Hamid Mydin's Sepak Raga team during his work tenure in Guar Chempedak, Kedah, around the 1950s. (Hamid Mydin is standing, 6th from the left). Photo from infotakraw.com

4. 2nd MAS-Utusan-RTM Sepak Takraw Championship 1986 in Stadium Negara. Photo from infotakraw.com

5. Utusan Malaysia, 1985. Reported by Ali Salim. Photo from infotakraw.com

6. Hamid Mydin speaks to Mohd Yussof Abdul Latiff (fourth from left) during the meeting to establish the Pan Malayan Sepak Raga Association at Balai Rakyat, Jalan Patani, Penang, in 1960. Photo from infotakraw.com

7. Article about the history of Sepak Takraw by the late historian, Khoo Kay Kim. Photo from infotakraw.com

BY MUHAMMAD AMIRUL NAIM

2

IN 2018, as I watched the Sepak Takraw League (STL) final between the Penang Black Panthers and the ATM Guardians (Malaysian Armed Forces), I was also trying to finish *Memori di George Town*, an anthology of stories about George Town. Coincidentally, I came across a chapter where Mohd Yusoff Latiff, Chairman of PEMENANG (Penang Malay Association), recalled the glory days of Sepak Raga Bulatan being played in George Town's Malay villages. Kampung Kelawai, Kampung Makam, Kampung Dodol and Jalan Hatin (Hutton Road) were the hubs of this traditional sport. Even the Shaw Brothers, who had established Malay Film Productions, collaborated with PEMENANG to organise competitions, highlighting its cultural significance.

It was during one of these matches on Jalan Patani that a groundbreaking idea emerged. The villagers—mostly fishermen—used a fishing net as a prototype, creating a game similar to badminton, but that is deeply rooted in Malay tradition. This innovation marked the birth of Sepak Raga Jaring, which later evolved into what we now know as Sepak Takraw. In its early stages, the game was sometimes referred to as Sepak Raga Jala. However, Zahari Mydin, the founder of the Sepak Takraw Info website, says that it was more appropriate to use the term Sepak Raga Jaring (*jaring* means net, and *jala* specifically refers to nets used by fishermen to catch fish).

THE ROOTS OF SEPAK RAGA

The earliest mention of Sepak Raga appeared in the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), in a tragic tale that ends with the death of Tun Besar, the son of Bendahara Paduka Raja of Melaka, at the hands of Raja Muhammad, the Sultan of Melaka's son.[1] Sepak Raga was traditionally played in a circle, and the goal is to keep the rattan ball in the air using only the feet, head, knees or chest. There are variations of the game across Southeast Asia—*Takraw* in Thailand, *Sepa Sepa* in the Philippines, *Ching Loong* in Myanmar, *Rago* in Indonesia and *Kator* in Laos.[2]

In Malaysia, Sepak Raga gained prominence in Negeri Sembilan and Pahang. In 1935, during King George V's Silver Jubilee celebration, the game was played over a badminton net, combining the rules from both sports. This new variation was called Sepak Raga Jubilee, although formal rules were not yet established. By 1937, teams consisted of four players, but smaller formats like one-on-one or two-on-two were also explored.[3]

By the mid-20th century, Sepak Raga Bulatan had declined in popularity among the young, who viewed it as an old pastime. In 1946, Hamid Mydin, in an effort to revive the game, experimented with a badminton-style court at Jalan Patani, using chalk to mark lines and a rattan ball (*bola raga*) to kick. Eventually, he settled on the now-standard three-a-side format, with a *tekong* (server) and two *apit* (front) players.[4]

Hamid's efforts led to widespread adoption in Penang of the newly improved game. By 1956, a committee formalised the sport, and on 25 June 1960, the Persekutuan Sepak Raga Jaring Malaya (Malayan Sepak Raga Jaring Federation) was established at Balai Rakyat, Jalan Patani. Hamid Mydin was recognised as the sport's founder, and his contributions earned him awards like the Khir Johari Gold Medal (1977) and the Pingat Jasa Masyarakat (1979).[5]

P. RAMLEE: A CULTURAL ICON AND TAKRAW ENTHUSIAST

The legendary Penangite, P. Ramlee, known for his contributions to film and music, was also a skilled Sepak Takraw player. Representing Kampung Jawa and the Eastern Smelting Club, he played as an *apit kiri* (left hitter), and was admired for his agility and smashes. In Singapore, he established the Sangga Buana Club and promoted the sport, even donating a trophy named "Oskar Sumbangsih P. Ramlee", which is now displayed at Pustaka Peringatan P. Ramlee in KL.[6] His films, like *Antara Dua Darjat* (1960), showcased Sepak Raga scenes, blending traditional Malay culture with modern entertainment.

THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RISE OF SEPAK TAKRAW

As Malaya approached independence, there was a growing desire to create a unique national identity distinct from colonial influences. Sepak Raga Jaring became a symbol of Malay heritage and modernity, offering a thrilling spectacle of acrobatics and teamwork.

I believe that the contributions of Penang Malays to this sport are especially significant, fueled by their wish to join the Federation of Malaya and their opposition against the Malayan Union between 1946 and 1957. In this spirit of resilience and unity, Penang Malays' efforts in preserving and innovating their cultural identity—including Sepak Raga—were part of their contribution to the larger national narrative for nation building. This was not only about maintaining tradition, but also reforming it. The evolution of Sepak Raga into Sepak Takraw highlights the creativity of Penang Malays in preserving traditional games.

By the late 1950s, the sport had spread to other states, and competitions gained prominence. I traced newspaper archives and found notable milestones in Sepak Takraw's history:

3 December 1957; *Berita Harian*
A Singapore boxing promoter, Tuan A. Razak, highlighted the need to revive Sepak Raga Jaring as the original sports of the people as Malaya had just gained independence. 51 teams participated in a Sepak Raga Jaring competition at Taman Hiburan Great World, Singapore.

18 July 1959; *Berita Harian*
A writer, Anak Abu, from Hale Road, KL, mentioned the declining popularity of Sepak Raga Jaring in the peninsula. As Western sports gained influence, the game was now only mostly played in the northern Malaysian states.

16 October 1959; *Berita Harian*
Cathay-Keris Film Company in Singapore organised a Sepak Raga Jula Juli competition, tied to the film, *Jula Juli Bintang Tiga*. The sport was shown in the film as one enjoyed by both nobles and commoners.

26 January 1960; *Berita Harian*
The conference to establish the Sepak Raga Jala organisation was held at the PEMENANG building, organised by the Malay Football Association's Sepak Raga Division—Yusuf Latif, Secretary of the Malay Football Association's Sepak Raga Division.

25 May 1960; *Berita Harian*
Sepak Raga Jaring was seen as a growing national sport alongside football, badminton and hockey.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Sulalatus Salatin (Sejarah Melayu), A. Samad Ahmad, Student Edition, Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka. Page 150

[2] International Sepak Takraw History, Sepak Takraw Association of Canada (STAC) Official Website. https://sepaktakraw.ca/international-sepak-takraw-history#specific-position

[3] The Straits Time, 3 July 1950 – The Old Game of Sepak Raga, Veronica Taylor

[4] Sejarah dan Pembangunan, Hamid Mydin – Pencipta dan Pengasas Permainan Sepak Takraw. Zahari Hamid Mydin. Takraw Info Website ; https://infotakraw.com/hamid-mydin-pencipta-pengasas-sepak-takraw/#.UX5fQkopfIU

[5] Ibid.

[6] P. (Pemain Sepak Takraw) Ramlee: Seniman Agung Si Apit Kiri!, Abdul Hafiz Ahmad, 31 May 2020 https://kitareporters.com/insan/MvbmZq8GdY#google_vignette

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29 June 1960; *New Straits Times*
Daud Meah, chairman of the Pan Malayan Sepak Raga Association, advocated for making Sepak Raga Jaring a national sport, and supported people from other races to join. The association held its first general meeting, opened by Penang's first Chief Minister, Wong Pow Nee.

12 September 1960; *Berita Harian*
Zubir Said, the composer of Singapore's national anthem, created a song titled "Sepak Raga" specifically for the teams of Singapore and the Federation of Malaya. The song features an upbeat rhythm, reflecting the dynamic nature of Sepak Raga Jaring. He granted permission for the song to be played without his prior approval to promote the development of the sport. Zubir Said greatly admired Sepak Raga Jaring, as he viewed the sport as a revival of an old cultural tradition brought back to life with modern innovations.

29 January 1961; *Berita Harian*
The Ministry of Education of the Federation of Malaya supported Sepak Raga Jaring's expansion into schools nationwide, recognising its cultural and cost-effective appeal. Rules of the game were formalised and distributed to schools.

9 November 1967; *Berita Harian*
The Malaysian Sepak Takraw team trained at Sekolah Teknik Tengku Abdul Rahman (TARP), Penang for the 4th Southeast Asian Peninsula (SEAP) Games in Bangkok.

29 January 1969; *Berita Harian*
A Sepak Raga competition, "Piala Menteri Besar dan Ketua Menteri", for the northern states of Malaysia was held, and included teams from Perlis, Perak, Kedah and Penang.

Other notable milestones include:
1977: The Penang team showcased Sepak Takraw during North Malaysia Week in Adelaide, George Town's twin city in Australia.
1977 and 1979: Hamid Mydin received the Khir Johari Gold Medal and the Pingat Jasa Masyarakat from the Penang Governor in recognition of his contributions to the sport.

A LASTING CULTURAL HERITAGE

Penang Malays played a crucial role in turning the traditional game into an internationally recognised sport. Figures like Hamid Mydin and P. Ramlee exemplify the community's creativity and dedication.

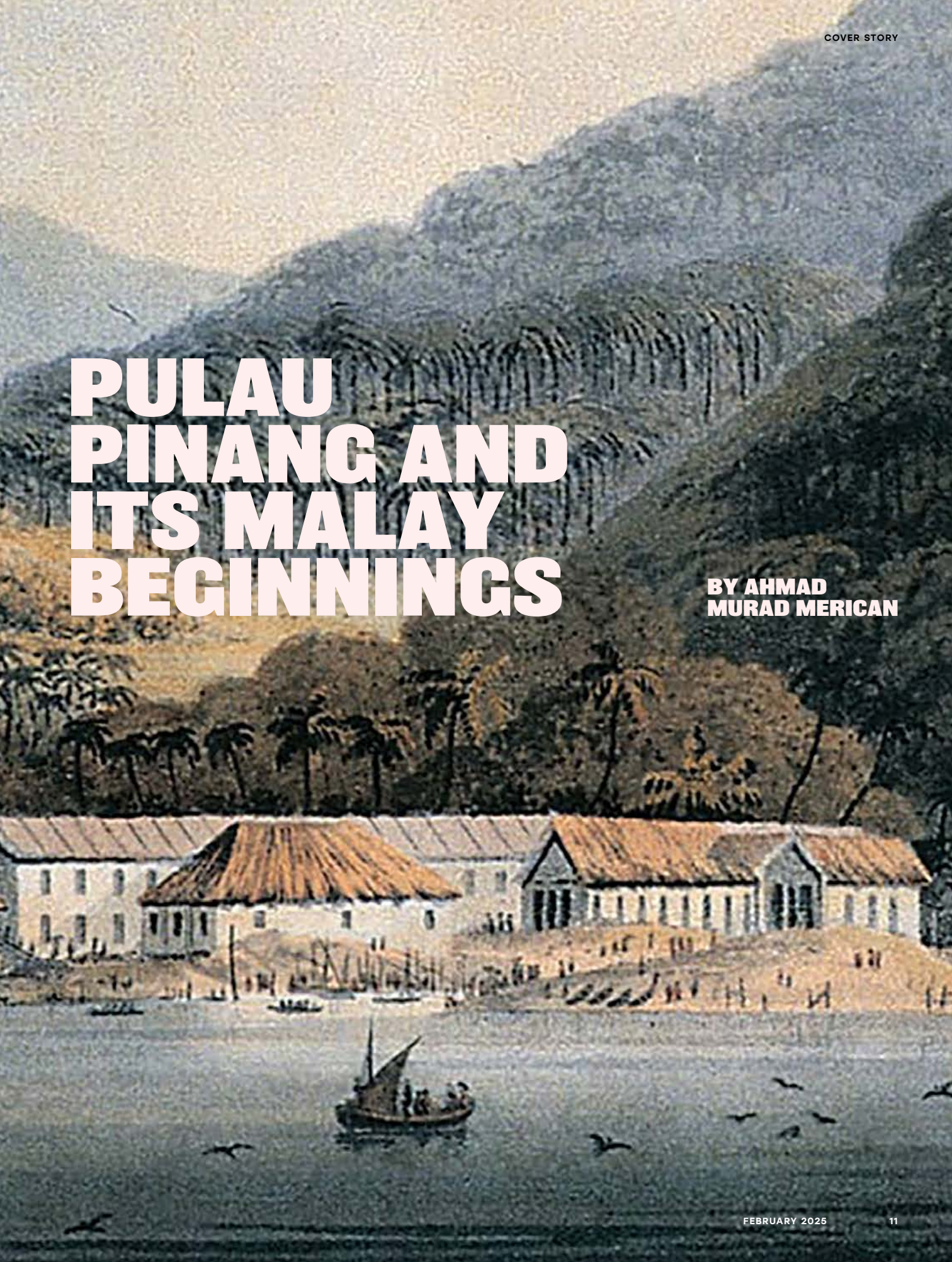
Zahari Mydin, the son of Hamid Mydin, in his efforts to preserve and share the story of Sepak Takraw's development set up the website takrawinfo.com. This became one of the best sources of information for Sepak Takraw, offering insights into the journey of his father's pioneering work. The website was built with the help of his children and son-in-law, and serves as a remarkable documentation of the history and evolution of the sport.

From the streets of Jalan Patani to the global arena, Sepak Takraw remains a testament to Penang Malays' resilience and innovation.

MUHAMMAD AMIRUL NAIM holds a Bachelor's degree in Human Sciences from the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). His areas of interest encompass social history, intellectual history and political thought.

PULAU PINANG AND ITS MALAY BEGINNINGS

BY AHMAD MURAD MERICAN



THE ORIGINAL COMMUNITY in Pulau Pinang was indigenous or Malay-Muslim, similar to the case in any state or region on the Malay Peninsula. This fact is integral to the geographical, historical and social character of the Malay Archipelago, and acts as a reminder about the twists and turns of historical narratives, of vested interests, and of the assumptions and prejudices involved.

CHALLENGING COLONIAL NARRATIVES

This is not an essay written by a historian. Let me begin with what we expect to hear—that Pulau Pinang has always been associated with trade and commerce, as well as an inter-ethnic melting pot. Pulau Pinang, from whichever perspective one chooses, manifests much fluidity and eclecticism in its past (and present).

However, such a place cannot but suggest alternative histories. These are, in fact, slowly emerging. Over the last two decades, we have seen a growth in consciousness about the past, and in the wish to reclaim or rewrite it.

It had earlier been assumed that Pulau Pinang had no history worth mentioning before the coming of the English East India Company. The island was said to have before that been inhabited only by a "band of native fishermen", who were occasionally referred to as "pirates and wild natives". Such descriptions are common in books on the island's history, and in tourist literature and brochures about the island. This is misrepresentation at best, and standard Eurocentric denial of agency in "the Other" at worst.

Another common error is the belief that the earlier name of Pulau Pinang was Pulau Kasatu. This is a misreading of early texts. The name Pulau Pinang has been around for many centuries. Portuguese 16th-century maps spelt Pulau Pinang as Pulo/Poloo Pinaom. This is clearly a foreign transliteration of Pulau Pinang—and not of Pulau Kasatu.

The latter is, in fact, associated with Nakhoda Ragam, from the 1600s. Scientifically, events over the centuries which took place on the other side of the Strait of Malacca should to good epistemic advantage be understood to be relevant to Pulau Pinang. Furthermore, the geography and strategic location of the island could not but have positioned it for regional social, economic and political significance. Its population over the centuries would have been tied to the populating of Kedah, and of Kedah Tua. Today, one can clearly see Gunung Jerai, the landfall for mariners, on the mainland. People would have passed or domiciled on the island at various points, and they would almost certainly have been subjects of kingdoms such as Srivijaya and Langkasuka. A common view, held among local and foreign historians such as Leonard Andaya, is that the earliest population was from Acheh. Now, must the inhabitants in Pulau Pinang have come from somewhere? That appears to me to be a question interesting only in discussions about prehistory.

Of greater significance to modern history, the people living in Pulau Pinang before 1786, or traversing across the channel between the island and what is now Seberang Perai would, with great probability given the proximity of Kedah, have been subjects in some sense to that sultanate. There is no need to assume that they "came" or "escaped, fled from Kedah" or the "mainland" or "migrated from Acheh" or Sumatra. The historicity and semantics involved here need to be studied seriously, and discredited from academic and policy discourses.

The often-used phrase of these early people having "landed" or "settled on the island" are necessarily misrepresentations as well; in fact, this resonates the colonial position that the world consisted largely of *terra nullius*. Equally worth noting is that "founding" or "discovering" are categories employed to justify European exceptionalism.

The Eurocentric narrative accords founder status to Francis Light. In effect, this casts other perspectives into deep shadow, alienating them and making them hard to conceive.

Revisiting the history of the communities who inhabited the island before 1786 remains an imperative in drafting Malaysian history. The history of Pulau Pinang did not begin in 1786. To say so grossly distorts the overall Malay narrative and Malay self-understanding. Pulau Pinang is, of course, not alone. While the circumstances may differ, both Pulau Pinang and Singapore are both curated to be "history-starved".

In a 2007 paper presented at a seminar on Ahmad Ibrahim titled "Lifting the Veils: The Mystique (Mistake) of Penang Legal History", authors Bashiran Begum Mobarak Ali, Noriah Ramli, and Siti Junaidah Muhamad raised legal discrepancies surrounding the British occupation of Pulau Pinang. It has often been claimed that the legal history of Malaysia, in general, and Pulau Pinang specifically begins with the British occupation of the island in 1786 and with the three Charters of Justice: 1807, 1826 and 1855.

