

PENANG MONTHLY



MAR 2025 | FREE COPY

FEATURE

**SEXUAL HARASSMENT:
THE IMPORTANCE OF
EARLY PREVENTIVE
MEASURES**

FEATURE

**OIL AND OPPRESSION:
WOMEN'S STRUGGLES IN
THE PALM OIL INDUSTRY**

PENANG PROFILE

**ZARIZANA ABDUL AZIZ:
UNCOVERING
GENDER BIASES
AND HIGHLIGHTING
WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

PROTECTING WOMEN



X

PENANG MONTHLY

HELP US BRAILLE PENANG MONTHLY

Help us make *Penang Monthly* accessible to the blind and visually impaired community.


Your donation will help:

- Expand reading materials: Increase the availability of braille materials.
- Support St. Nicholas' Home: Contribute to the library at St. Nicholas' Home.
- Empower the visually impaired: Provide opportunities for personal learning, growth and enjoyment.

SCAN THIS CODE
TO DONATE



Each Braille issue costs approx. RM100 to produce.

FOR MORE INFO  <https://snh.org.my/donations/braille-penang-monthly>

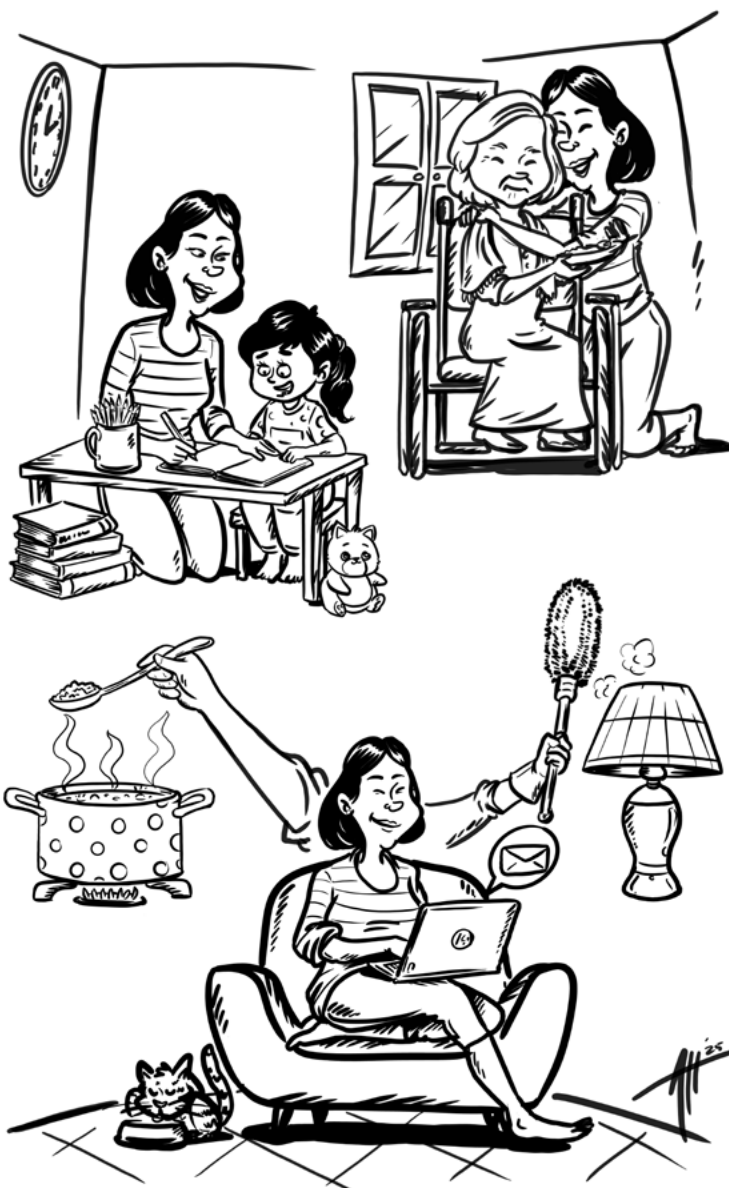
PENANG MONTHLY

THE PENANG MONTHLY ENDEAVORS TO BE THE VOICE OF PENANG AND AN INSPIRING READ FOR THE CURIOUS MALAYSIAN. A PUBLICATION OF PENANG INSTITUTE, IT AIMS TO:

- 1 Supply Penangites with information about significant issues in order to promote public participation;
- 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;
- 5 Highlight the importance of Penang as a generator of culture, education, industry and cosmopolitan values;
- 6 Emphasise present trends in the arts, industry, politics and economics which affect the immediate future of the state and country; and
- 7 Offer reliable socioeconomic data for the benefit of decision makers in government and the private sector.

LIKE WHAT WE DO? SUPPORT US!

Penang Institute is a non-profit organisation, relying mainly on research grants and donations. To keep us up and running, and to continuously give you the latest scoop on economic and cultural trends every month, you can make a contribution to Penang Institute. Tax exemption receipts will be given for donations above RM100. Please contact business@penangmonthly.com for more information.



INVISIBLE LABOUR

By Azmi Hussin

HANDY PHONE NUMBERS

POLICE & AMBULANCE

999

FIRE

994

RESCUE

991

PENANG ISLAND

CITY COUNCIL (MBPP)

04-259 2020

MBPP HOTLINE

04-263 7637 / 04-263 7000

SEBERANG PERAI CITY

COUNCIL (MBSP)

04-549 7555

MBSP 24H FREE TOLL

1-800-88-6777

POLICE HEADQUARTERS

04-222 1522

PENANG HILL RAILWAY

04-828 8880

PENANG BRIDGE HOTLINE

04-398 7419

BUTTERWORTH RAILWAY STATION

04-391 0050

INCOME TAX (LHDN)

04-255 2000 (George Town)

04-584 7000 (Bukit Mertajam)

04-578 3930 (Seberang Perai)

CUSTOMS' OFFICE

04-262 2300

IMMIGRATION OFFICE

04-262 2300

04-250 3414 (George Town)

04-397 3011 (Seberang Perai)

STATE SECRETARY OFFICE

04-262 1957

EMPLOYEES PROVIDENT FUND (EPF)

04-226 1000 (George Town)

SOCIAL SECURITY (SOCSO)

04-238 9888 (George Town)

04-388 7666 (Seberang Perai)

ROAD TRANSPORT

DEPARTMENT (JPJ)

04-656 4131 (Batu Uban)

04-392 7777 (Seberang Perai)

NATIONAL REGISTRATION

DEPARTMENT (JPN)

04-226 5161

DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR

04-262 5536 (George Town)

04-575 1957 (Seberang Perai)

MALAYSIAN RED CRESCENT

SOCIETY NON-EMERGENCY

AMBULANCE SERVICE

011-5767 0917/011-5767 0916

CONSUMER ASSOCIATION

OF PENANG

04-829 9511

WOMEN'S CENTRE FOR CHANGE

04-228 0342

CHILDREN'S PROTECTION SOCIETY

04-829 4046

BEFRIENDERS

04-291 0100

SPCA

04-281 6559

PENANG PUBLIC LIBRARY

CORPORATION

04-397 1058

A SAFER WORLD FOR WOMEN

NEXT MONTH ON *PENANG MONTHLY*

RENEWABLE ENERGY

EDITOR

Ooi Kee Beng

ASSISTANT EDITORS

Sheryl Teoh and Rachel Yeoh

COMMUNICATIONS

Iylia de Silva

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

OGL Consultancy

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

Kai Fam and Kevin Teh

PRINTER

The Phoenix Press Sdn Bhd (1723K)
2509 Jalan Perusahaan Baru,
Prai Industrial Complex,
13600 Prai, Penang, Malaysia.

GENERAL ENQUIRIES & CONTRIBUTIONS

editor@penangmonthly.com or
contact +604 228 3306 (Extension 224 or 225)

BUSINESS ENQUIRIES

business@penangmonthly.com

PUBLISHER

PENANG
INSTITUTE
making ideas work

10 Brown Road,
10350 Penang, Malaysia

T +604 228 3306

F +604 226 7042

IG @PenangMonthly

FB fb.com/penangmonthly

W penangmonthly.com

@ All rights reserved by the
Penang Institute (199701008164).

No part of this publication may be reproduced
in any form without the publisher's explicit
permission. The views expressed in this publication
are not necessarily those of the Penang Institute
(199701008164) or Penang Monthly.

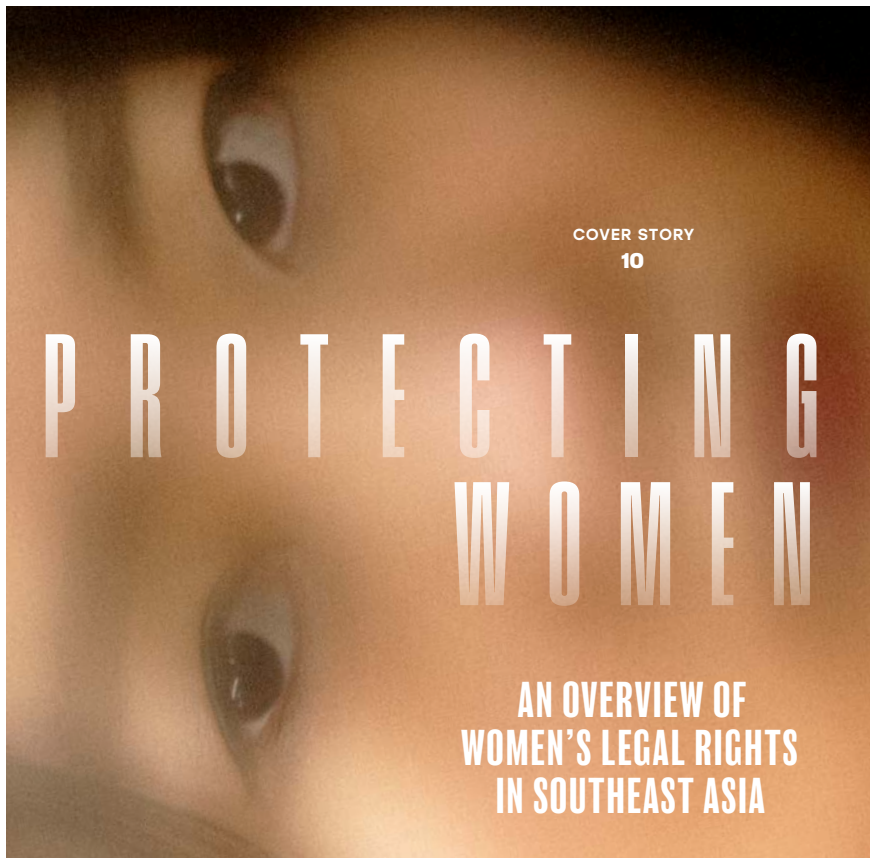
While every care has been taken, the publisher will not
be held liable for errors, inaccuracies, or omissions.
Unsolicited material is submitted at sender's risk.

ISSN 2232-0733 03



PP 14554/11/2012 (031123)

MCI (P) 116/12/2012



COVER STORY

10

PROTECTING WOMEN

AN OVERVIEW OF
WOMEN'S LEGAL RIGHTS
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

EDITORIAL

Simple Tools for Taming Your
Prejudices

4

FEATURE

UNICEF: Female Household
Heads Face Greater
Socio-economic Challenges

6



FEATURE

8

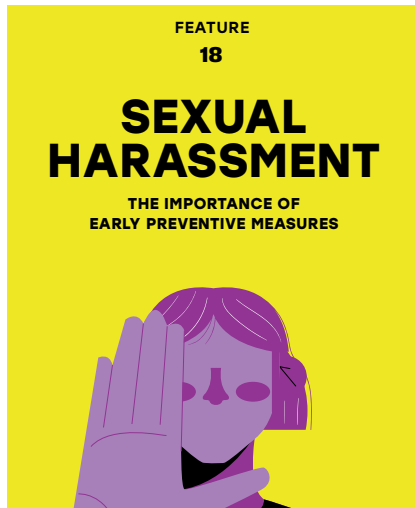
OIL AND OPPRESSION

WOMEN'S
STRUGGLES
IN THE
PALM OIL
INDUSTRY

FEATURE

Women-Focused NGOs: Better Working Together

16



FEATURE
18

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

THE IMPORTANCE OF
EARLY PREVENTIVE MEASURES

PENANG PROFILE
20

ZARIZANA ABDUL AZIZ

UNCOVERING
GENDER BIASES
AND HIGHLIGHTING
WOMEN'S RIGHTS



PEAKS AND PARKS
36

EXPLORING
PENANG'S
FRONTIER IN

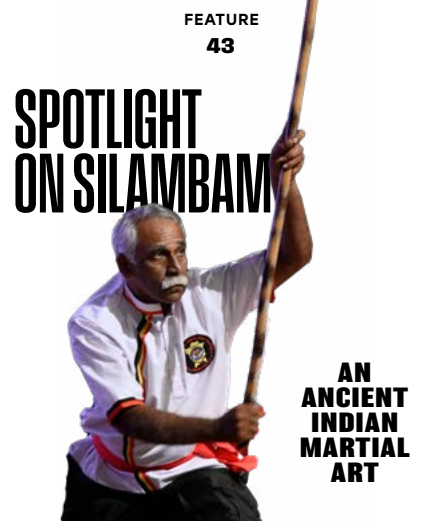
BUKIT PANCHOR STATE PARK



FEATURE

Ooi Eow Jin: A Humble Virtuoso in Malaysia's Music History

40



FEATURE
43

SPOTLIGHT ON SILAMBAM

AN
ANCIENT
INDIAN
MARTIAL
ART

LEST WE FORGET
46

THE BOMBING OF PENANG

A FERRY SERVICE WORKER'S
EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF
JAPANESE AIR RAIDS IN 1941



FEATURE

Are Beauty Pageants Out of Date?

24

DAY IN THE LIFE

ElShaddai Centre:
Working Against the Tide
in Aid of Desperate Refugees

26

LEST WE FORGET

Colonial Penang's Southern
Frontier: Tin, Treaties and the
Pangkor Connection

28

FEATURE

The T'ng Tok Panjang
in Ancestral Worship

32



... deep-seated
cultural norms, weak
enforcement and
social stigma continue
to leave many women
vulnerable to abuse
and discrimination.

—IYLIA DE SILVA
(IN "PROTECTING WOMEN:
AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S LEGAL
RIGHTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA")

LIFESTYLE

Pickleball, Anyone?
Young or Old?

50

LIFESTYLE

Lifestyle and Function:
Furniture and Décor
Shopping in Penang

52

FOR ARTS' SAKE

Art That Heals:
H3RO Sedekad Connects Visitors
to Familial Roots and Bonds

54

SIMPLE TOOLS FOR TAMING YOUR PREJUDICES

BY OOI KEE BENG

I AM STRONGLY convinced that as long as children continue to be brought up to learn behaviours and imbibe ideas that certain groups of humans are inherently worth less than others, we can expect human civilisation to not be much more than an exercise in Damage Control.

I am also convinced that attitudes of superiority—if they did not stem from feelings of insecurity, which they often do—sooner or later cultivate fear vis-à-vis those one dismisses as beings not worth the respect of a peer and a fellow human being. This fear may guise itself as disgust and aversion, mainly because one is guilty of metaphorically throwing the first punch whenever one thinks of others as being inferior through no fault of their own.



The truth is, biases and prejudices are the building blocks of hate, be that in the context of gender, race or class.”

After reading those first two paragraphs, you, dear reader, are probably thinking of people you meet or have to deal with who are of another ethnic background (this is of course deeply tied to class background where group biases are concerned). But let me hold you back a bit here. Let us look closer. You do not have to leave the four walls of your home to realise that your ideas and behaviours often follow received patterns of behaviour which are not based on equal treatment of the other.

What biases do we conserve and preserve in how we treat—or think of—a husband or wife, son, daughter, parent, brother or sister? These relationships are so close and immediate that it is hard for us to recognise them, let alone psychoanalyse them. But not recognising them means that we cannot re-cognate them; we cannot reflect on them.

Out in society, in interpersonal engagements in general, bias and prejudice are most easily recognised as bullying, as coercion, as harassment, as persecution—one could go on—as victimisation, as discrimination, as oppression. In all cases, they are hurtful behaviours, to say the least.

Now, within the home, at least two major dimensions open to bias are apparent. One is gender, and the other is age. How do men in your family treat women? And vice versa. How do members in your family treat the very young or the very old? And vice versa in any crisscross fashion.

It all gets rather complicated. And since these biases are common, culturally accepted and almost unconscious given that the role plays are ongoing, how is anyone supposed to be able to step off-stage and cry time-out? We are all deeply complicit to some extent or this issue wouldn't be a problem.

Let me suggest three ways of effectuating a time-out, of stepping off-stage, or of slowing down the bullying behaviour we are prone to exercise on a daily basis. At the very least, they allow for some serious self-reflection.

PROVIDE MUTUAL AID

The first is Mutual Aid. I shall not in this present context go too much into the history of this term, which emanated mainly from Anarchist thought, and from Evolutionary theory, except to highlight the idea of cooperation and collaboration in human relations. This is more a matter of attitude and approach. Not thinking this way usually leaves us with the need to compete and to contest.

In sports, competition is arranged to be among equals. In life, that is far from always the case.

In collaboration and cooperation, empathy is needed. One should ask of oneself, when gaining some advantage over another: “In fairness, what do they get, what should they get when benefiting me?”

So a husband and wife, however long they may have been married, should each of them stop, reflect and recognise whether they have been collaborating all along, or whether they have been manipulating each other's biases and benefiting from weaknesses, one over the other.

APPLY THE GOLDEN RULE

The second is to exercise The Golden Rule. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Or less pretentiously, “Do not do unto others what you do not wish done unto you.” The attitude is clearly different, but that discussion is for another day.

What is salient to this present discussion is the time-out possibility. Before you act, stop to consider the impact on others. Does it hurt them? Does it hurt their soul? Does it perpetuate a bias that keeps them in their place? Is it a cheap shot on your part taken to gain an advantage offered by an established inequity? An injustice?

DON'T CONCLUDE, HYPOTHESISE INSTEAD

The third is to think of prejudices as hypotheses. What makes a negative conclusion about some person or group a prejudice and not a hypothesis is the silent—or insidious—wish to exercise unfair advantage. We look no further once we have adopted a prejudice. But if we consider an idea about others to be a hypothesis lacking validation or further interrogation, then we realise that we still have some way yet to go. We become humble, instead of arrogant. We understand that any idea is forever tentative, prone to suffer from incomplete facts, unfinished thought or insufficient perspective.

As a final note, do not misunderstand me. I may be discussing biases and prejudices as daily events; that may make them sound almost harmless. Or just annoying. The truth is, biases and prejudices are the building blocks of hate, be that in the context of gender, race or class. Let's make no mistake on that front. I am not talking only about the individual. Prejudices are collective creations. Like hate, they are a group phenomenon.

Conclusion? You hate because you are a lazy thinker.



UN FEMALE HOUSEHOLD HEADS FACE GREATER SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

ALTHOUGH THE GLOBAL economy has largely recovered since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, lingering socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are still largely felt by low-income communities. With increasing costs of living in post-pandemic conditions, these families are feeling the brunt more than ever. These effects are particularly prominent for women and children in low-income households.

Many women were among the first to feel the impact when the economy shut down during the pandemic. In Penang, many of them worked in the retail and hospitality sectors as well as in domestic work—fields characterised by limited job security, minimal benefits along with inadequate and unequal pay. These job insecurities persist, and it is undeniable that female-headed households often face greater challenges compared to male-headed households.

In a study conducted by UNICEF and Penang Institute, it was found that a higher percentage of female household heads had exited the labour force even though they were facing the challenges of high costs of living.^[1] Some were due to the loss of employment, while 16.1% left the labour force due to family responsibilities. Only 66.9% of female household heads remained employed throughout the survey period, while a larger percentage of male household heads (88.6%) managed to maintain steady employment.

This disparity was corroborated by an odds ratio analysis, which indicated that female heads were 64% less likely to be employed. Such findings suggest that men are able to withstand employment turbulence better than women, and that systemic inequalities in the labour market disproportionately affect women. These inequalities were likely intensified by other factors such as gender pay gaps, the lack of affordable child-care options, and socio-cultural expectations around domestic work and family responsibilities. Furthermore, the study also found unemployment to be a critical risk factor for households falling into the bottom 1%. As such, higher unemployment rates among female household heads imply that these women were more likely to fall within the lowest household income percentile.

Female-headed households were also found to have lower levels of social protection. In the survey, 46.6% of female heads of households lacked any form of social or labour protection. The proportion of those

ICEF

BY
YEONG
PEY
JUNG

with access to EPF (Employee Provident Fund) or pension schemes was also lower compared to their male counterparts. This was further compounded by the findings that female household heads were less likely to hold full-time employment, hence suffering less social or labour protection.

Full-time homemakers were even less socially protected. Although the government has set up social protection policies for homemakers such as i-Suri,^[2] the contribution remains voluntary, and not all homemakers have registered for the scheme.^[3] Therefore, there is still a strong need to implement more targeted social safety nets to ensure that female-led households are able to weather economic storms.

In comparison to male household heads, female household heads also self-reported poorer standards of living, with more of them reporting “bad” or “very bad” living standards. The percentage of women who were somewhat satisfied with their standards of living were 10 percentage points lower than their male counterparts. A higher proportion of female household heads also indicated declining standards of living within the survey period. An odds ratio analysis further confirmed this observation, finding that female household heads were 42% less likely to be satisfied with their standard of living than male household heads.

FINANCE: MEN- VS. WOMEN-LED HOUSEHOLDS

Women-led households were also found to be less financially secure. More than 70% of these deemed their monthly household income to be insufficient, with 26.6% stating that their income was significantly insufficient. Overall, less than one third of female-headed households felt financially secure. At the same time, 40.2% of male-headed households felt that their income was sufficient to maintain household expenses.

The level of savings was equally precarious for women-headed households. A worrying 75% of female household heads indicated that they had no savings and were living hand-to-mouth, day by day. Those who had savings of up to 10% of their monthly income were a mere 24%. Although the majority of male-headed households also reported that they had no savings, the percentage of those with at least 10% of savings were higher than their female counterparts. Female household heads also expressed a higher level of concern about household savings, with this worry increasing further in households with young children.

Moreover, the double burden of work and family responsibilities often disproportionately fall upon

women. As previously noted, 16.1% of female household heads chose to drop out of the labour force because of family responsibilities. In contrast, none of the male household heads took up family duties at the expense of their employment. It must be noted that caregiving responsibilities do not lessen if women remain in the workforce.

Within female-headed households, it was found that care work was taken up by female household members, with nearly half of female household heads (49.5%) assuming the duty themselves. Additionally, female household members were also the primary caretaker for 70% of male-headed households. As such, it is evident that women are still expected to take care of household chores and family wellbeing, even if they hold full-time jobs. This has led to women mostly bearing the mental burden of caretaker fatigue, particularly if the household had children and elderly or disabled family members that needed care. The stress levels are likely even greater for women who are the sole providers of their households, even more so for single mothers.

IS THERE SECURITY FOR THEIR FUTURE?

Female household heads expressed significantly higher levels of concern about their households’ future compared to male household heads. Furthermore, this level of worry among female heads of households increased notably over a six-month period. On the other hand, male household heads were four times more likely to feel positive about their households’ future. Increasing costs of living, financial constraints and caregiving responsibilities ranked high as the main sources of worry for female household heads.

