



IMAGES OF THE  
**JAWI PERANAKAN**  
OF PENANG

Assimilation of the Jawi Peranakan Community  
into the Malay Society

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# IMAGES OF THE JAWI PERANAKAN OF PENANG

Assimilation of the Jawi Peranakan Community  
into the Malay Society

HALIMAH MOHD SAID & ZAINAB ABDUL MAJID



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Our heartfelt thanks goes to the interviewees and informants who have generously given of their time and contributed their thoughts, opinions and experiences to enrich the ethnographic data of the study. To all the friends and family members who have given us their support, we would like to say *terima kasih* for allowing us to dig deep into their hearts and minds as well as family albums. Without your contributions we would not have been able to collate the wonderful insights, images and photographs of the *Jawi Peranakan* that have gone into this labour of love.

Last but not least, we would like to thank Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya and Arkib Negara for allowing us to access invaluable references and sources to add to the wealth of information we have gathered for this study.

*Pulau Pinang tiga bersegi*  
*Bertentang dengan tanah seberang*  
*Orang berbudi tidak kan rugi*  
*Harapan juga dikenang orang*

*Pulau Pinang digelar Tanjung*  
*Terkenal juga Pulau Mutiara*  
*Kerja keras menambah untung*  
*Maju bangsa maju negara*

Halimah Mohd Said & Zainab Abdul Majid

## FOREWORD

The term 'Malay' in Malaysia differs somewhat in meaning from that used by people from abroad. This is because of the definition of the term given in the Constitution of the Federation of Malaysia, which is culturally rather than ethnically-based. According to the Malaysian Constitution the cultural components that are basic to the Malays are Islam, the Malay language, and the Malay way of life. This being the case, groups which are not ethnically Malay can become Malay as provided for by the Constitution.

This study of the *Jawi Peranakan* of Penang provides us with a clear picture of how people of Indian origin became completely assimilated into the Malay group when they had already professed Islam as their religious faith, when as they settled down in Malaysia they had adopted Malay or a variety of it as their mother tongue, and when in tandem with this language acquisition they had adopted the Malay customs in the conduct of their day to day life.

Datin Halimah Mohd Said and Puan Zainab Abdul Majid discuss the various processes of assimilation into the Malay society that the early Indian Muslim settlers of Penang went through such that their descendants have become completely Malay. At the same time the authors are also able to pick out and delineate traits, though minor, which make the *Jawi Peranakan* distinct from the indigenous Peninsular Malays.

A great number of ethnic and racial groups have made

Malaysia their home. At the same time there are also groups which are not easily defined based on racial or ethnic parameters. The *Jawi Peranakan* group is one of them. Research on the Malaysian peoples should encompass all groups, major or minor, so that we can have a comprehensive picture of the Malaysian citizenry. And together with this information comes our acquaintance with the value systems and ethos of the groups, a knowledge which is pertinent to our nation building.

I wish to congratulate the authors on their work and the Institut Peradaban Melayu, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris for initiating and sponsoring the project which led to the writing of this book, *Images of the Jawi Peranakan of Penang: Assimilation of the Jawi Peranakan Community into the Malay Society*.

Datuk Dr. Muhammad Rais bin Abdul Karim  
Vice-Chancellor  
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

## PREFACE

Working on this book has been a most enriching and fulfilling journey of discovery for the two of us. We did not realise at the outset of our joint endeavour how much information we would be able to uncover from the treasure trove of the *Jawi Peranakan* community until we ploughed into the area of research. It was our complementary synergy and mutual interest which harnessed our desire to delve into the history and evolution of the *Jawi Peranakan* minority group as it moves in the process of gradual assimilation into the larger Malay society.

The *Jawi Peranakan* community which represents the descendants of the Indian Muslim migrants in Penang who married into the local Malay community has a cultural legacy worthy of being recorded and preserved. Through this extended research, we have been able to trace the roots of the *Jawi Peranakan* from the history of their forefathers, their tenacity and fortitude which fostered their early economic success, their contributions towards the socio-economic development of Penang in particular, their geographical spread and impact on the socio-political scene, and the kaleidoscope of shifting images they portray as they evolve and emerge to become a part of the Malay society.

