

AHMAD MURAD MERICAN

THE AVATAR OF 1786

Decolonizing the
Penang Story

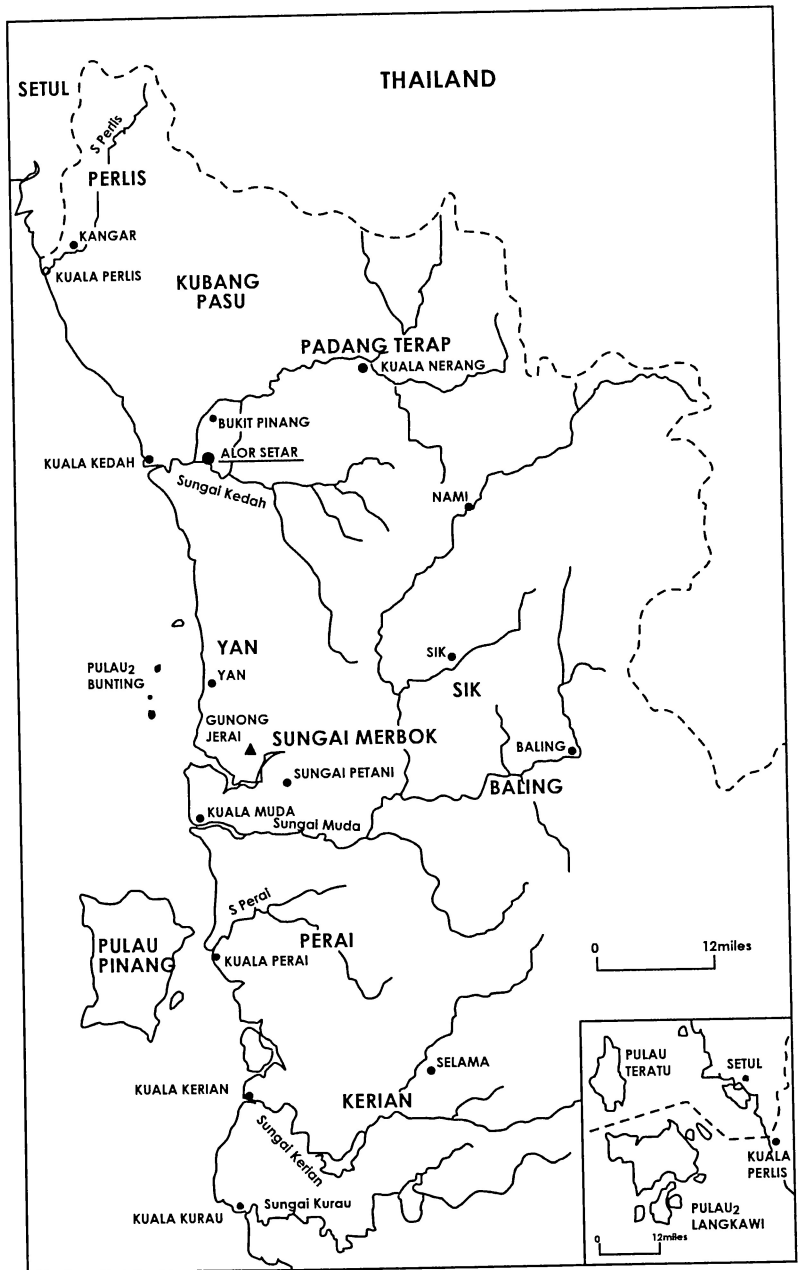


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THE AVATAR OF 1786





Kedah before 1786

Source: Adapted from Bonney (1971)

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Decolonizing the Penang Story

Ahmad Murad Merican

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To the descendants of
Dato' Keramat, Nakhoda nan Intan @ Haji Muhammad Salleh,
Nakhoda Kecil @ Ismail, Nakhoda Bayan, Dato' Jenaton @ Jenan,
and the rest of the *keturunan a al*



P. F. Office of Malacca Island. 1791.

A deceptive image, there was no 1786 treaty
Source: Lim (1986)

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Preface

The history of Pulau Pinang needs a closure. It addresses a blind spot committed by historians from both sides – that of prejudice of each other's past in the narrative. It is guilty by omission, just like the crime of Francis Light in stealing Pulau Pinang from the Sultan of Kedah. In so doing, the identity and the history of both Kedah and Pulau Pinang are fragmented and distorted. The avatar of 1786, viralled throughout and ever since, becomes the pivot for all enterprising interests on both polities.