The challenges faced by female household heads in low income families are often compounded by the disadvantages mentioned above. Therefore, there exists a critical need for action to better support them. A comprehensive approach, beginning with government policies that fully support training and upskilling for women to improve their employment prospects, is required. In addition, social safety nets for female household heads and homemakers need to be strengthened to offer them greater security. Finally, there must be universal access to affordable childcare, specifically for low-income female-headed households. This would help alleviate caregiving burdens, allowing them to participate in the workforce and improve their economic stability and financial independence.

FOOTNOTES

[1] UNICEF and Penang Institute. (2023). Families on the Edge, Penang, retrieved from <https://penanginstitute.org/publications/reports-and-papers/unicef-penang-institute-families-on-the-edge-final-report/>

[2] i-Suri is a voluntary contribution programme for women registered in the National Poverty Data Bank (eKasih) including housewives, widows, single mothers and single women.

[3] The Malaysian Reserve (2023). 489,780 housewives registered under i-Suri, retrieved from <https://themalayianreserve.com/2023/05/23/489780-housewives-registered-under-i-suri/>

“
Female-headed households were also found to have lower levels of social protection. In the survey, 46.6% of female heads of households lacked any form of social or labour protection.”



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.

OIL AND OPPRESSION: WOMEN'S STRUGGLES IN THE PALM OIL INDUSTRY

BY
NISHA KUMARAVEL

PALM OIL IS the lifeblood of Malaysia's economy, contributing USD37.4bil in exports in 2022 alone.^[1] This supports a wide range of industries, from food production to cosmetics, and the sector employs over 391,000 foreign workers, of which 74% are from Indonesia.^[2]

However, this prosperity is frequently built upon the exploitation of underpaid, overworked and often overlooked workers, particularly women. The latter group tend to face unsafe conditions, wage theft, and relentless physical and emotional demands.^[3]

Malaysia's palm oil industry is the second-largest in the world, producing 31% of the global total of 87.39 million tonnes in 2022, accounting for 49% of palm oil exports.^[4] However, the wealth generated rarely reaches the workers who sustain the industry. This deeply rooted issue can be traced back to the colonial era, when large-scale plantations were established to meet global demand, relying on imported South Asian labour.^{[5][6]}

WOMEN IN MALAYSIA'S PLANTATIONS

KAVITHA'S* STRUGGLE WITH WORKPLACE HAZARDS

Kavitha's work on a palm oil plantation is physically demanding and incessant. Her day begins at sunrise, hauling heavy sacks of palm fruit under the oppressive tropical heat. Workers like her endure constant exposure to the chemicals used to maintain the crops, with little to no protective gear provided. Safety briefings are non-existent, and the risks are downplayed by management.

One morning, Kavitha's skin began to burn and her chest tighten after working near a field freshly sprayed with chemicals. Reporting her symptoms to her supervisor yielded no action. He dismissed her complaints as "mild" and reminded her that meeting production targets was more important. With no financial support for medical care, she was forced to rely on home remedies and endure the discomfort.

Over time, her health declined, with persistent respiratory issues making her daily tasks even harder. But leaving the job was not an option. Speaking out could lead to dismissal, and the lack of union representation leaves workers powerless.

MEENAKSHI'S* BATTLE WITH HARASSMENT AND ABUSE

Meenakshi was the target of harassment by her supervisor since the first week of work. Unwelcome remarks and subtle threats escalated into her being assigned the most grueling tasks. The male-dominated environment left her isolated, with few allies willing to intervene.

When Meenakshi rejected her supervisor's advances, the retaliation became more overt. She was publicly humiliated during team meetings and fre-

FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://gapki.id/en/news/2024/02/12/feature-expecting-special-palm-oil-board-from-the-next-govt/>

[2] <https://prestasisawit.mpob.gov.my/en/palmnews/news/34416>

[3] <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/eliminating-vulnerability-female-workers-exploitation-palm-oil-and>

[4] <https://www.pmo.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/8-Nov-2023-THE-MPOB-INTERNATIONAL-PALM-OIL-CONGRESS-AND-EXHIBITION-PIPOC-2023.pdf>

quently sent to work in dangerous areas. The plantation's complaint system was little more than a formality. Previous cases had resulted in workers losing their jobs or facing social ostracism.

Meenakshi considered contacting outside organisations for help, but feared repercussions. Many women who speak out against such treatment find themselves blacklisted, with no means to support their families. Without systemic reform and enforcement of workplace protections, her story remains all too common among women in the palm oil industry.

SITI'S* DESCENT FROM HOPE TO DESPAIR

Siti left her home in Indonesia with the hope of providing a better future for herself and her family. She was promised a stable and well-paying job on a plantation in Malaysia. However, the reality she encountered was far from the promises made to her. Trapped in a cycle of debt, Siti was forced to pay the recruiter who had arranged her travel and accommodation with her wages. All the salary she earned went toward clearing the debt, leaving her with nothing for herself or her loved ones.

The financial strain took a heavy toll on Siti's mental health. Anxiety and depression became constant companions as she struggled to find any sense of hope in her situation. The oppressive atmosphere of the plantation drained her motivation, and the dream of a better future slowly faded.

LEGAL AND POLICY REFORMS: WHERE DO THEY FALL SHORT?

Legal reforms such as the Employment Act^[7] and the Occupational Safety and Health Act^[8] (OSHA) in Malaysia have made strides in improving workers' rights and safety. However, these laws often fall short due to poor enforcement and loopholes. For example, while the Employment Act sets limits on working hours and provides for basic benefits, many plantation workers, particularly women, are excluded due to their employment status as "temporary" or "contract" workers. Additionally, although OSHA mandates safety measures, enforcement is weak, and violations are rarely addressed, leaving workers vulnerable to unsafe conditions. The lack of stringent inspections and penalties allows exploitative practices to persist, undermining the intent of these reforms.

Debt bondage, a practice supposedly outlawed, remains rampant, perpetuated by recruitment agents and plantation managers exploiting enforcement gaps. Despite minimum wage laws, unlawful deductions and exploitative practices leave plantation workers struggling to make ends meet. The economic precarity extends beyond wages—plantation workers often live in employer-provided housing, usually cramped quarters shared by multiple families. Access to clean water is a luxury, and medical facilities are often several hours away.

This lack of infrastructure contributes to health risks, including increased exposure to infectious diseases.^[9] Furthermore, the remote locations of many plantations mean that access to medical facilities is limited, often requiring several hours of travel. This isolation exacerbates the challenges workers face in obtaining necessary healthcare services.^[10]

Children of plantation workers have limited access to education and healthcare. A UNICEF report focusing on Sabah highlights that approximately 30% of children in the study were engaged in work to support their families, with 61% of these children employed in plantations.^[11] This involvement in labour not only hinders their educational opportunities, but also perpetuates cycles of poverty. The lack of formal education among parents, particularly those working in plantations, correlates with higher rates of children being out of school. This situation diminishes prospects for upward mobility for future generations.

A WAY FORWARD: BUILDING A JUST SYSTEM

Strict enforcement of labour laws to combat exploitative practices in the palm oil industry involves not only enacting robust legislation, but also ensuring that these laws are rigorously implemented and monitored. Regular audits of plantations, combined with substantial penalties for non-compliance, are critical to deterring violations and ensuring accountability. By creating mechanisms for workers to report abuses safely and confidentially, the government can further strengthen their commitment to protecting labour rights.

Education also plays a vital role in empowering women workers to understand and assert their rights. Comprehensive training programmes enable women to recognise exploitative practices and navigate the channels available to seek redress. Trade unions must prioritise amplifying female representation within their ranks, creating platforms where women's perspectives shape workplace policies and decision-making processes. Grassroots organisations can complement these efforts by offering targeted training and advocacy programmes, equipping workers with the knowledge and confidence they need to demand fair treatment and systemic reforms.

Public support is a powerful driver of systemic change. Media campaigns and educational initiatives can raise awareness of the struggles faced by plantation workers, encouraging consumers to demand ethically sourced products. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can amplify these efforts by exposing exploitative practices and advocating for reforms at both local and global levels. Consumers, too, have a pivotal role to play; by making informed choices and actively supporting ethical brands, they can send a strong message to companies that exploitative practices will not be tolerated.

**Names changed to protect identities.*



NISHA KUMARAVEL is a licensed counselor, communications specialist and project coordinator, advocating for labour and farmer's rights, as well as agricultural and political reform. In her spare time, she enjoys reading and caring for her 13 unruly cats.

[5] https://www.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/oilpalmchainpartaandb_esri.pdf

[6] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii>

[7] <https://www.accaglobal.com/gb/en/student/exam-support-resources/fundamentals-exams-study-resources/f4/technical-articles/my-employment-act-1955.html/>

[8] https://www.dosh.gov.my/index.php/legislation/guidelines/general/598-05-guidelines-on-occupational-safety-and-health-act-1994-act-514-2006/file_S1364032114005115#:~:text=Palm%20

oil%20was%20introduced%20to,global%20food%20and%20biofuel%20markets. com/2023/05/23/489780-housewives-registered-under-i-suri/

[9] <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6820316/>

[10] <https://finnwatch.org/en/publications/migrant-workers-rights-in-oil-palm-estates-in-malaysia>

[11] [https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media/921/file/Out%20of%20School%20children%20%20\(OOSC\)%20Accessible%20version.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media/921/file/Out%20of%20School%20children%20%20(OOSC)%20Accessible%20version.pdf)



PROTECTING WOMEN

BY
IYLIA
DE
SILVA

AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S LEGAL RIGHTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

“‘WHY DO MEN feel threatened by women?’ I asked a male friend of mine... ‘They’re afraid women will laugh at them,’ he said... Then I asked some women students... ‘Why do women feel threatened by men?’ ‘They’re afraid of being killed,’ they said.” Margaret Atwood wrote this profound and provoking account in her 1982 book *Second Words*.

Across the world, women are disproportionately killed and harmed by men. According to a report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, more than 81% of female murders are perpetrated by men, with a large number of the perpetrators being an intimate partner or family member.^[1] A 2023 UN report also estimates 85,000 cases of femicide—wherein a woman is targeted because of her gender—in the same year; 51,100 of them were killed by a husband, partner or family member. Experts believe that this number is likely an underestimation because many countries around the world do not collect data on femicide.^[2]

The fight for women’s rights has always been a struggle. As society progresses and with increasing awareness, legal reforms have evolved and continue evolving to address the many forms of violence against women—including domestic abuse, workplace harassment and online violence.

In Malaysia and across Southeast Asia, laws have been strengthened and amended to tackle these issues, reflecting a growing recognition of the different and disproportionate ways women experience harm. Despite these advancements, deep-seated cultural norms, weak enforcement and social stigma continue to leave many women vulnerable to abuse and discrimination.

MALAYSIA’S EFFORTS TO PROTECT WOMEN

ONLINE HARASSMENT AND STALKING

A recent case sparked national outrage when a netizen responded to Malaysian comedian Harith Iskander’s social media post, threatening not only to murder the comedian and his children, but also to rape and kill his ex-wife. The perpetrator, who later claimed it was “an emotional prank” in response to the comedian’s insensitive joke, was sentenced to five months in jail and fined RM2,000 under Section 506 of the Penal Code for criminal intimidation and Section 509 for insulting a person’s modesty.^[3]

Sharing obscene or offensive content online is not just inappropriate—it is a crime. To combat rising online harassment, Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 was reinforced to penalise offensive and obscene content shared electronically. Following the case of Acacia Diana—a renowned female photographer whose stalker harassed her for nearly eight years, even tracking her overseas to the UK—Malaysia introduced Section 507A of the Penal Code to criminalise stalking. This law covers not only

physical stalking, but also various forms of harassment, including repeated unwanted messages or gifts, online tracking and excessive “likes” or emojis to the point of discomfort.^[4]

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND WORKPLACE PROTECTIONS

According to the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry, more than 85% of reported sexual harassment cases involve women, with 522 recorded in 2023 alone—88% of which occurred in the workplace.^[5]

In response to these alarming statistics, Malaysia enacted the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022, which was fully enforced on 8 March 2024. The law established the Anti-Sexual Harassment Tribunal (TAGS), providing victims with a streamlined process to seek justice without enduring lengthy court trials.

However, public awareness of TAGS remains low. In an interview with *The Malaysian Reserve*, lawyer Amir Khusyairi Mohamad Tanusi highlighted this gap: “Many members of the public are still unaware of the existence of TAGS. Many do not know where to report if they have been sexually harassed. What they know is only to file a police report.”^[6]

Many employers are unaware that the 2022 amendment to the Employment Act 1955 introduced Section 81H, which mandates them to publish information on sexual harassment and available reporting avenues in the workplace. Under the Act, they must also implement clear policies, conduct awareness programmes and ensure a safe reporting mechanism. In line with these legal requirements, the Public Services Commission outlined disciplinary offences in 2023 that constitute sexual harassment, including addressing colleagues with endearing terms like “sayang”.^[7]

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Domestic Violence Act 1994 (DVA) has been strengthened over the years, introducing measures such as Emergency Protection Orders (EPOs), which can be issued without a police report by a Social Welfare Department (JKM) officer to instruct the perpetrator to cease all acts of violence against the victim, providing immediate protection.

Recent cases have tested the effectiveness of these laws. In August 2023, Dong Yi, a 23-year-old Chinese woman from Ipoh, made headlines after allegedly being assaulted by her family for dating a Malay man.^[8] She filed a police report and left home, but the case remains unresolved due to the complexities of enforcing domestic violence laws in situations involving cultural and familial pressure.

Domestic violence extends beyond private spaces. In a recent viral public incident, a man in Kota Warisan was charged under Section 323 of the Penal Code and Section 18 of the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) after slapping his wife in a supermarket—allegedly over a long wait for chicken rice.^[9]

Survivors of abuse often suffer in silence, trapped by fear and manipulation. Providing support early is crucial to prevent extreme measures. In January 2025, the wife of a prominent Selangor lawyer made headlines when she escaped a decade-long abusive marriage by jumping from the second floor of their home, sustaining severe injuries that affected her for six months.^[10]



IYLIA DE SILVA is a law graduate from the University of London. Balancing work and play, she savours every moment by indulging in her passion for food, languages, music and engaging with people from diverse cultures.

FOOTNOTES

[1] https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet_5.pdf

[2] <https://www.npr.org/sections/goats-and-soda/2024/11/25/g-s1-35392/femicide-women-murder-united-nations-women>

[3] <https://www.thesstar.com.my/news/nation/2025/01/25/man-arrested-for-threatening-comedian-harith-iskandar-family>

[4] <https://www.tatler-asia.com/power-purpose/front-female/acacia-diana-anti-stalking-law-malaysia-safety>

[5] <https://says.com/my/news/obscene-jokes-sexual-harassment-act>

[6] <https://themalaysianreserve.com/2024/08/26/sexual-harassment-are-we-not-safe-at-work/>

[7] <https://next.myc.my/articles/2445/malaysias-spa-takes-firm-stance-against-inappropriate-behaviour-in-the-workplace>

[8] <https://www.therakyatpost.com/news/malaysia/2023/11/04/woman-allegedly-beaten-by-parents-for-dating-a-malay-man/>

[9] <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/02/1169602/man-slaps-wife-incident-its-just-because-chicken-rice-delay>

[10] <https://www.therakyatpost.com/news/malaysia/2025/01/24/prominent-selangor-lawyers-wife-alleges-10-years-of-domestic-abuse/>

[11] <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/8/16/the-female-face-of-islamic-law-in-malaysia>

[12] <https://eseaor.ippf.org/news/indonesia-passes-long-awaited-bill-towards-eliminating-sexual-violence>

REFORMS IN THE SYARIAH LEGAL SYSTEM

A significant milestone in Malaysia's Islamic judiciary came in 2016, when Nenney Shushaidah Shamsuddin made history by becoming the first female Syariah Court judge in the country; this challenges long-standing gender norms in a male-dominated field and paves the way for greater inclusivity.^[11]

Reforms have been proposed to address gender imbalances in the Syariah legal system, including the 2023 amendments to simplify divorce procedures and enhance financial protections for Muslim women. While these efforts have sparked debate on balancing legal advancements with traditional values, advocacy groups continue to push for gender-sensitive interpretations of Islamic law.

Furthermore, marital rape remains a critical gap in Malaysia's legal framework. While Section 375A of the Penal Code criminalises forced intercourse through violence or threats, it does not cover non-consensual sex without physical coercion—such as when a spouse is asleep or incapacitated. Groups like the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) and Sisters in Islam (SIS) have long advocated for legal reforms to explicitly criminalise marital rape, but progress remains stalled due to societal and political resistance.

CITIZENSHIP AND GENDER EQUALITY

On 17 October 2024, Malaysia's Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2024 was passed, granting automatic citizenship to children born overseas to Malaysian women with foreign spouses. This long-awaited change rectifies a historical gender disparity in Malaysia's citizenship laws, which previously only granted this right to Malaysian men.

While the amendment has been widely praised as a victory for gender equality, concerns remain—particularly its non-retroactive application, meaning children born before the amendment's enactment are still excluded.

WHERE DO OTHER SEA COUNTRIES STAND?

INDONESIA

Indonesia's Elimination of Sexual Violence Law (2022) was passed a decade after it was proposed, expanding the legal definition of sexual abuse to include physical and non-physical sexual abuse, forced contraception, forced sterilisation, forced marriage, sexual torture, sexual exploitation, sexual slavery and sexual abuse through electronic means. The law also guarantees survivors access to medical, psychological and legal aid. However, it has been criticised for failing to criminalise marital rape, which remains punishable only under the Domestic Violence Act, leading to weaker penalties and limited legal recourse.

Indonesia's Criminal Code revision in 2022 further sparked controversy with a provision under Article 411 which criminalises sex outside of marriage, which critics warn could deter survivors from reporting sexual violence due to fear of prosecution.^[12]

To tackle the rise in workplace sexual violence, the Ministry of Manpower issued Decree No. 88 of 2023, providing guidelines for employers, workers, government agencies and the public on prevention and response measures.

THAILAND

Thailand's Gender Equality Act (2015) prohibits gender-based discrimination and allows victims to file complaints with the Committee on Determination of Unfair Gender Discrimination. Meanwhile, the Domestic Violence Victim Protection Act provides survivors with protective orders, but weak enforcement, social stigma and fear of retaliation often leave cases unreported.

SINGAPORE

The Women's Charter (Family Violence and Other Matters) (Amendment) Bill enhances both survivor protection and perpetrator accountability. Under this bill, individuals aged 18 and above can apply for Personal Protection Orders (PPOs), while Expedited Protection Orders (EPOs) may be issued in high-risk cases.^[13]

In 2019, Singapore became one of the few countries in the region to fully criminalise marital rape through amendments to the Penal Code. Workplace protections have also been reinforced, with the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) covering sexual harassment and stalking, alongside the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices, which promote gender equality in hiring and employment.

Additionally, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon recently announced that Singapore courts will introduce measures to improve the handling of sexual offence cases. Moving forward, all sexual offence trials in the High Court and select cases in the State Courts will be assigned to a specialist list of experienced and specially trained judges.^[14]

THE PHILIPPINES

The Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act criminalises physical, psychological, sexual and economic abuse within intimate relationships, offering survivors protection orders and legal recourse.^[15]

The Safe Spaces Act (RA 11313), also known as the Bawal Bastos Law, expands protections against gender-based harassment, covering offenses such as street harassment, online abuse and workplace discrimination.^[16]

Despite these legal protections, enforcement remains a challenge, particularly in rural areas where authorities often lack resources or training. Moreover, the Philippines is the only country in the region where divorce is illegal, leaving women in abusive marriages with limited legal avenues for escape. While annulment and legal separation are available, these processes can be costly, lengthy and challenging.

MYANMAR

Myanmar's legal framework for addressing gender-based violence remains rooted in the British-era Penal Code, which does not fully cover domestic violence, marital rape or workplace harassment.

Political instability since the 2021 military coup has further delayed legal reforms, including the Prevention and Protection of Violence Against Women (PoVAW) Law. UN reports highlight concerns over sexual violence in conflict zones and ethnic minority communities, while access to justice remains challenging under military governance.^[17]



Survivors of abuse often suffer in silence, trapped by fear and manipulation. Providing support early is crucial to prevent extreme measures.”

VIETNAM

Vietnam addresses gender-based violence through the Law on Gender Equality (2006) and the Domestic Violence Prevention and Control Law (2007). A 2022 revision strengthened protections by emphasising prevention, victim support and stricter law enforcement intervention.

The law focuses on three key areas: preventive measures and victim protection, coordination mechanisms for enforcement, and mobilising social resources to combat domestic violence.^[18]

CAMBODIA

Cambodia's Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims (2005) criminalises domestic abuse. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has announced plans to strengthen enforcement and improve support for victims, emphasising community involvement and inter-agency cooperation to address domestic violence nationwide.

Despite these efforts, Cambodia continues to face criticism for not adequately addressing online gender-based violence, with issues like cyber harassment and non-consensual pornography remaining largely unregulated.^[19]

TIMOR-LESTE

Timor-Leste has strengthened legal protections with the Law Against Domestic Violence (2010), which classifies domestic abuse as a public crime, allowing authorities to pursue cases without a formal complaint from the survivor. Yet, enforcement remains inconsistent, particularly in rural areas where traditional dispute resolution often takes precedence. Deep-rooted cultural norms further deter survivors from seeking legal recourse, limiting the law's impact.

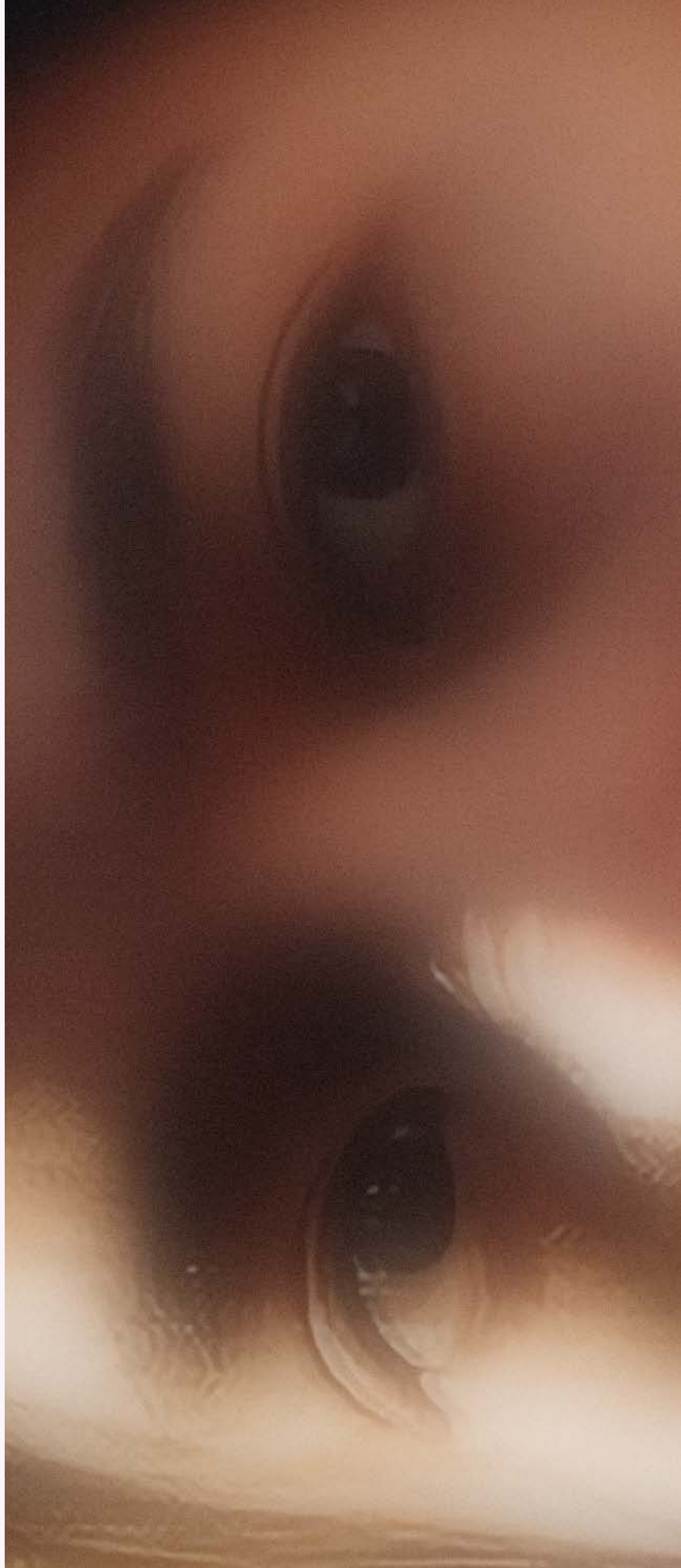
LAOS

Similarly, Laos' Law on Development and Protection of Women (2004) addresses gender-based violence and discrimination. However, informal mediation is often favoured over legal action, prioritising reconciliation rather than accountability. Limited public awareness and inadequate support services further hinder survivors from seeking justice.