The ethos and salient cultural characteristics of the *Jawi Peranakan* are highlighted in this book from the perspective of their historical development, their social organisation, their value system and their mind and personality. Their resilience and adaptability to the demands of the changing environment from the days of their

progenitors to the present times are looked at within the framework of the broader challenges posed by the other Malay sub-groups and the country's other major ethnic groups, as they oscillate between the need to preserve their own cultural identity on the one hand, and the expedient desire to be fully integrated into the Malay society through the various stages of assimilation, on the other. The extent of an eclectic culture which has evolved among the *Jawi Peranakan*, as a result of the syncretisation of Indian Muslim values and influence enmeshed with Malay cultural traditions are borne out by the study as well.

This research is based on an ethnographic approach which allows us to adopt a systematic method of social observation and description of the group under investigation. Of utmost importance in this methodology is our sensitivity to and familiarity with the environment under study. The fact that we ourselves are members of the *Jawi Peranakan* community – Zainab Abdul Majid a *Jawi Peranakan* by birth, and Halimah Mohd Said by association, being married to a *Jawi Peranakan* for more than three decades – allows for a good rapport to be established with the informants and interviewees, thus facilitating elicitation as well as responsive interaction in the process of data collection. Our impressionistic and subjective perceptions complement well with the inputs gathered from the more objective modes of participant observation and data analysis. The comprehensive library research that was undertaken provides an invaluable source of information which helps to substantiate available data on the theoretical aspects as well as the historical background relevant to this study.

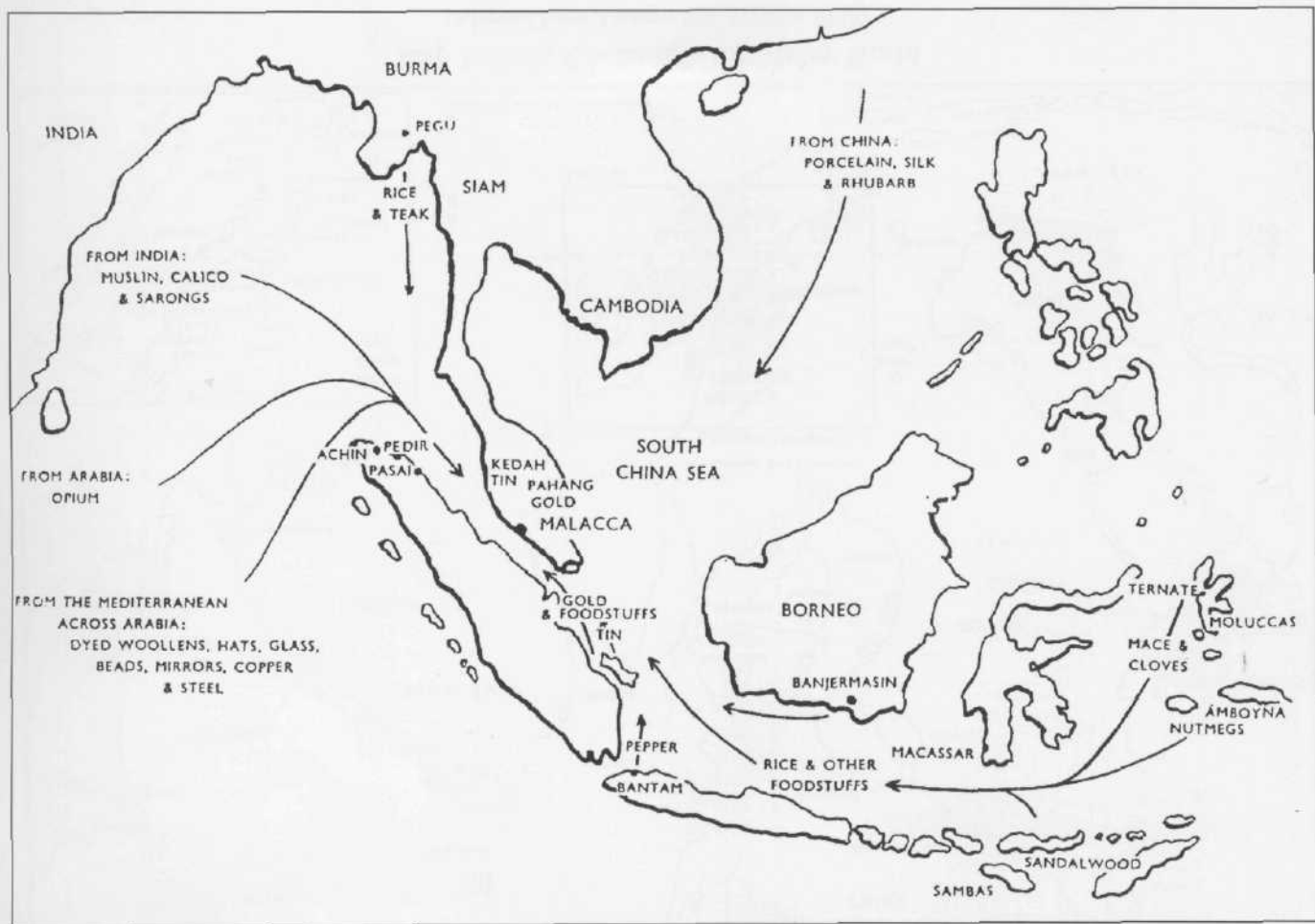
The collection of precious photographs which is included in this book provides a non-linear representation of the historical past and evolution of the *Jawi Peranakan* community. These visual supports which form part of the material culture impart images that vividly depict the lives and times of the people through successive generations. They serve as a dynamic supplement to the research and should allow the reader to gain better insights into the background of the people, as much as to help create a more lasting impression of their rich cultural heritage.