I had previously written two books on Pulau Pinang. The name Pulau Pinang is used throughout and not 'Penang,' except when referring to the title, or mentioning it as a colonized moniker, or being faithful to the relevant sources. The books are titled *Batu Uban: Sejarah Awal Pulau Pinang*, published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 2015; and *Batu Uban, Tanjong and Bagan: Pengkisahan Lisan* by Penerbit USM in 2020. The latter is the outcome of oral renditions from informants invited to the year-long CenPRIS-Dato' Jenaton Lecture Series beginning November of 2016. Both books have the Malay-reading audience in mind.

This book is different. It addresses an English-reading and a largely bilingual readership, and beyond the nation's shores in addressing a national problem, one of deception. All three works (together with the present book), are outcomes of my observations on the character of the narrative, in the representation on Pulau Pinang history. The mainstream narrative has been exclusive – colonial, Eurocentric and ethnicized. And certainly, the history of Pulau Pinang is also consumed by the nation and the world. The Malays have largely remained consumers. Much of their narrative has been socially, intellectually and institutionally sidelined. And

undercurrents over previous two decades have revealed much frustration over the mainstream narrative, with more recent visible voices revealing the impropriety of Pulau Pinang in 1786. These voices called for justice and recognition of the early population on the island, and integrity in the Pulau Pinang story.

This book represents work done over more than two decades. The beginning of this century saw my public involvement on the Pulau Pinang narrative through my writings and advocacy. Portions of this book are culled from my previous writings in the media – print and online – apart from my previous two books. I have been responding to heritage issues involving the Malays in Pulau Pinang through my essays and columns in the newspapers and magazines. These comments found their way online and have been the subject of debates and criticisms evoking responses from the community, civil society organizations and public authorities. Portions of the materials here were revised journal papers published and papers presented over the last two decades at conferences and seminars. I have also given numerous talks on the subject of Pulau Pinang history and heritage from the Malay perspective organized by universities, public agencies, heritage and historical organizations both in Malaysia and abroad. Some pertinent ones are noted in the book. Versions of the *Batu Uban: Sejarah Awal Pulau Pinang* book are used to establish the presence of a population and a society on the island before the coming of the Europeans.

I have also made reference to the Light Letters collection, comprising some 1200 correspondence and other letters, including notes, kept at the Archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. They are now digitized and available at Malaysiana and Archives Division at Universiti Sains Malaysia's Hamzah Sendut Library. The inclusion of the Postscript making reference to letters pertinent to this book's argument, should be read together with R. Bonney's position on the nature of the separation of Pulau Pinang from Kedah in his book *Kedah 1771–1821: The Search for Security and Independence*. First appearing in 1971, and reprinted three years later, not much of Bonney was heard in public discourse. Bonney's interpretations were marginalized. His discourse was silenced. For some five decades, historians have steered away on the contested history. They ignored the collective memory.

Many have ignored oral history. A few have certainly used it as a critical source in unearthing the past of the island. This book uses local sources and narratives, as well as colonial notes and writings. *The Avatar of 1786: Decolonizing the Penang Story* was not written as a book about the history of Pulau Pinang. 1

did not write the book as a historian. I am not one. It was written because there was never a formal deliberation on any territorial transfer from Kedah to the British. Pulau Pinang was neither leased, granted or ceded by any written treaty or agreement in 1786. The history of Pulau Pinang did not begin from 1786.

This book is not only the story of Pulau Pinang. It is the story of Malaysia too. Both needs a revision. My *New Straits Times* essay, titled “The Merdeka of Pulau Pinang” which appeared on 24 August 2020 could perhaps sum up the sentiment. I asked: whose history, and whose legal history? The past must be accorded with justice and integrity; lest we want to continue with a false one.

My gratitude to Puan Alimie Liman, Senior Publications Officer, and Puan Awatif Ahmad, the then Director of Penerbit USM for their diligence in facilitating the crafting of the manuscript into a book. I am also grateful to Puan Radia Banu Jan Mohamad, Deputy Chief Librarian at Perpustakaan Hamdan Tahir, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian Kelantan; and former head of the Library’s Malaysiana and Archives Division. Thank you also to Puan Fujiza Azura Fesal and Puan Noor Azlinda Wan Jan, both Senior Librarians at the Malaysiana and Archives Division, Minden/Bukit Tok Jenaton Campus. To Puan Haryany Mohamad, Director of the Penang State Museum, special thanks for the permission to use the image that graces the cover of this book. Finally a note of appreciation to my collaborators, Dr. Muttaqa Yushau Abdura’uf and Ab Ur-Rahman Mohd. Amin.

October 2022



By Way of an Introduction

This book focusses on a contested history, not to the natives of the island of Kedah, or Kedah itself, but to the prevailing belief on the existence of Pulau Pinang¹ as a separate, independent polity. One way to put it is a contest between a Eurocentric and an indigenous narrative.