BRUNEI

Although Brunei's legal framework offers some safeguards against rape and sexual harassment through the Women and Girls Protection Act, it lacks a comprehensive approach to address gender-based violence. Most notably, the Constitution of Brunei (1959) does not explicitly guarantee gender equality.^[20] The law does not criminalise spousal rape, and explicitly states that sexual intercourse by a man with his wife is not rape if she is not younger than 14 (or 15, if she is ethnic Chinese).^[21] Strict interpretations of the Syariah Penal Code can also deter women from reporting abuse, while many cases go unaddressed due to social and legal constraints.

Moreover, the Syariah Penal Code Order 2013 enforces modest dressing for Muslim women—wearing “revealing” clothing or failing to cover their hair in certain public spaces can result in fines or punishment. Severe punishments, particularly in cases of *zina* (illicit sex) and modesty violations, including stoning for adultery and whipping for “moral offenses”, also disproportionately affect women.





Our work is empowerment, not welfare. When you want to help women, you assist with no expectations. When we counsel a woman, we help her make informed choices.”

— Loh Cheng Kooi,
Executive Director
of Women’s
Centre for Change
(WCC)

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS

Many Southeast Asian nations are signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), committing to align domestic laws with international standards. Regional initiatives, such as the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) and the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (RPA on EVAW), aim to strengthen protections and policy frameworks. While these agreements are not always legally binding, they create legitimate expectations that governments will implement policies in line with their commitments.

Additionally, the UN Due Diligence Framework on State Accountability for Eliminating Violence Against Women outlines clear obligations for governments to prevent, investigate and respond to gender-based violence.^[22] It emphasises that states are responsible not only for enacting legal protections, but also for ensuring their effective implementation and enforcement. As Zarizana Abdul Aziz, a human rights lawyer and expert who co-developed the framework, explains, “We’ve worked with thousands of advocates and experts across various regions, assessing what states have done over a five-year period to prevent violence against women and protect them.” This framework has been instrumental in shaping global and regional efforts, particularly in addressing online violence and harassment.

WHERE CAN VICTIMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE TURN FOR HELP?

In Malaysia, organisations such as the Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO), Telenisa by Sisters in Islam and Women’s Centre for Change (WCC) Penang provide legal support, shelters and counselling to help survivors navigate the legal system.

Emphasising WCC’s commitment to empowerment, Executive Director Loh Cheng Kooi explains, “Our work is empowerment, not welfare. When you want to help women, you assist with no expectations. When we counsel a woman, we help her make informed choices.”^[23]

Additionally, the All Women’s Action Society (AWAM) offers legal aid and advocacy, while the Protect & Save The Children organisation focuses on child survivors of abuse. The Federation of Reproductive Health Associations, Malaysia (FRHAM) provides support where reproductive rights and sexual violence are concerned.

MOVING FORWARD: AN ONGOING BATTLE FOR LEGAL PROTECTIONS

Legal protections for women in Southeast Asia remain hindered by cultural, religious and socio-political factors. Many laws were historically shaped by patriarchal norms, prioritising family unity over individual rights. Even with legal reforms, weak enforcement, lack of awareness and judicial gaps continue to undermine progress.

While progress has been made, real change requires stronger implementation and societal commitment to breaking the cycle of violence. Until then, many women remain at risk, waiting for justice. And justice must not be delayed.

[13] <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/article/family-violence-amendment-bill-enhances-protection-for-survivors-and-rehabilitation-of-perpetrators>

[14] <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-courts-new-measures-enhance-management-sexual-offence-cases-chief-justice-sundares-h-menon-4849911>

[15] <https://pcw.gov.ph/violence-against-women/#:~:text=Accord%20to%20Republic%20Act%209262,whom%20he%20has%20a%20common>

[16] <https://jrrmmc.gov.ph/gad/infographics/225-republic-act-11313#:~:text=The%20Republic%20Act%20No.,%2C%20workplaces%2C%20and%20online%20spaces>

[17] <https://www.globaljusticecenter.net/myanmar-s-proposed-prevention-of-violence-against-women-law-a-failure-to-meet-international-human-rights-standards/#:~:text=Myanmar's%20obligation%20to%20protect%20all,committed%20by%20both%20private%20and>

[18] <https://vietnamlaw-magazine.vn/law-on-domestic-violence-prevention-and-control-69622.html>

[19] <https://www.khmer-timeskh.com/501601910/womens-ministry-to-get-tough-on-domestic-violence/>

[20] <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC134218/>

[21] https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/415610_BRUNEI-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf

[22] <https://www.ourplatform.org/resource/du-diligence-framework-state-accountability-framework-eliminating-violence-women/>

[23] <https://sokong.org/articles/wcc-changes-lives-and-empowers-women>

WOMEN-FOCUSED NGOs: BETTER WORKING TOGETHER

BY HUSNA
SHAFIRAH



HUSNA SHAFIRAH is a final-year student of Applied Language (Hons): English for Intercultural Communication from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Currently interning with *Penang Monthly*, she is enjoying her first opportunities in writing about culture and lifestyle along with the smell of freshly printed magazines.

IN THE 1980S, women's organisations were relatively scarce, but their number began to rise following Malaysia's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1995. Between 2020 and 2024, a total of 1,944 new registrations of women-related non-government organisations (NGOs) were recorded by the Malaysian Registrar of Society (ROS) to advocate for women's rights, welfare and empowerment. However, numbers alone do not dictate whether they are addressing critical gaps effectively.

Institutional theory in organisational behavioural studies suggests that the formation of organisations—including NGOs—is influenced by social norms, expectations and legitimacy. This explains why women-focused NGOs continue to emerge—as they respond to societal needs shaped by gendered experiences and systemic and structural inequalities.

Demonstrating this model of establishment is the Persatuan Pembela Wanita Pulau Pinang (Women's Protection Society), which has been providing a safe space for women facing exploitation, violence or crisis since 2022. Their active involvement in women's welfare affairs in Penang gives them an on-field understanding of the need for shelter homes for all women—including migrant women who slip through the gaps in terms of government aid and support.

NGOs focusing on entrepreneurial development among women have also been on the rise, potentially due to socio-economic struggles faced by women post-2020. These particularly aim to empower

women in lower income brackets through dispensing micro-loans for business capital, especially to housewives and single mothers. A 2023 study conducted by UiTM and Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia shows that micro-loans do significantly and economically empower women, reinforcing the need for more economic-focused women's NGOs.

However, some gaps remain unaddressed. The Penang Women's Development Corporation (PWDC) and Women's Protection Society highlight the lack of affordable and accessible childcare, which continues to be an economic barrier for women, especially those in lower income brackets. Without affordable, reputable and adequate childcare services, the responsibility of childcare falls onto mothers, limiting their opportunity to join the workforce or operate a business.

Roopinder Kaur, Head of Communication in PWDC and who has experience working with both government agencies and NGOs, opines that the issue of childcare is not one most NGOs can realistically tackle. "Setting up a childcare centre involves a lot of funds and resources, and you need to be consistent in the operations," she says.

"Our role is to constantly advocate for more childcare services to policymakers, private operators and better-funded NGOs who can better address this," she adds.

COORDINATION OF NGO NETWORK

In improving women's welfare, well-being and development, NGOs, state agencies and government bodies exist within an ecosystem that should complement one



Without affordable, reputable and adequate childcare services, the responsibility of childcare falls onto mothers, limiting their opportunity to join the workforce or operate a business.”

another. Having a large number of women-focused NGOs is only advantageous when these operate effectively, sustainably and in coordination with one another. With such a large number of NGOs dedicated towards the same cause, there is also risk that organisations may need to compete for funding, be it from the public or from the government.

To mitigate this, Women's Centre for Change (WCC) often acts as a coordinator to connect women NGOs in Penang. For instance, they help redirect women who are victims of domestic violence to the Women's Protection Society for temporary shelter assistance.

The Women's Protection Society also works closely with government bodies such as Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM) in their efforts to be officially recognised as a shelter for women. They emphasise that although NGOs typically work with fewer bureaucratic challenges, they still rely on government bodies in legislation affairs.

Women NGOs also play a significant role in handling gender discrimination cases—which are often unreported—by compiling cases and providing information for CEDAW reports and for legal action to be taken. One instance would be the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), which involves the collaboration of 15 women-focused NGOs, including Penang's WCC. Among their most remarkable achievements is their long-standing advocacy for the amendment of the Federal Constitution to allow Malaysian mothers to automatically confer citizenship to their

children born overseas. This change was enacted through the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2024, which was passed on 17 October 2024 with a two-thirds majority in the Dewan Rakyat.

For women empowerment and development, state-supported organisations like PWDC also play a vital role in providing leadership, management training and mentoring to other NGOs specialising in providing business and entrepreneurship capacity building, on top of synergising their efforts. They also function as a connecting point for corporations who are looking to fulfil their corporate social responsibilities.

Another initiative that can significantly improve coordination to facilitate better networking, resource-sharing and strategic partnerships is an accessible platform or shared database listing the specialities, locations and focus areas of women-focused NGOs. Government bodies such as JKM and ROS do list NGOs in their databases; however, their platforms do not specifically cover women's welfare focus areas.

The number of women-focused NGOs in Malaysia reflects the evolving challenges faced by women in the country. While concerns about redundancies and diversion of funds are valid, the collaborative and synergistic way these organisations work with each other is promising. As Chilean-American writer, Isabelle Allende says, “I can promise you that women working together—linked, informed and educated—can bring peace and prosperity to this forsaken planet.”

REFERENCES

- [1] Roopinder Kaur (2025), Head of Division, Communication, Penang Women's Development Corporation, 10 February 2025. Interview.
- [2] Sally Alexander (2025), Honorary Advisor, Persatuan Pembela Wanita Pulau Pinang, 7 February 2025. Interview.
- [3] Registrar of Societies Malaysia. “Number of Women-Focused NGOs Registered (2020–2024).” Email to author. 23 January 2025.
- [4] Atarmizi, W. A. (2024, October 18). Citizenship amendment offers hope to Malaysian mothers, but leaves children born before law in limbo | Sinar Daily. <https://www.sinardaily.my/article/222380/focus/national/citizenship-amendment-offers-hope-to-malaysian-mothers-but-leaves-children-born-before-law-in-limbo> com/2023/05/23/489780-housewives-registered-under-i-suri/

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

A stylized illustration of a woman's face and hand. The woman has short, dark hair and is looking directly at the viewer. Her hand is raised, with her fingers spread, covering her mouth. The illustration is rendered in a flat, graphic style with a limited color palette of dark blue, light blue, and white. The background is a solid light blue.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY PREVENTIVE MEASURES

BY
SAMANTHA
KHOO

EVERY TIME I hear stories of sexual abuse, I wonder what goes on in the mind of the perpetrator. I can't help but wonder if the perpetrators were once victims themselves. Did they witness sexual abuse at a young age, and were unable to process it healthily? Were they not taught to respect other people? Were they simply mimicking what they saw at home?

I also ponder how the victims feel. For those who continue staying silent, what makes them keep mum?

From 2018 to 2023, more than 18,000 cases of child sexual abuse cases were recorded in Malaysia. In the last three years, a total of 9,198 sexual harassment and abuse cases were reported, affecting both female and male victims.

AWARENESS FROM YOUNG

Some schools and organisations have begun introducing the concept of “good touch” and “bad touch” to young children.

“Starting from age four is when we start talking to our children about their personal boundaries,” says Alfie Sebastian, a retired kindergarten school principal who has been teaching for over 30 years. “We usually start with a story, *Nina and Her Secret*. It is a story about how a child is touched inappropriately by an adult, but is asked to keep it a secret, until one day, a monkey encourages her to tell her parents,” she recounts. Children need to be taught that they do not need to keep all secrets, especially ones that a perpetrator tells them to keep. If it makes them uncomfortable, they must tell someone they trust.

For young children, playing with their friends’ private parts, like pinching or touching buttocks, can be brushed off simply as harmless play. But Sebastian recommends enforcing these boundaries early, teaching them to respect themselves and their friends. She encourages empowering children to say, “No—do not touch me there,” when in danger.

She also recognises a need for children to be able to open up and tell a grownup about a difficult challenge they are facing. So, her school introduced a small, one-seat play mat in all the classrooms. If any child went to sit on it, it indicated that they feel troubled, and wanted to talk about it. Their class teacher would then listen and help the child with their problem.

“This has worked for us, and we’ve found that it’s created a safe space that allows us to see into their world, and we address their problems from there,” Sebastian adds.

APPROACHING TEENS

We used to tell children not to open the door for strangers if they were at home or in the car alone. Now, with almost every child having access to smartphones, strangers are just hiding behind their screens.

“We are seeing more and more children with phones, starting from 10 years old,” says Ooi Bee See, a social worker at Pusat Perkhidmatan Wanita, the mainland branch of the Penang Women’s Centre for Change (WCC).

The Australian government prohibits those under 16 from using social media, but Malaysia has yet to enforce such laws. Even though social media policies state that children should be at least 13 years old before they are permitted to use it, this is simply ignored.



Regardless of how old the child is, it is the responsibility of grownups and parents to protect them from sexual abuse and engaging in unhealthy activities.”

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS ARE CRUCIAL

Regardless of how old the child is, it is the responsibility of grownups and parents to protect them from sexual abuse and engaging in unhealthy activities. We cannot do much when the act has happened, but we can prevent it.

“Young children simply desire their parents’ love. So, express your love to your kids and spend quality time with them. Listen to them and deepen your relationship with them. Show them what true love is, starting from the home, so that they do not seek to fill that void in the wrong places from the wrong people,” Sebastian advises.

“When children reach teenage years, they begin to enter a stage of self-exploration. They may look for validation and guidance from social media, where perpetrators lurk in wait for young and innocent teens,” says Bee See. She advises parents to find ways to increase their teenagers’ self-esteem and confidence, helping them achieve their goals and ambitions in healthy ways. As teenagers begin to see and define their identities, parents should continue building that relationship with them.

There is no knowing who can be a sexual offender in advance—they can be a friend, family member or even someone respected by the community. Therefore, no time should be wasted when it comes to educating our children in this matter.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Below are a few storybooks produced by WCC, available in multiple languages for free. Access the storybooks on <https://www.wccpenang.org/books/>.

Storybooks to read with your children:

- *Nina and Her Secret*

Storybooks to read with pre-teens:

- *Samir and His Online Friend*
- *Lisa and Her Secret*
- *Yusri and His Secret*

Resources for teachers and parents:

- “Cybersafety: Keeping Children and Teenagers Safe Online” (English only)



A personal blogger since her teenage years, **SAMANTHA KHOO** has always enjoyed stringing words together. Her dream is to live off-grid in a cottage with all the coffee, ink and paper she can have.

ZARIZANA ABDUL AZIZ



UNCOVERING GENDER BIASES AND HIGHLIGHTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

BY IYLIA DE SILVA

A LEADING EXPERT in law, gender and human rights issues, Zarizana Abdul Aziz is affiliated with the Due Diligence Project, a non-profit organisation committed to strengthening state accountability through research, analysis and policy reform. Zarizana has trained judges, prosecutors, lawyers, government officials and civil society advocates on gender-sensitive legal and constitutional framework.

In an interview with *Penang Monthly*, Zarizana discusses her work on gender equality, the challenges of addressing violence against women, and how the legal system is evolving to meet these critical issues.

Iylia De Silva (IDS):
Zarizana Abdul Aziz
(ZAA):

What motivated you to become a human rights lawyer?

It all started when I was studying in Australia. I volunteered at community legal centres in the inner city of Sydney, providing legal advice. When I returned to Penang, I continued volunteering with the Women's Crisis Centre—now the Women's Centre for Change (WCC). There was a major sexual harassment case in Penang involving a foreign hotel manager and an employee. I provided emotional and legal support in court, and that experience made me realise I wanted to do something more holistic.

At the time, the Domestic Violence Act was being proposed. The Women's Crisis Centre had many volunteer lawyers, and we pushed for gender equality legislation and stronger sexual harassment laws. Although we proposed a standalone Act, the sexual harassment law was passed as an amendment. It's always a negotiation, you know, you don't always get everything you ask for.

After practicing for many years, I realised I wanted to do more, so I applied for a Master's in Human Rights Studies. I chose Columbia University because I wanted to work closely with the UN, whose headquarters is in New York.

IDS: How did the Due Diligence Project come about? How does the project contribute to the protection of women's rights?

ZAA: I started the Due Diligence Project in the US right after completing my Master's. Due diligence is a principle in international law that requires states to promote, protect and fulfil human rights. In the context of women's rights and violence against women, we launched a global initiative, collaborating with governments, the UN and over 300 NGOs. We've worked with thousands of advocates and experts across various regions, assessing what states have done over a five-year period to prevent violence against women and protect them.

IDS: The Due Diligence Framework highlights five key areas: prevention, protection, prosecution, punishment and redress. In your experience, which of these do governments struggle with the most, and why?

ZAA: Redress and reparation is often overlooked. Beyond punishing the perpetrator, how do survivors rebuild their lives? For example, a rape survivor in a small village, what options does she have? Or victims of domestic violence who are blamed instead of supported. To the authorities, as long as the perpetrator is punished, that's the end of it. But we must consider rehabilitation and long-term support for survivors.

So, we developed this framework—a multi-country, multi-year research project that took up to four years. It was widely distributed, cited in UN reports and referenced in various publications. It was ground-breaking, actually, because it not only crystallises state obligations and accountability, but also lays out exactly what states must do.

IDS: Was it challenging, especially in the early stages, to implement this framework?

ZAA: States were generally open to it, but of course, there were pushbacks. I remember presenting it at ASEAN, and a few foreign ministers pushed back. But overall, many states accepted it. State obligations aren't absolute unless the state itself is the perpetrator, like in cases where soldiers commit rape or sexual harassment within the military or government offices. But when the perpetrators are non-state actors, the state still has an obligation to implement preventive measures.

IDS: And how do cultural and social norms impact prevention efforts?

ZAA: A woman had acid thrown on her face for rejecting a marriage proposal, or a bride is burned because her dowry wasn't enough. Reasonable prevention isn't just about telling men, "Don't beat your wife," but about looking into the underlying causes such as gender inequality—male entitlement, male privilege and gender discrimination. And when prevention efforts ignore cultural and socio-cultural norms, they fall short.

I've often heard the excuse, "But it's their culture." Yes, there's multiculturalism, but culture cannot be used as a justification to violate someone else's human rights. Some claim that Islam allows child marriage, but that is their interpretation. A lot of religious scholars, fatwas, even religious court decisions say it causes harm to the child. Apart from taking her out of school, there is early pregnancy, which is very dangerous for a child. And anything that causes harm is haram. And yet, there are still people who will use their own religious interpretations or underlying justification to defy the law.

Another woman told me that when her father died, all the inheritance went to her brothers; even though she had cared for him for years, she was only given a small sum. Traditionally, men receive a larger share in Islam because they are supposed to take care of their unmarried sisters. So today, the law should enforce this—that if males were to get a bigger share, they have to maintain their unmarried sisters—but this has not been done.

So, as society changes, traditional gender roles no longer align with contemporary realities and where women are right now. And yet, when the government talks about culture and religion, it only considers the interpretations of a certain group of people—who are predominantly male. So, that mindset has to change.

- IDS:** I heard that you train judges in different countries. Is it mostly on new legislation and recent developments on women's rights?
- ZAA:** Yes, I've trained thousands of judges. In fact, just last month, I was in Pakistan, training judges on the gender perspective. I explain what gender is and how it is different from sex. Sex is biological, but gender expectation is cultural. For example, expecting women to have long hair, it's a cultural perception. There was quite a hullabaloo some time ago when an actress, Sharifah Amani, shaved her head for a role in a film by the late Yasmin Ahmad—the director of *Sepet* and those Merdeka ads.
- IDS:** Perhaps we can talk about social media. Violence against women has escalated onto online platforms, and it's difficult to address since identifying the perpetrators itself is a challenge. What are your thoughts on that?
- ZAA:** In 2013, we applied the Due Diligence Framework to what was then called online violence, now termed technology-facilitated violence (TFV). I produced a paper addressing key issues: the rapid spread of harmful content and the difficulty of identifying perpetrators.
- Progress has been made in certain areas, like Child Sexual Abuse Materials (CSAM). They used to call it child pornography, but we stopped using the word pornography because it denotes consent. There were not only deepfake images of girls, people were uploading and selling actual rape videos.
- I raised this issue with online platforms, but they say it's difficult to control, since they have millions of users. But that doesn't discharge them of their obligation. It's difficult, yes, but they profit from it. If I own a mall that is visited by millions of people, and someone slips on a wet floor, I'm still responsible.
- IDS:** But platforms do seem capable of regulating content to a certain extent, right? So that certain material can't be shared or posted, like how Instagram bans nudity.
- ZAA:** There are two things here. If you try to upload a Disney clip, the platform would ask if you own the rights to the clip. Many platforms are effective when it comes to enforcing copyright protections, because companies like Disney have sued for billions of dollars over copyright violations.
- But if I upload your photo, does the platform ask if I have your consent to do so? No. The system is primarily designed to protect financial and commercial interests, but much less attention is given to the social and individual impact of content sharing.
- Some European countries, like Germany, have imposed huge penalties for platforms that don't respond to complaints and do not take down offensive material within a certain time.
- The technology is there, watermarking and tracking, but at the same time, you have debates about privacy. How do you regulate harmful content while ensuring user privacy?
- And platform providers are also concerned about censorship, if they restrict certain materials, some governments might also push to censor political content.
- And looking at the news, things are changing again. For example, Facebook removed its fact-checking system, which was important.
- IDS:** And now there's also AI in the picture.
- ZAA:** Exactly. Now I can use AI to generate, for example, sexual abuse materials without a real victim. So then the question is, who does it actually harm?
- AI can also perpetuate biases. If I train AI on past hiring data where all managers were men, it will favour similar candidates, resulting in women not getting the job. So, for a start, women technicians should be involved in AI development to ensure fairness.
- Some time ago, a woman created and trained an algorithm to detect and filter out pictures of the male genitalia because she was fed up with getting unsolicited explicit photos. And of course, she faced a huge backlash after that and took herself off Instagram for a while. My point is, the algorithm can be trained. It depends on whether we have enough gender-sensitised technicians who are willing to do this.
- We're always playing catch-up with technology. We need to think ahead, from the development stage, and not just at the end-user level, which is what is happening now.
- IDS:** Do you work with civil society organisations (CSOs) to combat online violence against women?
- ZAA:** Yes, it's critical for the state and civil society to work together to ensure proper implementation. Research has shown that countries with the best laws are those with active civil societies, because they advocate and identify the gaps, strengthening the system.

