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Batu Ferringhi, Farangs and the Portuguese

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PERCEPTION: In much of the Malay archipelago, the arrival of the Europeans was welcomed and honoured

WE know that Batu Ferringhi is in Penang. If we translate the name of that well-known beach area, it would mean "foreigner's rock". Not many take the name seriously. I had imagined how the Malays in Kedah (Penang was included before the arrival of Francis Light), like the Malays in Melaka earlier or at the same time, had likened the foreigner in the Portuguese language as a Ferringhi (meaning foreigner or outsider).

It depicts an early encounter between East and West. Early Portuguese fleets, carrying hundreds of Portuguese who had little prior interaction with non-Christians, were perceived as the "Franks" by the larger non-European Asian population. The Muslims who first encountered the Portuguese brought the idea of the "Franks" as the people who had attacked the holy places during the Crusades.

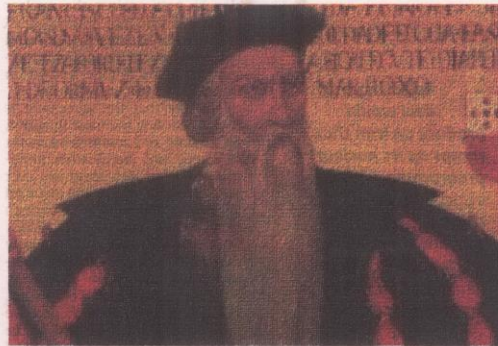
The word "Frank" originated from the Farsi "Farang" or "Farangi", meaning European. Some attributed Farang to the Arabic "afranj". Hence, we hear of the "Faranj", "Franji", "Paranki", "Parangiar", and, of course, "Ferringhi".

The Farang also has a place in contemporary Thai intellectual and popular thought. (The late Thai anthropologist) Pattana Kitiarsa in a paper titled "Farang as Siamese Occidentalism" (2005) re-read Thai historical and cultural constructions of the Farang.

Taking it as a reflexive subject to recapture its impact on the making and remaking of the Thai-self, he sees the idea of the Farang as "the wicked Other for the Thai. From time to time, the West has been represented as the giant, tricky wolf, while Siam the little helpless and innocent lamb". A "Self-indulgent nationalism" robbing the production of thoughtful self criticism.

While there is the "us-them" distinction, there was no presumption of moral or cultural superiority involved in the Malay categorisation of the Ferringgi as the Other. One of my earliest memories on narrations of Malay encounters with the West was the term "Benggali Putih" (White Bengalis) in a primary school history textbook from a chapter on the Portuguese in Melaka.

The Malays have made classifications on other peoples throughout history. We know this from early modern Portuguese records and of descriptions by the Malays from classical texts and epics. Malay perception of the Portuguese in the 16th



The Malays called the Portuguese traders 'White Bengali.'

century gives an idea of the first direct impact of these "Franks" in Southeast Asia. Historian Anthony Reid in his book *Charting the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia* (1999) describes the mission of Diego Lopez de Sequeira arriving in Melaka in September 1509.

The account from the *Sejarah Melayu* pictured the Portuguese arrival as: "Then there came a Feringgi ship from Goa, and it came to trade in Melaka. The Feringgi saw that the city of Melaka was magnificent, and its port was exceedingly crowded. The people crowded round to see what the Feringgi looked like, and they were all surprised at their appearance."

The Melaka Malays likened the Portuguese to the Bengalis rather than Arabs. According to Reid, the latter "had to be respected on religious grounds, however much laughed at privately, but Bengalis were more numerous and more resented in Melaka. Citing Portuguese chronicler Tomé Pires (1515), when the Malays want to insult a man, they call him a Bengali, "alleged to be sharp-witted but treacherous".

Generally Malay accounts of the arrival of the Feringgi are morally neutral. To the Melaka Malays, or the various Malays in the Malay archipelago then, the Europeans represented just another element — and were always welcome. We find in indigenous and colonial sources that foreign merchants were acknowledged and honoured figures in the diplomatic practice of the region. And language was not a problem, for the lingua franca was always Malay.

Malay classical texts have a way of describing the geographical and cul-

tural location, hence self-identity — that of by reference to the term "atas angin" (above the wind) and "bawah angin" (below the wind). The former refers to the Indo-Persian world, the Arab world, Rome (usually described as Rum) and all points West. The latter refers to the Malays and other peoples of the East — most obvious are the Chinese and the Japanese.

Indeed, the Malays initially perceived the Europeans as a kind of people from "atas angin" who were distinguished by pale skin and round eyes and displayed effectiveness with their shipboard cannon, armour and firearms.

The description by local Malay rulers of early encounters with the Ferringgis can also be described as the first Malay "ethnography" of the Europeans. And not always flattering at that. As we find in Italian explorer Antonio Pigafetta (1524), when Magellan's men reached the Philippines, a Muslim merchant in the port of Cebu explained to its raja that "these were the same Feringgi who had conquered Calicut and Melaka".

Despite accounts in *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Hikayat Tanah Hitu* among the many Malay classical text across the Malay archipelago, the conception of the Ferringgi is unlike that of the Thai Farang. The Ferringgi, conceived as the "unproblematic Other", was everywhere in the Malay archipelago.

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