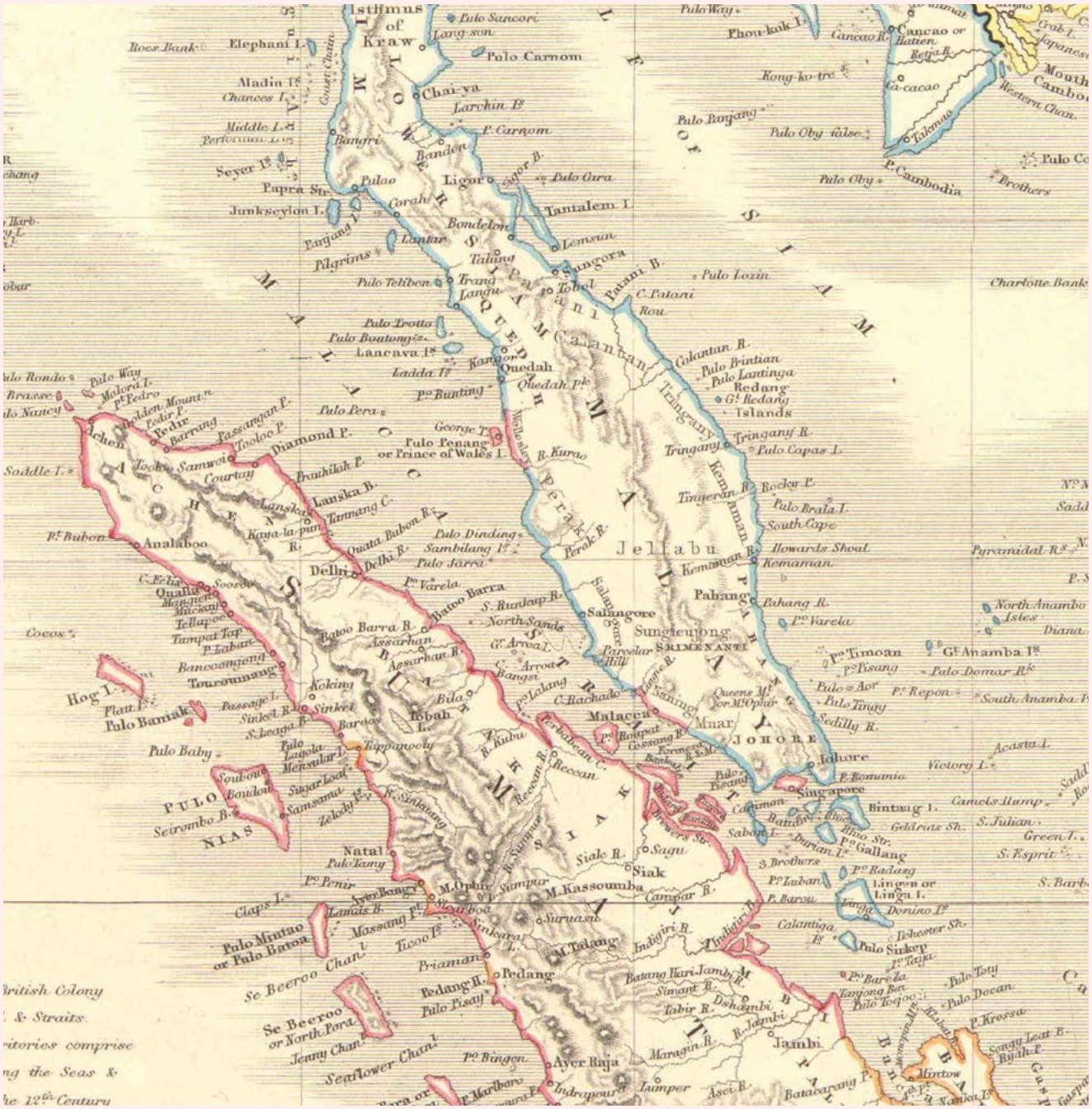
Pulau Pinang's legal history did not begin from 1786. There was a legal system in existence on the island prior to 1786, or 1807. This can be perceived from the way of life of the local community, and their *adat* (customs) and laws claimed *punca kuasa* (source of authority) from the Kedah Sultanate. There is really no evidence that they were "pirates".

In 1605, there were already rules relating to port management in Kedah. The Kedah government drafted these based on Islamic law modified by the *Adat Temenggong* on matters related to marriages, divorce, custody, land dealings, and criminal or civil offences. The British, as pointed out by Abu Haniffa, had failed "to look at the *Al-Quran*, the basic textbook of all these laws that was and is still applicable". These customary laws, just like the common law of England, were basically common law.

> "Revisiting the history of the communities who inhabited the island before 1786 remains an imperative in drafting Malaysian history."

TIES TO KEDAH

The character of Malay-Muslim society in Pulau Pinang must be seen against the background of the larger polity and territory. The Kedah sultan was indeed the sovereign of both land and sea routes between the Indian Ocean and the southern reaches of the Malacca Strait. In his foreword in Maziar Mozaffari Falarti's *Malay Kingship in Kedah: Religion, Trade and Society*, Professor Emeritus of Asian Studies C.A. Trocki describes Kedah as one of the most durable dynasties in Southeast Asia (if not the whole Islamic world). Falarti's study of Kedah's traditional history pioneered the idea of its connections to South, Central and West Asia. The book brings to our attention the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*—much neglected and often dismissed as mythical—as textual foundation for the spiritual legit-



imacy of the dynasty. Its use of indigenous literary, oral and cultural sources, hitherto doubted and ignored by scholars in the understanding of Kedah and, by extension, the Malay world and Southeast Asia, gives vital insights to the significance of ideas and events. Pulau Pinang is integral to the Merong Mahawangsa narrative.

There is also the link between Kedah and the indigenous Orang Laut, or the Bugis-Makassar, Ilanun and Siak-Minangkabau. Significantly, these peoples were engaged in the Kedah/Pulau Pinang story. Significant in Falarti's work are two aspects: firstly, its referencing of Kedah as a maritime power in Southeast Asia, and secondly, its many references to Pulau Pinang.

Falarti, unlike earlier scholars of Malayan or Kedah history, does not see Pulau Pinang as an entity separate from the sultanate.

Kedah's connections outwards equipped it with essential cultural and social links by land to Pattani, to Nakhon Si Thammarat and to old Siam further north, as well as to the Malay territories mostly to its south and southeastern borders; and by sea to Sumatra, Burma, Angkor, the Mon principalities, China, India and Persia; not to mention Europe. It is argued that Kedah traditionally acted as a regional exchange hub. Contrary to its present image as a *padi*-planting state, and having a history that covers not much more than the Lembah Bujang and the Siamese invasions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Kedah was eclectic. There had been an intermingling of peoples, goods and cultures over the centuries. Kedah's sea and overland routes enabled a regular exchange of traditions, literature, languages and sciences.

In Raja Ali Haji's *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, we find Syed Ali, the Siak sea lord, leaving Siak in the Strait of Malacca solely to ambush Songkla in the Gulf of Siam on behalf of Kedah. The Siak-Minangkabau/Bugis-Makassar rivalry in Kedah was intertwined with Raja Kechil and the early history of Pulau Pinang. Falarti notes that there were Minangkabaus on the island, aligned traditionally with Siak. There were also Minangkabau settlements in Seberang Prai around 1780. In the first half of the 18th century, Pulau Pinang was invaded by the Orang Laut and the Bugis. Falarti suggests that Nakhoda Nan Intan (originally from the Minangkabau heartland of Payakumbuh), who settled in Batu Uban on the island in the 1730s, had either asked for the help of Siak's sea lords or Kedah's ruler.

PRE-COLONIAL SETTLEMENTS

Batu Uban—one of the earliest urban centres on the island—is central to the history and narrative of Pulau Pinang. It was pioneered in 1734 by Nakhoda Nan Intan or Haji Muhammad Salleh, who was from Kampung Bodi (Buadi) in Payakumbuh, Sumatera. According to Norman Macalister's (1803) informant, in the first 20 years of 1700, about 60 years before 1786, Pulau Pinang had a population of about 2,000.

Total ignorance of the significance of Batu Uban in Pulau Pinang's history saw its significance fade from historical consciousness. This is true also of other settlements such as Sungai Pinang, Jelutong and Sungai Nibong. Batu Uban has now virtually been levelled except for Masjid Jamek, with its more than 500-odd graves, sandwiched between a highway named after a

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chief minister and some high-rise structures. This lack of due regard has erased a past that is crucial to the understanding of Pulau Pinang's traditional society and its linkage to Kedah.

Only the mosque is gazetted. Behind it lies a burial ground established in 1734 by Nakhoda Nan Intan. Batu Uban in the early 1700s was not only a place—it was also a town and a port, established earlier than the one in what is now George Town, what was then Tanjong Penaga. The mosque—the earliest in the state and one of the earliest on the peninsula—is not mentioned in books on mosques or in tourist brochures and pamphlets.

The early peoples residing in places like Batu Uban, Tanjong Tokong, Jelutong and Dato' Kramat have been rendered faceless and nameless, or worse, people without history and genealogy.

This raises an important point: Condescension towards a place, towards the history of a place, tends to lead to it being marginalised in public policies. Short cuts in exploring regional histories, along with a refusal to accept that national history has to be intertwined with regional histories, have been destructive—to Pulau Pinang and Kedah; and certainly to Malaysia and its overall historical depth. Pulau Pinang is a case study of a history betrayed by historians.

Abdul Aziz Ishak's *Mencari Bako* remains generally unknown, even among historians and heritage advocates. Chapter one begins with the emphasis that, by 1786, of the many inhabitants on the island, most comprised of Malays originating from Eastern Sumatera.

"Mereka dipercayai menetap sejak tahun 1700 lagi, dan adalah benar bahawa di Batu Uban, Dato' Keramat dan Jelutung sudahpun terdapat tanah perkuburan Islam semasa Light mendarat." (Abdul Aziz Ishak, 1983: p.12)—"They are believed to have settled since the 1700s, and it is true that in Batu Uban, Dato' Keramat and Jelutong, there were already Muslim burial grounds at the time Light landed."

Malays were also domiciled in Tanjong Penegri and Kelawai (Kuala Awal). Tanjong Tokong, to the north of Tanjong Penaga, was already populated by Malays and by Jawi Peranakan from the mainland.

In his account, Jonas Daniel Vaughan (1825–1891) documented information from the "Narrative of Haji Mohamed Salleh". Apart from his function as Superintendent of Police for Pulau Pinang, Vaughan was also interested in the lives and cultures of the local communities. But the Haji Mohamed Salleh of his writings was about a different person from Haji Muhammad Salleh@Nakhoda Nan Intan, who was from Kampong Bodi (Buadi), Payakumbuh, in the Minangkabau heartlands. The narrative refers to a Haji Mohamed Salleh who hailed from Brunei, and was thus known as Haji Brunei. The account contains names of places such as Penaga, Dato' Keramat, Batu Uban, Jelutong and Gelugor.

What follows are brief accounts of early place names in Pulau Pinang according to Vaughan's Haji Mohamed Salleh Narrative:

Tanjong Penaga. The name Tanjong Penaga was mentioned early in the narrative as a place seen by Francis Light to be suitable as a settlement, port and fort. The name was subsequently changed to Fort Cornwallis. It is significant that the focus for developing Tanjong Penaga was to replace the old port of Batu Uban.

Dato' Keramat. This is the territory first named in the Haji Mohamad Salleh Narrative, although there was no mention of any Malay settlement there. However, in a document by C.J.S. Maxwell (1885), based on land records kept at the Register of Surveys 1795, Dato' Keramat was said to be the earliest settlement in Pulau Pinang. J.C. Pasqual in the 1922 *Penang Gazette*, cited by Clodd (1948:46–47), also said that:

> "Malay tradition assigns a considerable population to Penang before the British period. According to this tradition, an area on the present island known as Dato' Keramat was at one time a separate island in a swampy area. The rapid recession of the sea combined with the silt brought down by the Penang river have since joined it to the main island. There is also a record that before the foundation of Penang as a British settlement its inhabitants numbered some thousands who were massacred by order of one of the Sultan[s] of Kedah because of their piratical attacks. When Light landed in 1786 he found only a small remnant of Malays at Dato' Kramat. In 1795, a grant of this clearing was given to Maharaja Setia who claimed that he was a relation by descent of the Dato' Kramat who cleared the ground ninety years before."

Batu Uban. The Narrative made an error as to the year Batu Uban was opened, but the name Batu Uban was said to have originated from several large rocks whitish in colour, and with growth that resembled graying hair on a human head. Another account was that before the appearance of the name "Batu Uban", the place was called Batu Bara, reflecting family and trade contacts to Batu Bara, in Sumatera Utara.

According to Omar Farouk Shaeik Ahmad (1978), Batu Uban was a place where Arabs from Hadhramaut and other parts of the Arab world came to trade or be engaged in missionary activities. The mosque next to the beach, now 290 years old, was the focal point for religious activities. Batu Uban was also an important education centre.

The vocabulary of the history of Pulau Pinang is in great need for rearrangement. Representations of early Pulau Pinang society need to be inclusive of its Malay antecedents who converged from surrounding regions. Preceding 1786 are the important years of 1749 and 1734—these point to a history and heritage that we have forgotten. Batu Uban was the earliest settlement—and already a cosmopolitan place then. It did not develop "from the backwaters to a modern settlement". From Batu Uban, its progressive population radiated to Tanjong Penegeri and Tanjong Penaga—referred by the local population as Tanjong—and along the coast toward Sungai Nibong, Sungai Ara and Bayan Lepas.

The history of Pulau Pinang is not a simple one about the opening up to free trade; it is not as simple as the development of George Town as a multicultural and cosmopolitan centre of the region. It is more than the claims that "Malays from Kedah, Perak, Patani and Sumatra settled here," or that "the Penang Malays comprise[d] the Achenese, Minangkabaus and Javanese." Pulau Pinang's history, deeply intertwined with the Malay-Muslim heritage of the region and the Kedah Sultanate, is a complex one that predates colonial encounters. Recognising this will honour more clearly the legacy of its earliest communities.

"Short cuts in exploring regional histories, along with a refusal to accept that national history has to be intertwined with regional histories, have been destructive—to Pulau Pinang and Kedah; and certainly to Malaysia and its overall historical depth."

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF PENANG'S COSMOPOLITAN ISLAMIC HERITAGE

BY NABIL NADRI

THERE ARE SIGNIFICANT archaeological traces that hint at a vibrant historical past in Penang. From the discoveries of the Penang Woman at Guar Kepah dated circa 4th millennia BCE, to the finding of structures and artefacts from the prosperous Bujang Valley at Kota Aur and Cherok Tok Kun circa 6th to 12th centuries CE, this area had been evidently settled by complex and developed societies in its distant past.

The arrival of Islam, through Middle Eastern and South Indian Muslim maritime voyagers, marked a transformative period, beginning with the mass conversion of the Kedah Sultanate in 1136 CE[1], as recorded in *Al-Tarikh Silsilah Negeri Kedah* (ATSK). This period saw economic, cultural and religious development that continued into the early modern era, and whose legacy may still be seen to date.

THE FINDING OF EARLY ISLAMIC GRAVESTONES

Old Kedah, connected through coastal and riverine (Muda-Perai) corridors to Penang, was described by Arabic and Chinese sources as a thriving cultural and economic centre. This is evidenced by the discovery of numerous ancient Islamic gravestones scattered across Penang Island and the mainland.

A pair of such gravestones, marking an 18th-century, Arab-Sumatran aristocratic settlement, was first discovered in 2004 at Masjid Melayu Lebuh Aceh by academicians Daniel Perret and Kamaruddin A. Razak. Between 2016 and 2019, I found more gravestones in Bagan Jermal, Perai that date back to as early as the 15th century CE. The rest—at least 20 ancient graves—were mostly from the 17th to 19th century and were equally distributed on both geographical sides of Penang. The dating of these artefacts was confirmed based on morphological typology produced by Othman Yatim (1988), Daniel Perret and Kamaruddin A. Razak (1999, 2004).

These ancient gravestones, blending Islamic and Hindu-Buddhist stonework traditions, were crafted from durable stone materials like andesite, sandstone and granite, and are the most important remains from Penang's early Islamic period, suggesting the affluence and skills of the society of the time. Based on both archaeological remains and supplementary historical references like ATSK and *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (HMM), the masonry tradition is believed to have first taken root in the northern Malayan peninsula and northern Sumatran kingdoms.

The presence of these gravestones in Bagan Jermal highlights Penang's significance as a maritime hub as early as in the 15th century, which connected the Samudera-Pasai Sultanate in northern Sumatra across the Strait of Malacca to the Malay Peninsula. The Samudera-Pasai Sultanate, socio-politically related to the Sultanate of Kedah circa 13th to 15th centuries CE, was an early manufacturer of Islamic gravestones.[2] Furthermore, a significant number of gravestones with similar morphology were also found in Kedah's Bukit Meriam, Sungai Mas, Kuala Muda, Permatang Pasir, Seberang Tok Soh and Pantai Chichar (further upstream at Kuala Ketil)—suggesting Penang's role as a socio-political and economic outlet of ancient Kedah and the greater Andaman and Indian Ocean region. The estuary of Perai River, an important littoral zone since the early centuries CE, continued to be a strategic trade route during the Islamic period as trans-peninsular trade happened up and down Muda River. Commodities from the east coast bound for mercantile ships at the estuary and coastal harbours were also transported along this river.

As an economically promising and well-connected trading site, Penang attracted aristocrats and traders alike. While no grave inscriptions explicitly identifying its owner could be found on these southern Kedah gravestones, historians believe these to be the gravestones of Kedahan royals who ruled from the southern administrative capital of Kedah at Kuala Muda around the 14th century CE.