The Eurocentric narrative accords Francis Light the founding status of Pulau Pinang in 1786. This has alienated another perspective. Revisiting the history of the earliest communities who inhabited the island of Kedah before 1786 remains an imperative role for the writing of Malaysian history. It must be remembered and be reminded that the history of Pulau Pinang did not start from 1786. The Malay narrative is forgotten.² On the outset, this book tasks for a revisiting, rewriting and decolonizing of the narrative. The island was believed and judged to be *terra nullius*.³ This is the template constructing the history

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- ¹ This book uses the name “Pulau Pinang”. On the other hand, “Penang” is used whenever appropriate for specific contexts.
 - ² It is quite interesting to note that James Low in translating the Merong Mahawangsa, the *Kedah Annals*, emphasizes that “it is a History of Keddáh on the Malayan Peninsula; and, independently of any intrinsic value which it may possess, it is interesting to the British, since the settlement of Penáng and Province Wellesley once formed an integral portion of the country of Keddáh.” See James Low (1849), pp. 1, 162, 253, 314, 467.
 - ³ *Terra nullius* means “nobody’s land”. This doctrine has existed in the law of nations throughout the development of Western democracy. Derived from Roman law, it refers to the concept that ownership by seizure of a thing no one owns is legitimate. Such a concept has attracted expanding European empires competing for trade and political dominance in the

of Malaysia also – from the school textbook to public history.⁴ Pulau Pinang is of course, not alone. Parallels are seen with the history and historiography of Singapura. Circumstances are different, yet Pulau Pinang is as history-starved as her counterpart down south. I have used the term *pengemis sejarah* (beggars of history) in my writings on the history of the island.⁵ In October 2019, I happened to be an audience at Alfian Sa'at's play, *Merdeka*. It was about Singapore's breaking up with the West, on why Raffles must fall. Watching the play is like digesting large chunks of texts in two hours, alerting me to the 'emptiness' of the island's past identity had it not been for the peninsula and the vast archipelago in its proximity. *Merdeka*, meaning independence, draws from Singapore's past. The six characters seamlessly are all for a clean break with Sir Stamford Raffles, or so the tension prevails. The group, taking the theme "Raffles Must Fall", was inspired by the "Rhodes Must Fall" post-apartheid movement, located at the University of Cape Town.

There, it was directed against a statue of Cecil John Rhodes, colonizer of Africa. The campaign for the statue's removal led to a wider movement to decolonize education across South Africa and received attention around the world. That call was not the first. The 1950s saw the first demand by Afrikaner students. This introduction sets the perspective by belaboring on Singapore. Back in Singapore, the Raffles statue still exists. Some US\$200 million was budgeted for Singapore's 200th anniversary of colonialism in 2019. In their introduction to the book *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*, Kwa Chong Guan et al. (2019) delve into the writing of Singapore's history. They began with historian K.G. Tregonning's declaration that "Modern Singapore began in 1819. Nothing that occurred prior to this has particular relevance to an understanding of the contemporary scene; it is of an antiquarian interest only."

17th and 18th centuries. See opening address to the Law Society of New South Wales, Young Lawyers' Conference, 20 October 2017, "*The Rule of Law and Reconciliation*". Internet document available at <https://www.fedcourt.gov.au/digital-law-library/judges-speeches/justice-jagot/jagot-j-20171020> (accessed 30 October 2020). The idea of *terra nullius* has a central place in the political thought of thinkers such as Grotius and Locke. See Camilla Boisen (2013), pp. 335–353.

⁴ In the latest Form Three history textbook (2019), p. 30, there is a note saying that the island was populated before the coming of Francis Light. It also states that Pulau Pinang was integral to the Kedah Sultanate. The notion of *terra nullius* then seems to be gradually eradicated. Be that as it may, endogenous voices are silent. And the changes in the textbooks are still Eurocentric. The template stays. That still lies in the national consciousness. There is a gap between textbook history and public history.

⁵ See Ahmad Murad Merican (2015a).

Tregonning, Raffles Professor of History at the University of Singapore, made the declaration to a volume commemorating the 150th anniversary of Raffles in Singapore. Tregonning's remarks represent the prevailing ideology held by historians of Singapore's past in recent times. This is the template, not only of Singapore's history, but that of Pulau Pinang, the rest of Malaysia, and the region. In 1987, S. Rajaratnam attributed Singapore's beginnings entirely to Raffle's arrival: "Nothing very much appears to have happened in Singapore ... before Raffles landed in this unpromising land." Singapore's template into the capital of British Malaya by 1919 came to be detailed by a generation of students in the History Department of the University of Malaya, established in 1949. Tales from East India Company (EIC) and Colonial Office records were the mantra. Mary Turnbull's *A History of Singapore 1819–1975*, had framed Singapore's history as a positive outcome of British colonialism. Raffles was founding father. Fact or fiction?