IDS: Are there Southeast Asian countries that have made notable legal progress in addressing violence against women?

ZAA: Yes, Indonesia enacted the Law on Sexual Violence Crimes in 2022. They have a National Commission on violence against women, a mechanism Malaysia can consider.

During the #MeToo movement, many women who came forward and accused powerful men were sued in retaliation. Some countries have since enacted laws to protect survivors or delay counter-suits until the original complaint is resolved.

Many countries also started looking into the judicial sector. We may have laws in place, but if law enforcers aren't aligned—for example, if a police officer believes it's acceptable to beat his wife, how can we expect him to enforce the Domestic Violence Act fairly?

IDS: Public figures often argue that just because their profile and content are public, it doesn't mean they forfeit their right to privacy. Where do we draw the line between public interest and personal privacy?

ZAA: Yes, public figures are entitled to a certain level of privacy. But when your career thrives on being in public, on your opinions, where do you draw the line?

I know there is enhanced scrutiny by the police, for example, in California, for celebrities because they're exposed to more trolling, more attacks. And people search for their information. How private then is their data?

A lot of our personal data is held by the government, for example, our driver's license records. But just because the government collects this information doesn't mean it's public. These records exist for specific purposes.

The same applies to companies that store our personal data. If they experience a breach, what level of accountability should they have? If they cannot guarantee the security of the data they collect, should they even be allowed to store it?

Is social media like a house with windows, where you can control visibility, or is it an open field where anyone can watch? The distinction between public and private spaces is critical. If you want something to remain private, you have to take steps to lock it down.

IDS: What advice would you give young activists and legal professionals who want to work in the human rights and gender justice field? Many use online platforms to advocate, but they also find themselves targeted for abuse.

ZAA: There is strength in numbers. Join others who share your goal. For a young person who is interested, there are various areas you can insert yourself into, whether you're doing this full time or not. You can work in law, policy, activism, or even in the tech industry.

But what's important is the underlying understanding of gender equality, freedom and the role of socio-cultural norms.

This applies across professions. Even a doctor can do harm if they approach a rape survivor with the wrong mindset—for instance, asking questions like “What were you wearing?” or “Why were you out at night?”, instead of focusing on care and support. That's why awareness matters.

Whatever field you enter, make sure you are pushing for equality and freedom. You can't have freedom when half of the population is afraid. I've been to countries where young women don't even have their own social media accounts, they use their brothers' or a male relative's because they fear the consequences of visibility. And each year, after the Women's March on March 8, for example, activists in some countries find their photos circulating online, and receive abusive messages just for participating. So while social media helps amplify their advocacy, it also exposes them to harassment.

At the end of the day, a more equal society leads to greater freedom—for everyone.

IDS: Thank you so much for making the time and for sharing your insights.

ZAA: Sure, thank you.



IYLIA DE SILVA is a law graduate from the University of London. Balancing work and play, she savours every moment by indulging in her passion for food, languages, music and engaging with people from diverse cultures.

ARE BEAUTY PAGEANTS OUT OF DATE?

BY
CAROLYN
KHOR

THE FIRST BEAUTY PAGEANT, Miss World, was created in 1951 by Eric Morley in the UK. Miss Universe debuted a year later, in 1952. Eight years later, in 1960, Miss International was created. Miss Earth came in 2001.

Every year, millions tune in to watch contestants strut across stages in shimmering gowns, skimpy clothing, perfectly styled hair and dazzling smiles. For decades, beauty pageants have been marketed as celebrations of grace, intelligence and empowerment. But are these competitions truly empowering platforms for women, or do they perpetuate outdated values and beauty standards? In an era where gender equality, body diversity and body positivity are at the forefront of social discourses, many question if beauty pageants—often also a multimillion-dollar industry shaped by sponsorships, media influence and commercial interests—are still relevant.

A WORLD OF GRIT AND GLAMOUR

The road to wearing the pageant crown starts much earlier than the qualifying rounds. Contestants undergo months of rigorous preparation—learning how to walk, speak and present themselves with poise before stepping onto the stage. Contestants are often coached to behave in ways that align with conventional notions of femininity, emphasising softness, grace and charm.

Malaysia's beauty pageants have not been without controversy. Malay Muslim women, who form the majority of the population, were barred from participating in pageants after a 1996 fatwa by the National Fatwa Council, citing concerns about modesty and Islamic values, particularly regarding swimwear segments.

Recently, Malay women have been able to circumvent the fatwa by opting out of swimwear rounds or wearing modest swimwear attire, according to a seasoned Penang-based beauty pageant organiser, Ivan Choo. As the founder and director of Velvet Signature with over 23 years of experience, Ivan has witnessed the evolution of the industry, and been through its ups and downs in the country.

“It depends on the direction of the organiser. If the organiser focuses on the themes of charity, peace and goodwill, it can benefit society.”

Some pageant winners have been known to use their newfound fame for good—Deborah Henry, Miss Universe Malaysia 2011, co-founded the Fugee School to provide education for refugee children.

For many, pageants represent a stepping stone to larger ambitions, especially in the world of showbiz and entertainment. “Organisers who are looking for new artistes—actresses, singers, etc—will cultivate talents. Many businesses also promote their brands through beauty pageants and competitions, which makes these valuable to those who want to enter the industry.”

Additionally, beauty queens can also promote art

and culture in the tourism industry, he said, citing the economic boost brought about by events such as Miss Tourism, which brought attention to local food and culture in areas like Lebuhraya Macallum.

CHANGING NARRATIVES

Over the past decades, pageants have attempted to rebrand the industry by including contestants of diverse backgrounds, removing age restrictions or emphasising social impact initiatives. These have tried to remain relevant by increasing emphasis on inner beauty, intelligence and advocacy work. However, physical beauty—and a narrow, restricted, predetermined ideal at that—remain a core part of the industry.

While discussing abuses during competitions, Ivan denied knowledge of any untoward behaviour towards beauty contestants.

“I have neither seen nor heard of this kind of abuse. Maybe there are too many activities during the beauty pageants resulting in irregular mealtimes and rest periods. Do these count as abuse? I don’t know,” he said.

He added that his company ensures that ethics are at the forefront of his dealings with the contestants, with strict terms and conditions laid out in a contract. “We do not tolerate unethical practices in our pageants. Any violation will result in disqualification and a ban from future events,” he said.

To support contestants, his company provides them with grooming sessions, life attitude training and psychological support.

While Ivan acknowledged the negative perceptions associated with beauty pageants, he argued that the objectification of women stems from broader societal attitudes, not one limited to beauty pageants.

“Beauties will always attract attention, but it’s important to instil in them the right values and encourage participants to use this platform wisely,” he said.

In spite of the argument that beauty pageants empower and open up avenues to women, its premise, which requires women to compete against one another based on their looks (among other things), remain problematic. It is argued that if the goal is to celebrate intelligence, personality, talent and leadership, there are numerous other channels—such as academic scholarships, leadership programmes and professional networking initiatives—which do not require women to parade in evening gowns, bikinis, heavy makeup and sky high heels to be taken seriously.

Instead of clinging to outdated traditions, we should focus on initiatives that celebrate women for their achievements and contributions to society regardless of their looks. It is time to move beyond beauty pageants and toward a future where women are valued and appreciated for who they are and what they are capable of, instead of how they look.

“

In spite of the argument that beauty pageants empower and open up avenues to women, its premise, which requires women to compete against one another based on their looks... remain problematic.”



CAROLYN KHOR is a former ministerial press secretary, a former United Nations volunteer and an independent researcher/writer.

ELSHADDAI CENTRE

**WORKING
AGAINST
THE TIDE
IN AID OF
DESPERATE
REFUGEES**

BY RACHEL YEOH

“

...they do not have the awareness of what abuse is and that abuse is wrong. By the time they are referred to the Centre, the issue would have evolved to be very severe.”

I CANNOT IMAGINE the shock felt by Ling* when she arrived back at her staff quarters, and was greeted by refugees also taking shelter in the same lodging. She had only been away for approximately one week. As one who teaches refugee children for a living, she didn't think she had the mental capacity to share her living space with them too. Most of the staff were packing to leave for another staff house, citing the need for privacy—she decided to do the same, but changed her mind after one of the girls held her hand and said, “Teacher, can you please stay with me because I have no one to stay with me.”

That was five years ago. Today, the house is a shelter for high-risk refugees. It is a refuge for single mothers and teens who are recovering from physical and sexual abuse. For Ling, it was a segue from her full-time teaching to her calling—helping refugees.

“I don't really like to teach, but it was one of the tools to reach out to them, to know more about them and to care for them. I still teach once a week,” Ling said. She was teaching Afghanistan students in Ampang, and Myanmar and Pakistani students in Klang under ElShaddai Centre, a Christian-based humanitarian NGO affiliated with UNHCR that helps displaced and marginalised communities such as refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless people and other marginalised diaspora communities in Malaysia. Their main focus is to provide educational opportunities from preschool to high school, so that all children have a fair chance at education.

At the time, there was an influx of refugees in the country, and children who had been abused and left

homeless had nowhere to go—then there was the looming Covid-19 that had just started to extend its tendrils.

SHELTER SCHEDULE

Ling got to work almost immediately after going through some adjustments regarding work responsibilities. She decided to head the shelter—which also meant living in the shelter. Thankfully, the organisation was flexible and supported her needs.

Its first occupants were an Iranian single mother and her two children—they were chased out by their landlord. Another was a Myanmar girl who had run away from her forced marriage. The police found her and sent her to UNHCR, which then referred her to ElShaddai Centre. Slowly, they expanded from one to three shelters—one Rohingya shelter with nine residents, a mixed single mothers shelter with six residents and another for girls (children and teens) with 13 residents.

Ling is helped by two house guardians, Rhea* and Anne*. They reside in the shelter with the children and teens. Ling and Rhea serve as life coaches and Anne is a counsellor.

All children living in the shelter follow a daily schedule. The schedule for mothers are more flexible.

Weekday mornings begin at 6.30AM—the children wake up to shower, get dressed and have their breakfast. At 7.30AM, a van picks them up for school (ElShaddai Learning Centre). There are four types of learning centres provided: preschool, primary (Cambridge IGCSE), secondary (Cambridge IGCSE) and accelerated (for those aged 10+ without prior education to complete

preschool and primary school in four years). The centre has also included additional subjects to fit the needs of the students. For high schoolers, there are lessons on Global Perspective, and Peace and Diversity. For those aged 9 to 18, there is also a subject on Leaderonomics.

While the children are in school, either Ling, Rhea or Anne does grocery shopping. The mothers then cook lunch for everyone. By 1PM, the children are back from school. After lunch and shower, all the children would complete their homework, do their revision—and if time permits, take a nap. The teens are rostered to cook dinner. Once dinner is done, everyone has to clean up before enjoying some free time. It is during this period that those involved in high-risk cases can get their phones to make needed phone calls. At around 9.30PM, they would have a sharing session before lights-off at 10.30PM.

BETWEEN WORK AND ME TIME

From dawn to dusk and the hours following it, the three young matrons would busy themselves with the inhabitants. More often than not, Ling is roped in to settle conflicts between the mothers. “There is not much problem with the girls—the kids or teens. Issues always arise between the single mothers because all of them have different perspectives—they have not learnt to be tolerant, so to speak. One of the biggest disagreements stem from cooking. Most of them cook rice, but they can’t agree on what time to cook and how much to cook,” she sighed.

“These disagreements also occur because the older mothers think themselves superior to younger mothers, but we work well with younger mothers because they usually can speak English. They also argue about how to care for children. It is difficult, but we have now started group counselling—hopefully it can help them accept and understand each other,” Rhea added.

Anne, the in-home counsellor, spends a significant amount of time doing one-on-one counselling with those who have experienced trauma. Sometimes, she works with counsellors and lawyers affiliated with the Centre. “Some of them, they have to go to court. We have to prepare them for their court hearing, or when they have to testify—we need to train them on how to speak so their case can progress.”

After a long day, all three would write reports to send to the Centre, the different NGOs concerned and UNHCR. However, despite their morning-to-night responsibilities, they do take time off to decompress.

“My me time is when I go back to my room and sleep. During weekends, we do go out to have a good meal—plus we do a silent retreat once a year. It is then that we can get away from the shelter, keep silent and just focus on resting,” Ling smiled. Rhea covets her alone time—“I’ll go watch a movie by myself, sometimes in the middle of the day for a few hours. I am also a night owl, and after a long day of dealing with conflict, I like to complete the administration work in silence, after everyone has gone to bed.” Unlike Rhea, Anne dislikes being alone, so playtime with the younger children or a short nap is enough to energise her.

A FULFILLING CALLING

The shelter is transient, a revolving door of comings and goings. Those who enter stay for a few months to a year, and if they are involved in more complicated cases, their stay may drag on for two years or more.

Nevertheless, the house guardians are dedicated to the emotional restoration and physical relocation of all who stop by.

“We always hope that they can re-join their family, or for their court case to be over within one year, but for special cases, especially if they are not ready, we will not force them. We have a resident who has been staying with us for three years, but hers is a special case because it is not safe for her to go back to her community,” Anne explained.

“There was a case where a girl was raped by her neighbour, and the case was brought to court. Her mother and the inspector were very cooperative. Within six months, her case was closed and the predator was given jail time and lashes. All we had to do was to help her through her trauma and prepare her mentally for a reunion with her family,” she said, adding that reunions are what makes her job fulfilling. “When they come to the shelter, they treat themselves as a victim—and rightly so—but after coming alongside them and processing their horrors with them, they are able to forgive, accept their past and move on. They know that this is not forever and they know how to grow from it.”

Ling is also particularly encouraged when the girls take up leadership in the shelter. “Some take the initiative to welcome new people and even plan activities for those living here. We don’t always have the energy to socialise, but seeing them empowered to take responsibility really makes me very proud.”

A PRESSING NEED

As Malaysia is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol, there is no way that UNHCR can help solve the issues of refugees in the country. Therefore, they enlist the help of ElShaddai Centre. Right now, 50% of those in the shelter are UNHCR referrals, and another 50% are from other NGOs like Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO), HOST International and Persatuan Kebajikan Suara Kanak-Kanak Malaysia (SUKA). They also have partnerships with a family therapy centre, a mobile clinic doctor and other volunteers, mostly from churches around the area. However, there is a pressing need for more shelters and workers as they are now working at maximum capacity.

Much of the problems within their community stem from their culture. As females, they do not have the right to education—they are ingrained to think that they are supposed to stay at home and wait to be married. Many who arrive undocumented cannot secure jobs, always living in fear that they might be caught by the Malaysian immigration. Due to stress, men often lash out at their wives, both physically and verbally. According to Anne, they do not have the awareness of what abuse is and that abuse is wrong. By the time they are referred to the Centre, the issue would have evolved to be very severe.

The refugee community here also view children as their hope. Therefore, they are either given into marriage when they get their menses, which is too young, and are encouraged to have more children. It is a vicious cycle fed by fear and persecution, both from within and outside their community.

Ling, Rhea and Anne are just three individuals doing their best to recourse the life of the undocumented and abused. Akin to throwing starfish into the sea from a shore laden with them, they are telling themselves, “at least, that is one life saved”.

**Names changed to protect identities.*



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.

LEST WE FORGET

فولوفينج PINANG

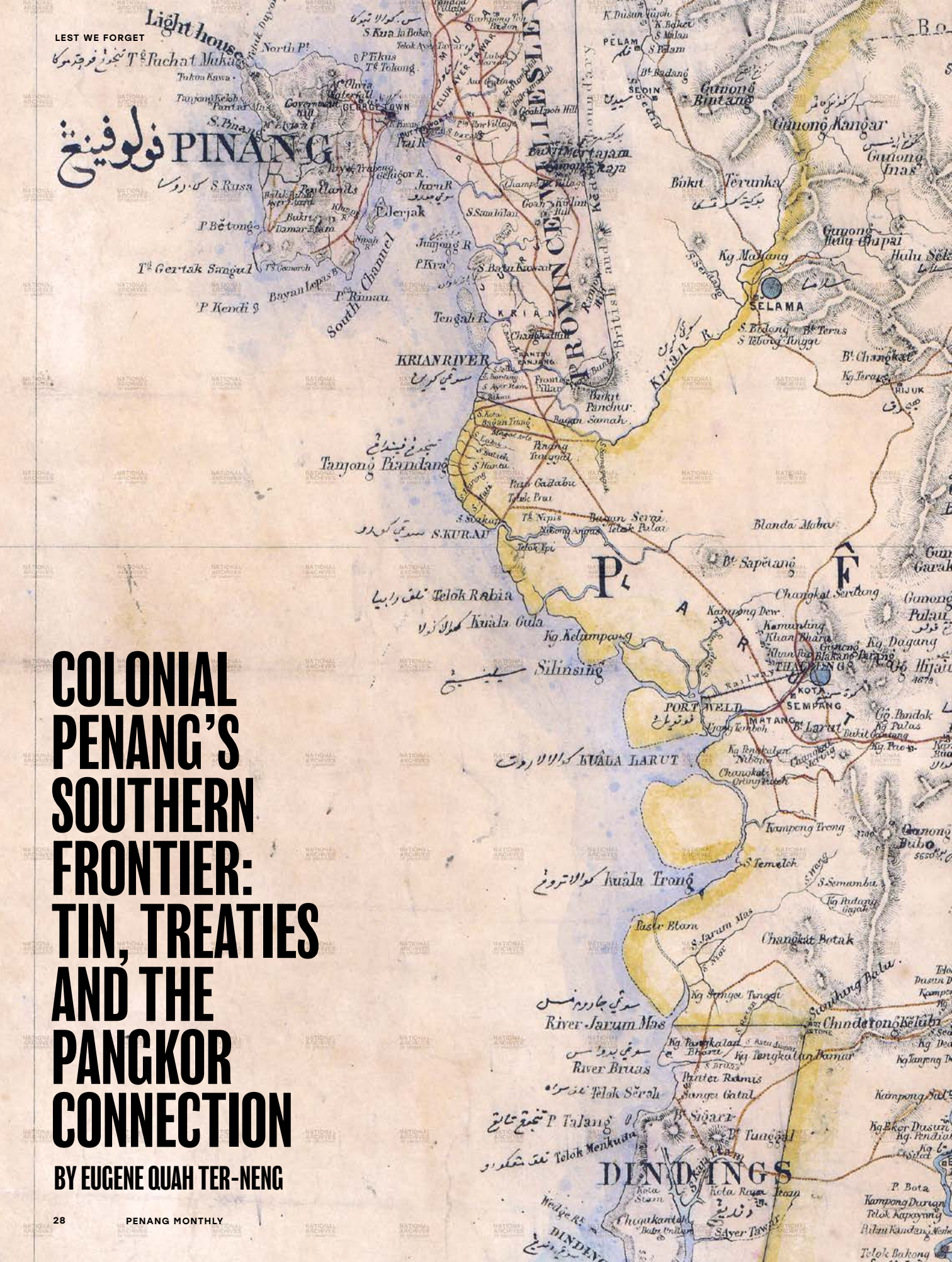
S. Prance

S. Russ

T. Russ

COLONIAL PENANG'S SOUTHERN FRONTIER: TIN, TREATIES AND THE PANGKOR CONNECTION

BY EUGENE QUAH TER-NENG



THE NAME PANGKOR was mentioned as far back as 1511 by Sulaymān al-Mahrī in his treatise *al-Minhāj al-Fākhir fī 'Ilm al-Baḥr al-Zākhir* (The Precious Method on the Science of the Rising Sea). He states that sailing past Falu Finanj (Pulau Pinang) towards Malaqa (Melaka), one will first encounter Dengdeng (Dinding) and then Bankūr Lau (Pangkor Laut).

The main island of Pangkor was once called Pangkor Darat (Land Pangkor), while Pangkor Laut (Sea Pangkor) is a smaller island in the southwest that, today, hosts a luxury resort. These islands act as a barrier at the mouth of the Dinding River, suggesting that “Pangkor” may have derived from the Thai “Gampāeng Koh” (pronounced gum-pang-koh) meaning “island barrier”. The *Misa Melayu*, an 18th-century Malay court chronicle written by Raja Chulan ibni Raja Hamid (c. 1720–1786), distinguishes between Pulau Pangkor, Selat Pangkor, Kuala Dinding and Sungai Dinding—unlike European records, which often conflate these names.

At the same time, the name “Dinding” is found in Arab navigational guides as early as 1426, and may relate to the Thai “Din Daeng”, meaning red earth—a name still used by local Malays, who refer to Lumut as “Tanah Merah” (red earth) and local Chinese, who use the Hokkien term, “Ang Thor K’um” (red earth cover).

The strategic importance of Pangkor was recognised early by European powers. On 29 November 1663, the Dutch navigator Wouter Schouten stopped at Pangkor to obtain fresh water, and he wrote:

“The Island Dinding [Pangkor]... is uninhabited, full of Mountains, vast Forest and very dreadful Wilderness... It is said on this Island... the best fresh water of the whole of East Indies is found.”

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) took possession of Pangkor in 1670. According to a later report by Balthasar Bort, the Governor of Melaka, by 1678 “59 men are before Pera, engaged in the blockade of that place and stationed on the island of Dingdingh [Pangkor]... occupying a square wooden fort there provided with [nine] pieces of iron ordnance.”

This outpost was abandoned after it was sacked by Panglima Kulup in 1690. In 1743, a stone fort was built to house a garrison of “30 Europeans and the same number of native soldiers”. This fort was only used for five years and then left to ruin. The reconstructed ruins of this second fort still stand today.

At the south-eastern end of Pangkor at Teluk Raja Bayang (Bay of the Shadow King) is a Malay fishing village marked by a handsome mosque. Local lore identifies this as the site of the first Malay settlement.

The mysterious Raja Bayang, despite local supernatural tales, appears to have been a Perak merchant. A letter from the Sultan of Perak to Francis Light dated 26 October 1787 mentions him:

“... if Raja Bayang and Raja Lela Sutan... face any difficulties or illnesses, our friend should assist with the remaining expenses and all transactions... Our friend, the Governor, is our only hope in Penang Island... we have nothing else to say except for three pieces of tin as a token of our hope...”

THE LARUT WARS AND THEIR AFTERMATH

The Malay kingdom of Perak—the Abode of Grace (Darul Ridzuan)—was a country in turmoil in the 1870s. The mineral-rich land had suffered years of unrest. Chinese secret societies were at war with each other. What began as a dispute over mining and water rights between two factions escalated into a series of violent conflicts which became known as the Larut Wars. The two main factions, or *hoay*, were the Hai San and Ghee Hin, led by Chung Keng Kwee and Chin Seng Yam, respectively.