ACEHNESE PRESENCE IN PENANG

The Aceh Sultanate, which succeeded the Samudera-Pasai Sultanate in northern Sumatra, like its predecessor exerted its cultural influence on neighbouring kingdoms across the strait, such as Kedah and Penang. It had also inherited the gravestone culture of Samudera-Pasai circa early 16th century CE, and further improved on its artistic characteristics. Remains found from this period were mainly associated with the grave of Datuk Keramat Tua in Kampung Dodol, Jalan Perak, who according to oral tradition, was an Acehnese-Kedahan of Indo-Arab (Merican family) heritage.

Datuk Keramat Tua had established a local settlement in Sungai Pinang circa 1690s, which was, in 1785, recorded by a British correspondent to have flourished, boasting thousands of inhabitants until they were expelled by the Sultan of Kedah in the 1710s for alleged piracy.

Coinciding with the same period of time circa 1710s, a traditional account tells of the arrival of a Pathan (Afghan) Muslim group at Bagan Dalam, Perai. They were led by two Islamic scholar brothers, Sheikh Aqil Muhammad Khan and Sheikh Ghulam Khan, whose graves can still be found today in a private cemetery near Rumah Pangsa Sri Bagan. Like other newcomers, they were said to have arrived first in Aceh, then migrated to Kedah. The account also claims that the brothers were granted permission by the Sultan of Kedah to settle in Penang after vanquishing local piracy. Their presence added to the already multicultural community in Penang, with living descendants still existing to date.

The cosmopolitan nature of the area was mainly encouraged by the policies of Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Adilin II of Kedah (r. 1710-1778), who according to different historical accounts, was famously well-travelled. This made him welcoming of foreign scholars, skilled men and artisans.

Sayyid Hussain, who would abdicate in favour of his son, Sultan Sharif Saif al-Alam Shah (r. 1815-1818), after a one-month reign in 1815, was the founder of an Acehnese-Malay settlement at Lebuh Aceh and Kebun Lama sometime around the 1780s to 1790s. The royal family was expelled from Aceh by political rivals, and permanently settled in Penang. Their presence in Penang attracted the international mercantile community, contributing significantly to the early socio-political and economic development of the state. Under the community leadership of Sayyid Hussain al-Aidid, the settlement was a political refuge as well as a trading emporium for the Muslim community in Penang, and the luxuriously carved gravestones of Sayyid Hussain, his family members and retinues can still be found inside the mosque complex endowed by them.

In the transfer of power from the absolute suzerainty of the Kedah Sultanate to that of colonial administration, local Malay chiefs retained much of their socio-political dominance among their grassroots subjects, while their autonomy was mutually respected by the new government they served. This status quo became the basis for the existential integrity for most of the early local settlements in Penang.

Today, Penang's cosmopolitan, Islamic heritage is reflected within the descendants of the Muslim (and Malay) communities in Penang. Though many unique characteristics of these people may have been lost or forgotten over the course of time and in the process of assimilating into local culture, these diverse communities have still left their mark on Penang society, be it in the form of mosques, cuisines, language-dialects or traditional art.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Other accounts, for instance by R.O. Winsted (1938), suggest 1474 CE as the date of conversion of Old Kedah instead.

[2] According to textual and historiographical analysis of various classical Malay literatures like *Sulalat al-Salatin* (HSS), *Hikayat Raja Pasai* (HRP) and the oral story of Puteri Lindungan Bulan.

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SYED HUSS

BY RAHIDA AINI

A CONVERSATION ABOUT Syed Hussein Alatas led my thoughts to his daughter, Masturah Alatas. In her memoir, Masturah not only reflected on her father's intellectual legacy, but also charts her own growth as a writer—a journey deeply intertwined with his scholarly work.

Syed Hussein Alatas, a key figure in Malaysian history, renowned for his substantial contributions to the nation's political and intellectual landscape, was born on 17 September 1928 in Bogor, Indonesia. Alatas received his early education in Johor, and during the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), he spent his teenage years in Sukabumi, West Java. After the war, he returned to Johor Bahru, where he completed his School Certificate at the Johor Bahru English College. He later pursued higher education at the University of Amsterdam, earning a Doctorandus degree in 1956 and a PhD in 1963.

Alatas returned to Malaysia and began his professional journey at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of Language and Literature). In 1958, he became the Head of the Research Department, and by 1960, he was lecturing part-time at Universiti Malaya. By 1963, he was head of the Cultural Division in the university's Malay Studies Department. He would lead the Malay Studies Department at the National University of Singapore from 1967 for over 20 years. He later returned to Malaysia as Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Malaya, but his commitment to university reforms—introducing meritocracy within Malaysian universities—often put him at odds with the political establishment.

In her memoir, Masturah Alatas reflects on this, expressing frustration at how her father's ideas were frequently misunderstood or deliberately maligned. She recalls how he became the victim of character assassination for his efforts to elevate the university to international standards by promoting a culture of excellence regardless of race. His push for reform clashed with academics who were less competent, driven by ethnic agendas and backed by political influence. After he was ousted from his position as vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaya in 1991 due to allegations of misconduct, Alatas remained dedicated to his academic work, continuing at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia until 1999. He was later appointed Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation, which further cemented his legacy as a scholar and an intellectual.

ALATAS' WORKS

It is evident that Alatas' experiences during the Japanese Occupation and his exposure to both Malaysian and Indonesian societies significantly shaped his worldview. His time in Amsterdam, combined with his involvement in academic and literary circles, further honed his intellectual foundation. These influences fostered his critical thinking and his determination for reform, which became defining aspects of his scholarly work and public life.

He is particularly known for his critical analysis of colonialism, offering incisive critiques that reshaped the narrative surrounding Malaysia's colonial past and its post-colonial development. He was attracted to Indian, Indonesian, Latin American and African intellectual developments, all ignited by people-centred movements responding to the injustices of colonial administration. He wanted a similar intellectual awakening for Malaysia. His scholarship serves as a vital commentary on the complexities of Malaysian society, shedding light on its intricate political and social fabric.

EIN ALATAS

A STRONG LEGACY OF CRITICAL THINKING

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Alatas called for a more nuanced understanding of colonialism and its lasting effects on Malaysian identity. His unique ability to interweave history with social theory positioned him as a pioneering thinker in Southeast Asia. Beyond his critique of colonialism, he also emphasised the transformative power of knowledge in driving societal change.

As noted by Ismail, Abd Aziz, Arsani and Ahmad (2022), Alatas' philosophy offers modern Muslims a framework for intellectual development that balances tradition with modernity. He advocated for an approach rooted in Islamic principles, suggesting that societal progress could only be achieved through a combination of knowledge, social consciousness and spiritual growth. For Alatas, intellectual and moral development were inseparable, forming the foundation for confronting the challenges of the modern world.

Throughout his career, Syed Hussein Alatas was a tireless critic of corruption, post-colonial governance and superficial policies designed to boost the Malay economy. Masturah observed that he "spent his entire life writing about corrupt and servile times." Among his landmark works were *The Sociology of Corruption* (1968), the first academic book on the topic in Malaysia, and *Corruption and the Destiny of Asia* (1999). Yet, despite his persistent warnings, his concerns about corruption were often ignored.

Alatas was particularly vocal in his criticism of the New Economic Policy (NEP), arguing that it failed to foster genuine economic growth. He believed that the NEP primarily benefited a small group of Malay business elites, leading to unethical practices that fostered an opaque environment that enabled corruption, ultimately stifling broader economic development. As Alatas and others have meticulously shown, historically, the "natives" were economically capable of succeeding in business and accumulating wealth without relying on extensive support. According to Alatas, the way forward is to establish a level playing field for all Malaysians, ensuring equal access to public university education and government contracts. He also emphasised that Muslims in Malaysia and beyond should rekindle their interest in science and technology to remain competitive on the global stage.

His warnings about corruption and the centralisation of wealth are as relevant today as they were during his time. Despite ambitious anti-corruption efforts, such as the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) from 2019 to 2023, Malaysia's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) score declined from 53 to 50, slipping in global rankings from 51st to 57th out of 180 nations. These setbacks underscore the ongoing challenges of combating corruption, despite the government's aspirations to improve its rankings significantly by 2025 and 2030.

The critiques of colonialism and corruption he put forth continue to inspire assessments of Malaysia's nation-building efforts. His bold calls for reform in education and governance reflect his unwavering belief in the transformative power of knowledge—an enduring message that holds particular relevance for addressing Malaysia's contemporary challenges.

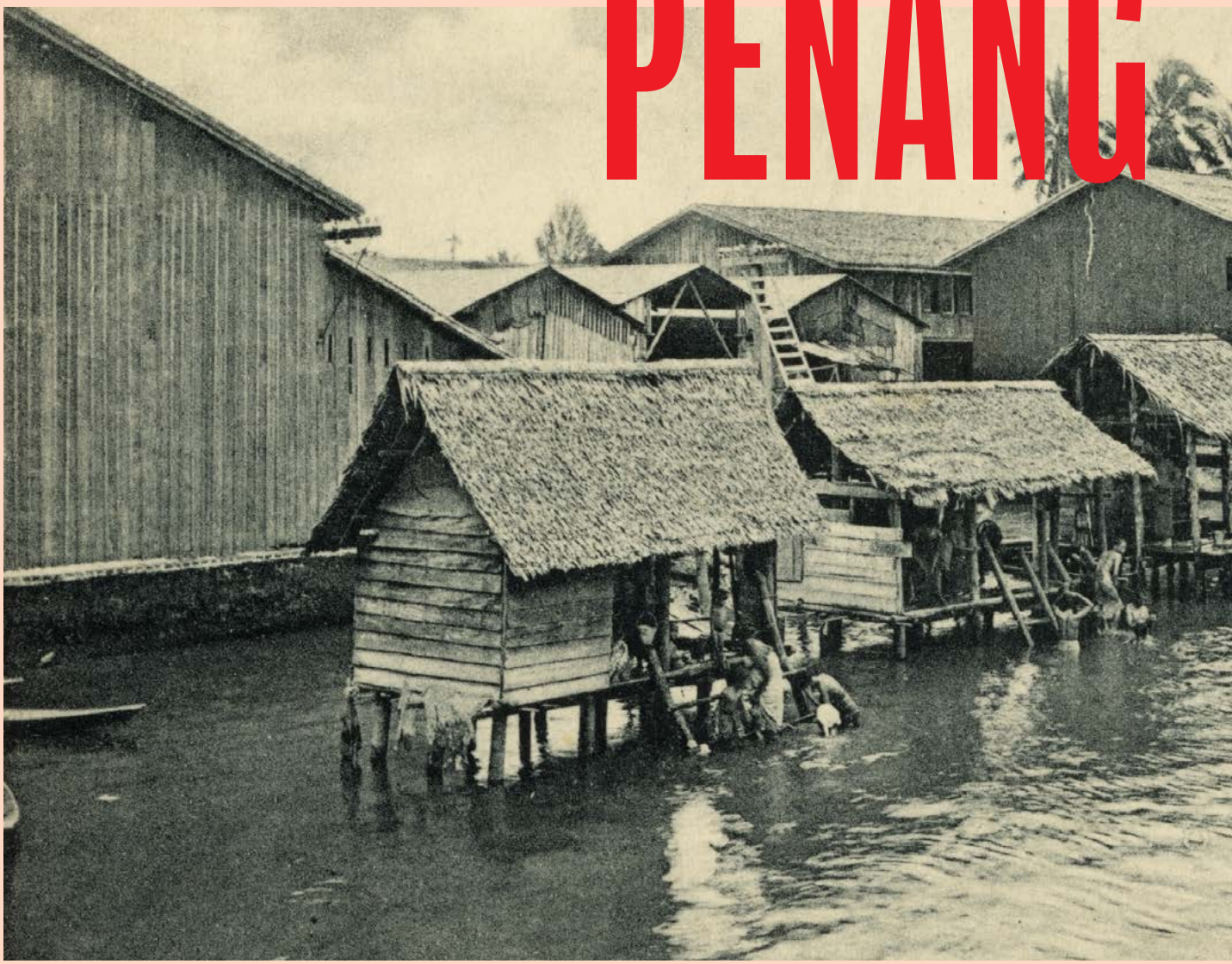
Even in his later years, Alatas remained deeply engaged in political and academic discourse, shaping conversations around Malaysia's socio-political future until his passing on 23 January 2007. His ideas live on, leaving a lasting impact not only in academia, but across the broader intellectual and public landscapes.

CAPTION

1. Syed Hussein Alatas at his doctoral viva voce at the University of Amsterdam, 1963. Source: Photo courtesy of Masturah Alatas

DR. RAHIDA AINI works as a researcher at Penang Institute. She enjoys writing and strolling along Straits Quay, appreciating the beauty of mother earth.

MALAY HOUSES IN PENANG



CIRCA 1900

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BY MUHAMMAD AMIRUL NAIM

IMAGES FROM MARCUS LANGDON COLLECTION

MUHAMMAD AMIRUL NAIM holds a Bachelor's degree in Human Sciences from the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). His areas of interest encompass social history, intellectual history and political thought.

MALAYS IN PENANG traditionally lived inland or along the coast, depending on their livelihoods. This had some bearing on how they built or located their dwellings. One common house style is the *Bumbung Panjang Berserambi* (long roof with veranda), known for its simple yet practical design. The roof has two slopes—an upper and a lower—and the structure allows easy extensions such as a *gajah menyusu* (side addition) and an *anjung* (raised porch).

Such houses are divided into three main parts: the *rumah ibu* (core house), *serambi samanaik* (a veranda parallel to the main house), and the additional *gajah menyusu* and *anjung* sections. The design promotes cross-ventilation, with wide openings on the walls to keep the house cool.

Traditional houses such as these, however, are disappearing. Modern homes that Malays now live in on the island—except some in Teluk Bahang and Balik Pulau, and on Seberang Perai—often lack open yards; this disconnects the families from nature. Today, feet that once touched soil daily now tread on cement and concrete.

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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Malay stilt houses by TN Shaik Ismail No. 14 taken c.1902 (ML-3575).

2. A Malay village located along North Beach, believed to be along the Bagan Jermal area c.1910 (ML-5410). Such settlements, especially those built along the coastline, consist of raised floor construction to weather the tropical climate. The space under the raised deck may be utilised for various purposes, including storage.

3. Penang Malay house c. 1930s (ML-1001). Coconut trees are a common sight around Malay villages. The coconut tree is known as the "tree of a thousand uses" *(pokok seribu guna)* in the Malay-Indonesian culture.

4. Penang Malay houses c.1920s (ML-1644). These are typical of dwellings built inland.

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A TYPICAL ATTAP HOUSE, PENANG

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MALAY CHILDREN
AT THEIR MORNING MEAL
PENANG

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MALAY KAMPONG PENANG

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CAPTIONS

5. A typical attap house in Penang from the late 1950s (ML-3694).
This well-structured house is separated into three parts, a front portion (with the verandah, porch and stairs), a middle portion which serves as the sleeping area, and a kitchen located at the back (as stated in *A Traditional Malay House,* by Abdul Halim Nasir and Wan Hashim Wan Teh).

6. Malay children at their morning meal, Penang c.1930 (ML-2272).
This morning meal is what we know now as Nasi Kandar. Traditionally Nasi Kandar sellers were itinerant, and would go about from one place to another balancing *(mengandar)* rice and curry dishes on a pole on their shoulder.

7. A postcard of a Malay village amid a coconut grove in Penang c. 1910 (ML-2560).

8. A Malay house in a Penang suburb c.1910s (ML-5045).
Much of the architecture is similar to those in Kedah and Perlis, like a wicker work wall seen in this photo.

9. A Malay village, Telok Tikus Penang c.1920 (ML-3599) located by the water's edge, also known as *gigi air.* Telok Tikus is located close to Tanjung Bungah. This was probably one of the earliest traditional seaside Malay villages.

10. "No. 27. Greetings from Penang" postcard by August Kaulfuss c. 1905 (ML-1589).
This is a scene in a Karo village in Penang. Often referred to as the Karo Batak people, the Karo originated from Northern Sumatra.

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FRANCIS LIGHT SCHOOL AND THE DAWN OF MERDEKA

BY EUGENE QUAH TER-NENG

EUGENE QUAH is an independent researcher and writer who is working on a book tentatively called "Illustrated Guide to the North Coast of Penang". He rediscovered the joys of writing after moving back to Penang from abroad.

AT THE EASTERN end of Northam Road (now Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah), within the weathered walls of the Old Protestant Cemetery, rests Captain Francis Light, who in 1786 established Britain's first settlement in the Strait of Malacca on the jungle-clad island of Pulo Pinang. Although Thomas Stamford Raffles' name is memorialised in many places and institutions in the younger sister settlement of Singapore, Francis Light's legacy in Penang is more modest. His name only lives on in a street near Fort Cornwallis and in a school on Perak Road.

THE NORTHAM ROAD GOVERNMENT ENGLISH SCHOOL

The origins of Francis Light School—which hosted historical events leading to our country's independence—lies not at Perak Road, but a minute's walk west of his tomb. There, one can find the hulking carcass of what was once a magnificent building, No. 11, Northam Road, known in Hokkien as the *goh chan lau* (five storey mansion)—the residence of *towkay* Cheah Tek Soon.

By 1922, after changing hands many times having served as a boarding house then a luxury hotel, the building was leased to the Education Department to house the Government English School. The then owners, *towkays* Tye Chee Tean and Tye Shook Yuen

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also supported the school financially with a monthly contribution—a deed done in remembrance of their father Tye Kee Yoon from whom they inherited the property.

The first headmaster of the Government English School was Harold Ambrose Robinson Cheeseman, "formerly of the [Penang] Free School [PFS]... a fine disciplinarian, and keen sportsman and indefatigable volunteer [soldier]".[1] By December 1926, Edmund Thomas Mortlock Lias, another Free School teacher, "was appointed Headmaster of the Government English School". The 29-year-old Lias came to Malaya in 1921. On 21 October that year, the Cambridge-educated teacher was assigned to the Penang Free School, then located at Farquhar Street.