Alfian Sa'at's play attempts to liberate ourselves from that template. To accept that template as a fact of history itself falsifies the past. To be sure there are many roads to the past. The historical narrative is also an argument. Colonial archives are certainly biased. So are our historians, custodians of heritage and policymakers. There is not one but two statues of Raffles standing in Singapore's civic and heritage districts. The year 1819 still stays in Singapore's colonialist view of the founding father. This is the question of beyond the statue.

Francis Light's statue is still in Pulau Pinang. And what is Frank Athelstane Swettenham's statue doing on the grounds of Muzium Negara in Kuala Lumpur? And the statue of King Edward VII in the same location? And this is coming to 66 years of political independence. Colonialism is never benign. What happened in 1786, is what can be termed as the conquest of Pulau Pinang. The colonial past does not preclude what tantamounts to criminality. But Light did not commit murder. Raffles did. The likes of the Raffles massacre in Palembang and Banjarmasin Affair involve the criminality of the colonial state. On the former, a letter from Raffles for the extermination of the Dutch reads, "... buang habiskan sekali-kali segala Belanda dan Residentnya ... Jangan kasi tinggal lagi" (... must throw away, finish entirely all the Dutch people and their Residents ... Do not allow them to stay).⁶ As per the statues in the vicinity of Muzium Negara, their presence and visibility there are partly

⁶ See Syed Hussein Alatas (2000). First published in 1971, this second edition comes with a new introduction by Syed Farid Alatas assessing contemporary Singapore's take on Raffles, and how far we have or not have come in thinking through Singapore's colonial legacy.

due to our attitude towards colonialism. We have not “buang habiskan” that narrative.⁷ Should the Sultanate of Kedah, and the people of Kedah and Pulau Pinang also demand a public apology, and compensation from the British for distorting its history? Opening a new chapter in the nation’s history renders the old narrative “dibuang habiskan” (stealing a phrase from Raffles).

The story goes that the Sultan of Kedah gave his daughter⁸ in marriage to Francis Light and offered Pulau Pinang as a dowry, in return of protection by the English EIC against his enemies.⁹ Fast forward 20 years later, after the implementation of the so-called Charter of Justice 1807, the Pulau Pinang courts have held that in order to provide justice to the natives of the state, the *lex loci* of Penang should be the English Common Law and the rules of Equity applicable in England. On the contrary, the Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Abdullah Mukarram Shah¹⁰ claimed that he was merely allowing the British to occupy the island while taking care of the Sultan and His kingdom against his enemies, especially Siam. So, to the Sultan,¹¹ Pulau Pinang was never given away to British. Furthermore in 1800, Seberang Perai was taken by the British on the assumption that the Sultan and his Kingdom will be protected. In 1829,¹² the Courts took a turn by claiming that they have had never heard of Sultan of Kedah or his Kingdom. However, in 1856 the same Court, accepted that there was such a thing as Sultan of Kedah, but he has no authority to deal with the land as sovereignty actually belonged to Siam!¹³

In a paper presented at the Seminar Ahmad Ibrahim in 2007 titled “Lifting the Veils: The Mystique (Mistake) of Penang Legal History” (henceforth referred to as “Lifting the Veils”) authors Bashiran Begum Mobarak Ali, Noriah Ramli and Siti Junaidah Muhamad raise the problem of legal historical discrepancies surrounding the British occupation of Pulau Pinang with a plethora of

See Ahmad Murad Merican (2020).

⁸ Not the Sultan’s daughter but generally said to be a lady from the Kedah court. This was during the reign of Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Adilin Mu’adzam Shah II who reigned between 1710 and 1778.

⁹ See *Kyshes Reports Volume 1 (Civil Cases)*.

¹⁰ Much of the interactions on acquiring Pulau Pinang by Francis Light was made with Sultan Muhammad Jiwa’s son, Sultan Abdullah Mukarram Shah who reigned between 1778 and 1797.

¹¹ And to the memory of his descendants, namely Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah II (1804–1845), and Sultan Badlishah (1943–1958), for example, Pulau Pinang was never ceded to the British.

¹² At that time, Kedah was ruled by Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah II.