Very few publications are available on the *Jawi Peranakan* community. With the exception of Helen Fujimoto's (1988) research work entitled *The South Indian Muslim Community and the Evolution of the Jawi Peranakan in Penang up to 1948*, not much substantive work has been published on the community thus far. While we do not by any means claim that our work is exhaustive, we hope that it will serve as an updated source of information which will, to a small extent, make up for the paucity of research in the field. This book will be useful to anyone seeking to enrich his knowledge and insights on the *Jawi Peranakan* community in particular, and also to those interested in exploring the sub-disciplines of cultural studies which relate to the area of acculturation and assimilation, ethnicity and identity, and cross-cultural relations in general.

Halimah Mohd Said & Zainab Abdul Majid

Kuala Lumpur

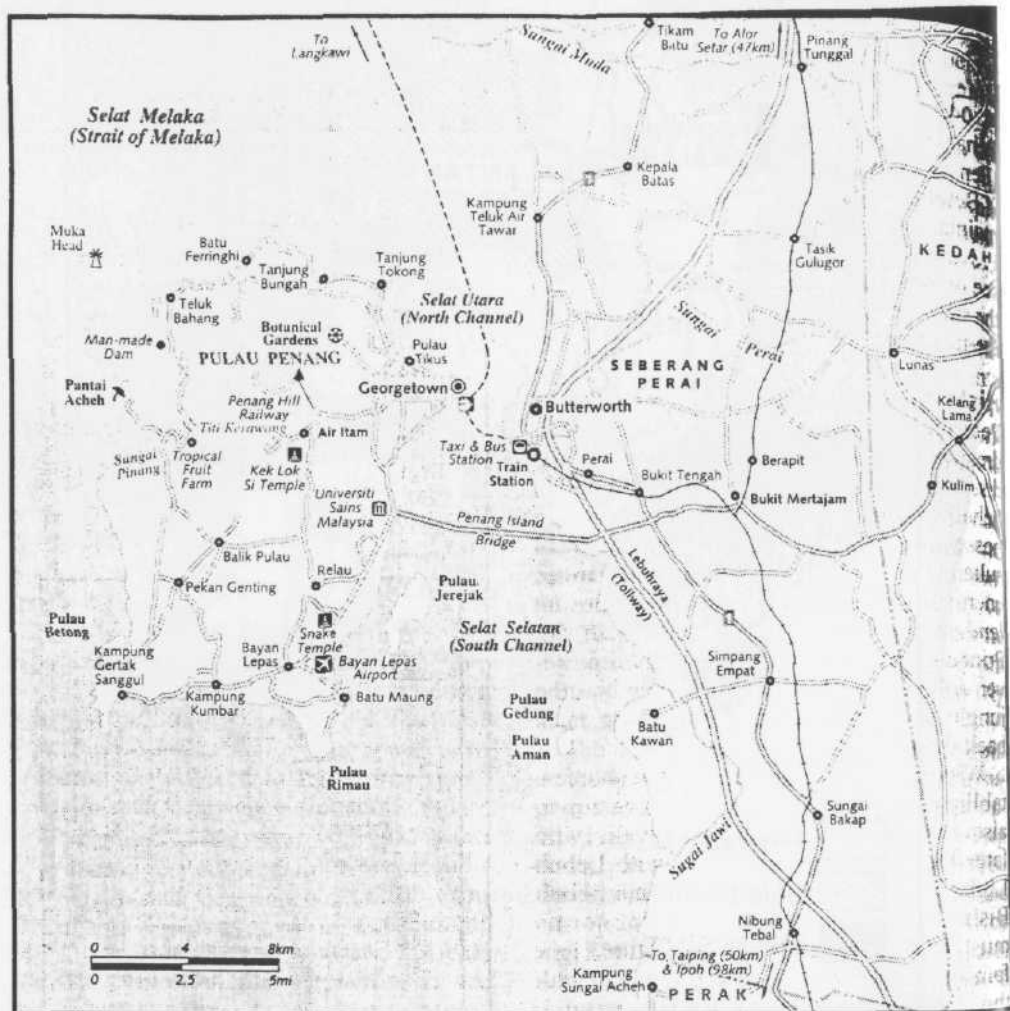
April 2004



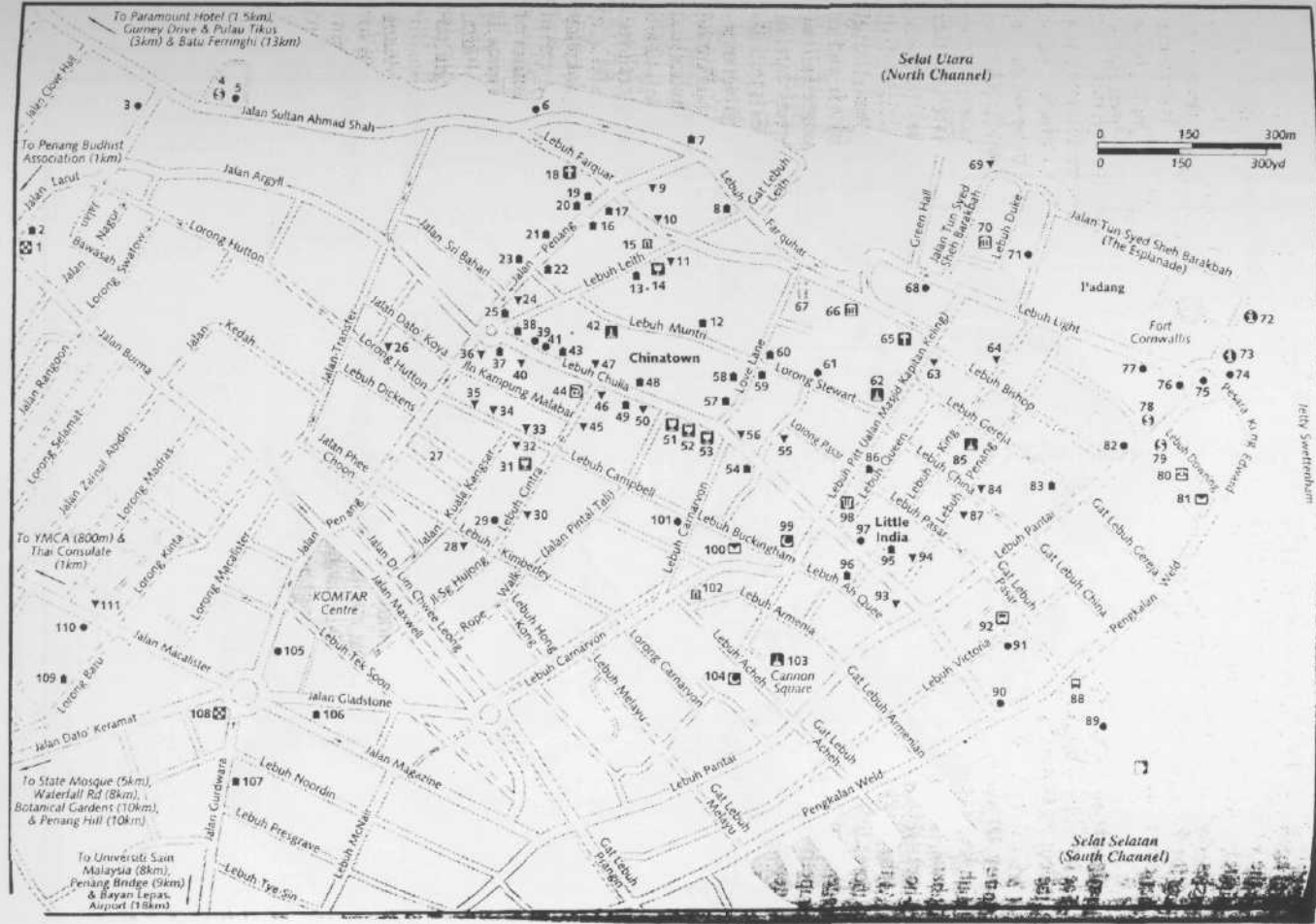
Map 2: 15<sup>th</sup> Century Malacca - A Centre of the Eastern Trade