THE PERAK ROAD NEW SCHOOL

The Government English School at Northam Road was a stopgap measure as new schools were being built to accommodate the burgeoning student population of Penang. On 21 August 1929, Clifford George Sollis, Inspector of Schools, told the press that the "Perak Road new school", built to replace the Northam Road school, was nearing completion, and will "hold 500 boys". This was because the building at Northam Road,

CAPTIONS

1. The staff of the Francis Light School in 1948. The headmaster was Ng Cheong Weng (seated first row, 6th from left). Source: SK Francis Light

2. Hamid Khan was the first Malay headmaster of the Francis Light School. Source: Francis Light School

3. The school logo contains the school motto "Luceo". The school believes that it was designed by a government servant named Christie—likely David Hamilton Christie—who later became Director General of Education in 1960. He joined the education department as a European master in 1936.

4. The Cambridge-educated former Penang Free School teacher, Edmund Thomas Mortlock Lias (E.T.M. Lias), became the first headmaster of the Francis Light School when it opened in 1930. Source: Public Domain

5. View of the school probably taken in 1948. Source: SK Francis Light

6. A notable alumnus of the school was the renowned composer, actor and movie director, "Seniman Agung Negara", P. Ramlee, seen here with the Francis Light School football team. He joined the school in 1939 and studied until Year 5 when the war interrupted his studies. After the war, he continued his education at the Penang Free School. Source: Arkib Negara

7. S.M. Zainul Abidin became the second Malay to lead the school. He was later an influential Penang UMNO politician.

8. No. 11, Northam Road was once a magnificent mansion built by Cheah Tek Soon.

9. Francis Light School in 2025.

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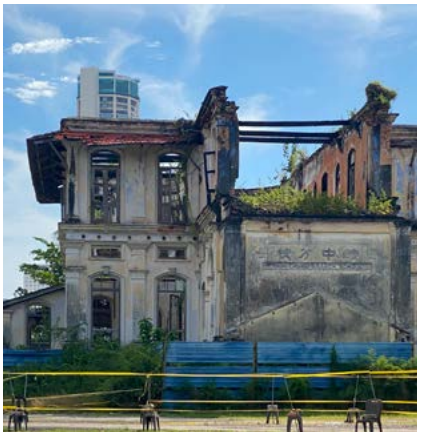

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originally a residential mansion, "was not built for a school, and is, in some ways, very unsuitable".

"Boys from the Farquhar Street School and some of the pupils in the Government English School, Northam Road, will be transferred to the new building. Mr. Lias, present Headmaster of the Government English School, will probably be in charge of the new school, while Mr. Hamid Khan, Headmaster of the Farquhar Street School, will take Mr. Lias' place in the [Government English School]," explained Sollis. "The classes in the new school will include second, third and fourth standards. What remains of the [Government English School] at Northam will consist of a special Malay class, first standard and second standards," he added. It would also act as a feeder school from which "the Penang Free School [would] ultimately absorb the boys" after they completed their primary schooling.

LUCEO

The new school at Perak Road began operations on 20 January 1930, and was called the Francis Light School. Its motto was *Luceo*, light in Latin. According to a letter dated 16 July 1936 published by the *Pinang Gazette* a few years later, "A small measure of credit … is due to Mr. E.T.M. Lias, at whose suggestion, the Government School in Perak Road was named the Francis Light School, and he was the first Head Master… While Mr. Lias was head of the [Northam Road] school, he took his pupils every year to Francis Light's grave, on the anniversary of his birthday. Before this there was no proper memorial to the Founder of Penang except the Street that bears his name," the letter revealed.

The first prize day was held on 10 December 1930. Lias told the audience that with the help of a loyal staff co-operating with him he was able to carry on the work of the school very smoothly. This was the first year of the school life and therefore there was not much to add. He also thanked "the Municipality for allowing the school to make use of the Dato Karamat *padang* [today's Padang Brown]. The Scout movement of the school had also flourished during the year under Messrs. Mohummed Ali and Wong Ah Gnow and the Penang Scout Commissioner had sent a favourable report regarding the School's Scouts". An 11-year-old boy named Lim Kean Chye received the prize for reading and conversation.

By the school's third "Speech-day and prize-giving day" in 1932, Lias was happy to report that "cricket, that king of games for boys, was an entirely new venture at the beginning of the year, but, thanks to the coaching of Mr. Saravanamuttu, a surprisingly high level of play was reached". He also touched on the academic performance of the students: "The Standard Five examination results were somewhat disappointing, the boys failing to do themselves justice," said Lias, "but I am not unduly disheartened. More years ago than I care to remember, when I was at school, a master, who I am glad to say is still going strong, used to ask us why we came to school, the answer he required being 'To learn to think'." Lias proceeded to invite the guest of honour, Lim Cheng Ean, a member of the Legislative Council member of the Straits Settlements to hand out the prizes.

"You may not think it to look at my grey hairs but your headmaster [Mr. Lias] and I were at the Varsity [at Cambridge] together, a place where, I hope, some of you will go and do yourselves and those who brought you up

FOOTNOTES

[1] Penang Free School's Cheeseman (red) sports house and Jalan Cheeseman were named after him.

[2] Their sister Lim Phaik Gan (P.G. Lim) also read law at Cambridge, and later became the first female to obtain a Master's in Law at the university.

[3] Hamid Khan bin Ibrahim Khan (1882–1960) is not to be mistaken with Abdul Hamid Khan bin Haji Sakhawat Ali Khan (1900-1972), known as Captain Hamid Khan, who was Education Minister from 1962-1964. The Hamid Khan secondary school, named so at the suggestion of UMNO, was most probably (but unconfirmed) in honour of the minister. The school's own defunct website stated that the school was named after Captain Hamid Khan, but the biographical details provided are of I.K. Hamid Khan (who had no military title), indicating some level of confusion.

credit," Lim encouraged the students. "Now why have I... come to address all of you young boys to-day? It is to tell you to use your brains and think," the prominent Penang lawyer told the students before handling out the prizes. He presented the reading and conversation prize to a standard three boy named Lim Kean Siew, the younger brother of Kean Chye—the inaugural winner. Both boys—Lim's sons—would indeed later go on to read law at the University of Cambridge.[2]

On 9 March 1933, Hamid Khan,[3] who years earlier had become the first Asian headmaster of a government English school, was appointed acting headmaster of the Francis Light School (probably in Lias' absence). Lias would later be transferred to become the Headmaster of the Bukit Mertajam High School, a post he assumed on 22 November 1934.[4] Tragically, on 7 June 1938, while on home leave, Lias suddenly died at a relatively young age of 46 years old "at The London Hospital Whitechapel" leaving behind his wife and young daughter.

THE WAR YEARS

That same year, Zainul Abidin—better known as S.M. Zainul Abidin—became the second Malay to lead the school. Noor Mohamed Hashim, the first Malay Legislative Councillor who established the Malay Volunteers, told students at the school in 1940 as war edged closer to Malaya:

"I am glad to be able to say a few words to the boys of this school, Francis Light School. What a splendid name for a school... Under his guidance and government, people of all races were able to come here and trade peacefully... I am also glad to find that your Headmaster is Tuan Zainul Abidin. He is well-known throughout Malaya as the founder and president of the Brotherhood of the Pen—Sahabat Penner—a Malay organisation that encourages brotherhood among Malays throughout the Peninsula... He is a good example to you all and I hope there are boys in this school who will follow his example in years to come."

His words, like Cheng Ean's, would be prophetic; the school would indeed become a focal point of Malay political unity after the war, with S.M. Zainul Abidin playing a key role in Malay politics.

By the end of 1941, the full invasion of Malaya was underway by the Japanese forces. The school's cricket coach and an Oxford-educated editor of the *Straits Echo*, Manicasothy Saravanamuttu—known to all as Sara—recounted that by 17 December 1941, the "Eurasian Volunteer [Troops] Company... made its headquarters at the Francis Light School... while the Chinese Company had moved to Ayer Itam... under the control of Lim Cheng Ean." The Volunteer Police force was empowered to stop looting in George Town; any goods moved whose ownership was in doubt were confiscated and "stored at the Francis Light School Hall and soon there were large collections of motley goods".

During the Japanese Occupation, it appeared that the school was repurposed to mostly teach Indian students, with lessons in Hindi, Japanese, culture and mathematics. Jeyaraj Christopher Rajarao recalled in his memoirs, "... by year end 1943, I had gained fluency in the Japanese language while studying in Azad Hind School, the one in Francis Light School Penang... I was selected to deliver the annual address [in Japanese] in the school grounds, in front of the students, public and invited distinguished guests." The principal was Japanese, while "there were many former teachers of the pre-war English schools."[5]

During the Occupation, many students of Francis Light School had their education interrupted, including a Year 5 student named Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Puteh. Going by the name of P. Ramlee, he would later go on to become an iconic figure in the entertainment industry.

UNITED MALAYS

When the exhausted Great Britain—victorious but depleted both in reputation and wealth—resumed its rule of Malaya after the war, it sought to simplify the governance of Malaya. However, the ill-conceived "Malayan Union scheme introduced in 1946 by the Colonial Office" backfired spectacularly; it united the Malays politically against the colonial government, and protests quickly spread nationwide.

Malays felt the Union "stripped the powers of the Malay rulers and the Malay people over their own land, and as a result, sought to erase the name of the Malays from the face of the earth"—as one protestor put it. In Penang, opposition against the Union culminated in an unprecedented gathering at the grounds of the school on 1 June 1946, where even Malay "women and children took part in a political demonstration with the men." At this time, S.M. Zainul Abidin had resumed his duty as headmaster.

In one of the speeches given that day, Ibrahim bin Mahmood summed up the stance of the Malays:

"We, as the Malay people, together with our brothers and sisters throughout the Malay Peninsula, join and will stand together, living and dying in our struggle against the Malayan Union. This is because we remain determined to be Malays and are unwilling to become Malayan..."

He then welcomed the guest of honour:

"We express our deepest gratitude for your willingness, Dato', to visit Penang, and we pray that Dato' is granted a long life, good health, increasing strength and success in all your endeavours and ambitions. Wassalam. *Hidup Melayu*, *hidup* Dato' Onn [Long live the Malays, long live Dato' Onn]."

Onn Jaafar was the founder of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which, at the time of the gathering, was less than a month old. The fledgling Malay organisation would hold its third General Assembly at Francis Light School the following month. On Thursday, 27 July 1946, before the official opening ceremony, Sultan Badlishah of Kedah presided over the flag-raising ceremony where the UMNO flag was unveiled to the world for the first time. During the meeting which lasted for two days, the organisation "demanded that the British grant full independence to Malaya".

EPILOGUE

The school, through its 95-year history, had helped shape the nation's future through its graduates. Other than those already mentioned, among its distinguished alumni were Sultan Yahya Petra ibni al-Marhum Sultan Ibrahim of Kelantan, the 6th Yang di-Pertuan Agong (1931 to 1934), former Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen, Azizan Zainul Abidin, former president of Petronas and Ahmad Murad Mohd Noor Merican, an essayist and scholar who spearheaded a critical re-evaluation of Francis Light's legacy from a post-colonial perspective.

[4] E.T.M. Lias' whereabouts from March 1933 until he started work at the high school in Bukit Mertajam remains unclear. He was likely on home leave, although he appeared to have still been in Malaya in December 1933.

[5] The Provisional Government of Free India or Azad Hind was established by Subhas Chandra Bose in Singapore with the goal to liberate India from Great Britain. [See When Penang was an Axis Submarine Base]

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

THE MANY LIVES OF PENANG'S ROADS

BY LIANI MK

FOR ANY VISITOR, George Town's colonial footprint is easily evident in the names of roads, named after European administrators, merchants and notable personalities during the British colonial period. Light Street, for example, was named after Francis Light, Penang's first superintendent, who had named this street after himself in 1786 after clearing a forested land that would later form Penang's Esplanade.

While such British names may point to the island's colonial beginnings, oftentimes they also signify a biased retelling of the history and origins of places. It is often forgotten until recently, for example, that the same Francis Light, who has been credited as the "founder" of Penang, had taken over the island in a series of dishonest dealings between both the sultan of Kedah and the East India Company. Penang's road names, in indicating the place's colonial legacy, can also obscure the stories of those who came before.

Peninsular Malaysia, including Penang, is historically regarded as the original land of various indigenous communities. People like the Senoi, Aboriginal Malay and Semang, who were categorised in the 1960s based on early European racial concepts, are part of the broader Orang Asli groups.

These classifications, however, oversimplify and misrepresent their histories and cultural identities. Limited documentation exists about Penang's indigenous peoples beyond James Richardson Logan's colonial writing, which describes "various tribes inhabiting Penang and Province Wellesley". There is limited research on older indigenous names of places like Penang, despite evidence of indigenous communities living in the state prior to British presence. This absence underscores the need to uncover indigenous narratives to provide a fuller understanding of Penang's complex past.

Meanwhile, other existing road names do document local cultural stories and figures. Aboo Siti Lane, for instance, is named after Aboo Siti, who was known as the father of Bangsawan—a Penang Malay opera form that later on influenced Malaysia's early film industry.

There have also been recent moves such as in 2019, when the state proposed that street names return to their old, gazetted spellings, for instance Ayer Itam (instead of Air Itam), and Aboo Sittee Lane (from Abu Siti Lane) for consistency. Such changes reflect both the passage of time and the multicultural influences that define the island.

UNDERGOING CHANGE

Place names are not static entities, and they evolve with the communities around them. Local adaptations and spellings of road names hint at Penang's evolving linguistic and cultural landscape.

Love Lane is an example of a place with a layered past. Today, Love Lane is a tourist haunt dotted with all-weeknight bars. However, in the past, the lane was long associated with sailors and wealthy Chinese merchants who kept their lovers in the area. In this way, Love Lane's name carries romanticised yet seedy connotations. Another theory links Love Lane to the surname "Love", possibly of a colonial officer or influential resident.

A less sensational but more likely theory links the street's name to Shiite Muslims who brought the Muharram Festival to George Town in the 19th century. During the festival, Chulia Street and Love Lane were painted red with the blood of devotees engaged in acts of self-flagellation. Cries of "Hassan! Hussain!" would echo through the streets as they honoured Prophet Muhammad's grandsons through rituals involving swords, skewers and fiery coals. The sight of their devotion and self-sacrifice reportedly moved onlookers, and inspired the street's evocative name—Love Lane.

Green Lane, officially known as Jalan Masjid Negeri, has a different but equally compelling story as it transitioned from a leafy suburban avenue (hence "green") to a busy thoroughfare that now, more than ever, reflects Penang's rapid urbanisation.

The place itself has its roots in Penang's colonial era, when it was a suburban road flanked by greenery. It was a key route with a scenic passageway, connecting Air Itam to the city centre. It is for this reason that the original name "Green Lane" persists among locals, as a nostalgic reminder of the area's once-peaceful aura.

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> **"Place names are not static entities, and they evolve with the communities around them."**

Of mixed indigenous roots, **LIANI MK** is an independent writer, journalist and artist covering indigenous knowledge, migration, language, film and culture in Southeast Asia. With a background in history and Southeast Asian Studies, she also engages in media advocacy with a regional feminist organisation.

Tanjung Tokong, or "Cape of the Shrine", was traditionally a Malay fishing village. The area is named after a seaside shrine, which reflects the spiritual significance attributed to coastal landmarks by the local Malay community. However, over time, rapid urbanisation displaced local communities and transformed Tanjung Tokong from a traditional fishing village into a high-density residential area. While these changes occurred, the road name has remained.

Jelutong is named after the Jelutong tree (*Dyera costulata*), once abundant in the area. The Malay community utilised the tree's latex for various purposes, including making traditional crafts.

Founded by Tengku Syed Hussain, a Malay-Arab trader from Acheh, Sumatra, Lebuh Acheh was another street that became a centre for the Malay-Muslim community in the early 19th century. The street housed the Acheen Street Mosque and served as a spot for pilgrims journeying to Mecca.

Formerly known as Pitt Street, Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling was renamed to honour the Kapitan Keling Mosque, one of Penang's oldest mosques built by Indian Muslim traders. The Sanskrit term "Kalinga" was historically used to refer to people from the Indian subcontinent, though its derivative is now considered a derogatory term. The road's name reflects the multicultural make-up of Penang.

These historic roads are not immune to overdevelopment. Jalan Tanjung Tokong, for example, once a Malay fishing village, has given way to high-rise developments and luxury apartments.

Gentrification in George Town has also led to increased property prices on Lebuh Acheh, which has completely altered the street's historical character and displaced its long-standing residents.

Jalan Jelutong, once a coastal village, has seen environmental degradation with industrial expansion along the thoroughfare, affecting the livelihoods of nearby residents and contributing to the decline of traditional trades—thus altering the area's identity completely. Kampung Melayu, translating to "Malay Village", faces similar pressures. Urban development has encroached on this historical enclave to threaten its cultural integrity and community bonds.

THE POLITICS OF A NAME

Road names can be political—reminders of power dynamics and historical narratives. Thus, researching road names and the history of a place can deepen appreciation and understanding of our communities and their linkages to the land. Documenting and preserving these histories can prevent a disconnect from Penang's diverse heritage. A book on street names, written by Loh Lin Lee, a member of the Penang Heritage Trust, has been commissioned by GTWHI.

Efforts to recontextualise Penang's road names—and to uncover the stories behind them—are necessary to understand how colonialism, migration and modernisation shaped this island. By documenting our experiences, indigenous histories and local stories, we can honour the layers of identity embedded in the roads most often taken.

EMILY ISMAIL manages a team of writers for a multinational corporation. Beyond her professional life, she's a driving force behind Penang Hidden Gems and Persatuan Pencinta Sejarah dan Warisan Pulau Pinang, showcasing a dedication to heritage preservation and community building.

THE MALAY HERITAGE TRAIL: A JOURNEY OF PERSONAL DISCOVERY

BY EMILY ISMAIL

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Fairus Saad sharing with the participants of the Malay Heritage Trail.
2. Participants of the heritage trail were treated to a sumptuously cooked meal.
3. Awal Muharram celebration.
4. The Acheen Street Mosque.

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MY JOURNEY BEGAN on sun-drenched Acheen Street, not as a tourist, but as a participant in the Malay Heritage Trail organised by my team at Penang Hidden Gems in conjunction with the George Town Literary Festival. Guided by the insightful Fairus Saad, 20 of us—a diverse mix of local and international visitors—walked through Armenian and Acheen Street, a journey that revealed a microcosm of Malaysia's rich and complex history.