See Bashiran Begum Mobarak Ali, Noriah Ramli and Siti Junaidah Muhamad (2007).

questions that need to be decided. It has always been claimed that the legal history of Malaysia in general, and Pulau Pinang specifically, begins with the occupation of the British of the island in 1786 and the three Charters of Justice: 1807, 1826 and 1855. They cite legal scholar Professor Ahmad Ibrahim that this has to change – that Pulau Pinang legal history did not begin from 1786. There was a legal system in existence on the island prior to 1786. This can be observed from the way of life of the local inhabitants (see Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 of this book). They account that the application of the Islamic law modified by the Adat Temenggong could be seen in the law of marriages and divorce, the payment of tax, law of property, transaction, types of offences, either in civil and criminal, maritime rules, the sultanate kingdom and the administration of the society. Ahmad Ibrahim is of the view that Islamic law modified by the Adat Temenggong should have been the *lex loci* of Pulau Pinang.

Arguments were also raised as to the status of Kedah as a sovereign state. Writers such as Wan Arfah Hamzah and Ramy Bulan,¹⁴ both from the legal fraternity, opine that Kedah was not an independent state as it was a vassal of Siam (for views not aligned to this, see Chapter 2). They argue therefore that sovereignty belongs to Siam. The payment of *ufti* (*bunga emas*) to Siam was made once in every three years. It symbolizes ‘friendship’ between Kedah and Siam and accepting Siam as a strong and powerful government. But Siam was also sending *bunga emas* to China. Siam has never acknowledged that its country has been ruled by China. Siam rules according to its own law and custom. Similarly, Kedah has never perceived that she is subjected to Siam.

The authors of “Lifting the Veils” lend further credence to their argument on the sovereignty of Kedah by a series of letters sent by Sultan Abdul Hamid to the Government of Siam that Siam will not interfere with their administration.¹⁵ Kedah has full authority to apply its own laws and customs. Historically, it is proven that in 1605 there were already rules relating to port management in Kedah.¹⁶ The Kedah Government drafted these rules according to their own custom that was based on Islamic law modified by the Adat Temenggong to matters related to marriages, divorce, custody, and land dealings, criminal or civil offences. The British, as said by Abu Haniffa (2005), has forgotten “to look at the Al-Quran, the basic textbook of all these laws that was and is still

¹⁴ See Wan Arfah Hamzah and Ramy Bulan (2004), p. 101.

¹⁵ Mohammad Isa Othman (1990).

¹ The *Undang-undang Laut*.

applicable.”¹⁷ The customary laws, just like the common law of England, were basically unwritten law.

The Kedah Sultanate is through lineage; there has never been any interference or suggestion from Siam to elect the Sultan. No approval was needed from Siam on the appointment of the sovereign of the Kingdom. However, the situation has changed following the Burney Treaty 1826. Owing to the Sultan’s reluctance to assist Siam to fight against Burma, the Siam government attacked and dethroned the Sultan of Kedah and declared him as a Governor of Kedah.¹⁸ The EIC and the British Government refused to support and provide protection to the Sultan of Kedah. On the other hand, the British Government detained the Sultan and his family members as state prisoners.

This can be seen in *Ishmahel Laxamana v. East India Company*,¹⁹ when Claridge R. dismissed the Sultan of Kedah’s petition and condescendingly said that neither the Court nor the government of Pulau Pinang recognized any person as a Sultan of Kedah. Unexpectedly, the Malay Sultan of Kedah has been officially and judicially betrayed not only by Siam but also by the British. It was contended in this case that the treaties between Sultan of Kedah and the EIC were confidential, and the Company had never been granted the sovereignty of the island by the King of England. In *Nairne v. Ahmed Tajudin²⁰ bin Sultan Zainal Noor Rashid (Rajah of Quedah)²¹ and Wan Ismail*, R. Maxwell R., described the Sultan of Kedah as Governor of Kedah and the Kedah territory is a state tributary to the Kingdom of Siam. He proceeded by saying that it cannot be denied that the country of Kedah “was permanently occupied and treated as part and parcel of Siam Empire, and it was their right to expel the old Rajah”. In 1842, the Sultan of Kedah was reinstated in the government of Kedah.²²

The sultanate of Kedah boasts an unbroken line stretching over 884 years²³ by a single royal family. Japan and Thailand, on the other hand, were ruled by different royal families over the centuries. Tracing Kedah’s history and its royal

¹ Cited from Abu Haniffa Mohd Abdullah, “Islamic Law of Bequests in Malaysia: The Two Principles Restrictions-Malaysian Sovereignty and the Reception of English Law of Inheritance” (2005), *Shariah Law Reports*, pp. 27–32.

¹ Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah II.

¹ Bashiran Begum Mobarak Ali, Noriah Ramli and Siti Junaidah Muhamad, *op.cit.* Cited from (1829) 1 Ky. 5.

Referring to Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah II.

¹ Sultan Zainal Rashid Muadzam Shah I.