In 1850, Che’ Long Jaffar, a son of a minor Perak chief, having obtained a title to the Larut district, started his first mine at Klian^[1] Pauh and invited others to work the land. The “rich tin-fields became known, and more Chinese flocked to the area”. By the 1860s, most tin mines in Perak were principally funded by Penang *towkays*. Later, his son and successor, Ngah Ibrahim, obtained a new deed from the Sultan and ruled with greater authority than his father as the Mantri (Menteri) of Larut.

The conflict between the two Chinese factions escalated when the Mantri supported the Hai San, eventually spilling out of Perak. In one instance, the Ghee Hin even burned the Mantri’s house in Penang, near what is now Muntri Street. Penang’s closeness to Perak made it more influential than Singapore over the tin trade.

In 1874, Andrew Clarke, the new governor of the Straits Settlements, found the tin trade severely disrupted by strife, and sought a political solution. When an opportunity rose to install a compliant Perak prince amenable to British advice to the throne, Clarke quickly summoned all the parties involved for talks to set his plan into action. This engagement would signal the start of direct British intervention in affairs of the Malay states—something the Colonial Office had tried to avoid doing.

THE PANGKOR TREATY

Frank Swettenham, one of the officials tasked with organising the talks, recounted in his journal:

“I went from Pinang to Larut on board *HMS Avon* to tell the Chinese that their friends in Pinang had agreed to suspend hostilities, and to invite the Mantri, and any other chiefs who could be got at, to meet Sir Andrew at the rendezvous on 15 January [1874] ... at Pangkor.”

Swettenham noted that those present were:

“Raja Abdullah [the claimant], his relative Raja Idris (the present Sultan of Perak), and the chiefs... also the Raja Bendahara, the Mantri, the Temenggong and the Dato Sagor [uncle of the Mantri]... Mr. Pickering and the heads of the Chinese factions were also present.”

At the Perak Museum in Taiping—the oldest in the country—there is an exhibit depicting a Malay royal and a high-ranking British official seated at a small, sturdy wooden round table aboard the colonial steamer *HMS Pluto*. The scene represents that fateful Tuesday afternoon in January 1874, when Raja Muda Abdullah, claimant to the throne of Perak, and Governor Andrew Clarke of the Straits Settlements signed a document that forever altered the political landscape of the Malay peninsula. After the signing of the treaty, hostilities between the Chinese secret societies ceased. The British then established a new planned town near Klian Pauh named Taiping, meaning Eternal Peace.

TALE OF A TRAGIC TABLE

The physical witness to this momentous treaty was a wooden table that would later become a remarkable colonial Malayan artefact. Its history emerged when Hubert Berkeley, then District Officer of Upper Perak, donated it to the Taiping Museum. In his accompanying documentation, Berkeley wrote:

“The history of this table was given me by Tukang Ismail [Craftsman Ismail], who made it, and by Penghulu [Village Headman] Haji Mat Akib, who had it made for the house he built in January, 1874, for the Pangkor Treaty.”

According to Edward Marsh Merewether, a few years prior to the Pangkor Treaty, a “Kedah Malay named Haji Mahomad Akib^[2] conceived the idea of settling at Pangkor,



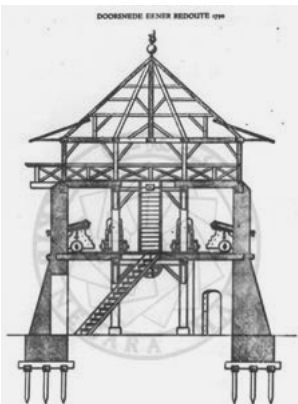
2



3



4



6



5



7

and applied to the [Lieutenant-Governor] of Penang [Col. Henry Stuart Man] for permission to do so". The seemingly innocuous request turned out to be anything but, for the authorities were "doubtful whether it was British Territory". It led to a most curious discovery, according to Peter Benson Maxwell, former Chief Justice of the Straits Settlements:

"... in 1866 the old Malay paper [a treaty] was found in a pigeon-hole [filing cabinet] in the Government office [in Penang]; and our officers, ignorant of its history, claimed the long-neglected gift"—Pulau Pangkor.

Satisfied that Pangkor was indeed British territory, the Penang authorities gave Mat Akib permission to settle at Pangkor together with "a concession 100 orlongs of land". In early 1867, Col. Archibald Anson noted that Pangkor had "recently been occupied by three Malays, to whom permit to occupy and clear land... had been given, and a small population, many of whom were escaped slaves from Perak, has sprung up there". According to Merewether, who knew Mat Akib personally:

"He induced a few others to join him, but most of them went away... as Pangkor and Pulo Sembilan... were in those days the favourite haunt of pirates... [and] for the first few years Mahomed Akib lived almost alone."

After the signing of the treaty, the table stood inside the house and was passed on to its various ill-fated British occupants. In 1878, Captain Lloyd, one of the later owners of the table, was brutally murdered by a Chinese gang while at home. His assailants then attempted to burn down the house to cover up the crime, but Penghulu Akib arrived in time to put out the fire.

The table eventually passed on to the Superintendent of Dindings, R.R. Bruce, who, when seated at this table one morning, was stabbed from behind with a *golok* by a Malay who had run amok. When the gravely injured inspector returned home in 1883, "he gave this table and all his things to his Siamese woman [mistress], who sold me the table," recounted Berkeley. The table is now kept at Muzium Negara, while the one in the Taiping Museum is a replica.

COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION AND MODERN LEGACY

The Pangkor Treaty of 1874 formalised British control over not just the island, but also a strip of mainland that became known as the Dindings. This interpretation stemmed from an earlier 1826 treaty which, accord-

ing to Maxwell, who cited the now-lost original treaty written in Malay, only ceded the islands: “Pulo Dinding-Pangkor, dan sakalian pulo pulo sablah laut”—the island of Dinding-Pangkor, and all the islands to the seaward.

However, the English translation of the treaty read:

“The Sultan... ceded to the Honourable East India Company... henceforward and for ever, the Pulo Dinding and the Islands of Pangkor, together with all and every one of the Islands.”

Based on this awkwardly worded English translation, the Straits Settlements government under Henry Ord “revived the claim, and presented it in a new and expanded form. The plain opposite the island, and a range of hills beyond, were now said to be included in the cession”. Andrew Clarke, concurring with his predecessor’s interpretation, incorporated this spurious claim to the mainland strip into the 1874 Pangkor Treaty. Upon the treaty’s ratification, the expanded territory became part of the Straits Settlements—as administrative dependency of Penang—known as the Dindings. It was only on 17 February 1935 that the Dindings, together with Pangkor, were finally ceded back to Perak. In 1973, the Daerah Dindings [Dindings District] and its eponymous river was renamed Manjung.

Today, Pangkor’s historical connection to Penang lives on through its Chinese fishing community, who still speak Penang Hokkien—a linguistic legacy of the island’s 109-year association with its northern neighbour. And in Penang, this shared colonial past is preserved in the name of two streets—Jalan Dinding and Jalan Pangkor.



CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Extract from “Map of the Malay Peninsula in 1887” showing Penang and the Dindings. Source: National Archives of Singapore.
2. “View looking South from hill on Pulo Pangkor.” Dated 1874. Likely taken during the Pangkor talks. The *HMS Pluto* can be seen in the bay (possibly Teluk Raja Bayang). Source: The National Archives (UK).
3. This 1874 photo shows Penghulu Haji Mahomed Akib of Pangkor and his family. Source: The National Archive (UK), CO 1069-484-117.
4. Raja Muda Abdullah was installed by the British to the throne after signing the Pangkor Treaty in 1874. He reigned as Sultan Abdullah Muhammad Shah II, and is shown here with the Chiefs of Perak. This drawing was made after 1877, when he was no longer on the throne. Source: Fred. McNair (1878), *Perak and the Malays*.
5. Group portrait of Andrew Clarke, JWW Birch, FA Swettenham, Major McCallum, Captain Innes, Captain Speedy and others at the signing of the treaty. In the background is the house Penghulu Mat Akib built for the occasion. The actual signing took place on board the *HMS Pluto*. Source: The National Archives (UK).
6. In 1743, the Dutch East India Company built a redoubt (fortification) over the site of an earlier, 1670 wooden fort at Teluk Gedung, but it was abandoned just five years later. The top photos show a typical Dutch redoubt from the period and a profile view. The bottom painting shows the ruins as seen in July 1884 by JE Tenison-Woods. Source: “Gezichten op de eilanden goenong api en rosingyn”, Nationaal Archief. “Doorsnede Eener Redoute 1750”, Arkib Negara, “Album of drawings of Malaysian views and natural history”, State Library of New South Wales.
7. Chung Keng Quee (鄭景貴), later Kapitan Cina, was the leader of the Hai San secret society. Two roads in Penang were named after him. The current Pinang Peranakan Mansion was his house. After the

main Pangkor treaty was signed by the Malays and the British, the Chinese secret society signed a separate agreement among themselves to cease hostilities—Chung Keng Quee being one of the signatories. Source: Jeffery Seow.

8. Ngah Ibrahim, the Mantri of Larut and one of the parties of the Larut Wars. Muntri Street in Penang, where he had a house, was named after him. Source: Public Domain.

REFERENCES

- [1] Archibald Edward Harboed Anson (1920), “About Others and Myself 1745 To 1920”
- [2] Balthasar Bort (1678), “Report on Malacca”, M.J. Bremner (Translator), Charles Otto Blagden (Editor).
- [3] Barbara June Watson Andaya (1975), “Perak, The Abode of Grace - A Study of an Eighteenth Century
- [4] C.D. Cowan (1950), “Governor Bannerman and the Penang Tin Scheme. 1818-1819”, JMBRAS, Vol. 23, No. 1 (151) (February 1950), pp. 52-83
- [5] C.S. Wong (1964), “A Gallery of Chinese Kapitans”
- [6] D. MacIntyre (1961), “Britain’s Intervention in Malaya: The Origin of Lord Kimberley’s Instructions to Sir Andrew Clarke in 1873”, *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Oct. 1961), pp. 47-69
- [7] Edward Marsh Merewether (1891), JSBRAS, No. 23, “Outline of the History of the Dindings”, pg. 35-47
- [8] Frank Athelstane Swettenham (1875), “Sir Frank Swettenham’s Malay-an journals, 1874-1876”
- [9] John Anderson (1824), “Political and Commercial Considerations Relative to the Malayan Peninsula and the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca Peninsula”, pg. 178-170
- [10] K. E. Chan, C. H. Cho, S. H. Khoo (1971), “*Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Sep. 1971), “Place-Names in the Sitiawan Area, Perak”, pg. 185-194
- [11] Khoo Teng Tiong (1999), *Warta Geologi*, Volume 25, No. 3 May-Jun 1999, “Coastal geomorphology of the Strait of

Malacca area during the past millennium”, pg 161-164

[12] Malay State”, Thesis.

[13] Paul Wheatley (1961), “The Golden Khersonese: studies in the historical geography of the Malay Peninsula before A.D. 1500”

[14] Peeravit Koad Thatdao Rakmak (2023), “The Role of Astronomy in Determining the Locations of Geographical Features During the Eleventh to Seventeenth Centuries”.

[15] Peter Benson Maxwell (1878), “Our Malay Conquests”

[16] Raja Chulan ibni Raja Hamid (2015), “Hikayat Misa Melayu”, Eds. Jelani Harun, Zainal Abidin Borhan. Based on (MS Or. 832)

[17] Sultan Ahmaddin Shah ibni Sultan Muhammad Shah (1787), “Surat Sultan Perak kepada Francis Light berkaitan pembelian beras”, Letter dated 26 October 1787, MS 40320/11, f.33

[18] Wilkinson, R.J. (1908), “Papers on Malay Subjects: History (Part II) Notes on Perak History, pg. 89-90.

[19] William Dampier (1729), “A Collection of Voyages: In Four Volumes: Containing I. Captain William Dampier’s Voyages Round the World”, pg. 171-176

FOOTNOTES

[1] Contraction of *kelian*, an old word for a surface mine. Related to the modern word *galian* (mineral).

[2] Not to be mistaken for Penghulu Mat Akib of Bandar Bahru—an enemy of Dato’ Sagor, the Mantri of Larut’s uncle.



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.

THE T'NG TOK PANJANG IN ANCESTRAL WORSHIP

BY ONG JIN TEONG

CAPTIONS

1. Offering to ancestors.^[2]
2. Ancestral offerings at the Kee Ancestral Hall at Sungei Bakap.



DR. ONG JIN TEONG

is the author of two award-winning books—*Nonya Heritage Kitchen: Origins, Utensils, Recipes* and *Penang Heritage Food: Yesterday's Recipes for Today's Cook*. Following his retirement as a Nanyang Technological University's College of Engineering professor, he lectures, conducts classes, writes books and articles on Nonya cooking and food heritage, and runs the occasional supper club.

WHEN T'NG TOK is mentioned in Penang, it is in reference to the sumptuous feasts^[1] prepared to celebrate occasions like weddings, significant birthdays and funerals. The food is served on a long but narrow table, hence the name *t'ng tok* (Penang) or *tok panjang* (Singapore and Melaka). For the uninitiated, the Hokkien dialects spoken in the North and South of Peninsular Malaysia are slightly different from each other, as can be seen in the different pronunciations/spellings used for many of the same dishes—e.g. fish is *hu* in the North and *he* in the South.

In my mother-in-law's Kee family ancestral home in Sungei Bakap, there is a Kee ancestral hall. When a male descendant passes away, a tablet (*sin chew*) would be placed behind the altar in the ancestral hall. I happened to be there on a particular day in the Chinese calendar, when food offerings were laid on the usual rectangular tables for the departed forebears. There was also a long table with a setting for each of the other descendants; each setting consisted of a bowl of rice, a bowl of *kuih ee*, a glass of wine, a cup of tea plus a spoon and a pair of chopsticks. This was the first time I had seen the long table used for ancestral offerings.

After reading Arthur Lim's book, *Tok Panjang: The Evolution of a Peranakan Heritage Feast*,^[3] I am convinced that the *t'ng tok panjang* evolved from the long table used for ancestral worship.

There is a suggestion that the rich Babas and Nyonyas adopted the long dining table from the British. Another says that it could have evolved from the Malay communal custom of sitting on the floor, sharing food around a *dulang*. Since the move from eating on the floor to sitting at the table is relatively recent, these suggestions are not very credible.

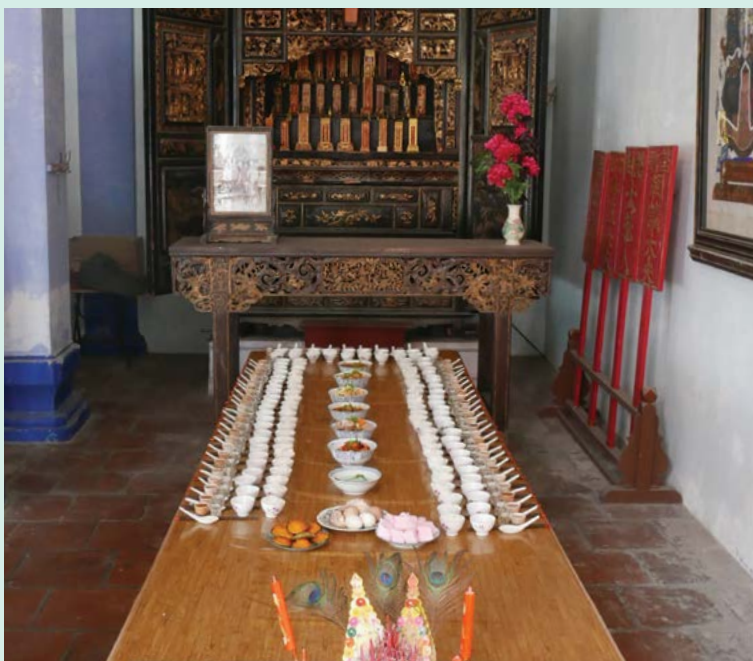
TABLE ARRANGEMENTS FOR T'NG TOK PANJANG

Since well-off Nyonya families usually lived in terraced houses, there would not have been space for storing long tables. Therefore, these tables were assembled by joining several square or rectangular tables together, and then covered with table cloths. Those who weren't so wealthy settled for whatever was available in the house—a large rectangular table that could accommodate the guests, for example.

When my family moved from the annex in my grandmother's house in Macalister Road to our own house, a large wide rectangular table was the prominent feature of our dining room. When we moved to a newly built house in the early 1950s, this large rectangular table came with us. Whenever we had a celebratory meal at home, that was the table we used.

The traditional *t'ng tok panjang* is rather narrow, with chairs arranged on both sides of the table. The two ends of the table are traditionally left unoccupied. According to Norman Cho, unlike Western-style dining, the "*tok panjang* is devoid of accessories like flowers and epergnes".^[4] Epergnes is a three-dimensional form of lazy susan used to hold food or flowers; the name is derived from the French *epargne* meaning saving, built on the idea that guests were saved the trouble of passing the dish along—very appropriate when talking about the *t'ng tok panjang*.

The dishes are usually arranged in three rows on the table. The main dishes like soups and curries are served in large bowls in the middle. Dishes like *achar*, *lor bak*, *jiu hu char* and liver rolls are served on small plates or bowls on





2

the outer rows. Condiments like *sambal belacan*, lettuce leaves to accompany the *jiu hu char* and pickles for liver rolls are also placed on the outer rows.

It is not polite, especially for Nyonyas, to stretch out their hands for food on the table. Hence, several sets of the same dishes are laid out at regular intervals on the table, so that all the dishes are within reach of anyone seated anywhere along the table. Guests eat in a continuous “shift”, starting with the elders, followed by the married relatives, unmarried relatives and then, the young unmarried, including the ladies waiting on the guests. Any seat that is vacated is filled immediately. Therefore, dishes have to be replenished regularly by relatives and helpers.^[5]

The number of dishes served can range from five to seven, sometimes 12 or 24, and even 40 has been mentioned. With three rows of dishes and 20 dishes served in a cluster, each row will have about seven dishes that will stretch over approximately five feet. If 40 dishes were served along three rows, with 13 dishes per row, that would be stretching it a bit far. My wife’s *jee chim* (second aunt) said that the very rich could serve five rows of dishes.

WHO COOKS THE DISHES?

The preparation of the many dishes is usually done by extended family members, close friends and neighbours. In wealthier families, it is a common practice to book the services of a *champhor* (a Hainanese chef) who would come to their homes to prepare multi-courses of festive Nyonya dishes. In those days (early 1950s in Penang) there were no known restaurants that could cater for large groups.

After the host and the *champhor* agree on the menu, the *champhor* would arrange for the ingredients. If there is a long guest list, the *champhor* would enlist the help of an assistant or apprentice. The chef would bring all the cooking utensils he needs with him to the house, and the host would make arrangements for the *t’ng tok panjang* with the help of other members of her family and sometimes, with the help of neighbours. The *champhor* arrives the night before the meal or early in the morning.

Expensive ingredients like crab, prawns and fish maw were the order of the day, and inexpensive ingredients like beansprouts, water spinach, *tau kwa* or sweet potato leaves were not served. Dark colours were considered inauspicious, hence dark-coloured dishes were also not traditionally served. For happy occasions, very sour dishes are not traditionally served. Black, blue and sometimes green are associated with mourning. Traditionally, dishes that use dark-coloured *rempahs* (like *buah keluak*) are not acceptable, compared with curries or dishes that use red chillies because of the auspicious colours. Roast meat like roast chicken or roast pork is always a good choice.

PENANG VS. SINGAPORE & MELAKA

The main dishes served for weddings and other significant events—the eve of Chinese New Year and ancestral worship (*semayang*) like Cheng Beng (Tomb Sweeping Day)—are very similar. Some of the family Nyonya dishes that I can remember, together with those mentioned by Lily Yew^[6] and others^{[7][8][9]}, are *gulai kay* (chicken curry); soups such as *kiam chai ark* (also known as *itek tim* in the South), *tu tor th’ng* (pork

FOOTNOTES

[1] The term *t’ng tok* will be used in this article for Penang; *tok panjang* for Singapore & Melaka, but when referring terms used in the three states, *t’ng tok panjang* will be used.

[2] The main offerings are in the foreground and in the middle of the photo. The *sin chew* on the chair at the far end of the photo is for the patriarch. There are three tablets on the right and left for the six sons.

[3] Arthur SK Lim, *Tok Panjang: The Evolution of a Peranakan Heritage Feast*, Landmark Books, 2023

[4] Norman Cho, At the *Tok Panjang: What Exactly is the Tok Panjang*, first published in *The Peranakan*, Issue 1, 2010 [Reprinted in “Being Baba - Selected Articles from the Peranakan Magazine”, edited by Linda Chee, Cavendish Press, 2015]

[5] Yeap Joo Kim, *The Patriarch*, 2nd Revised Printing May, 1976, about KSE Birthday [pp145-150]

tripe soup), *chap chai th'ng* (braised mixed vegetable stew) and *hu peow th'ng* (fish maw soup). These dishes were served in large bowls in the middle row of *t'ng tok panjang*.

Jiu hu char, *pnee hu char*, *hu chee char*, *lor bak*, *tu kua kian* (liver roll or *babi hati bungkus*), *chim choe*, *heh kian* (prawn fritters), *timun char kay pak lai*, *kerabu kay bok nee*, and *achar awak* and *achar hu* are served in small plates and small bowls on the outer rows on the *t'ng tok panjang*. Included in the list of dishes served are the favourite dishes of the deceased.

Unlike the Southern Peranakans, *chap chai*, *nasi lemak*, *nasi ulam* are not traditionally served on the *t'ng tok* in Penang. In *The Patriarch*, Khoo Sian Ewe's grand-daughter Yeap Joo Kim mentioned that birthday noodles were not traditionally served as a dish on the *t'ng tok*. The birthday noodle served in Penang is different because it includes several ingredients which are considered auspicious and fruitful, unlike the *mee orang tidur* that is served in funerals in the South. I have been assured that Penang Lam Mee is also served in funerals as it marks the last birthday of the deceased.

In Singapore and Melaka, there is a clearer distinction between dishes traditionally offered in ancestral worship (*semayang lauk*) and dishes served during happy occasions like weddings and significant birthdays. Over the years, many *semayang* dishes have been served on the *tok panjang* for happy occasions. Other articles, like from Tan Kuning in "Ancestral Feasts"^[10], on *semayang luaks* reinforce the concept that the *tok panjang* originated from offerings to the departed.

“

It is not polite, especially for Nyonyas, to stretch out their hands for food on the table. Hence, several sets of the same dishes are laid out at regular intervals on the table, so that all the dishes are within reach of anyone seated anywhere along the table. Guests eat in a continuous 'shift', starting with the elders, followed by the married relatives, unmarried relatives and then, the young unmarried, including the ladies waiting on the guests.”