Three *kampung* houses nestled within Acheen Street's compound became our first lesson in the multifaceted nature of Malay identity. Fairus eloquently detailed the history of these buildings, highlighting Al-Mashoor, Penang's first Islamic religious school, housed within one of them.

Seeing the humble origins of this institution that shaped the Penang Muslim community's identity made me introspective. The adjacent house, home to the fifth-generation descendant of Sheikh Omar Basheer Al-Khalidy—a revered Naqshabandiah Sufi teacher and imam of the Acheen Street Mosque—further underscored the enduring legacy of individuals who molded the spiritual and cultural landscape of late 19th-century Penang. This prompted in me a deeper exploration of the nuanced definition of being Malay.

A SPECTRUM OF MALAY IDENTITIES: BEYOND THE EXPECTED

At Jawi House, the subtle aroma of *serabai* (delicate Malay crumpets) and *kaya* weaves through the rich fragrance of Arabic coffee and tea. Chef and owner Nuril Karim Razha shared the captivating history of the Jawi Peranakan community, whose significant presence in Acheen Street led to it being known as "the second Jeddah". This bustling hub was a vibrant crossroads for pilgrims preparing for their journey to Mecca from across the Malay Archipelago and beyond. This once-small *kampung* transformed into a bustling *souk*—an Arabian bazaar—offering everything from food and *jubah* (Arabian robes) to essential pilgrimage items.

Growing up half-Chinese and half-Malay, I have always navigated the complexities of this dual identity. The homogenous portrayal of "Malay-ness" in mass media often felt at odds with my own lived experience. This heritage trail, however, changed that perception.

Food, as Puan Habibie elegantly illustrated, provides a powerful example. "During Hari Raya," she shared, "we don't eat *ketupat* and *rendang*. Instead, we enjoy *bamiah* (a Hadramawti lamb and okra stew) with *roti*. Therefore, Sharifah Aini's popular Hari Raya song, *'Rasalah ketupat ini, dengan rendangnya sekali*,' feels quite foreign to us."

This simple statement shattered preconceived notions about what being a Malay means, highlighting the sheer diversity within Malaysia's Malay community, and prompting the realisation that groups like the Jawi Peranakans and Indian Muslims also share unique expressions of Malay identity.

REDEFINING "MALAY": BEYOND THE KAMPUNG NARRATIVE

Joel Kahn's *Other Malay: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* challenges the dominant Malaysian narrative associating Malay identity with the static, homogenous *kampung*—a rural village rooted in subsistence farming and allegiance to the royal court. However, this overlooks the dynamic cosmopolitanism that has profoundly shaped Malay identity throughout history, especially in Penang.

A more inclusive understanding must acknowledge the multifaceted contributions of diverse groups. The Jawi Peranakan, for instance, significantly enriched Malay heritage in Penang, influencing traditions and customs. Similarly, Indian Muslim communities from Tenkasi, Ramnad and Kadayanallur introduced distinctive cooking techniques and spice blends, giving rise to the iconic Penang dish, Nasi Kandar—a testament to the island's vibrant culinary fusion. The Chulias, another group of Southern Indian Muslim immigrants, further contributed to the economic and cultural tapestry of the state through their entrepreneurial prowess in trade and finance.

The life of C.M. Hashim, the illustrious Penang UMNO chief, embodies this cosmopolitan Malay identity. His journey as a Malay of Indian descent from humble beginnings to becoming a prominent businessman and champion of independence, marked by cross-racial collaborations, highlights the challenges of researching this often-overlooked aspect of Malay history.

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MALAYSIA VS. INDONESIA: DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTITY

The definition of "Malay" diverges significantly between Malaysia and Indonesia. A recent People of Penang (PoPcast) episode emphasised Indonesia's preference for regional ethnic identities (Javanese, Sundanese, etc.) over a singular "Malay" identity—a stark contrast to Malaysia where religious affiliation plays a more defining role.

My conversation with Mohammad Ammar Alwandi during an event in Jakarta—Bincang Melayu bersama Muzium Negara Malaysia di Gedung STOVIA—reinforced this distinction. Despite his outward presentation of Malay identity (wearing a *baju Melayu*), Ammar emphasised Indonesian national identity over ethnic affiliation—a concern he addresses through his Instagram initiative, Nusa Angka, which promotes Malay ethnicity in Indonesia. In Indonesia, "Melayu" is simply one ethnicity among many.

Malaysia's approach—exemplified by C.M. Hashim's experience—centres on conversion to Islam and adopting the Malay language and culture. This approach, while creating a sense of national unity, marginalises the rich diversity within the nation. The simplified portrayal of Malay identity in education often leaves schoolchildren with an incomplete understanding of their heritage. Penang Hidden Gems' free history trips for secondary school students aim to address this, and tries to foster a more inclusive appreciation of Malaysia's multifaceted past.

TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE FUTURE

We must consider the historical context to fully understand the evolution of Malay identity. Malaysia and Indonesia's status as Muslim-majority nations was not a singular event, but a gradual process shaped by early traders, the peaceful spread of Islam through trade and Sufi missionaries (13th-15th centuries), as well as the conversions of local rulers, which led to powerful Islamic sultanates. Post-colonial Indonesia saw Islam further solidify as a national identity.

Colonialism, however, left deep scars. Arbitrary border redrawing fractured communities, and disrupted established migration and cultural exchange patterns. The 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty, which ceded Malay-populated regions to Siam (Thailand), highlights this disruption. The Minangkabaus, originating from West Sumatra, and who were historically migrants throughout the Malay Archipelago, now experience fragmented identities due to the differing definitions of "Malay" in Malaysia and Indonesia.

The current singular definition of Malay identity in Malaysia presents challenges, not only for Malays, but also for those with mixed heritage. The overemphasis on a single definition neglects the diverse cultural expressions within the community, leaving many with a limited understanding of their own and other Malaysian cultures.

By embracing the complexities of Malay identity, we can cultivate inclusivity and build a stronger, more unified nation.

My journey on the Malay Heritage Trail triggered a profound reflection on the multifaceted nature of being Malay in Malaysia. The seemingly simple question "What is Malay?" reveals a rich tapestry interwoven with ethnicity, religion, culture and history. It demands a nuanced, inclusive understanding that respects the diverse experiences and traditions within the community. My mixed heritage is a testament to this complexity—a puzzle that continues to challenge and shape our belonging in a diverse nation.

The world has embraced diversity, equity and inclusion; the question is, will we answer the call?

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CHAMPIONING ASEAN ECONOMIC INTEGRATION UNDER MALAYSIA'S CHAIRMANSHIP

BY IAN MCINTYRE

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PENANG KICKED OFF 2025 with a bang, hosting the launch of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—Business Advisory Council (BAC) here, in tandem with Malaysia assuming the chairmanship of ASEAN.

The ASEAN-BAC chairman is Nazir Razak, whose late father Abdul Razak Hussein, the country's second prime minister, was a founder-member of the group. At the launch, Nazir called for greater economic integration of the ASEAN member states in light of the global economic uncertainty brought on by US threats of punitive tariffs, technology imbalances, sustained inflation and the developmental divide.

Nazir introduced the Asean Business Entity (ABE) as a pioneering concept to ease the movement of people, trade and capital. Staffers of companies with an ASEAN status and with ABE would be able to work seamlessly throughout the region in their branches or in associate firms without work visas. It would allow easier immigration clearance, easier inflow of capital and seamless ways to outsource work. The objective remains the achieving of a fully-integrated Asean Economic Community (AEC).

According to Penang Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow, who also spoke at the launch, ASEAN is a vital trading partner globally, contributing 7% to world trade. With a population of over 600 million people, it stands as the world's fourth-largest economy with a 2023 GDP of USD4.1tril, a remarkable ascent from USD24bil in 1967.

Chow has offered Penang as a financial hub for ASEAN, owing to its strengths in logistics, trade, manufacturing, services and its strategic location off the Indian Ocean. Penang also offers great geographic connectivity and online link ups.

Malaysia's trade relations with ASEAN in 2023 showed that the region remained a key trading partner with a trade value amounting to USD160bil, or 27.3% of the nation's total trade in the year, with an export value of USD93bil.

Penang's trade with ASEAN has also surged significantly, with trade values more than tripling over the past decade to reach USD14.7bil in 2023, Chow revealed. The growth is particularly evident in electrical and electronic exports, which have multiplied by over seven-fold, with a significant increase in exports to Vietnam. Singapore and Vietnam now stand as its major trading partners within ASEAN.

On top of that, 7% of global semiconductor trade flows through Malaysia, making the country the sixth largest exporter of semiconductors in the world. It is due to these reasons that Chow now espouses Penang as an ideal gateway to ASEAN markets, and with it, the status of regional financial hub.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) The Chairman and Council Member (third and eighth from left) with the Penang Governor and his wife (fifth and sixth from left) and the Penang Chief Minister (fourth from left) at the launch of the ASEAN-BAC Malaysia Chairmanship 2025.

2. MoU signing preceding the ASEAN-BAC Malaysia Chairmanship 2025 launch.

3. Nazir Razak, the ASEAN-BAC Malaysia chairman.

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MOVING FORWARD WITH ABE

A successful year chairing ASEAN by Malaysia should see the realisation of ABE. In this project, Nazir is supported by 25 Malaysian companies who are part of the BAC network, including corporate captains such as AirAsia's founder Tony Fernandez, and Lim Chern Yuan, the young chief executive officer of Yinson Holdings Bhd, a global energy infrastructure and technology company based in KL.

With the ongoing animosity between China and the US, ASEAN has no choice but to come together to fortify its standing as a global economic bloc.

"The tools must be in place to integrate the economies, and the economies of scale are an invaluable tool in global trade," said Nazir. With the ABE, each ASEAN country must certify and recognise their respective local companies as ABE-status and worthy to expand as well as invest regionally.

While large public-listed companies are common recipients of ABE status, eligible SMEs are also encouraged to apply. He also called for greater recognition of ASEAN's potential to raise substantial private capital to boost investments and accelerate growth. Nazir also wants to see the realisation of a regional Initial Public Offering (IPO) Prospectus to help tap the huge financial resources that the region offers.

The 12 initiatives highlighted for the year by ASEAN-BAC are the ABE, ASEAN private capital markets, IPO Prospectus, talent development and mobility, common carbon framework with the ability to trade for carbon credits, digital exchange platform, business-to-business connect, identity (tourism) initiative, common corporate philanthropy framework, diversity, equity and inclusion framework, sustainability reporting, and regional Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms.

MoUs have been signed with Sime Darby Property Malaysia and YCH Group Singapore to focus on integrated logistics hubs and real estate solutions, with Bornion Green Sdn Bhd (Malaysia) and Yovel East Research and Development Inc (Philippines) to cultivate Musang King durian plantations, and to explore collaborative prospects between the Canadian and ASEAN business councils.

CAPTIONS

4. Welcome Reception at 32 Mansion (from left), Frauline Hor, VP - Programmes and Events of ASEAN-BAC Malaysia, Tan Leng Hock, CEO of Wawasan Education Foundation, Nazir Razak, Chairman of ASEAN-BAC Malaysia 2025, Jukhee Hong, Executive Director of ASEAN-BAC Malaysia, Zainul Hashim, Senior Banker of CIMB Group and Nur Sabrina Azam, Special Officer to Nazir Razak.

5. Laos officially passing on the ASEAN-BAC chairmanship to Malaysia.

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HOSTED BY A PENANGITE

Jukhee Hong is a woman going places after she was handpicked to manage ASEAN-BAC. Despite her active schedule running ASEAN-BAC programmes, she consented to an interview with *Penang Monthly*.

A proud Penangite, she studied at SRJK (C) Union before furthering her studies at Chung Ling High School and Universiti Sains Malaysia. She is also a former media practitioner and trilingual newscaster, having served as a news anchor on the NTV7 news segment before heading the CIMB regional think tank where she specialises on policy matters and fine-tuning the ecosystem for economic integration. Before that, Hong also served as the executive director of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)-BAC.

Hong represents the realism ASEAN needs to navigate the current uncertain global economic environment. She said that with threats of de-globalisation and protectionism taking root, it is more important than ever for ASEAN to embrace the "prosper thy neighbour" principle.

Hong wants to champion ABE, and realises that there is much global diplomacy and negotiations to navigate. For example, the World Trade Organisation does not allow for special exceptions to be accorded to select countries.

"But there are ways to circumnavigate this; ASEAN has several existing economic and trade charters which can be rewritten to allow for ABE principles to be applied.

"Covid-19 taught ASEAN a lesson; the global supply chain bogged down each nation, and drove up inflation globally. If ASEAN can develop an alternative regional supply chain across the spectrums of skills and goods, it would make the grouping more competitive," Hong echoed.

She added that Penang's offer to be a regional financial hub has merits because the state is a top-notch producer in the global semiconductor field. "But more data needs to be shared, and Penang's ecosystem for finance, trade and investments besides manufacturing needs to be scrutinised to see to what extent the state can qualify to become a financial hub."

She said that currently, Singapore is an ideal destination as a financial hub due to its diversified economic strengths. Hong is hoping that Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN can see the region accepting the need for better levels of economic integration.

IAN MCINTYRE is a veteran journalist with over 25 years of experience reporting for the mainstream and alternative media. He subscribes to a belief that what is good for society is likewise beneficial for the media.

PENANG MONTHLY GOES BRAILLE

BY YEONG PEY JUNG

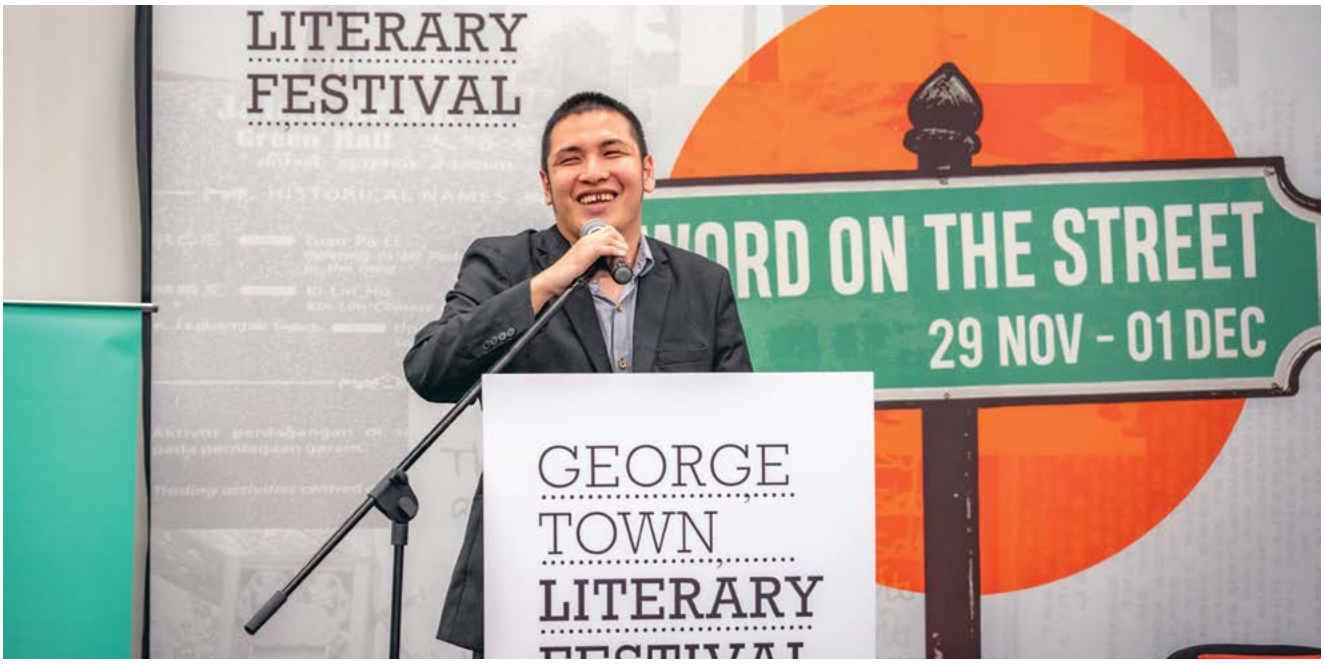
A NEW CHAPTER in community engagement unfolded at the recently concluded George Town Literary Festival (GTLF). On that day, a collaborative project between *Penang Monthly* and St. Nicholas' Home Penang was officially launched. The initiative's main objective is to make the *Penang Monthly* magazine accessible to the visually impaired community in Penang, and widely to Malaysia.

The idea to braille *Penang Monthly* was first sparked when the editorial team paid a visit to St. Nicholas' Home for an event. During the visit, the Home highlighted the need for more reading materials to benefit both its residents and the wider community of visually impaired individuals. This vision was realised a year later, with the successful translation of *Penang Monthly* into braille.

The MoU signing during GTLF drew quite a crowd, and was also graced by Man Booker Prize nominee, Tan Twan Eng. The event opened with welcoming speeches from Penang Institute's Executive Director, Ooi Kee Beng and General Manager of St. Nicholas' Home, Carmen Chew. Ooi expressed his pride in this initiative, stating that the goals of both organisations—inclusiveness, accessibility, communal interactions and a shared understanding of Penang's special history—are aligned towards improving literacy for all.

Chew, in turn, emphasised that accessibility to different kinds of reading material is a fundamental right on its own, and stressed the importance of ensuring accessibility for all members of the community. She added that diversity is valuable in the building of an inclusive community, and this includes integrating the visually impaired community.

The attendees then had the opportunity to hear from Lim Kui Yong and Tang Wei Chong from the Home, who gave two engaging presentations. Lim, a professional brailler, provided an insightful overview of the history of braille, including the story of its founder, Louis Braille. She took the captivated audience through the constructs and systems of braille, and how it was taught and used.