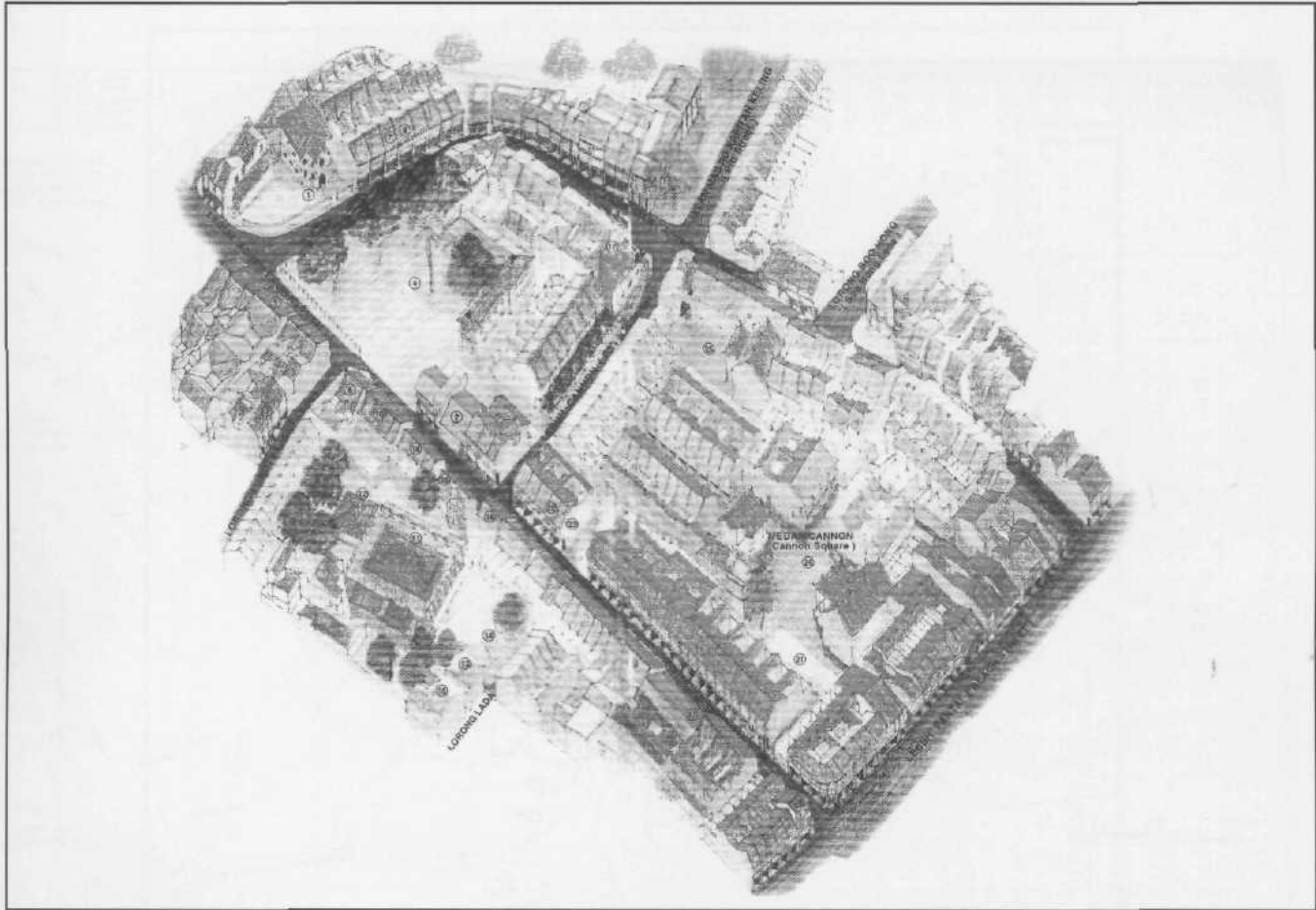
Map 3: The Malay Peninsula in 1920



Map 4: Penang



Map 5: George Town



Map 6: George Town Muslim Malay Settlement

(adapted from Lebuah Aceh & Lebuah Armenian : Wadah Tumpuan Warisan Budaya 1992)

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Map 1: Early Contacts in the Malay World  
 (adapted from Andaya and Andaya 1982)