3



4



5



6

FOOTNOTES

[6] Lily Yew, "Being Penang Straits Chinese: You Say Nyanya, I Say Mama - Mrs. Lily Yew" on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=T51N-0PryIU>

[7] Cedric Tan (Editor), Our Mamas' RECIPES - Traditional Peranakan Dishes for Special Occasions, MPH Group Publishing Sdn Bhd, 2020

[8] Yeap Joo Kim, "The Penang Palate", The Phoenix Press Sdn Bhd, 1990

[9] Julie Wong (Editor), "Nonya Flavours - A Complete Guide to Penang Straits Chinese Cuisine", Star Publications (M) Bhd, 2003

[10] Tan Kuning, Ancestral Feasts, The Peranakan, Issue 2, 2014, pp18-19. [Reprinted in "Being Baba - selected Articles from the Peranakan Magazine", Edited by Linda Chee, Cavendish Press, 2015]

[11] Gwee Thiam Hock, A Nonya Mosaic: Memoirs of a Peranakan Childhood, Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2013. [Re-issue of book published in 1985]

[12] Cedric Tan (Editor), Our Mamas' RECIPES - Traditional Peranakan Dishes for Special Occasions, MPH Group Publishing Sdn Bhd, 2020

[13] Sylvia Tan, "One Table 11 Dishes & 50 Guests", Straits Times, 26th August 2012.

Each family has its own list of dishes, so it is appropriate to start to work out a list from as many sources as possible that represent the *semayang* dishes prepared by Chinese Peranakans in the South.

Lim has four separate lists of dishes— for birth-days, weddings, *luak semayang* and Cheng Beng. The following could be classified as *semayang* dishes: *bak-wan kepiting* (flower crab meatballs soup), *sambal udang* (sambal prawns), *hati babi bungkus*, *ayam buah keluak*, *babi/ayam pong teh* (some similarity to Penang's *hong bak*), *chap chai*, *pong tauhu* (pork and beancurd balls in bamboo shoot soup), *tee hee* (stir fried pig's lungs), *itek tim* and *udang goreng assam* (tamarind fried prawns).

Gwee^[11] and Tan both provided their lists of wedding dishes, with Gwee's list being more extensive, and including *semayang* items like *ayam buah keluak*, *babi pong teh*, *mee orang tidur* and *itek tim*. Here, I list a combined representative list of wedding and birthday dishes from Singapore and Melaka on top of the several items served for *semayang*: *kari ayam*, *he pio* soup (fish maw soup), *ter toh* soup/*perut kambing* soup (pig or goat tripe soup), *nasi lemak*, *nasi ulam*, *chap chai*, *sayur char* (stir fried vegetables with carrots, snow peas and cabbage), *otak otak* (spicy fish mousse), shark's fin scrambled with egg, *achar*, *sek bak* and *ngoh hiang* (similar to Penang's *lor bak*).^[12]

There is a suggestion that over time, the inauspicious dishes appeared with other festive dishes due to family preference or ignorance of traditional practices.

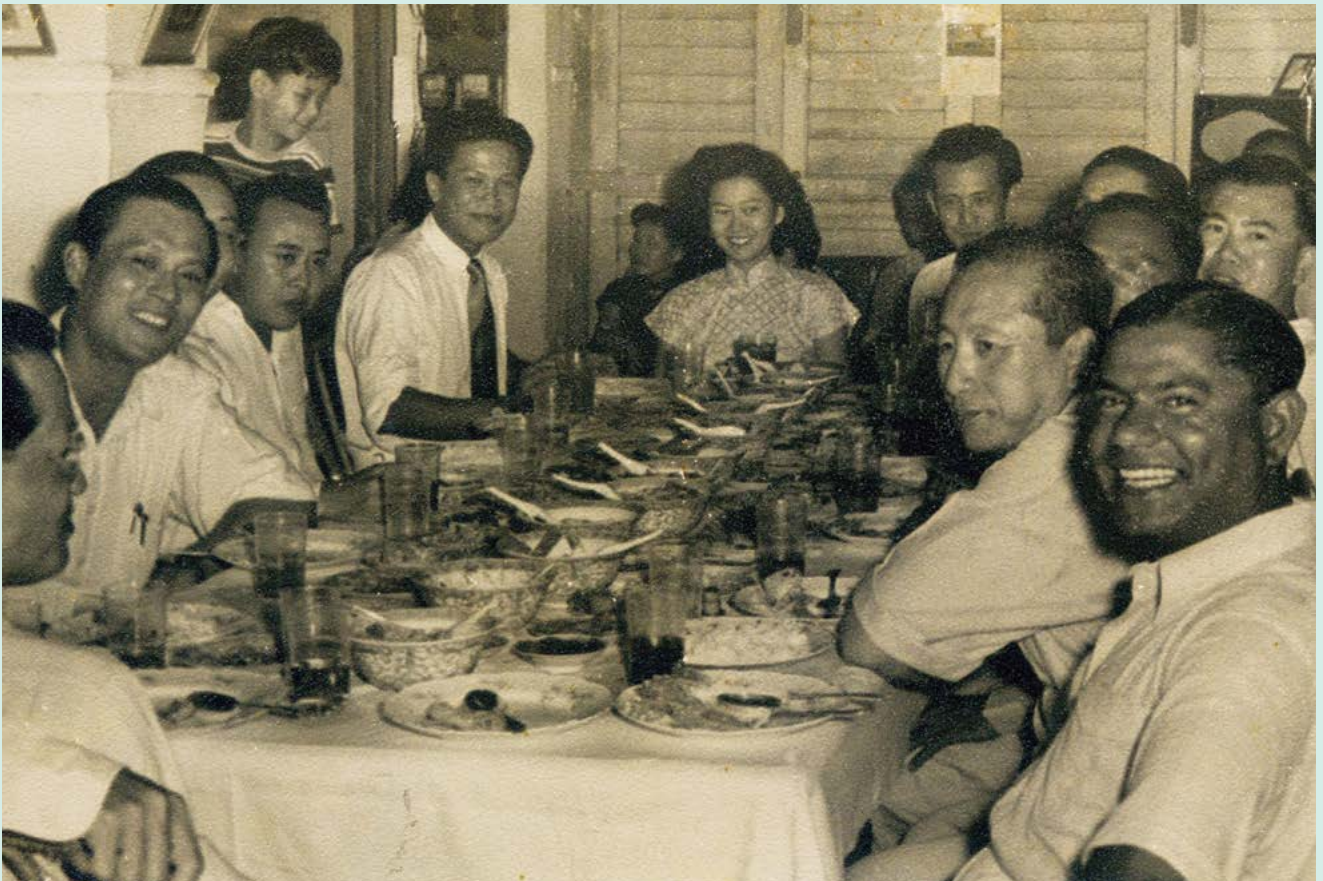
HOLDING ON TO TRADITION

It is important that the dishes served in *t'ng tok panjang* as well as the associated traditions and practices be recorded for the benefit of future generations of Nyonias and Babas. Sylvia Tan, in an article "One Table 11 Dishes & 50 Guests"^[13] in the *Straits Times*, recalled the issues faced when she held a *tok panjang* for her son's wedding, mainly because her guest did not understand protocol for the seating of guests. They behaved as though they were at a buffet!

These traditions and practices need to be highlighted so that when changes are made now or in the future, they would be gradual and done without the loss of its essence. F&B organisations that wish to adopt and commercialise the *t'ng tok panjang* concept should also bear this in mind.

CAPTIONS

3. Ancestral offerings (Penang).
4. *Kiam chai ark/itek tim*.
5. Top: *Jiu hu char*
Bottom: *Kiam chai ark/itek tim*
Right: *Lor bak*
6. *Acak awak* (Penang)
7. *T'ng tok* at my uncle's wedding in the 1940s features a large rectangular table that can accommodate guests.



BY
REXY
PRAKASH
CHACKO

EXPLORING
PENANG'S
FRONTIER IN

BUKIT PANCHOR STATE PARK

HIKE AT A GLANCE

LENGTH

1–2 hours
(To and fro)

DIFFICULTY

Moderate

INTEREST LEVEL

High

SIGNPOSTING

Few, however the main path is clear.

LIKELIHOOD OF
GETTING LOST

Low

NUMBER OF HIKERS

Few

ALONG THE SOUTHEAST border of mainland Penang is the 446ha Bukit Panchor State Park, a natural paradise characterised by towering dipterocarps, clear bubbling streams, and the sights and sounds of wildlife rarely spotted elsewhere in the state. Approximately 10km from Nibong Tebal, the location was first gazetted as the Bukit Panchor Permanent Forest Reserve in 1963, and later elevated to the status of a State Park in 2008 because of its rich biodiversity and recreational potential.

Being such a vast lowland dipterocarp forest, it is no surprise that a network of trails criss-crosses the park, some of which are also used for scientific research. After hearing about a trail in the park which leads to an old frontier pillar, I was intrigued, and made plans for a visit. Hikers should note that from 2 January 2025, activities within forest reserves in Penang state (including hiking) necessitate a permit, which has to be applied for at eforestpay.penang.gov.my. The permit application is best done a few days before the hike, and approvals are usually fast with the nominal permit fee being collected online.

We start early, knowing that the drive from Penang island to Bukit Panchor State Park takes about an hour. The part closest to the entrance is a recreational area, with a canteen, camping ground, several chalets and even a little boardwalk. Most visitors to the park are day trippers, who come for picnics and to dip in the cooling waters of Sungai Buaya, which meanders through this area. However, our focus is on the hike, and we trudge up along the main path, quickly coming to a junction where we take the right fork. Here, a tarred road goes past the chalets and up a slope.

On both sides of this road, trees are meticulously identified and marked with their local and scientific names as well as their unique characteristics, making this journey a very educational experience. Stopping to read the boards, we learn about several trees which grow here, like Karas, Kempas, Mempening and Sepe-
tir, to name a few.

This diversity is no surprise; back in 2016, a research team from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) found a whopping 224 species of trees here. About 10 minutes into the walk, we come across the first point of interest—a High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF) plot, where the Pinang Angin palm (*Iguanura corniculata*) grows. A few fenced plots within the area safeguard this rare palm, which is featured prominently on the state park's logo. While once thought to be endemic to a few states in Peninsular Malaysia, recent scientific research has found that *Iguanura corniculata* is a synonym of *Iguanura polymorpha*, a species which has a much wider, regional distribution.

The path continues gently uphill, with more delightful botanical sights and the sounds of birds and crickets chirping in the background. It takes another 15 minutes to reach the next pit stop, a small concrete hut where the path branches off into three ways.

In front of us, the road continues in the direction of the Frontier Pillar, while to the right, two wide trails branch off to caves within the park—Gua Tongkat and Gua Kelawar. Gua Kelawar is well-known for its large roosting population of bats.

As we take a quick break at this hut, we marvel at a large Meranti Tembaga (*Shorea leprosula*) tree growing majestically in front of us. Prized for its timber, this tree is known to grow rapidly, its upward growth firmly supported by its wide buttresses. As we read the signboard near the hut, we are quite surprised to find out that the whole area was logged about 80 years ago, before it regenerated. Nature does indeed work wonders when given a chance!

We take the path that continues downhill past the hut, and soon cross a stream. It is soothing to look at the gentle flowing stream; its wide sandy banks tempts one to follow the waters downstream. The tarred road ends abruptly at this point, and it starts going uphill along a pebbled path. After the gentle ascent and subsequent descent, this uphill section proves to be tiring, slowing us down a little, but not dimming our spirits. About 35 minutes from the previous hut, we reach a small junction branching off slightly to the left, just before the pebbled path comes to a dead end. Following this brings us right to the border of Bukit Panchor State Park, where the Frontier Pillar stands.

Only part of the pillar remains; the other half having crumbled away. This Frontier Pillar and others along the mainland border were built after the signing of the 1869 “Treaty between Great Britain and Siam, respecting Quedah”. It was financed jointly by the government of the Straits Settlements and the Kedah Sultanate. These Frontier Pillars were no less than 6ft high, spaced 1 mile apart from each other, and based on the photos of Frontier Pillars seen elsewhere along this border, the complete structure would have looked like a short obelisk.

While frontier pillars are a thing of the past, this structure still marks the current borders of Penang and Kedah. Having come right up to the border of Penang, it is only natural that we take a few steps into Kedah, and make this an interstate hike. We follow the path beside the Frontier Pillar and immediately find ourselves in an orchard in Kedah's Bandar Baharu district. Any further foray along this path would be a story I could write for a hiking column in a Kedah-based magazine!

Having got a glimpse of Kedah to satisfy our curiosity, we step back into Penang, and end our adventure with a packed meal. This hike in the Bukit Panchor State Park is one filled with botanical delights, calming surroundings and a curious frontier pillar—and is probably the only hike where I can bring my readers to the very frontiers of Penang (and beyond)!

REFERENCES

- [1] GOVERNMENT NOTIFICATIONS, The Straits Times, 28 August 1869, Page 3. Retrieved from <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/> on 11 February 2025
- [2] Mohamad, Nora-zlinda & Latiff, A & Fitri, Zohari & Sani, M.. (2019). Tree species composition, diversity and biomass estimation of Bukit Panchor Recreational Forest, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. *Malayan Nature Journal*. 68. 145-155.
- [3] Saw, L.G. (2023). A revision of the genus *Iguanura* (Arecaceae) in Peninsular Malaysia. *Gardens' Bulletin Singapore* 75: 73-117.
- [4] Treaty between Great Britain and Siam, respecting Boundaries, Extradition Customs Dues. (Quedah.) Signed at Bangkok, May 6, 1869.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Walking up the pebbled path towards the Frontier Pillar.
 2. Cascades along Sungai Buaya.
 3. Bukit Panchor State Park.
 4. A gentle stream in the park.
 5. The small concrete hut where the path branches off in three separate ways.
 6. The Frontier Pillar.
- 7–11. Flora of Bukit Panchor State Park.



REXY PRAKASH CHACKO is an electronic engineer by profession and a nature lover by passion. While he spends his weekdays earning a living at the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone, his weekends are spent reflecting and recharging on the green hills of Penang.



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11

OOI EOW JIN

A HUMBLE
VIRTUOSO IN
MALAYSIA'S
MUSIC HISTORY

BY PAUL AUGUSTIN



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.

1

“Mr. Ooi is one of a handful of non-Malays involved in a predominantly Malay business: ‘Playing Malay music and appreciating it is something that has grown on me over the years. I can sit down and play any sort of traditional Malay tune on the spur of the moment. I have them all categorised in my mind.’”

—“Keep Evolving” *Malay Mail*, 5 November 1982



2

his school, and he knew that Eow Jin played the instrument. He asked Eow Jin to sit in with the band. Tan noticed his talent, and that he could play the popular songs of the day. After the event, he invited Eow Jin to join the band’s practice sessions, which he did, marking the beginning of his musical journey.

Eow Jin joined the band—his first—and played the accordion and the piano (if one was available at the venue). The Jolly Amigos was a popular band of that period, performing at various functions and holding a steady gig at the Chinese Swimming Club (CSC).

Joining the band opened a door to another world for Eow Jin, leading him to play nights at a cabaret club on Noordin Street and joining Albert Yeoh’s band at the E&O Hotel on weekends, whilst holding down a stable daytime job as an English teacher and later, as a government clerk in the survey department.

One day, he heard the Ted Heath Orchestra playing an orchestrated version of “Begin the Beguine” on the radio. It inspired him to explore and learn music arrangement. To improve his basic musical skills, he bought books on the subject, and when he heard that Radio Malaya had started an orchestra, he began sending his arrangements to Alfonso Soliano, the orchestra leader. Soliano tried out the arrangements with the orchestra and found them to be quite good.

In 1962, Eow Jin won first prize in Radio Malaya’s inaugural national tune-writing contest with his song “Rusohan Kalbu”. He was the only Chinese winner with a Malay-titled song, suggested by a friend. Eow Jin confessed at a later interview that he didn’t know what the title meant, but used it because it sounded nice.

The following year, Soliano travelled to Penang with the Radio Malaya Orchestra. He sought out Eow Jin, and told him that he liked the arrangements that he sent. Soliano invited him to join the Orchestra as he needed a piano player. Though it meant leaving a stable and pensionable government job—many friends advised against it—Eow Jin decided to embrace this opportunity to start a new chapter in his life. He was earning less than \$200 as a clerk, and the salary working with the orchestra was

\$700 (on a contract basis)—the huge difference in earnings and the opportunity to work with the nation’s top orchestra and musicians were too good to pass up. It was a decision he never regretted.

With the Radio Malaya Orchestra, Eow Jin performed at numerous government functions for the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and other heads of state, and led the RTM Combo with P. Ramlee, Saloma, S.M. Salim, Hamzah Dolmat, Kamariah Noor and others for a three-week tour to 21 forward operating bases of the Malaysian army throughout the country in 1965.

Eow Jin left the RTM Orchestra in 1967; he felt he couldn’t get any further in his career on a temporary contract. He decided to try his hand as a commercial musician in the nightclub circuit, leading combos in KL hotels—Federal, Hilton and Regent. The longest stint he held was a four-year gig with his own seven-piece band at Mirama Hotel. The hotel’s restaurant had a floor show every night and the band had two singers—one who sang in Chinese and a Filipino singer who sang in English.

He occasionally returned to Penang to play with Robert Tan’s band at the Ambassador Hotel. On one of his trips back to Penang, sometime in 1969, he met up with drummer Tony Perkins, who had returned for a break in Penang from Bangkok. Tony invited him to play with a band that he was putting together for a US Air Force base club in Thailand, catering to American soldiers on leave from Vietnam. The quartet consisted of Tony Perkins (drums), George Baum (guitar), Jack (a Thai musician on bass) and Eow Jin on piano. He played with the band for six months before returning to KL.

In 1974, when the RTM Orchestra had an opening for a senior musician cum arranger, Eow Jin took up the post. This second stint with the Orchestra lasted a decade. During this period, he also represented Malaysia with an original composition at the first Korean Song Festival in 1979, led bands for performances at Seri Perdana for visiting dignitaries such as Nancy Reagan, the Prime Ministers of Turkey, Cambodia, etc., and was Combo leader for the Department of Tourism and Malaysia Airlines, promotional shows in Korea,



3

“**O**NE DAY, out of the blue, my father bought a piano and forced me to learn it.” And like the obedient son he was, Eow Jin readily complied. “Learning was not a choice—I was told to do it and I did it. I didn’t enjoy the piano lessons because I had to play classical tunes, which I found boring,” he shared.

When Ooi Eow Jin reached Grade 3 in piano, his father arranged for him to take accordion lessons from David Ng, the son of a close friend. After just a few lessons, David moved to Singapore to pursue his own musical career—he went on to become a renowned jazz pianist in Europe. Despite the short duration, the accordion lessons left a lasting impression; David had taught and encouraged him to play popular songs and to develop his own style.

Born on 3 June 1938, Eow Jin started his education at Wellesley Primary School for two years before moving to Westlands School and then Penang Free School (1952–1955), where he obtained his Cambridge School Certificate.

In the mid-1950s, Eow Jin’s musical journey took off unexpectedly at his Form Five farewell dance, where Robert Tan’s band, Roy Hits and the Jolly Amigos, was performing. The accordion player happened to be his Malay language teacher in

Dubai, Amsterdam, Taiwan and Kuwait that same year. When Johari Salleh left RTM in 1983, Eow Jin co-led the RTM Orchestra with Gus Steyn for 14 months.

EOW JIN'S DISCOGRAPHY

Eow Jin was the leader of the backing band for the Bakat TV & Bintang RTM competitions from 1974 to 1984. He recalled that he was doing the arrangement for the medley of "Cabaret" and "Big Spender" for Sudirman for the 1976 Bintang RTM finals, and felt that "there was something special about Sudirman, he was different from the other contestants; he knew exactly what he wanted for the medley and I just put it together for him in a full Broadway-style arrangement." Sudirman proceeded to go on and win that year's competition, and Eow Jin had the opportunity to produce and contribute to the title track for Sudirman's first recording "Teriring Doa". One of Eow Jin's other compositions that Sudirman later recorded and which became a hit was "Gerimis di Lautan" in 1979.

In addition to his work with RTM, Eow Jin was involved in a number of other external projects such as being a part-time songwriter with a local recording company Warnada, the music director and contributor of eight songs for two albums by Rafeah Buang in Singapore, and the co-producer of M. Nasir's first recording in Singapore in 1979. From 1980 to 1985, some of Eow Jin's compositions were recorded by Dhalan Zainuddin ("Lagu Untuk Mu"), Salamiah Hassan, Frances Yip, Jennifer Yen, Flora Santos, Rosemaria, Malek Ridzuan, Yunizar Hoessein, Alleycats and Rahimah Rahim.

Meanwhile, Eow Jin was approached and contracted by Sarimah Films to compose, arrange and produce film music scores, which he considered a personal achievement on his musical journey. He worked on two films with Sarimah Films—"Dia Ibu Ku" (1980) and "Rantau Sepanjang Jalan" (1983) with the latter winning Best Theme Music award for composition and arrangement for film score at the 4th Malaysia Film Festival in 1983. Later, he also composed and arranged the film music scores for "Ali Setan II" (1986) and "Hati Bukan Kristal" (1989).

He left RTM again in 1984 and ventured into music education. He joined Institut Teknologi MARA (ITM) as a music officer in the Cultural Unit and a lecturer in the Fine Arts Department. However, this appointment only lasted a year as Ahmad Merican, who was the programme manager of the newly established TV3, sought out Eow Jin, offering him the job as the station's music supervisor/coordinator. Eow Jin realised that this was another opportunity that was too good to pass up, "it was as if the scope for the appointment was 'tailor made' for me!" he quipped.

CAPTIONS

1. A younger Ooi Eow Jin.
2. Ooi Eow Jin later in his life.
3. Ooi Eow Jin with P. Ramlee in the Pulau Sebatik army camp. RTM Orchestra toured armed forces bases after Konfrontasi in 1965.
4. Ooi Eow Jin (far left) in the RTM Auditorium on a vibraphone in a jam session with the Kansas University Jazz Quintet (1964).
5. Ooi Eow Jin and Azizah Basri representing Malaysia at the Seoul Song Festival 1978.



He was with TV3 for 13 years (1986 to 1999), and he created theme scores and incidental music for all TV3 programmes except the news segment. He had to compose, arrange and produce music for more than 150 different programmes, ranging from an entertainment show and a sports magazine to a cookery series, scoring music for made-by-TV3 television drama series and creating station jingles.

"My know-how of Malay traditional and modern music, I owe to my 13 years with Orkestra RTM. That has proven invaluable for my work at TV3 as most of the programme themes have a Malay music slant," he told *Malay Mail*.

Among some of his most memorable music themes composed for the station was the throbbing sound beat for TV3's pop chart series "Muzik, Muzik", the dramatic sounding promo for the Education Ministry and TV3's Secondary School Drama Competition, cookery show "Kuali", sports magazine "Dunia Sukan", and music scores for TV3 dramas "Tuan Brown" and "Arus". Besides his regular music-production-for-programmes routine, Eow Jin also handled TV3's musical extravaganzas: "Juara Lagu" and the "ABU-Golden Kite World Song Festival" which included hiring and conducting the live bands, and supervising the sound recording for the shows.

After retiring from TV3, Eow Jin returned to teaching, lecturing at the International College of Music (ICOM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (ASWARA).

After retiring from the day-to-day routine of broadcasting and lecturing, Eow Jin would still not call it a day. He returned to performing, playing for functions and tick-

ling the ivories as the resident pianist of Carcosa Sri Negara (2003-2006), The Ritz Carlton Hotel (2006-2012) and The Majestic Hotel (2012-2015). The Majestic Hotel turned out incidentally to be his last regular gig; he was soon diagnosed to have Alzheimer's disease.