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Tang, a librarian at the Home, shared a witty yet meaningful account of his life as a visually impaired person. He talked about the challenges he faces in daily life, in living in a world that is designed for the sighted, and expressed a desire for greater inclusivity. He also highlighted the misconception that blind individuals are introverts, emphasising that they are no different from those who are sighted. Taking himself as an example, he shared that he loves reading, has a lot of hobbies such as gaming, and enjoys socialising with friends.

One of the focal points of the event was a special art installation by Other Half Studio's Sumay Cheah, which featured a structure made of bamboo, twine and folded origami turtles and elephants crafted from recycled braille paper. People walking through the installation could close their eyes and not only touch and feel the origami, but also smell the unique scent that was sprayed onto it. She observed that sighted individuals tended to take their vision for granted at times. "With this installation, I hope to create an enriching tactile experience where people use senses other than sight to engage with the world around them."

Attendees also received personalised bookmarks brailled on the spot by Lim and Tang, were given cupcakes baked by the people at St. Nicholas' Home, and had the opportunity to browse through brailled copies of *Penang Monthly*.

ANOTHER "FIRST" BY PENANG

In a separate interview, Chew explained that the process of brailling *Penang Monthly* was fairly straightforward as all the hardware were readily available, with binding taking up the most time. "By having more reading materials in braille, we can encourage the visually impaired community to read more," she said, adding that digital technology still remains limited and unfriendly to visually impaired individuals. She pointed out that screen readers are not able to access picture file images such as JPEG, which are still widely used in digital media.

This limitation was echoed by Tang in his speech, where he explained his difficulties when it comes to web access. He believes that it is not difficult to make digital content and websites more accessible—for instance, adding alt-text to images.

Chew added that even accessing digital newspapers presents significant challenges for the visually impaired due to the incompatibility of formats with screen readers. The Home currently relies on volunteers to manually scan, copy, paste and proofread news articles before they are brailled.

"It's very important for the visually impaired community to have access to resources and knowledge, so that they would not feel left behind," she emphasised.

As such, reading materials in braille remain critically important. Currently, whatever reading material available at the Home's library are shared nationally; the Home mails them to library members who live out of state; the courier fees are waived by Pos Malaysia. The Home is open to collaborations with universities, authors and the public. "We especially hope that authors will share their books to be brailled, and book donations from the public are very much welcomed," she said.

Tang noted that it is both special and rare for a mainstream magazine like *Penang Monthly* to be made available in braille. "Penang is the first state to showcase this initiative," he said, "and it benefits everyone in the community, especially senior citizens, as it opens up the world for them." Chew added that readers found *Penang Monthly* really interesting and enriching. "As most of our residents are from other states, they really enjoy learning about Penang's history and culture through the magazine."

Chew hopes that this collaboration with *Penang Monthly* will continue to expand with more copies being printed and shared. Ooi, meanwhile, emphasised that Penang Institute has always valued partnerships with important NGOs such as St. Nicholas' Home. "Inclusivity is a core value in Penang society, and that aligns with the state's visions outlined in Penang2030," he stated.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Attendees flipping through the brailled November 2024 issue of the *Penang Monthly* magazine.

2. Tang sharing what his day-to-day life is like before the MoU signing.

3. Signing of the MoU. From left: Chairman of St. Nicholas' Home, Soe Chee Cheng, General Manager of St. Nicholas' Home, Carmen Chew, Executive Director of Penang Institute, Ooi Kee Beng and Sheryl Teoh, Assistant Editor of *Penang Monthly*.

YEONG PEY JUNG is a senior analyst with the Socioeconomics and Statistics Programme at Penang Institute. She is a reading enthusiast and is surgically attached to her Kindle.

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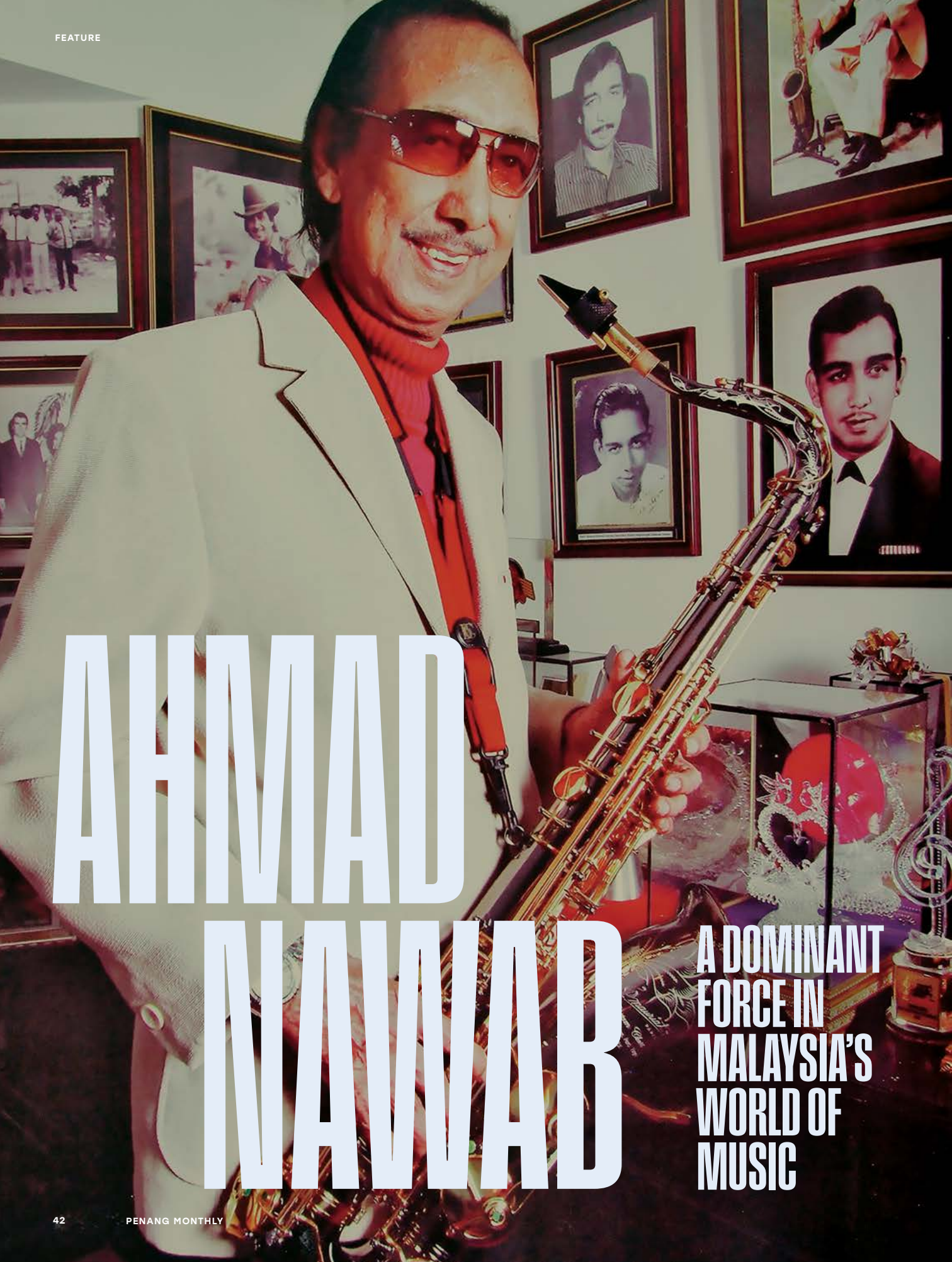

AHMAD NAWAB

A DOMINANT FORCE IN MALAYSIA'S WORLD OF MUSIC

"Ahmad is the man behind the 'making' of Malaysian stars—Sharifah Aini, Uji Rashid, Hail Amir, siblings Latif and Khadijah Ibrahim, Datuk Shake, Ramlah Ram, Siti Fairuz, Jamal Abdillah—the list goes on. In fact, the lifetime achievements of this music supremo once dubbed 'The Lion of Malaysian Music', could fill a novel!"

New Straits Times, 1 July 2000
Ahmad Nawab's Midas Touch

BY PAUL AUGUSTIN AND SHAZLIN AMIR HAMZAH

PENANG-BORN AHMAD NAWAB was a towering figure in Malaysian music. Born on 6 April 1933, Ahmad was the first child of immigrant Pakistani musician, Nawab Khan Rana Khan, who had come to Malaya with the Indian Army, and subsequently joined a Bangsawan troupe. He later married a mixed Indian Penangite Juhara Bee Fakir Maidin and they settled in Penang.

In an interview for the book *Just For The Love Of It,* Ahmad said his interest in the entertainment and music world began at an early age; he was particularly captivated with cinema and theatre. Prior to choosing music as an occupation, he thought of being an artist, as he had a talent for drawing portraits. In fact, he had entered competitions and even won a prize in a movie news magazine for his drawing of James Cagney.

While his desire to become a musician ran deep, his father did not approve of it. The latter knew the hardships of a musician's life and was determined to spare his son those struggles. Ahmad followed his father's advice and tried to enrol in a Batu Lanchang vocational school after failing his Standard Five exams at Francis Light School. But as fate would have it, the school had a fixed quota, and the person lining up in front of him was the last person to be accepted into the school. Ahmad was turned away.

This setback further fuelled his ambition to pursue a career in music. According to Ahmad, it was his mother who finally managed to persuade his father to let him follow his passion. His father insisted that if he were to be a musician, he had to be the best. He pushed Ahmad into reading music and learning theory. This became Ahmad's motivation—he wanted to make his father proud.

In 1949, after picking up the basics from his father, Ahmad joined the Penang Municipal Band as a clarinet player. During his time with the band, he took the opportunity to interact with more professional musicians, deepening his understanding of music more systematically.

A year later, Ahmad joined the Kedah Police Band in Alor Setar as an auxiliary police officer. It was then that he discovered a book about Glenn Miller. It opened his eyes to the world of music—from composing, arranging, lyric writing, producing albums, film scoring and conducting orchestras. Now inspired by new knowledge, Ahmad composed his first song, *Bintang Malam,* while gazing at the moon one night.

Seeing that playing in a police band was rather limiting—the focus was primarily on classical pieces and marching songs—he returned to Penang after two years, and rejoined the municipal band in George Town headed by Bhagart Singh. He played third clarinet while his father held the position of first clarinet in the same band.

A TASTE OF THE COMMERCIAL WORLD

Inigo Geronimo, who was also playing clarinet in the municipal band, gave Ahmad the opportunity to expand his musical education by introducing him to the "commercial" side of music. Ahmad began playing in Inigo's band at New World Park, earning $4 a night. Ahmad recalls playing Arabic music with the band at the Windsor theatre every day before Arabic movie

PAUL AUGUSTIN is a prominent figure in the Malaysian music and events industry. He is the director of Penang House of Music and founder and festival director of the Penang Island Jazz Festival.

SHAZLIN HAMZAH is a research fellow with the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA). She specialises in nationalism and identity.

screenings that would last a week and in competitions at the Cathay cinema, besides doing casual gigs in the evenings. "We played all sorts of music—Arabic, Malay, Chinese and the latest Western hits—this was where my real-world education went to another level," Ahmad recalled.

He was invited to join the Wembley Cabaret band a little later to play the tenor saxophone. The band leader offered him the instrument, which Ahmad repaid in instalments of $40 a month. There, he honed his skills playing primarily dance and jazz music. Ahmad would cycle from his home behind Jalan Terengganu to town with his saxophone. "On my way home, the path to the house was very dark and ran next to a Japanese cemetery. I was so scared that I would wait at the entrance until I saw someone else going in, then I would follow—cycling fast and shouting to my mum to switch on the lights!" he recounted.

Ahmad also had an opportunity to perform with Joe Rozells' band at the Piccadilly, who "would start a song without telling you what it was or the key, and you just had to listen and pick it up fast." Ahmad joined several *keronchong* groups and even formed his own band, Orkes Juwita.

It was during this period that he started writing more songs: "I wanted to be a composer, but there was nobody to teach me. There were no music schools at that time. So I just learned how to compose from the basic music knowledge taught by my father."

In the early 1950s, he established a music academy in Kedah Road (a Chinese *towkay* let the locale out free-of-charge) to help nurture young Malay musicians. The outcome was Mambo Murni Orchestra, which specialised in Latin music, and whose vocalist was Ahmad Daud. They performed at various functions and made occasional appearances at Padang Tambun and on Radio Malaya.

MAKING THE MOVE TO KL

News of Ahmad's talent and his orchestra reached the ears of Ahmad Amin, also known as Ahmad Trumpet. The latter invited Ahmad Nawab to join his band at BB Park. Ahmad finally made his move to KL in 1957. Impressed by his talent and his young age, Ahmad Amin offered him a salary of $260 a month—a substantial sum at the time.

Playing at BB Park proved a challenging period for Ahmad Nawab. The leader of the band was not an easy person to work with, and Ahmad dreaded going to work. He told his wife, Siti Zainab Ibrahim (whom he married at the age of 19 in Penang), that they should go back to Penang even if it meant that he had to work as a trishaw rider.

However, just after that confession, he chanced upon Ahmad Merican at a coffee shop near Bukit Bintang. Ahmad Merican was actually looking for him; he needed a saxophonist for his band at the Embassy Hotel on Imbi Road. "Can you join me?" he asked, and Ahmad Nawab immediately answered "Yes!" The gig paid $300 a month, and the band played mainly jazz music. Unfortunately, this stint only lasted for about six months before the hotel closed down.

Left once again without a job, Ahmad this time decided to send Siti Zainab back to Penang while he remained in KL to look for opportunities. It was a difficult period for him; sometimes he went three days without eating, only drinking water, sleeping under

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CAPTIONS

1. P. Ramlee, Charlie Mariano, Saloma and Ahmad Nawab.

2. Ahmad Nawab with Uji Rashid in a recording studio.

3. Ahmad Nawab.

4. Ahmad Nawab, (seated far right) with RTM Malaysia Orchestra (1964).

5. *Malaysia Truly Asia* music score.

newspapers, and having only a few shirts and two pairs of pants to change between—one black and one grey. He wore these until they were torn from him bicycle riding so much. Fortunately, his former band's pianist managed to secure a gig at a British camp, which paid $25. After that stint, he joined the HH Tann Orchestra at Federal Hotel.

ORKES PUSPAHATI AND RADIO MALAYA

In 1960, Alfonso Soliano offered Ahmad an opportunity to join Puspahati, Radio Malaya's first orchestra, as baritone saxophonist. Ahmad accepted the offer, and returned to Penang to purchase a used baritone saxophone for $600 at the Cheng Lee music store on Penang Road. He then returned to KL to join the eight-piece orchestra. All the members were paid a standard $700 a month, including Alfonso, the orchestra leader.

Around that time that, Merdeka Films producer, L. Krishnan contacted Ahmad and asked if he would compose the soundtrack for the movie *Tun Teja*. Despite some initial hesitation, he promised to give it a try. He successfully penned the music score after getting the script.

In 1963, Radio Malaya became Radio Television Malaysia (RTM). By then, the orchestra had expanded to become RTM Orchestra. Ahmad's skills also significantly improved under the tutelage of Berklee lecturers Herb Pomeroy and Charlie Mariano, who briefly worked with the orchestra.

In 1964, P. Ramlee asked Ahmad to write music for his film; he had particularly liked *Bintang Malam*, which had been recorded by Zaharah Agus in 1960, and to have Saloma sing it. Ahmad introduced the Bossanova style, and wrote a song titled *Bossanova*. Both these songs were used in the movie, *Do Re Mi* (1966).

SONGS FOR THE STARS AND THE RECORDING INDUSTRY

While at the RTM orchestra, Ahmad was approached by EMI to write songs for artistes like Sharifah Aini, DJ Dave, Uji Rashid and Khadijah Ibrahim. He moved from being a part timer to A&R Manager cum composer, arranger and producer for EMI in 1975, after realising that his songs had played a huge part in turning these artistes into stars. In 1978, he joined WEA in the same capacity. In 1983, he left to set up his own recording company and established his own production house called Nawab Production in 1986. His oldest son, Ismail, served as the managing director and his daughter, June, managed artistes' image and publicity.

From the late 1970s to the 1980s, he reputedly dominated the Malaysian music scene, and the media began extolling him with labels and titles with articles such as "Lion of Malaysian Music", "Ahmad Nawab's Midas Touch", "The Music Maker", etc.

Over his six-decade career, Ahmad composed more than 2,000 songs recorded by over 70 singers within the region. His notable songs include *Kau Kunci Cintaku Dalam Hatimu* (made famous by Ramlah Ram), *Setulus Hati Mu* and *Sabar Menanti*. He also released instrumental albums (the first with EMI, three with WEA and one with MRC) and wrote award-winning music scores for films, winning best musical score award for *Sumber Ilham Ku* (1980), *Bintang Pujaan* (1981) and *Penentuan* (1982).

MALAYSIA TRULY ASIA

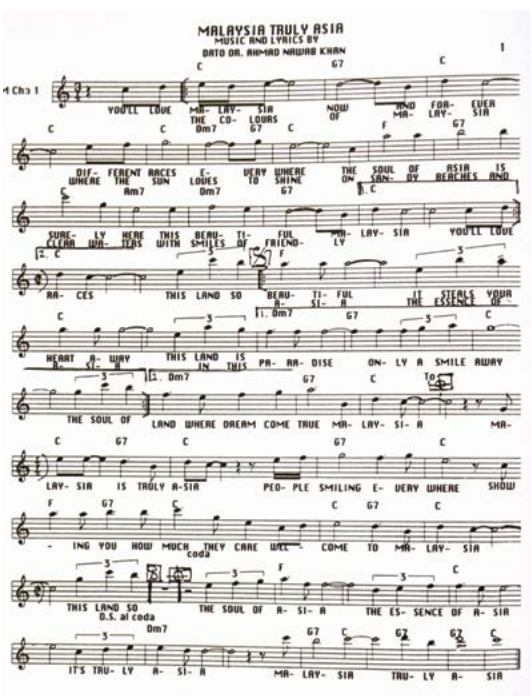
Ahmad was the creative genius behind *Malaysia Truly Asia*. He was commissioned by Tourism Malaysia in 1999 to compose a song that would present Malaysia to the rest of the world. His task was to create a melody that would appeal to Malaysia's major ethnic groups; the lyrics were already given. In a 2019 interview, Ahmad stated that this song was his most significant and esteemed musical accomplishment. Highlighting tourism, he said that song fulfilled a promise to his parents—to write a song that would resonate globally. The song was recorded in 17 languages for the entire world to understand.