² *Ibid.* Cited from (1961) 1 Ky. 145.

As of 2020.

lineage broadens the understanding of the peninsula's place in relation to the history of the Malay Archipelago, Southeast Asia and the world, and certainly, the history of Pulau Pinang. A study of another 'model' of Kedah challenges the rather narrow concept of the purely riverine Malay *negeri* (state). In some respect, Kedah resembled the maritime-entrepot polities of states, such as Palembang-Srivijaya, Melaka and Johor-Riau.²⁴

It is instructive to briefly narrate Kedah as a polity over the centuries. What is more significant of the Malay state is that Kedah's rulers not only controlled the seas and land, but also the riverine hinterland and river sources. The Kedah monarch was, indeed, the sovereign of both land and sea routes between the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. In his foreword to *Malay Kingship in Kedah: Religion, Trade and Society* by Maziar Mozaffari Falarti,²⁵ Professor Emeritus of Asian Studies C.A. Troki describes Kedah as one of the most durable dynasties in Southeast Asia (if not the whole Islamic world). Falarti's study of Kedah's traditional history, for the first time in the literature, notes its relationship to South, Central and West Asia. The book brings to our attention to the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, much neglected and often dismissed as mythical, as a textual foundation for the spiritual legitimacy on the dynasty. Its use of indigenous literary, oral and cultural sources, hitherto, doubted and ignored by scholars in the understanding of Kedah and, by extension, the Malay world and Southeast Asia, gives vital insights to the context and value of ideas and events.

Such sources brought a new understanding of Kedah, in itself and in the context of the Malay Archipelago. According to Falarti, Kedah has its own unique royal lineage in the Malay world, tracing itself to the land of Rum or Persia, instead of Alexander the Great or through the Palembang-Melaka-Johor line. There is also the link between Kedah and the indigenous *orang laut*, or the Bugis-Makassar, Ilanun and Siak-Minangkabau. Significantly, these peoples engaged themselves in Kedah/Pulau Pinang, and in the northern Malacca Straits. Significant in Falarti's work²⁶ to this book are two aspects: one, Kedah as a maritime power in Southeast Asia and, two, its reference to the early history of Pulau Pinang.

²⁴ See A. Murad Merican (2014a).

² 2014, first published in 2013 by Lexington Books.

² Originally a 2009 doctoral thesis titled *Kedah: The Foundations and Durability of Malay Kingship*, submitted to the Humanities Research Program, Queensland University of Technology.

Falarti, unlike earlier scholars on Malaya or Kedah history, does not see Pulau Pinang as a separate entity from the sultanate. Kedah historiography, on the other hand, unfortunately, has structured the island as alien to the sultanate, thus, erasing more than a millennium of history. Kedah's unique geography and its connections to overland and sea routes saw its cultural and social links by land to Pattani, Nakhon Si Thammarat and old Siam further north, as well as the Malay territories, mostly to its south and southeastern borders; and by sea, to Sumatera, Burma, Angkor, the Mon principalities, China, India and Persia, as well as Europe. It is argued that Kedah traditionally acted as a regional exchange hub. Contrary to its present image as a padi-planting state, with a history not much more than the Lembah Bujang and Siamese invasions of the 18th and 19th centuries, Kedah was eclectic. There was an intermingling of peoples, goods and cultures over the centuries. The sultanate's commanding link to the sea and overland routes enabled a regular exchange of traditions, literary sources, education, languages, sciences and inventions to travel to and from Kedah. Safe passages were ensured, as in the example of using sea lords. In Raja Ali Haji's *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, we find Syed Ali, the Siak sea lord, leaving Siak in the Straits of Malacca solely to ambush Songkla in the Gulf of Siam on behalf of Kedah. The Siak-Minangkabau/Bugis-Makassar rivalry in Kedah was intertwined to Raja Kechil and the early history of Pulau Pinang.

Falarti notes that there were Minangkabaus on the island, aligned traditionally with Siak. There are also Minangkabau settlements in Seberang Perai around 1780. In the first half of the 18th century, Pulau Pinang was invaded by the *orang laut* and the Bugis. Falarti suggests that Nakhoda nan Intan (originally from the Minangkabau heartland of Payakumbuh), who settled in Batu Uban in the 1730s, had either asked the help of Siak's sea lords or Kedah's ruler.²⁷ The presence of the Minangkabaus or the possible Siak refitting or naval base in Kedah was, indeed, significant in blocking foreign intrusion and maintaining peace. Pulau Pinang also did not escape being narrated by the Achenese 18th-century epic, *Hikayat Potjut Muhammad*, as peaceful and tranquil. Indeed, Pulau Pinang was the jewel in the Kedah Crown. Its loss to Francis Light and the EIC was not sentimental if we care to go through the letters of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Abdul Halim Shah II (1797–1843) and Sultan Badlishah (1943–1958). The former, in a letter dated 3 May 1837, described Pulau Pinang as "... tanah air beta paduka marhum..." (the motherland of my forefathers).