TALENT AND BRILLIANCE

Considering that Eow Jin was a self-taught musician (except for a British correspondence course he did when he joined RTM, with not even a certificate at the end of it), his musical achievements were nothing short of amazing. He won a number of awards and recorded a number of firsts in the country:

- First professional musician to be authorised by the Ministry of Education to teach music courses at degree level.
- First professional musician to teach at UPM and to be appointed adjunct professor.
- First professional musician to be awarded the Anugerah Seni Negara for musical arrangements by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage.

For a person who never really sought or thought of having a career in the music industry, Eow Jin had actually done it all: from being an active musician and band-leader, composer, arranger, record producer to leading an orchestra as well as being a music instructor and film music score writer.

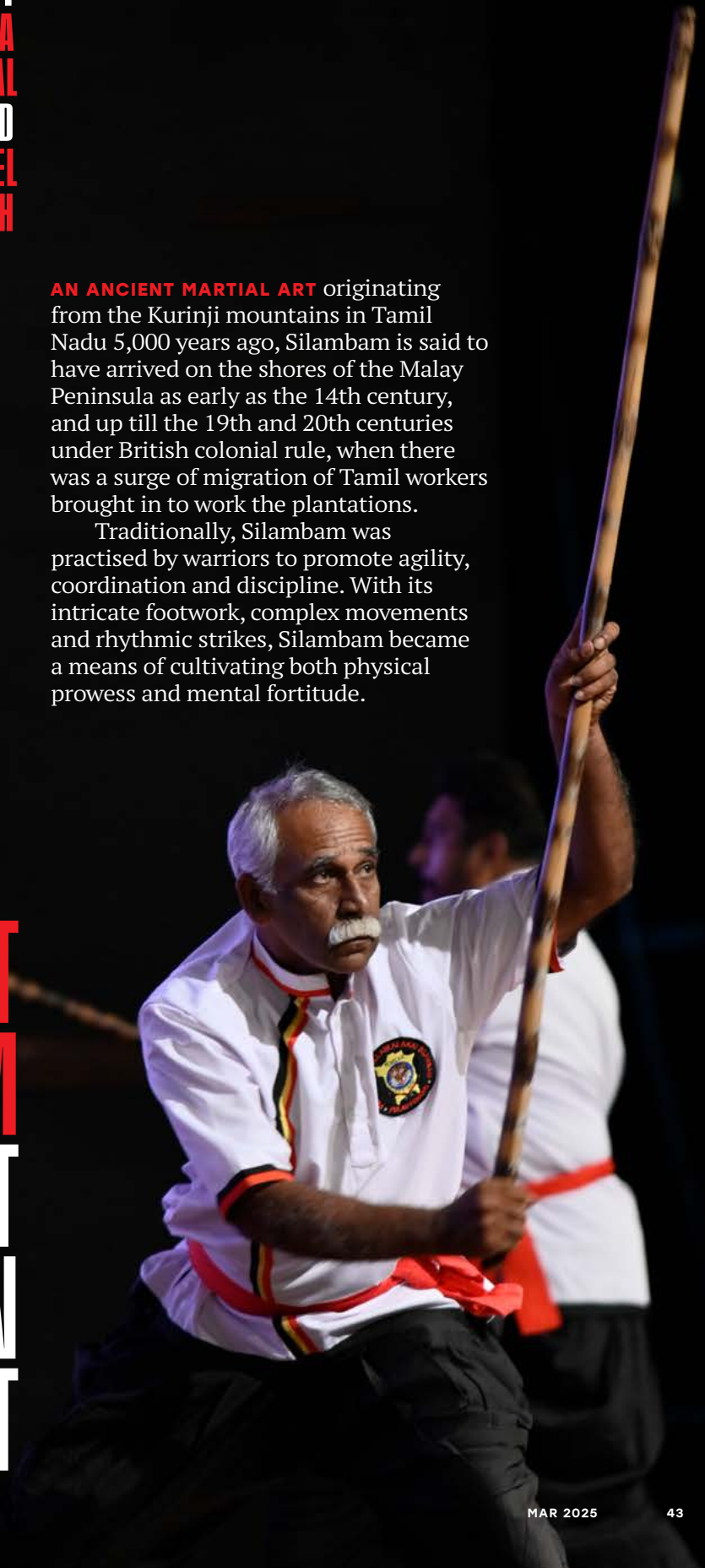
In his later years, Eow Jin was bedridden and was cared for by his wife, Elaine Khaw Lean Kee, with the assistance of a caregiver. Tragically, they had earlier lost both their sons. Eow Jin passed away on 18 September 2024 at the age of 86 in KL.

BY
PRIYANKA
BANSAL
AND
RACHEL
YEON

AN ANCIENT MARTIAL ART originating from the Kurinji mountains in Tamil Nadu 5,000 years ago, Silambam is said to have arrived on the shores of the Malay Peninsula as early as the 14th century, and up till the 19th and 20th centuries under British colonial rule, when there was a surge of migration of Tamil workers brought in to work the plantations.

Traditionally, Silambam was practised by warriors to promote agility, coordination and discipline. With its intricate footwork, complex movements and rhythmic strikes, Silambam became a means of cultivating both physical prowess and mental fortitude.

SPOTLIGHT ON SILAMBAM AN ANCIENT INDIAN MARTIAL ART





2



3



4

Formal Silambam instruction can be more readily traced to the early 20th century, particularly in areas like Kuala Selangor, Kapar and Klang. Silambam likely did not receive official recognition during the colonial period, which may have led to less formal settings for its instruction. After Malaya's independence, Silambam flourished; classes were often held in community centres, temples or open-air venues.

What many may not know is that Silambam in Malaysia can be classified into two types: sports Silambam and tradition Silambam.

SPORTS SILAMBAM

A modern, competitive version of the traditional martial art, Silambam in sports is common in Malaysia, and is practised using a long bamboo staff, involving intricate footwork, strikes, spins and defensive techniques. However, it has also evolved over time, with several Silambam associations and classes offered by the Rakan Muda programme in the 1990s introducing weapons from other traditional Indian martial arts like the *maru* (a thrusting weapon made from deer horns), *aruva* (sickle), *vaal* (a curved sword) and *sedikuchi* (short stick), among others.

In sports Silambam, points are given upon contact of the bamboo stick on any of the opponent's body parts. Points are also given based on how the bamboo stick rotates during the performance.

The Malaysian Silambam Federation has played a crucial role in promoting the martial art through tournaments and exhibitions. Those trained under clubs registered with the Ministry of Youth and Sports (KBS) are encouraged to join competitions. Shivashangaree Chanasekaran participated in sports Silambam from age 9 until 17 in the early 2000s and bears a black belt.

"At that time, we had to participate in two competitions—one under Persatuan Silambam Malaysia and another under Rakan Muda, representing my state, Perak. For both competitions, we had to travel to other states. For competitions under Rakan Muda, those who won gold received RM1,000 from the Perak Sultan. There was also a celebration dinner at the Sultan of Perak's palace," she recalls.

Penang's Silambam athletes recently came into the spotlight after securing an impressive 12 gold medals at the Asian Open Silambam Championship held in Qatar. They were the overall champs for 2024, beating Qatar, the UAE, India and Saudi Arabia.

NILAIKALAKKI SILAMBAM

Tradition Silambam, however, is seen as a martial art passed down from one generation to the next—it is tougher to learn and offers intangible value to the practitioner. Nillaikalakki Silambam—that can now only be found in Penang—is one of the traditional Silambams practised in Malaysia.

In 1936, a grandmaster of Nillaikalakki Silambam by the name of Mariapakiam arrived in Penang as forced labour. He was the 15th descendant of Nillaikalakki. Asan Anbanathan Ramasamy met him in 1960 and learnt this art form from him. He then registered the association on 20 February 1975, and the group, consisting of 20 members, had just celebrated their 50th anniversary. Anbanathan is now considered one of a few living masters teaching this art form; the form is said to be unadulterated—it is exactly how Nillaikalakki Silambam has been practised since its inception.

The word "nilai" means "stance" and "kalakki" means "to disturb". According to Munieswaran Krishna

Kumar, president and senior master of Nillaikalakki Silambam, those two words together means to disrupt an opponent's posture to gain an advantage during combat. In the spiritual sense, it means disturbing our own stance, aura or physical negativity to become a better person.

"There are several differences between Nillaikalakki and sport Silambam. For one thing, our focus is on preserving the intangible part of Nillaikalakki. There is no belting system; we use a sash. Yellow is for juniors and red is for those who have completed the basic lessons and have graduated to the advanced level," he says.

"Students will need seven years to complete basic to get the red sash. There are altogether 10 levels to complete in seven years—that is, if they commit to attending lessons five days a week, continuously. There is no shortcut, because there is no prearranged combat. When you are in combat, you are by yourself, that is why our students need to master every level. The focus is on understanding," he adds.

Despite being around for five decades, Munieswaran explained that there is not much support in terms of student enrolment because the training can be perceived as "boring" as there are no modifications and it is not particularly glorified like other types of martial arts. They currently have approximately 50 students consisting of Indians, Chinese and Malays.

However, they have been supported in other ways, like being invited to do demonstrations during many state government-related events like George Town World Heritage Day and other festivals.

"Right now, we are doing our best to document the art. I am interviewing my master and noting down what he has learned from his grandmaster," he reveals.

A CULTURAL LEGACY

On 9 January 2025, Asan, at 78, was awarded the PHT-HSBC-GTHH Living Heritage Treasures 2024-2025 by the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT)—a recognition of his role in training 20 Silambam masters throughout Malaysia. For 60 years, Asan taught Nillaikalakki Silambam for free at Gelugor's Balai Rakyat. He recently started a class for 10 autistic children under age 12. According to the PHT vice president, Loh-Lim Lin Lee, this award "highlighted a long-ignored traditional self-defence martial art form, and is a special acknowledgement for an often sidelined community".

"We did our research and found him to be an excellent candidate. Most of all, he was committed, devoted and provided an avenue for many disadvantaged youths to find purpose and commitment," she adds.

One of those who benefitted from Asan's work is Munieswaran, who has been his student since he was 17. Now 43, his two children started taking lessons four years ago.

This award was first presented in 2004 by PHT to honour Penang locals who are considered guardians of cultural heritage, and each recipient is entitled to RM2,000 per year for the rest of their lives. However, for the Nillaikalakki Silambam community, it is recognition for all their efforts in preserving the art and for successful knowledge transfer. After all, this art is already extinct in India.

"They [the PHT team] came to watch our training, and what we have promoted and preserved has been seen by the judges. [Asan] is the only martial art grandmaster that has achieved this award. With that, we feel seen by the community."

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Senior Master Thulaseedass showcasing his Nillaikalakki skill.
2. The team performing Nillaikalakki Silambam at Dewan Sri Pinang.
3. Asan Anbanathan Ramasamy awarded the PHT-HSBC-GTHH Living Heritage Treasures 2024-2025.
4. Nillaikalakki's junior team performing at Padang Kota Lama.



PRIYANKA BANSAL

is an Indian expat living in Penang. Owing to her artistic bent of mind she loves writing, painting and crafting.



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.



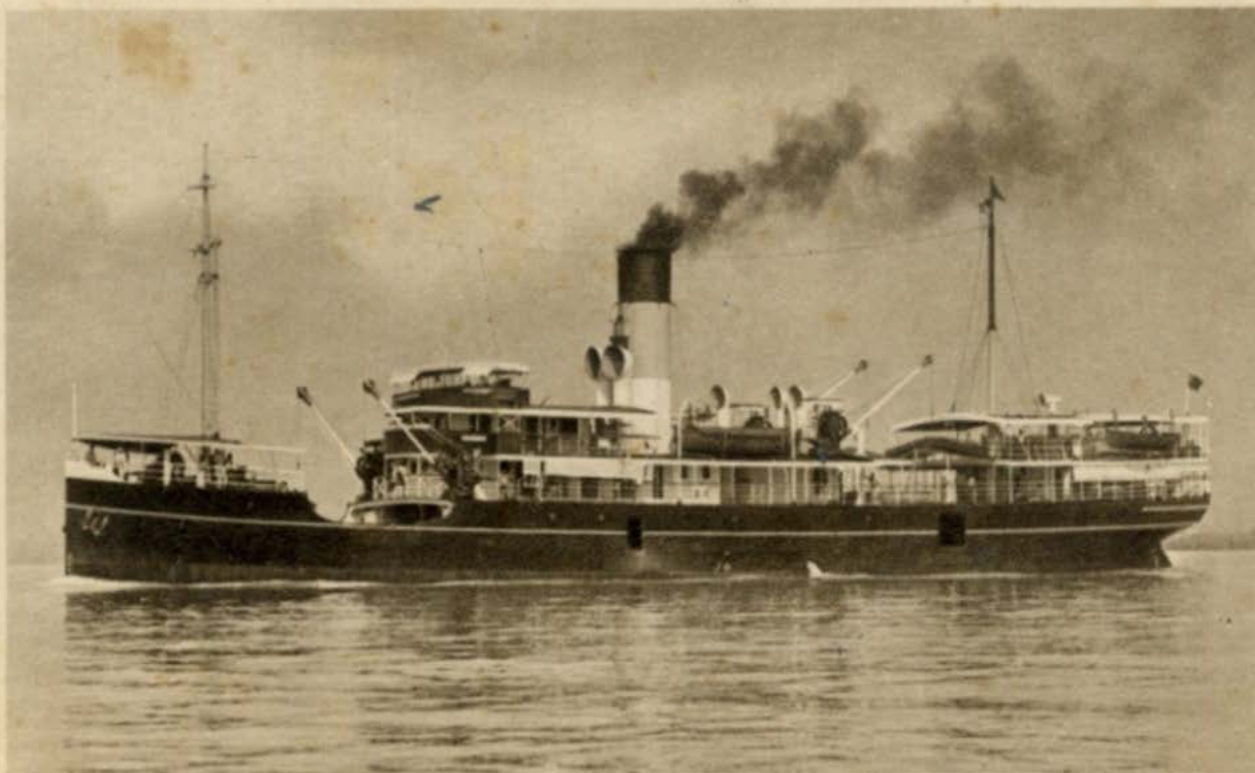
1

2



THE BOMBING

STRAITS STEAMSHIP COMPANY LIMITED



S.S. KAMPAR

3



4

OF PENANG

A FERRY SERVICE WORKER'S EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF JAPANESE AIR RAIDS IN 1941

BY ABDUL AZIZ BIN ZUBER

TALES OF WORLD WAR II never fail to captivate the attention of readers. Most interestingly, an 83-year-old record was found in a diary belonging to my late uncle in late January 2010, when his belongings were being sorted at his home in Kampung Guar Perahu, Seberang Perai Utara. The diary, modestly sized at 8.12cm by 11.42cm, holds a vivid account of a Japanese aerial assault on Penang.

My uncle, Tuan Haji Che Mat bin Mat Tahir, was born on 6 October 1915, in Kampung Bagan Jermal, Butterworth, and passed away on 1 January 1998, in Kampung Guar Perahu, Seberang Perai Utara. He began his early education at Sekolah Melayu Bagan Jermal in Butterworth before pursuing carpentry skills at Bagan Serai Vocational School from 1935 to 1936. In 1938, on his 23rd birthday, he became a worker in the Ferry Service division of the Penang Harbour Board, stationed at Mitchell Pier, Bagan Luar, Butterworth.

His handwritten notes, penned in Jawi—the primary script of the Malay language at the time—may consist of only about 600 words, yet they hold profound significance. I have translated and adapted them for easy reading without removing essence and meaning. He begins his account by narrating as follows:

**THE FIRST DAY:
8 DECEMBER 1941 (MONDAY)**

In Permatang Kuching Butterworth, I witnessed the start of the war on Monday, December 8, 1941, at around 10:45AM, six Japanese planes arrived. Only two of these planes made an attack. As a result, British planes were damaged, with two being destroyed by fire and three others being damaged.

The Royal Air Force (RAF) had established an airfield at Permatang Kuching, Butterworth in 1939, operating on a “care and maintenance” basis. However, in October 1941, RAF Butterworth was officially inaugurated as part of Britain’s World War II strategy to defend the Malayan Peninsula. The British air force primarily relied on aging and outdated Buffalo fighters, which were vastly outmatched by Japan’s advanced Zero fighters. As a result, most of the British aircraft were destroyed in combat, while the few remaining were relocated to the Dutch East Indies or Australia.

**THE SECOND DAY:
9 DECEMBER 1941 (TUESDAY)**

At around 3:30PM on Tuesday, December 9, 1941, Japanese planes launched an attack that resulted in approximately seven British planes being damaged. I personally saw a British plane crash and burn near the Bagan Ajam jetty, then plunge into the sea. When the plane was burning, I saw one of its pilots parachute out and land directly into the sea.

At around 4:30PM on Tuesday, December 9, 1941, Japanese planes returned, and I personally saw 14 Japanese planes attacking the *padang* [RAF Butterworth airfield], causing the British planes to be severely damaged, with explosions so loud they sounded like thunder. As a result of the attack between 3:30PM and 4:30PM that day, approximately 9 or 10 British planes were damaged.

The Straits Times reported that 14 Japanese planes conducted machine-gun attacks in one area of Penang during the afternoon, while numerous Japanese planes engaged RAF fighters in Butterworth.

**THE THIRD DAY:
DECEMBER 10, 1941 (WEDNESDAY)**

There were no observations on the third day. Instead, he continued his notes on the fourth day, December 11, 1941 (Thursday). It was however reported by *The Straits*

Times that Penang was raided at 11AM by seven Japanese bombers escorted by fighters. The raid resulted in four fatalities and eight injuries.

**THE FOURTH DAY:
DECEMBER 11, 1941 (THURSDAY)**

On Thursday, at around 10:30 AM on December 11, 1941, 26 Japanese planes initially arrived. These planes fired bombs, dropping them in Tanjong [George Town]. Penang experienced some fires as a result. After that, nine more Japanese planes arrived and fired shots, but most of the shots scattered over the sea, with only a few hitting land. Then, nine more Japanese planes came and fired, but again, many shots scattered in the sea, with only a few hitting land. After that, 24 more Japanese planes arrived and fired. This time, the majority of the shots hit land, and only a few fell into the sea, causing a massive fire in Penang. The total number of Japanese planes that attacked Penang that day was 68. Not a single Japanese plane was shot down, as I personally witnessed during the attack.

Following the bombing, the planes returned and machine-gunned people in the streets, causing many to flee for cover. Numerous casualties were reported. For nearly two hours, the attack continued, leaving many buildings in the Chinese quarter in flames. One of the greatest losses was the destruction of the central fire station. Motorcars in the streets were destroyed, and drivers who hadn’t taken cover were killed beside their vehicles. Thousands fled to the hills, while shops closed, leaving evacuees unable to purchase food.

It was reported that about 50 planes were seen “circling the island”, attacking ships in the harbour; none were apparently badly damaged, and repeated attacks were carried out on the central built-up area of the city.

**THE FIFTH DAY:
12 DECEMBER 1941 (FRIDAY)**

At around 9:30AM on Friday, December 12, 1941, three Japanese planes attacked Penang. At that time, a ferry called *Bagan* was seen leaving its wharf in Bagan Luar, and Japanese planes dropped three bombs beside the ferry. As the ferry moved south, another ferry named *Kulim* left the wharf in Tanjong [Church Street Pier],

and one Japanese plane dropped two bombs beside it, followed by another bomb being dropped in Tanjong [George Town], causing it to catch fire severely. Five bombs were also dropped near a ship called the *S.S. Kampar*.

At around 3:30PM, two Japanese planes came and attacked the *S.S. Kampar*, dropping four bombs near the ship. On this day, Friday, December 12, 1941, not a single Japanese plane was shot down.

In 1941, three ferries were being operated by the Penang Harbour Board (PHB): *Bagan*, *Kulim* and *Tanjong*. These ran regularly between the Church Street Pier in George Town and the Mitchell Pier in Bagan Luar, Butterworth. The *Bagan* ferry, which began operations in 1938, was built by the Singapore Harbour Board. At the onset of the Japanese occupation, this ferry was repurposed to evacuate war victims from Penang to Singapore, and then to Sumatra. Eventually, it fell into Japanese hands and was used by them throughout the war. After the war ended, the *Bagan* ferry was reclaimed by the PHB and continued its service until 1959, when the PHB launched five new ferries: *Pulau Pinang*, *Pulau Aman*, *Pulau Pangkor*, *Pulau Langkawi* and *Pulau Tioman*.

The *Kulim* and *Tanjong* ferries, which began operations in 1929, served only until 1941. During the Japanese air raids, the *Kulim* was reportedly scuttled, while the *Tanjong*, immobilised due to engine failure, was sunk by gunfire in the harbour to prevent both vessels from falling into enemy hands.

The *S.S. Kampar* was a transport vessel owned by the Straits Steamship Company Limited, based in Singapore. Launched in 1915, this ship operated as a crucial transport link between Singapore, Port Klang and Teluk Intan. On August 28, 1939, the British military repurposed the *Kampar* as an anti-submarine vessel. During the early days of World War II, the *Kampar* became a target for Japanese aerial assault. On December 12 and 13, 1941, the ship was struck by Japanese aircraft on two separate occasions. The first inflicted severe damage upon the vessel, while the second ultimately led to its near-total destruction; it was taken over by the Japanese in May 1942. Following repairs, it was renamed *Kasumi Maru* in 1943. Officially registered with the Imperial Japanese Navy in October 1943 as an auxiliary transport vessel, it struck a mine and sank in the Malacca Strait in May 1944.

**THE SIXTH DAY:
13 DECEMBER 1941 (SATURDAY)**

At around 3:30PM on Saturday, December 13, 1941, 30 Japanese planes came from the west, and



5

immediately, two British planes attacked the Japanese planes. As a result, one British plane was shot down and crashed on a hill, while another British plane fled east and crashed into a coconut farm, hitting a Malay house, causing it to catch fire. Another British plane crashed in Permatang Tok Jaya.

At around 9:00AM on Saturday, December 13, 1941, four Japanese planes dropped bombs on the *S.S. Kampar*, causing the ship to catch fire. Another bomb was dropped on Penang, also causing a fire, and another bomb was dropped on the new jetty beach at Bagan Luar. Then, two British planes came to engage the four Japanese planes. As a result, one Japanese plane was shot down and burned in the sea in front of Bagan Tuan Kechil. Another Japanese plane was shot down and burned in the sea near the *jer-mal* [a bamboo fence for trapping fish] near the jetty lights towards Bagan Ajam.

The report issued by *The Times* was as follows: no bombs were dropped on December 13. Fresh waves of Japanese aeroplanes were seen, but for the first time, resistance was encountered from British fighters and anti-aircraft fire from the mainland at Butterworth. The enemy was forced to flee in the face of this opposition. The evacuation of women and children was initiated on the evening of December 13. Seamen who were strangers in the locality manned the ferryboats and piloted them to the mainland with the aid of blue torches.

CAPTIONS

1. A photo of the *Tanjong* from 1928. *Kulim* also shared the same design. The *Tanjong* was launched on December 12, 1928, while the *Kulim* was launched in September 1928. The name *Kulim* was chosen as a compliment to H.H. the Sultan of Kedah. Source: Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle, 2 November 1928, Page 8. Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle, 13 December 1928, Page 6. Malayan Saturday Post, 15 December 1928, Page 24. The Straits Budget, 20 December 1928, Page 17.
2. Buffalos of No. 453 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), lined up at RAF Sembawang, Singapore. Source: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205209750>

3. A postcard image featuring the *S.S. Kampar*. Source: www.delcampe.net
4. Haji Che Mat bin Mat Tahir (left) is pictured with the author in February 1995. Source: Abdul Aziz bin Zuber (Photo)
5. Aerial view of the Japanese bombings on George Town.