Recognising Khadijah Ibrahim's unique voice, Ahmad invited her to record the song, stating, "Kathy, we have a big job." She returned immediately from Los Angeles to record a demo tape. He incorporated instruments and rhythms from Malaysia's diverse ethnicities and cultures—a combination of the *kompang,* Kelantan Wayang Kulit (shadow puppetry) music, *serunai, tabla,* accordion and *seruling* (flute).

Ahmad Nawab received numerous accolades, including Best Composer at Juara Lagu 1988 and Anugerah Nadi Cipta 1999, Anugerah Industri Muzik, Seniman Negara (2006), Anugerah Seni Parfi (Indonesia) and an honorary doctorate from Universiti Putra Malaysia.

At an event titled "Ahmad Nawab—The Man and His Music" held at the Penang House of Music during the 2017 George Town Festival, Ahmad reflected expressed disappointment that his expertise wasn't sought after. He lamented that Malaysia often undervalued its artistes, citing P. Ramlee as an example. In fact, serious discussions about the legacy of P. Ramlee, for example, was initiated only 13 years after his death.

On 24 November 2024, Ahmad Nawab passed away peacefully in his home surrounded by family.



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MASS SURVEILLANCE: WHO WATCHES THE WATCHERS?

BY KENNETH CHIN

THE NUMBER OF closed-circuit television (CCTV) units installed by local authorities for public area surveillance has, in recent times, increased drastically. In Penang alone, more than 1,200 CCTV cameras have been installed for the purpose of public safety and traffic enforcement. Additionally, the City Council of Penang Island (MBPP) integrated facial recognition technology into its CCTV surveillance system. Although these may be effective in preventing crime and aiding police investigations, the main concern is whether they will quickly lead us down the path towards becoming a police state with pervasive mass surveillance.

First of all, does such mass surveillance breach our right to privacy? Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides that all individuals have a right to privacy, and that they have legal protection against breaches to that right. Unfortunately, UDHR is not a legally binding treaty, especially when Malaysia has not formally ratified it. Nevertheless, in Malaysia, insofar as a matter is not inconsistent with the Federal Constitution (FC), regard is given to the UDHR. Moreover, there is a legal argument that these international human rights laws are nevertheless applicable in Malaysia.

Article 5 (1) of the FC states that no one is to be deprived of life and personal liberty in accordance with the law. The right to privacy in Malaysia is included in the liberal interpretation of "personal liberties", which can be perceived through leading court judgements. The Malaysian Federal Court has acknowledged the broad position on liberty in the sense that the right to privacy is protected under the FC. As in the case of India, the Constitution safeguards rights and freedoms, ensuring personal privacy and "liberty against government", except where justified. The right to privacy in Malaysia is, however, not an absolute right and can be validly restricted.

Malaysian courts have also recognised the need to balance security on one hand, and the right to privacy on the other. A test of reasonableness is required to determine if such surveillance is justified.

A reasonable example of such surveillance is continuous surveillance in public areas for the sole purpose of law enforcement or for increased security in semi-private settings, such as shopping malls. Generally, the right to privacy can be superseded by reasons of national security.

The purpose for mass surveillance is in preserving national security and in addressing security-related issues, such as crime. However, the potential for government abuse of surveillance tools must also be examined.

> **"Judiciary independence is essential to ensure that authorities do not act beyond their powers, and that our fundamental rights and liberty are not violated."**

KENNETH CHIN is a law student at the University of Malaya. He is a self-proclaimed foodie whose main areas of interest include football and politics.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DoSM), the crime rate in Malaysia from 2018 to 2022 has been showing a declining trend, notably in violent and property crimes. The overall crime index and commercial crimes showed a decline of 4.1% and 3.0% respectively in 2022, although specific areas like cybercrimes saw increases.

Although the reduction in crime rates cannot be attributed solely to the increase in CCTV surveillance, there has been an obvious correlation between the two. Nonetheless, by comparing the number of CCTV cameras per 1,000 people found in major cities, KL merely has 0.58 CCTV units per 1,000 people, which is a significantly lower amount compared to places like Moscow, London, and major cities in China like Shanghai, Shenzhen and Beijing, and in India like Delhi and Chennai. This number is not yet concerning, and public opinion generally supports surveillance in public areas.

There is, nevertheless, worry that such powers conferred upon enforcement authorities may open up avenues for abuse. For instance, prosecutors have the authority to access and intercept communication monitoring, which include CCTV footage for security and crime prevention purposes. Such broad discretionary powers granted to the prosecutors, if left with insufficient oversight, can lead to privacy infringements. Enforcement authorities can easily exploit reasons such as "preserving national security" or any uncertainty related to security without being held accountable.

Currently, the most suitable independent body that possesses a check-and-balance mechanism is the judiciary. Courts are the ones that can effectively review whether enforcement agencies' actions, when using these surveillance systems, interfere with national security or not. Judiciary independence is essential to ensure that authorities do not act beyond their powers, and that our fundamental rights and liberty are not violated.

An independent supervisory body is another alternative. This can oversee and scrutinise surveillance by the authorities. The system that we can adopt is the one that the UK uses. They have three independent supervisory bodies: the Interception of Communications Commissioner, the Office of Surveillance Commissioners (OSC) and the Intelligence Services Commissioner. These independent bodies are responsible for monitoring compliance with legislations, supporting systemic changes, reporting surveillance activities to the legislature and the public, and enforcing sanctions to prevent abuse.

While not explicitly expressed in our Constitution, privacy is a fundamental liberty. The Constitution is a living document, and it must adapt to the rapid rise of advanced surveillance systems.

CIVILIAN MEMORIES OF WWII

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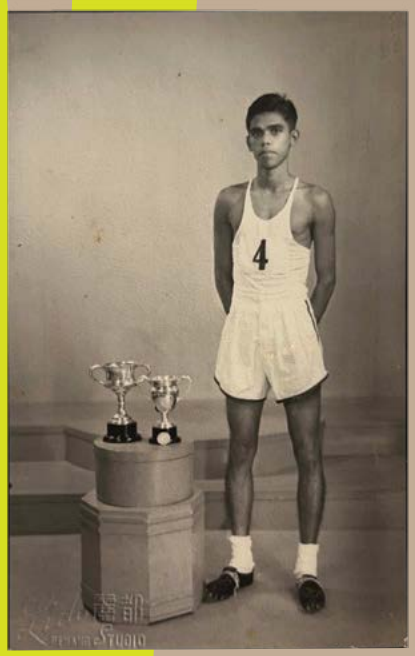

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CAPTIONS

Photo credit: Maitree

1. Photo of Imai-San.
2. Uncle Sarvaes with his champion trophies.
3. Aoyagi presenting Uncle Sarvaes with a Japanese doll.
4. Uncle Sarvaes coaching the hockey team.
5. Uncle Sarvaes and Aunty Indra's wedding photo.
6. Certificates and other documents awarded to Uncle Sarvaes for his excellence in the Japanese language.

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賞狀

三等

6

BY MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA

"I HAVE WAITED a long time to tell my story," said Sarvaesvaran Navaratnam, affectionately known as Uncle Sarvaes, as he sat across from me at the dining table. His eyes have a glimmer—unexpected, perhaps for a 92-year-old man—that somehow made me feel alive. There is a gentle command in his voice and presence, inviting any willing listener into a moment that many cannot, and will not speak of—the harrowing, traumatic experiences of being one of the last survivors of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya.

The Japanese invasion of Malaya occurred just after midnight on 8 December 1941, when over 5,000 troops of the Imperial Japanese Army landed on Sabak Beach, Kota Bharu. A little known fact is that the invasion took place about an hour earlier than the attack on Pearl Harbour, essentially making Malaya the first major Japanese attack of World War II.

Soon after, troops also landed in southern Thailand; the landings in Kota Bharu advanced down the eastern side of the peninsula, while troops in Thailand led the invasion at the west coast. The following day, on 9 December, the first of many air raids on Penang took place, with efforts to neutralise the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) stationed in Butterworth.

Author's Note: This article has been edited for clarity and readability. It is based on interview sessions with Uncle Sarvaes, whose oral history offers a deeply personal account of life during World War II. These stories are part of a broader tapestry of individual, community and collective memory, reflecting the Japanese Occupation's profound and lasting impact on our local history. Readers are encouraged to approach these accounts with respect and an understanding of their historical and cultural significance.

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A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

"I want to start at the beginning. I was nine years old. My family and I were living in Butterworth at the time. The first thing I noticed was the Japanese Zero Fighters that flew over the RAF air base nearby. They dropped some bombs and started to machine gun the place. We saw the Buffalo Fighters taking up the fight, but they were no match to the Zero Fighters—very powerful Japanese planes at the time."

"The Japanese raided Butterworth, and after one or two days, about 24 Japanese bombers attacked the island. They flew over Butterworth and from where we were staying, we counted one… two… three… four… five… 24 bombers! They made a circle, and flew over Penang."

Uncle Sarvaes' recollection mirrors many known community memories of the first few sightings of the Japanese planes flying over the island. During the air raids, civilians were largely left unaffected, and the local population had grown quite used to hearing the air raid sirens and watching air battles.

However, on 11 December, Japanese fighters flew over the island in three groups, in a Vic formation. The people remained in the streets and watched as the enemy circled back and dive-bombed George Town. Immediately after, they returned and machine-gunned people on the streets.

"My elder sister was taking her major exam at Convent Light Street when the bombings began. Thankfully her headmistress told all the students to get under the desks. She escaped the bombing."

"The Japanese had blasted the entire Carnarvon Street right down to Beach Street. I remember her saying she saw many bodies along the street as she made her way back to Butterworth. My wife's grandfather was also returning in a trishaw to work when the bombings began."

Indradevi, also known as Aunty Indra, Uncle Sarvaes' wife, shared her earliest memories about WWII: "I was about nine years old, and my family and I were in Taiping at the time. We could hear the sound of the bombings from there. At first we thought it was thunder, so we went out to see what was happening. But very quickly, my father rushed all of us out of the house, bundled us in his friend's car, and told the driver to take us to his friend's house in a rubber estate nearby so we could go into hiding."

"My grandparents were in Penang, staying along Madras Lane. My grandfather went to Carnarvon Street on a trishaw the day the Japanese bombed George Town. The shrapnel went through his body and he died on the spot. Someone saw him in the trishaw and informed my grandmother, who was at home then.

"His body was taken to the mortuary, stacked alongside all those who lost their life that day. My grandmother went with her sister to the mortuary to look for the body." As her grandfather had a relatively fair complexion, any corpse that fit the profile were pulled out to be identified.

"Eventually, they managed to find my grandfather and took him home. There was no cremation during the time, so they buried him at the Batu Lanchang Cemetery. Somehow, they informed my father. He only had a bicycle; following the railway line, he cycled all the way from Taiping to Butterworth, and then took a *sampan* across to see my grandmother."

Chaos ensued on the streets of George Town, and while the local population dealt with their losses and fled to places like Penang Hill, Jelutong and Air Itam, the British, who were unprepared for the invasion, shifted their efforts toward evacuating the island. The evacuation of armed forces and British civilians from Penang happened swiftly and quietly, leaving the local population at the mercy of the Japanese.

"After the British left, we had no income. So my father started selling newspapers. Two of them were *The Straits Echo* and the *Malay Mail*. I also used to sell the papers with him to support the family. That was how we got the news of what was happening on the island."

Despite the British departure, the Union Jack was still flying at Fort Cornwallis. The bombings continued; Manicasothy Saravanamuttu, then editor of *The Straits Echo,* Harold Speldewinde and Gopal "saved" George Town from further destruction—the three were instrumental in taking down the Union Jack, and raising a white flag in surrender at the Fort. Another individual was Ivan Allen. He took a *sampan* to the mainland and cycled to the Japanese headquarters in Sungai Petani to inform them that the British had left. There were others who read out messages of surrender on the radio to persuade the Japanese to discontinue their bombings. On 19 December, the Japanese took full control of Penang, ending over 150 years of British rule.

"Eventually, things started to settle. The Japanese quickly started their own civil service, and my father became a clerk and we lived in government quarters. The Japanese were strict. If you came late to work, you would have to stand under the sun, facing Japan. I remember my father rushing to work so he wouldn't have to endure any punishment."

Uncle Sarvaes added: "We were able to find a sense of normalcy, and there were no robberies. You could keep your house open at all times. The Japanese were very military-like in governance, and there were harsh punishments if you went against them, so people were generally quite scared and followed the rules."

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"When the schools reopened, I went back to school. My sisters became Japanese teachers, and my brother joined the Japanese civil service. The civil servants were given military training at Chung Ling High School, and my brother was one of them."

JAPANESE FRIENDS

They learnt the language very quickly. As he bonded with some of the Japanese soldiers, his Japanese became better than his English. "I think that was generally true for Indians and Malays, but sadly the situation was different for the Chinese. Because of the war in China, the local Chinese community had it hard—especially the women."

During these tumultuous times, one of Uncle Sarvaes' friends was Imai-san, a Japanese bomber pilot, who made a miniature plane out of one of the propellers from the British plane knocked down during one of the air battles in Butterworth. Uncle Sarvaes' name is engraved on the plane.

"We lived very close to the sea, so my father used to keep the door open for the sea breeze to come in. Everyone else would keep their doors closed. One day, there was a Japanese truck that stopped by; they were running short of water in the radiator. One soldier came with a pail, and seeing that our door wide open, asked if we could give him some water. From that day on, he would come and visit us. Sometimes, he would spend time with mother in the kitchen, where she would teach him how to pound the rice or cook some dishes. He wanted to learn our culture and we wanted to learn his, so we built a good relationship."

Although they adapted quickly to the Occupation—rationing, schooling, activities—the biggest disappointment was that there was no rice. "The Japanese took away all our rice—rice was only for them. But Aoyagi was kind to us, he used to bring us extra provisions like tea and pineapples. And once in a while, he would bring us rice."

"He also used to say that Japan would win the war. I remember my father saying once that the Americans would win the war, and eventually, the British would return. He told my father, 'If you had said that to any other Japanese soldier, he would have had your head chopped off!'"

But Japan did lose the war, and Aoyagi along with other soldiers left soon after. Four years after the Occupation ended, a letter arrived stating that he was returning to Malaya to visit the family.

"When the British came back, we all went to the seaside. As the first boat that came drew closer to shore, they started tossing bread to us. We hadn't seen bread for four years! We caught as much as we could. I think it made us realise how much we suffered, especially when it came to food. I don't know how we survived, living without proper food—especially rice, our staple—was a terrible feeling."

"The war experience was different for everyone. But it moulded us and made us stronger, more resilient, more appreciative of life. It made me not take life for granted, and to live it fully and peacefully."

After the Occupation, Uncle Sarvaes continued his secondary education at Penang Free School. He was an avid cricket and hockey player. Both he and Aunty Indra served as teachers until retirement. Uncle Sarvaes' story is slated to be one of the three that will be featured at the Fort Cornwallis museum opening in 2025.

CAPTIONS

7. Aoyagi and Uncle Sarvaes and their families.
8. Uncle Sarvaes and Aunty Indra today.
9. Uncle Sarvaes and his students.
10. Uncle Sarvaes and his hockey team.

MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA is a dabbler of creative expressions and a budding researcher rooted in sensitivity, vulnerability, faith and human connection. Check out more of her writing on mdev16.wordpress.com.

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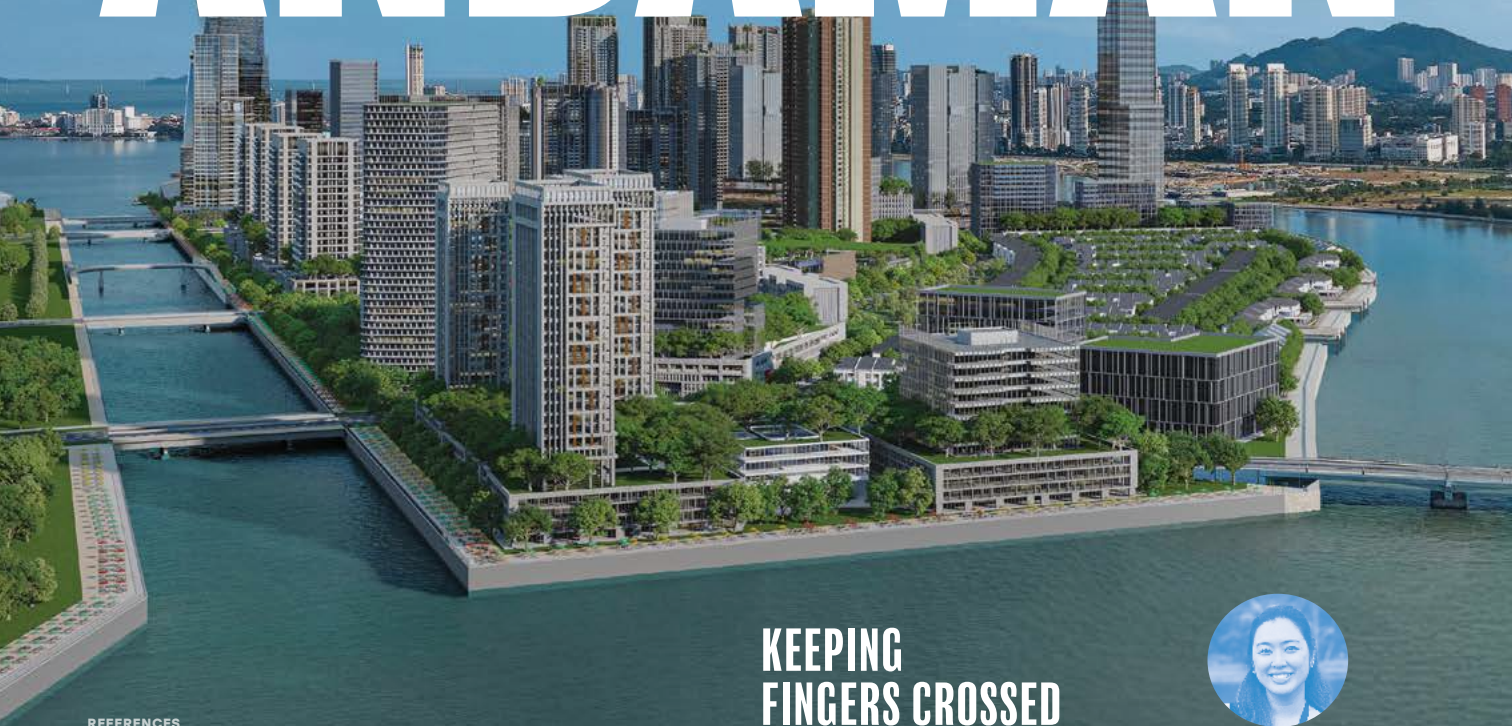
THE ANDAMAN

WE'VE BEEN WAITING for the emergence of this manmade island off the northeastern coast of Penang Island for years. A concept envisioned in 1982 by Lim Chong Eu, Penang's second Chief Minister, it met with stops and starts since the Penang State Government granted a concession for its reclamation and development in 1990. The halt occasioned by the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis looked like the death of a dream, but for many living along the coast, it meant an extended period of unobscured sea views.