² According to Falarti, Nakhoda nan Intan was joined by his two brothers, Nakhoda Kechil and Nakhoda Bayan, with the permission of the ruler of Kedah sometime before 1734, p. 127. See Chapters 6 and 7 of this book. The Minangkabaus in Pulau Pinang/Kedah are traditionally aligned to Siak. In 1786, there were 56 people living on the island.

One of the urban centers of this island of Kedah is Batu Uban (see Chapter 5 of this book). The total ignorance of history has utterly destroyed the place. And this also includes precolonial settlements such as Sungai Pinang, Jelutong and Sungai Nibong. According to Norman Macalister's (1803) informant, in the first 20 years of 1700, about 60 years before 1786, Pulau Pinang had a population of about 2,000.²⁸ Owing to the utter ignorance of the past, licences were given to developers beginning in the 1970s throughout the decades. This only shows a distorted knowledge of the island's history by its policy elites. This plays on prejudice. Batu Uban is now virtually levelled off except for the Masjid Jamek Batu Uban, with its 400-odd graves, sandwiched between the highway named after one chief minister, and several high-rise structures. All without due regard to its past, crucial to understanding Pulau Pinang society and the linkage to Kedah.

And only the mosque was gazetted. There is a burial ground behind the mosque, established in 1734 by Nakhoda nan Intan @ Haji Muhammad Salleh from Kampung Bodi, Payakumbuh, West Sumatera. The roads in Batu Uban are not named after the *nakhoda*. Neither is any structure in the vicinity named after the pioneer *nakhoda*. All we see are Jalan Batu Uban 1 and Jalan Batu Uban 2. Batu Uban in the early 1700s was not only a place – it was also a town and a port, earlier than the one in what is now George Town – what was then Tanjong Penaga. Even the mosque, the earliest in the state and one of the earliest in Malaysia, has not been cited or mentioned in books on mosques in Malaysia or tourist brochures and pamphlets on Penang historical sites.

Even the state seems to ignore the existence of the Batu Uban mosque. Instead, Masjid Kapitan Keling and Masjid Melayu Lebuah Acheh are much celebrated at its expense. And all simply because of apathy leading to ignorance. The *kampung* where the mosque is located lends prejudice and ignorance. It reflects historical illiteracy on the part of the state's establishment and policy elites. Not knowing history is indeed destructive. Since 1957, the powers in Pulau Pinang have some misguided notions of the state's history. And they have a problem with attitudes too. The absence or presence of public policies is also dependent on the attitudes of those in authority. The Malays of this island of Kedah conjure an ambivalent image of their past. And the people residing in places like Batu Uban, Tanjong Tokong, Jelutong and Dato' Keramat are rendered as 'faceless and nameless' residues of the past, or worst, people who

²⁸ It was reported that the Sultan of Kedah, angry at the population who "had given themselves up to piracy and plunder, which disturbed the commerce of Quida, ... had expelled every soul from the island." Macalister (1803), p. 23.

are deemed to have no history and genealogy. This suggests that if there is a condescending sense of the past, toward the history of a place, there is a tendency to be marginalized in the formulation of public policies. Ignorance and apathy towards national and regional histories, and the refusal to accept national history as intertwined with regional histories have been destructive to Pulau Pinang, and Kedah; and certainly, to Malaysia.²⁹

Back to Singapore. A recent debate on the demolition of the Runnymede would provide an appropriate picture of the colonial mentality amongst certain parties.³⁰ This is not on the demolition itself³¹ but on how the issue would be if discoursed and represented. I have to note the response by independent researcher and heritage advocate Abdur-Razzaq Lubis in his Facebook posting on 27 February 2016 who expressed that

The colonial mentality of the heritage movement is astounding. Don't they know that Singapore was not founded by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in as much as Penang was founded by Captain Francis Light. Singapore's history does not begin with the arrival of the British in 1819. Raffles himself never claimed he was the founder; the new island republic did in order to stamp and legitimize its nation-making. The fact of the matter is that Singapore's foundation dates back to around 1300.