REFERENCES

- [1] Hugh Crowther (2014), "RAF Station Butterworth Malaya (1939-1957)," Air Force Association NSW, pg. 1
- [2] Singapore: A Journey Through Time 1299-1970s, Secondary One, 2021, Star Publishing Pte Ltd, pg. 188
- [3] The Dock and Harbour Authority, No. 471, Vol. 40, January 1960, pg. 277
- [4] Karl Stenman and Andrew Thomas (2010), "Brewster F2A Buffalo Aces of World War 2," Osprey Publishing, pg. 48
- [5] Donald A. Bertke, Gordon Smith and Don Kindell (2013), "World War II Sea War, Vol 5: Air Raid Pearl Harbor. This Is Not a Drill," Bertke Publications, pg. 71
- [6] Andrew Barber (2010), "Penang At War: A History of Penang During and Between the First and Second World Wars 1914-1945," AB&A, pg. 63, 64 & 66
- [7] "Air Battles At Penang," The Straits Times, December 10, 1941, pg. 9
- [8] "Four Killed in Penang Raid," The Straits Times, December 11, 1941, pg. 9
- [9] "New Raids On Penang," The Straits Times, December 13, 1941, pg. 12
- [10] "Visitor Describes Heavy Raids On Penang Island," The Straits Times, December 14, 1941, pg. 5
- [11] "The Agony Of Penang," The Times, December 22, 1941, pg. 4
- [12] "The Rebirth of Penang Port," The Straits Times, September 22, 1946, pg. 4
- [13] "The Penang Ferries," The Straits Times, February 5, 1948, pg. 6
- [14] E.C. Aspden, "Penang's Mainland Link: Past And Present," The Straits Times, January 25, 1950, pg. 6 & 8
- [15] "The Service 66 Yrs. Old," The Straits Times, September 24, 1959, pg. 10
- [16] David Baratham, "I see death rain from the sky," The Straits Times, February 18, 1962, pg. 4 & 21
- [17] Charles Robert Samuel, "My experiences since the beginning of the invasion of Malaya," Far Eastern Heroes, Accessed: https://www.far-eastern-heroes.org.uk/Charles_Robert_Samuel/html/invasion_of_malaya.htm
- [18] Gilbert Casse and Peter Cundall (2015), "IJN KASUMI MARU: Tabular Record of Movement," Imperial Japanese Navy Page, Accessed: http://www.combinedfleet.com/Kasumi_t.htm
- [19] "Royal Navy Vessels Lost At Sea, 1939-45," Naval-History. Net, Accessed: <http://www.naval-history.net/WWitishLosses2Auxiliary.htm>
- [20] Joshua Chia, "Straits Steamship Company," Singapore Infopedia, Accessed: <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-dail?cmsuuiid=75443efb-744d-486a-b460-479e031cb322>
- [21] Alan Teh Leam Seng, "History Behind Penang's Popular Ferry Service Unveiled," The Straits Times, September 23, 2018, Accessed: <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/sunday->

vibes/2018/09/414239/history-behind-penangs-popular-ferry-service-unveiled

[22] Jeremy Tan, "Nostalgia of voyages past for Penang's iconic ferries," The Star, November 29, 2023, Accessed: <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2023/11/29/nostalgia-of-voyages-past>

*Note: Special thanks:

This article was completed with the assistance of Muhammad Amirul Naim, Distribution Executive (Administration Unit) at Penang Institute and my sister, Siti Hajar Zuber, who assisted in translating the original text from Malay to English.



A teacher at SK Kepala Batas, Penang, **ABDUL AZIZ BIN ZUBER** has contributed to various literary works, including the introduction to *Panduan Bangsa: Mengandung Akhlaq, Adab, Pergaulan, dan Lain-lain* (2021), and editing *Agama Bangsa & Tanah Air: Sejarah dan Peranan Madrasah Da'ir al-Ma'arif al-Wataniyyah* (2022). He also wrote the introduction to *Pawuan al-Din: Pada Menerangkan Perdirian Agama* (2023), published by Akademi Jawi Malaysia. Additionally, the author also supported the crowdfunding campaign for the book *Sejarah Bergambar Seberang Perai / Province Wellesley, A Pictorial History* (2016) by Areca Books.

PICKLEBALL, ANYONE?



PICKLEBALL IS A buzzword that has sprung up among both the young and the elderly in the past year. The racket sport originated in the mid-1960s, and it combines elements of badminton, tennis and ping pong. Pickleball is credited to Americans Joel Pritchard and Bill Bell, who invented the sport to make use of the badminton court in the backyard of Joel's Bainbridge Island home after his son, Frank, complained about having nothing to do on a summer day. When the paddles and plastic balls they repurposed from their garage began breaking, their neighbour, Barney McCallum, stepped in. He constructed better, more reliable paddles, and these became integral to the game's equipment and rules.^[1]

In Penang, pickleball is believed to have started being played among the elderly around the time the Covid-19 pandemic began. With a portable net, a set of paddles and a ball, they were able to stay active and pass the time when the world came to a halt following the Movement Control Order (MCO). Playing groups began to form as life started returning to normal, prompting people to recruit friends to join once the MCO eased. The timing couldn't have been better; people were reintegrating into society, looking for healthy activities to participate in. However, if I were to pinpoint when pickleball became a craze in Penang, it would be 2024.

Local clothing brands, social media influencers and even milk tea companies are all jumping on the bandwagon. The rapid growth of this new hobby has seen old buildings, warehouses, hypermarkets and malls revived and repurposed to meet the demands of the growing community.

I started playing pickleball early in 2024. Coming from a squash background and having played for Penang as a junior and having coached in the state's junior programme, I needed a sport that wouldn't strain my knees—I had been undergoing rehabilitation following an ACL reconstruction surgery in July 2023. It didn't take long for me to fall in love with the sport and its growing community. My friends and I eventually started our own club and hosted games targeting the young while welcoming players of all ages.

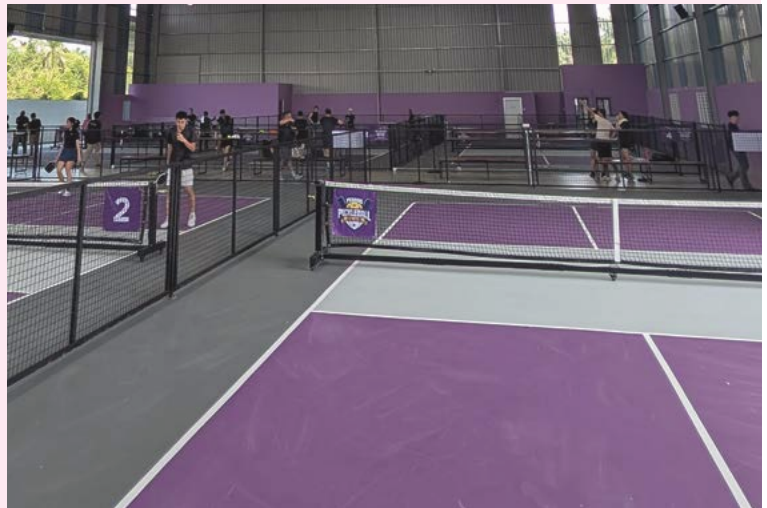
WHAT MAKES PICKLEBALL ATTRACTIVE?

One reason pickleball has become such a fast-growing sport is its low barrier to entry. It is much more forgiving at the beginner level than traditional racket sports like tennis, badminton and squash. This means that someone with no experience in racket sports can start playing much more quickly compared to other racket sports. As someone who has played squash competitively and coached both sports, I can confirm this observation. Of course, that's not to say pickleball can't be an elite sport. While the entry point may be low and players can get into a game relatively quickly, the Professional Pickleball Association (PPA) Tour in America demonstrates that the sport can be physically demanding and entertaining at the highest level.

In its early days, pickleball equipment was also very affordable. A quick browse through online shopping platforms reveals that you can find a simple starter pack with two paddles, a couple of balls and a bag for under RM200. Portable nets with floor markers are also readily available, allowing people to set up games in their backyards or community parks.

YOUNG OR OLD?

BY
IVAN NG



A common approach has been to rent badminton courts due to their dimensions being similar to pickleball's; the nets just need to be lowered to pickleball's regulation height (36 inches at the sides and 34 inches in the middle). Many schools and community centres already have badminton courts. With proper pickleball facilities still lacking at the time, many of the Chinese vernacular schools like Han Chiang, Sin Kang, Keong Hoe and Chung Ling allowed pickleball activities to be run on their badminton courts.

Chung Hwa Secondary was the only school that ran its own pickleball programme through a pickleball club, hosting outsiders at a small fee after school hours for a couple of days a week. The Girl Guides Association of Penang also rented out their courts for pickleball, with the condition that no badminton and pickleball activities ran at the same time. This is a thoughtful policy to keep both communities happy, as there had been complaints from badminton players about balls rolling onto their courts. Community centres (Balai Rakyat) were initially an option as well, but these have since prohibited rentals for pickleball.

As more makeshift facilities became available, new clubs began forming and quickly grew in number. Many use Reclub, a mobile application that allows users to search, sign up and communicate about social games, organise activities and manage their members. Seen as trendy by the youth, the convergence of new facilities, the convenience of mobile applications for finding players, and consistent media coverage by brands and influencers have all contributed to pickleball's status.

Three facilities in Penang comes to mind when we talk about early adopters of the sport. Seri Delima

ADUN Connie Tan saw the potential of the sport when residents approached her to convert a corner of a community park in her constituency into a court. She worked with the group called D5 (for De "lima") to provide public space for pickleball. It was at this court where two of my friends and I trained and prepared for our first tournament. Rainbow Paradise Hotel in Tanjung Bungah leased out its tennis court, which was then repurposed into four pickleball courts. Picklemotion, on the other hand, transformed the alfresco space at the entrance of Gurney Paragon to operate four outdoor courts, showcasing the sport to mall-goers.

There are currently 14 courts in Penang—11 on the island and three on the mainland, with more in the works. Court rates are on average RM40 during off-peak hours and RM70 during peak hours. Some premium courts may cost over RM100 per hour, offering more space, better flooring and a lounge area. Only time will tell if the industry can sustain these many courts.



IVAN NG graduated from the University of Mount Union in Ohio, US, and is currently in the insurance business. He is also an avid pickleballer and coaches squash as a side hustle.

FOOTNOTE

[1] <https://longcoveclub.com/the-history-of-pickleball/>

BY
IYLIA
DE
SILVA

LIFESTYLE AND FUNCTION: FURNITURE AND DÉCOR SHOPPING IN PENANG



IYLIA DE SILVA is a law graduate from the University of London. Balancing work and play, she savours every moment by indulging in her passion for food, languages, music and engaging with people from diverse cultures.

CAPTIONS

1. Cozy children's bed at HOOGA.
2. Living room and dining area display at Ruma.
3. Customised table at DAD'S WOODS.
4. Dining area display at Nitori.
5. Nitori's range of sofa designs and customisations.

ONCE IN A WHILE, I like to change up the look of my home—whether it is a small refresh or a full makeover. I find that decluttering and redecorating provide me with a creative outlet—whether it's adding new furniture, swapping décor or adding festive touches; each brings a sense of renewal and novelty to my space.

Decades ago, before mass production, people relied on carpenters for home essentials, focusing on quality and durability to create pieces that last generations. While this practice continues, there are also many stores now that provide ready-made pieces for convenience, efficiency and affordability.

When it comes to furniture and décor shopping in Penang, there are many fantastic stores that cater to diverse preferences. These are some of my top picks, where functionality and lifestyle blend seamlessly.

IKEA

IKEA in Batu Kawan offers minimalist Scandinavian designs that fit homes of all sizes. Its practical flat-pack concept reduces shipping costs, keeping prices affordable without sacrificing style. The furniture is designed for easy assembly with basic tools and no specialised skills, ideal for DIY enthusiasts or those seeking hassle-free furnishing.

IKEA also emphasises sustainability, with many products made from renewable and recycled materials. For functional, stylish and budget-friendly options, IKEA delivers a comprehensive and eco-conscious shopping experience—complete with in-store dining.

HOOGA

Another great spot for minimalist Scandinavian designs is HOOGA, located in Gurney Plaza. Inspired by the Danish word and culture of *hygge* (pronounced *hue-ga*), which describes a coziness brought on by comfort, this Singapore-based brand specialises in home décor





2



3



4



5

and accessories such as bedding, bath accessories, storage solutions and decorative items like vases and mirrors, as well as smaller pieces of furniture like bean bags, floor cushions and side tables.

Many of their bedding products feature TENCEL fabric, known for its sustainability, softness and breathability. The displays, thoughtfully arranged with scented candles and diffusers among other decorative knick-knacks, provide customers with inspiration on how to decorate their homes with their products.

NITORI

Colloquially called the “more affordable Muji”, Nitori at Gurney Paragon combines Japanese minimalism with practicality.

Their N-Cool series is a game-changer for Malaysia’s hot and humid weather, using special fabric made from materials like polyester, nylon or TENCEL, which absorbs body heat and releases it, maintaining a cooling sensation. Available in multiple cooling levels, the range includes bed sheets, pillows, pet beds and blankets, ensuring better and more comfortable sleep.

Furthermore, the N-Click Furniture Series uses Threespine click technology, which allows furniture to be assembled without screws or fittings—parts just click together—leaving no visible holes. Another standout is the Digital Multifunction Clock Pirouette, offering four functions—calendar, temperature display, timer and alarm—activated by simply rotating the clock.

Other innovations include storage beds, highly absorbent diatomite mats for safety and the customisable Resume Cabinet. Nitori’s commitment to quality and safety has been recognised with a special product safety award from the Japanese government.

DAD’S WOODS

The antithesis of fast furniture, DAD’s WOODS preserves artisanal craftsmanship with a focus on bespoke solid wood furniture designed to last for generations. Founded by siblings Khoo V-Ho and Giselle Khoo in memory of their late father, the brand uses

locally sourced woods from Peninsular Malaysia, including teak, merbau, mahogany and raintree wood, with chengal or timber, known for its natural durability, as their signature wood.

Customisation is available by appointment for stools, chairs and tables. In fact, DAD’s WOODS prides themselves on their personalised services and tries to tailor furniture to suit their customers’ personality and needs. While their sofas are not custom-made, clients can select the length, colour and fabric.

Featuring dark, beautifully textured, luxurious wood, their designs fit perfectly in the local context. Their latest Archipelago Collection 2024 features pieces like the Bangku Penang, Rempah Coffee Table and Perahu Congkok, celebrating Malaysian heritage by blending traditional aesthetics with modern design.

RUMA

The Ruma store at 1st Avenue features a labyrinth-style layout, where you can browse showrooms, snap pictures of your selections and place your order at the counter. Your items are then delivered directly to your home, as they do not hold stock in-store.

Ruma offers a diverse collection of eco-conscious, locally made furniture that blends contemporary chic with bespoke-quality craftsmanship at a reasonable price. While they don’t provide full customisation, their made-to-order programme allows you to choose from a selection of sofa fabrics.

SSF HOME

SSF Home is a prominent Malaysian retailer offering a wide range of furniture, home décor and home living products. With over 45 outlets nationwide including in Penang, SSF Home caters to various budgets and tastes. Their selection includes living room, dining and bedroom furniture, storage solutions, lighting, and essential home products like kitchenware and bedding.

Known for balancing affordability with quality, SSF Home is a go-to destination for stylish and functional furnishings.

ART THAT HEALS: H3RO SEDEKAD CONNECTS VISITORS TO FAMILIAL ROOTS AND BONDS

BY NICOLE CHANG

H3RO SEDEKAD (H3RO: A Decade) is an experiential portal that artfully invites visitors to reconnect with their roots. Co-created and co-curated by Hasnul Jamal Saidon (a cross-disciplinary artist) and Anderson Ee (a practising film director cum producer) in collaboration with Muzium Galleri Tuanku Fauziah (MGTF), and led by Tetriana Ahmed Fauzi (current Director of MGTF), the exhibition (from 1 October 2024 to 31 MAR 2025) is being held at MGTF in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang.





2



3



4

According to Hasnul and Anderson, H3RO started as an article on Hasnul's blog^[1] about his father. It was then translated into a short film, HERO,^[2] directed by Anderson. The subject and content were further translated and developed into a series of compassion workshops and performances featuring short film screenings, storytelling and songs held in a few different locations, engaging the local communities. That includes H3RO Ziarah Teluk Intan, Perak in 2017; H3RO National Visual Art Gallery, KL in 2022; and H3RO Ziarah A.P. Art Gallery, KL in 2023. Marking a decade since its inception, Hasnul and Anderson decided to transform H3RO from film into exhibition narratives.

H3RO: Sedekad brings Hasnul's heartfelt expressions and memories to life. It narrates his familial roots and bonds by highlighting his heroes (i.e. his parents). Through thoughtfully curated exhibits of chalk and mixed-media paintings, wall art, a short video screening and installations with cherished family memorabilia, the exhibition features intimate storytelling scenes, unfolding stories of love, kinship and enduring family bonds.

"Technically, we applied four languages: visual arts, writing, poetry and performance in this exhibition. Unlike a traditional fine art exhibition that showcases a collection of an artist's works, this exhibition tells a story through a film storyboard format, consisting of five main acts or scenes, and culminates with an epilogue," Anderson explains. Each scene is filled with relevant artworks and objects within the curated setting on-site.

"Without guiding art statements or lengthy wall texts, but only a few keywords, we believe in empowering the audience to navigate through the interconnected scenes independently until the end. Rather than presenting a curated narrative, this exhibition depicts a true story!" Anderson clarifies.

Stepping through the doorway created at the venue, visitors are transported into the heart of Hasnul's ancestral home, a place filled with nostalgic memories, familial kinship and personal history. The recreated setting of the blue windowed façade under the blue roof, with a vintage motorbike parked outside resembles Hasnul's childhood home in Teluk Intan.

The exhibition delves into Hasnul's familial journey, reflecting on his deep connections and cherished memories with his late father, a guiding source of wisdom and inspiration for him, and his recently departed mother, whom he deeply respected for her unwavering love, resilience and strength in raising nine children.

Through engaging and evocative displays, visitors become more than mere observers. They become part of a shared narrative, stepping into the echoes of self-reflection on their own roots and reconnecting with the universal themes of home, heritage and the ties that shape our well-being. This prompts them to embrace their own heroes, rekindle family connections and rediscover the essence of their personal path.

"H3RO Sedekad is a 'mirror' for hearts which are called upon to return. Be prepared to peek into your own reflection and face your own shadow," Hasnul explains.

"The darkness along the tunnel symbolises the grief experienced from losing loved ones. Walking through it represents a journey of passing through dark moments of separation or farewells. Recovery from such loss may take a long time. The final letter in the middle of the tunnel is probably a closing remark, while the light at the exit guides the audience towards



5

a brighter future. Not much justification is required, but the reactions are largely influenced by audiences' self-awareness and worldview," Anderson says.

Hasnul observes his visiting friends' teary-eyed departures as they step out of the exhibition and reflects: "We heal ourselves and others by sharing our stories."

Afzanizam Mohd Ali from the MGTG curatorial team is impressed with the visitors' engagement. "From mid-October last year until mid-January 2025, H3RO: Sedekad has engaged over 6,000 visitors from all age groups, ranging from preschool children to adults over 60." Most visits have been guided by the curatorial team, including Hasnul himself, who eagerly shares the stories and initiatives of H3RO.

"We noted that mature visitors, particularly those over 40, are deeply engaged with the exhibition, often displaying strong emotional reactions. For school children, providing pre-visit briefings, offering explanations during the visit and incorporating interactive activities, such as post-visit note-posting or informal chat and sharing sessions, significantly enhance their visiting experience," Afzanizam said.

Experiencing H3RO Sedekad firsthand reveals how art, through a universally relevant subject or theme, contributes as an accessible form of expression, inclusively engaging the public in embracing shared narratives of love, compassion and resilience of family legacy, which forms a core foundation of society.

"We inherit stories and memories as a form of legacy; and intangible heritage, character, value-driven narratives and memories as a form of reflective data, a form of value transmission," commented Ahmad Murad Merican during his talk, *Fathers & Their Wisdom*, held in conjunction with the exhibition.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Tetriana led a guided tour during the exhibition.
2. Hasnul's father, Haji Sa'idon bin Pandak Noh, was a dedicated teacher in Perak.
3. The last scene, which acts as the epilogue, led visitors through a dark tunnel (see right corner).
4. The setting transported visitors into the heart of Hasnul's ancestral home.
5. H3RO performance during its launch.

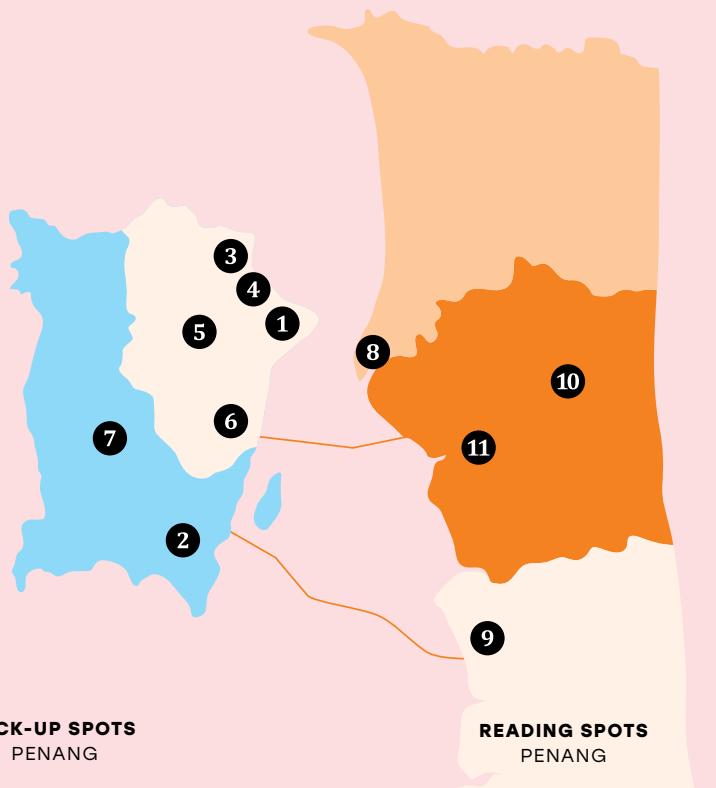
FOOTNOTES

- [1] <https://hasnulsaidon.blogspot.com/>
- [2] <https://youtu.be/m2KC4GjEtmw>



NICOLE CHANG has just completed her PhD programme at the Department of Development Planning and Management, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

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	

With the tagline “Making Ideas Work”, Penang Institute encourages bold and innovative thinking not only in academic disciplines but also through the support it gives to literature and culture by way of events such as book launches, public literature seminars; through its public policy briefs, ISSUES, Monographs; through interviews with notable personalities on current state of affairs and trends, Penang Institute Chats; and through its renown magazine Penang Monthly. In times of crisis, Penang Institute will contribute to the management of such crises by publishing informed papers on the local situation and on how this relates to events and initiatives undertaken in other parts of the world.

www.penanginstitute.org

MAKING IDEAS WORK