Left as-is and far from complete, the land reclamation along the coast was reinstated when Eastern & Oriental Berhad (E&O) assumed the rights, obligations and liabilities of the former concessionaire in 2003. The island had yet to take form when Seri Tanjung Pinang Phase 1 (STP1), the 240-acre reclamation project was completed in 2006.

However, this reclaimed shorefront with an estimated gross development value (GDV) of RM5.5bil consisting of seafront villas, semi-detached homes, luxury condominiums and executive apartments with a side of low- and medium-cost homes seem to pale in comparison to Phase 2. A precursor to a grand finale, Phase 2 has been christened Andaman Island, a 760-acre reclaimed island with an estimated GDV of RM60bil.



KEEPING FINGERS CROSSED FOR PENANG'S NEW ISLAND

BY RACHEL YEOH

RACHEL YEOH is a former journalist who traded her on-the-go job for a life behind the desk. For the sake of work-life balance, she participates in Penang's performing arts scene after hours.

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HIGHLY CURATED ISLAND

When I drove to Andaman Island for what E&O styled as an "immersive experience" for the media, I was met with the settling of thick dust, the rumbling of lorries transporting construction material sending tremors through the ground when they passed me, and mounds of sand a few times my height—the island has not only risen to the surface, it is burgeoning to become a new township.

Already I could see The Meg, which consists of 1,020 units of serviced apartments. Launched in December 2021, all units were sold out within nine months. Next to it was Arica with an additional 380 units of serviced apartments, and Senna and Fera, both landed properties with 137 units across Phases 1 and 2, all of which have been sold out. The Lume, launched in August 2024, a large-format premium condominium development offering units starting from RM2.2mil is seeing encouraging market responses. Their most recent launch is Maris, which offers furnished serviced residences ranging from 979ft² to 1,356ft², located at the waterfront, complete with a promenade.

There will also be 15 luxurious beachfront bungalows, each with its own private marina capable of accommodating two to three boats. These residential developments are located on the first islet completed in December 2019, which covers 102.38ha.

"Phase 1 of the Seri Tanjung Pinang development incorporates commercial hubs, community-oriented facilities and a network of canals. Reclamation work for the second phase, encompassing 205.17ha, is currently underway," Kok Tuck Cheong, the managing director of E&O stated during the media briefing at the show gallery.

The Andaman Island masterplan, guided by the principles of a "15-minute city", was unveiled in November 2024, and features three distinct districts: Shoreline, Gurney Green and Canalside. The Shoreline district emphasises nature-integrated living. A wide rock promenade will be constructed, offering residents a scenic jogging path which also serves as an emergency lane for vehicles such as fire trucks to reach coastal properties in case of emergency. E&O also revealed that the state government has approved for the marina to inculcate a yachting and seafaring lifestyle. Gurney Green, fronting Gurney Drive across a new strait is poised to be a vibrant commercial hub with office spaces and high-end hotels. Canalside faces the other manmade islet, and will be integrated with community-oriented amenities such as shopping malls and F&B outlets with waterfront access. These districts aim to provide residents with a well-rounded and enriching living experience.

To get to the island, I used the Andaman Bridge from Seri Tanjung Pinang; part of the eight-lane link from Gurney Drive to the island is expected to open late this year. According to Kok, connecting Andaman Island via Gurney Drive helps the re-rating of property prices to match those along Gurney, which has one of the highest per square foot prices in Penang. It also improves water channel flushing, allowing natural currents to flow through the created land area.

Every parcel of land on the island has been designated for specific purposes, such as education and religious institutions. To make the island "green", the development incorporates a green sewage treatment plant with the capacity to irrigate both the Andaman islets. E&O also promised space for charging vehicles for all high-rise residences and two electric vehicle (EV) charging stations for each landed unit. Only EV busses will ply the island and dedicated lanes for residents and separate lanes for construction vehicles will enhance safety and minimise environmental impact. There is also a total of 53 acres of green area across the island dedicated for use by residents.

Indeed, it appears to be the most curated island in Penang.

NOT HOLISTIC ENOUGH

If you could curate an island where you develop from the ground up—all terrains artificially built to accommodate anything you want—with endless possibilities, how would you do it?

Of course you'd have to take into account residential and economic demands. More important is how to draw people into the island so that the units—housing or commercial—are taken up. The draw, naturally, are amenities and entertainment. While the amenities slated by the E&O prove to be sufficient, I was eager to know what was planned for entertainment. I crossed my fingers hoping that it wouldn't just be—"a shopping mall, restaurant and cafes along the canal," Kok said, as the thought crossed my mind. I pursed my lips in disappointment.

I raised my hand to ask if there are other types of entertainment, particularly surrounding art and culture, seeing that just 10 minutes away from the Gurney Bridge is the heritage enclave. Kok replied in the negative, explaining that after supporting the Performing Arts Centre of Penang (penangpac) for a decade (2012-2022), he could see that the general public was not interested in the arts.

"Over time, if the market demands it—it has to be in line with the market demands—we will consider it. Of course, everything we do has to meet with certain principles and criteria—although it does not necessarily always subscribe to financial feasibility, these initiatives should primarily be community-driven—something we will follow through," Kok added.

In a separate interview, Khoo Suet Leng, a town planner and an expert in creative cities and urban heritage conservation, noted that the makings of a holistic township include blue bodies, green bodies, and most recently, the orange economy (the creative culture aspect). Khoo, who has taken a good look at the Andaman masterplan, told *Penang Monthly* that, undeniably, what E&O has done is considered world-class planning and urban design, "incorporating what we planners could only dream of". However, having said that, she added that the creative culture aspect is also crucial. "Only then can you say that your township is more holistic or integrated."

As Penang bulldozes its way toward further new developments—with the exception of George Town (for obvious reasons)— it is good to note that according to a report last year by Historic England, being exposed to local heritage improves mental and emotional health. I quote World Cities Cultures Forum's analyses on the report: "The Report shows day-to-day encounters with local heritage can be just as valuable for citizen wellbeing as visiting one of the seven wonders of the world or iconic places such as Sydney Opera House, Westminster Abbey in London or Christ the Redeemer Statue in Rio de Janeiro," and that the estimation of "the overall wellbeing value of heritage visits is worth GBP29 bil every year in England, supporting citizen life satisfaction and pre-empting long-term clinical interventions."

While I am not here to present possible health or psychological effects from the lack of exposure to local culture and heritage (it is an artificial island after all), I do see the value of latching on to existing ones we have on the big island. Khoo may agree, having stated during the interview that a place without culture and heritage would be soulless.

"I was invited to be part of the Nusantara research project team in Indonesia because of the work I do with regards to creative cities. I told them that you can have your smart, sustainable, innovative city, but at the same time, you need to have your creative elements inside—because it involves people. Even if you don't build on previous culture, even new places, new cultures can exist, but right now we also need to look at critical mass—there needs to be enough people to give birth to a new culture."

As of now, a majority of the units launched on Andaman have been sold. With the absence of creative culture aspects fed from the "mother island" in the masterplan, only time and population size will tell if Andaman is set to birth its own unique culture.

TEW

> **"Through movement, words and visuals, they embody the intangible, giving shape to the silenced voices of victims —the process of losing, of searching and of rebuilding one's sense of self."**

WHAT TO DO WHEN THERE IS NO LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

1

BY MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA

HOW DOES ONE begin to tell the story of a victim of bullying? Empathy may allow us to glimpse the edges of their pain, but can we ever truly know its weight—the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual toll of being coerced, hurt and diminished by abuse, aggression or cruel words? How do you convey the dragging heaviness of desolation or the invisible bruises that mark the individual?

Yet, theatre and performance makers across the world have long turned to the stage as a platform to confront this darkness. Through movement, words and visuals, they embody the intangible, giving shape to the silenced voices of victims—the process of losing, of searching and of rebuilding one's sense of self.

Tewas: No Light at the End of the Tunnel takes on the burden of telling these stories and much more. It was an intense experience: urgent, determined and unflinchingly intentional. To witness *Tewas* was to witness the lives of people no longer with us, each narrative a raw unfolding of torture, abuse, resistance, surrender and the eventual letting go.

The production tackled the harrowing realities of bullying and suicide fearlessly. But these were also Malaysian stories—accounts that once dominated headlines and gripped the nation. Those who followed these cases closely would have been able to recognise the events on which these narratives were based—the murder of Navy Cadet Officer Zulfarhan Osman Zulkarnain in June 2017 and the death of a 16-year-old girl in Sarawak who conducted an Instagram poll asking her followers if she should take her own life. 69% of her followers supported her decision to kill herself via the voting poll uploaded. Another case I assume to be referenced is more recent—Tay Tien Yaa, the 30-year-old head of the Chemical Pathology Unit in Lahad Datu, whose cause of death was linked to alleged workplace bullying.

Visceral and dynamic, *Tewas* demanded constant attention. The unpredictability of movements kept me on edge; yet, within the chaos, patterns of choreography would emerge, creating deliberate tension between structure and disorder. It was more than theatre; it was a bold statement which forced its audience to confront the weight of societal failure and the silent struggles of its victims.

Each actor delivered a monologue encapsulating a victim's story, thus holding space and giving voice to those often unheard. In a country where little room is given for such experiences to be shared and understood without judgement, this approach felt particularly significant.

The performers made commendable efforts to embody their characters. While each monologue took centre stage, the rest of the cast supported the performer with intricate physical sequences to create an arresting interplay of movement and speech. However, this dual focus also highlighted an imbalance. On the one hand, I was deeply impressed by the physicality and choreography, which pushed boundaries and kept me visually engaged. It truly was the highlight of the piece. On the other hand, I found myself yearning for stronger storytelling. The play was marketed as "raw storytelling", and while it succeeded in presenting accessible and uncomplicated narratives, some of the emotional displays felt unrefined.

As a result, the physical performances often overshadowed the narratives. While the movement conveyed powerful emotions, I found myself more drawn to the choreography than to the stories it was meant

2

to complement. In some instances, the storytelling felt secondary—almost like a supporting device. Having said that, I did find that the pieces performed by Hong and Almond struck a delicate balance between movement and storytelling. Their performances were marked by emotional depth and a sense of performative restraint, which made their stories impactful.

The set design was simple yet symbolic. At its core was the cage—a central element of the production, and far more than just a prop. At times, the cage felt like a character in its own right, brought to life through the actors' movements with and around it: falling from it, crawling through it, circling it and climbing over one another in desperate attempts to escape it. They wrestled with the cage, clung to it, detached from it and used it to physically articulate their struggles. It seemed to represent multiple states of being: body, mind, emotions. At moments, it reflected the weight of others' words and actions—the bullying, societal indifference, systemic injustices and failures. This layered symbolism was one of the production's most brilliant achievements, adding both emotional and visual depth to the themes.

The choreography, by Izzard Padzil, who also served as the scenographer, was purposeful, not only in the dynamic relationships between the actors, but also in their relationship with this symbolic structure. The combination of physical theatre and raw storytelling revealed the complex and layered nature of bullying. In many ways, *Tewas* illustrated that it is rarely a single event or act, but often a culmination of factors that build and ultimately lead to tragedy.

Another strength of the show was the multilingual approach, with the narratives delivered in Malay, Tamil, Mandarin and English. Each language brought an emotional resonance, and further grounding these stories in the Malaysian landscape. The performance and delivery by Hakim in Malay stood out for its restraint and steady deliberate pace, which conveyed a stoic composure while brimming with inner anguish. All that while, the actor was upside down for most of his piece!

Similarly, the performances in Tamil and Mandarin brought a gravity that reminded me of the emotional weight languages have when spoken authentically. While I cannot speak for the writing process, these pieces underscored how language itself can evoke a depth of feeling that no translation can quite capture.

Tewas deserves to make its rounds locally and internationally. However, I believe it should go beyond the traditional theatre crowd into education settings to spark conversations about bullying and suicide prevention. But this also raises an important question: can productions like *Tewas* lead to actionable change? And what might that look like?

I suppose one way would be to advocate for bullying prevention programmes in educational settings or having productions like *Tewas* set in schools. Or we could educate ourselves on recognising the signs of bullying and mental health struggles, committing to offer support where needed. This might mean stepping up as mentors, volunteering in anti-bullying organisations or even checking in with friends, colleagues and family to create a culture of care, empathy and kindness.

As much as the play asks its audience to reckon with these questions, it also asks us to take action. While the light at the end of the tunnel may be elusive for some, *Tewas* serves as a reminder that change begins with us.

CAPTIONS

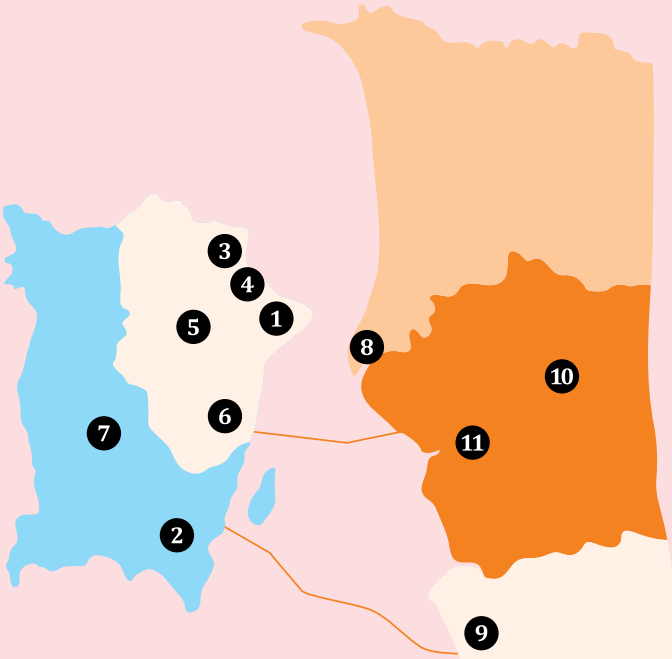
Photo credit: JDev Studios

1. (Cover spread) The actors in *Tewas* employ a single cage as their only prop, symbolising confinement and struggle throughout their performance.

2. Almond delivering a powerful monologue during *Tewas*.

MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA is a dabbler of creative expressions and a budding researcher rooted in sensitivity, vulnerability, faith and human connection. Check out more of her writing on mdev16.wordpress.com.

HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



PICK-UP SPOTS
KL/SELANGOR

◯ Kuala Lumpur
Hubba Hubba Mont Kiara
The Godown Arts Centre

◯ Petaling Jaya
Temu House
Yin's Sourdough Bakery and Café

◯ Subang Jaya
Sunway University
(Students Study Area)

PICK-UP SPOTS
PENANG

1 George Town
Areca Books
Book Island @ COEX
Infinity 8,
Black Kettle
BookXcess Gurney Paragon
ChinaHouse
Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion
(Blue Mansion)
Gerakbudaya Bookshop
@ Hikayat
Gurney Plaza
(Information Counter)
Hin Bus Depot Art Centre
Huey & Wah Café
Le Petit Four Patisserie
More by Arang Coffee
Penang Institute
Penang Island City Council
(Komtar Level 3)
Penang Island Municipal Council
Pusat Harmoni
(Harmonico)—Reception
Ren I Tang Heritage Inn
Sin Seh Kai Artisan Bakery
Tourist Information Centre
32 Mansion

2 Bayan Lepas
Arang Coffee
InvestPenang
Penang Development
Corporation (PDC)
Penang Skills
Development Centre (PSDC)
Spices by Yin's
Urban Republic

3 Tanjung Bungah
Gusto Café
Straits Mini Mart
Tenby International School
Yin's WholeFood Manufactory
(Lembah Permai)

4 Tanjung Tokong
Blue Reef Straits Quay

5 Air Itam
Coffee Elements
Penang Hill—Lower Station

6 Gelugor
E-Gate (Security Desk
located at the building's
middle span)
Penang Youth
Development Corporation
(PYDC)
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Hamzah Sendut Library 1
(Main Entrance Foyer)

9 Batu Kawan
IKEA Batu Kawan

10 Bukit Mertajam
Seberang Perai Municipal Council

11 Juru
AUTO CITY
Management Office

READING SPOTS
PENANG

1 George Town
Bricklin Café Bar
Consumers' Association
of Penang
Forward College
G Hotel
Kim Haus
Komichi Tea House
Mugshot Café
Narrow Marrow
Penang Public Library
USM Library
Wheeler's Café

4 Tanjung Tokong
Leo Books

7 Balik Pulau
Botanica Mansion
Nada Natural Farming

8 Butterworth
Artichoke Café

9 Batu Kawan
Peninsula College

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making ideas work

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