Singapore was already a thriving, populous city in the 14th century. Lubis draws from National University of Singapore archaeologist John Miksic's (2013) revelation that Singapura had an earlier incarnation as a port and an entreport. Miksic had articulated in his *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea: 1300–1800*, that the rise of the small island nation is not a recent historical accident. Lubis describes the mentality as smacking “of colonial adulation to trace the founding of Singapore to Raffles.” Raffles was a manufactured hero by a state out to reinvent itself in the image of imperialists and empire. It is not difficult to see the nexus between the media, the establishment and civil societies. The 25 February 2016 issue of *The Sun* carried the headline “Singapore founder lives in Runnymede” with the lead or intro narrated as

² See Ahmad Murad Merican (2018).

³ Stories on the demolition of the Runnymede first appeared online on 12 February 2016. See for example <http://www.thestar.com.my/metro/community/2016/02/12/historian-raffles-built-runnymede-in-1808/> Document accessed on 27 February 2016.

³ We are not advocating the demolition of colonial buildings or structures built by the British, or other European colonialists who arrived on the shores of the Peninsula, or Sabah and Sarawak.

A heritage group here has revealed that Penang Island City Council (MBPP) did have the documentation proving that Singapore founder Sir Stamford Raffles lived in the Runnymede Bungalow until at least 1810.³²

What is happening to the history of Pulau Pinang is part of the shaping of world history. The EIC and Francis Light were the historical outcomes of Western retaliation to the economic blockade. The economic blockade, effected by Islam upon the West beginning from the 9th to the 14th centuries in its control of world trade and trade routes – both land and sea routes – had forced the West to live in isolation and on its own means and efforts. In so doing it has to seek other ways to the sources of international supplies. In the quest, which was prompted by the direct involvement of Islam in world history and in Western intellectual history, has enabled Europe, after the *Reconquista* in the 15th and 16th centuries, to gather its strength and intellectual resources. Once again, it re-emerged on the stage of world history as a dynamic force. Subsequently it achieved many far-reaching discoveries for itself as such. Apart from scientific discoveries, there was the discovery of America by Amerigo Vespucci and Christopher Columbus. There was the discovery of the sea route to India via the Cape of Good Hope by Vasco da Gama with the assistance of his Muslim pilot who already knew the way. The spice islands of the Malay Archipelago was no exception. Its first adventure in colonization was with the capture of the strategic seaports and stapling points in the Indian Ocean, and in the Straits of Melaka by Alfonso d'Albuquerque. Voyages of “discovery” then was indicative of the beginnings of European globalization. This was followed by conquest and direct political control from the European metropolis. The engagements between Francis Light, Sultan Abdullah Mukarram Shah and his father Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Adilin Mu'adzam Shah II with the representatives of London at Calcutta, Bengal over Pulau Pinang were characteristic of such a strategy. From the 17th century onwards, imperialism was succeeded by colonization – with the establishment of (immigrant) communities in colonized territories, mimicking the metropolis, and supported by slavery and indentured labor. This resulted in the systemic subjugation of the colonized people. Such developments created a Eurocentric worldview of

² One response was as follows: “Everything started with the arrival of the white man. I don't celebrate that fact but I appreciate the records of the era carefully written down by the colonialists.” The same person refuted a suggestion of the appropriateness of saying it Raffles as “...founder of regulated, legislature & governed Singapore” By arguing that it was not about regulation either: “...the natives (I am one) were already there but the system wasn't written down and codified. Its history anyway and should be cherished.”

THE AVATAR OF 1786

Decolonizing the Penang Story

There must be a closure to the history of Pulau Pinang (and Kedah). There was no 1786 treaty – no agreement, no document, no signatories. The narrative continues independent of each other, representing an uncomfortable conscience glancing at each as two separate polities of Penang and Kedah, socially and intellectually structured by the year 1786. This book makes a strange revisit to pretension of a fact/event. And it counters the *terra nullius* doctrine. It also establishes that the *lex loci* was the Adat Temenggong (customary law) modified by the Qanun (laws) of Kedah. Malay collective memory maintains that Pulau Pinang is integral to the Kedah Sultanate. The island has law, order and society before the presence of the Europeans; not a “band of natives and fishermen” as stereotyped by the colonial narrative, even in the colonial courts. The Malays in Pulau Pinang in recent decades have become ‘beggars’ to their own history. This book contests that history through moral and legal arguments, as well as raising the themes and issues of representation and redemption.



Professor Dato' Dr. Ahmad Murad Merican

is Professor of Social and Intellectual History, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, International Islamic University Malaysia (ISTAC-IIUM). He has published on the history of social science, journalism studies and problems of representation on the narrative of Pulau Pinang. He is a columnist for the *New Straits Times*, *Melaka Hari Ini*, and *Dewan Masyarakat*. His book *Batu Uban: Sejarah Awal Pulau Pinang* was adjudged the Best History Book at the National Book Award (2020), National Book Development Foundation.

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