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**Heritage as History:  
Plural Narratives on Penang Malays**

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## Heritage as History: Plural Narratives on Penang Malays

### INTRODUCTION: PENANG MALAYS AS HEIRS TO A PLURAL TRADITION

The history of Penang over the past two and a half centuries has taken a course somewhat different from that of the other Malay states. It was the only territory with no royal ruler or sultan of its own, and even following its eventual incorporation into the state nation of Malaya in 1957, Penang state remained under the jurisdiction of a Chief Minister. From the time of its launch as an outpost of the East India Company in 1786, and later as a Straits Settlement, Penang always enjoyed certain economic privileges, first as a free port, and since the 1970s has remained a free-trade zone with its offshore industrial assembly plants.

The early Penang population too was distinctive for its demographic diversity, where people identified as Malays were a numerical minority among the streams of immigrant settlers who arrived throughout the nineteenth century. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the closest Malay political and social communities of any size were in the mainland states of Kedah, Perlis and Perak. A historical replay of an evolving multicultural, multi-religious society reveals through assorted accounts and events how Malayness has been constantly redefined (by self and other) over the generations. Arguably, such redefinitions continue today under various agencies.

It may be ventured too that early settlements like Penang (as well as Singapore and Melaka) represent or reproduce something of the last stages of the open, fluid, floating world of maritime Southeast Asia, where Malays encountered traders of material, religious and other commodities from India and beyond, bringing them into a wider Muslim world. Venturing even further, it may be possible to extrapolate to the Penang experience from accounts of lively, multicultural Muslim commercial communities in certain nineteenth century Indian port cities with British colonial exposure, such as Bombay and those in Bengal<sup>1</sup>. In Penang, the place of the local Malays in the demographic mix requires particular attention.

Nineteenth century ports such as Bombay and Bengal's Chittagong, and later Penang, were the sites of successive waves of new Muslim arrivals bearing their own cultural variants of Islam. Profiting from colonial laissez-faire and low or regulation in economic and religious matters, competition and innovation flourished. One result was a pluralistic Muslim community, whose internal cultural, ethnic and theological differences could be negotiated as situations arose. Bombay was the recipient of Muslim settlers with connections in the Ottoman and Persian regions, from the North-west frontier, from the Hadhramaut, and from the littoral of Africa, from Sunni, Shi'ah and Sufi traditions, who were grafted on to the existing complexity of Hindu, Parsee and Christian societies. Who there was "indigenous" and in what sense? In Bengal, earlier strata of Muslim arrivals from the Near East gradually crystallised into an Ashraf religious elite whose piety was closely connected with the revered Sheikhs of the Chishti Sufi order, later augmented by representatives of the Mughal ruling class. Parallel to these a distinctly local variety of rural Islam with its veneration of saints or *pirs* continued to flourish, along with veneration of shrines. Eaton's interpretation<sup>2</sup> gives an image of

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<sup>1</sup> Bombay's vibrant economic and religious saga is well chronicled in a recent contribution by Nile Green, in his *Bombay Islam: the religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840-1915*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. For a richly detailed account of the interplay of different strains of Islam in Bengal, see Richard M. Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian History*. New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Eaton 2001, *ibid*: "Who are the Bengal Muslims?" Chapter 11:249-275

religious strata, with the Ashraf most respected for their purity and origins. The Mughals, with different (central Asian) ethnic origins, but with the power and authority of a ruling class, were nonetheless recognised for their tolerance of certain Hindu practices, and even their political fusion with the Rajput warrior caste. Indeed the Mughals allegedly did not promote religious pressure, nor did they necessarily encourage or reward conversion to Islam by their lower-ranking Hindu officers<sup>3</sup>. Amid these distinctions along parameters of what are today parsed as “ethnic” and “religious”, and their subtle hierarchies within the Muslim community, certain elements later resurfaced in later debates over *adat* and “pure” Islam, Peranakan and Malay jati in Penang.

The period 1840-1915, covered by the Bombay and Bengal sketches above coincides with the expansion of the British East India Company to establish an outpost between the sub-continent and China, in the island of Penang (and also in Singapore). In this pre-national era the “Malays” existed as a series of mobile, far-flung maritime-based communities who shared a common language. The language was in effect a trading lingua franca used by many merchants of the southern seas<sup>4</sup>, from Java to Madagascar, and was not necessarily isomorphic with blood or genealogical “ethnic” identity. Rather, Malay populations were noted for their social openness, to intermarriages with immigrant Muslims, who were thereafter incorporated and socialised into a Malay family and community. In the first generation and often subsequently, the identity of the in-married spouses and their descendants could oscillate indefinitely between different options. Islam served as a medium of common values and understandings, as well as a solid base for commerce, a broader worldview and experience, and provided ritual and ethical matrix for kinship and family values, the traditional Malay *budi bahasa*. As in India, Islam in Penang was diverse, multicultural and until the late twentieth century, tolerant and encompassing, a religious economy which included Shi’ah, Sufi and other varieties of practice.

Malays across insular Southeast Asia were distinctive for their bilateral kinship system, unbounded by the kinds of lineal clan boundaries and strong patriarchal authority of Chinese or Arabs. Unlike the latter, Malays generally keep shallow genealogies without surname continuity, suited to a mobile existence and the retooling of identities. Likewise, their lack of specific rules of marriage alliance have long enabled the incorporation of outside spouses, usually immigrant Muslim males, into the Malay community and family, who were then incorporated into local culture, as they and their offspring effectively became Malay<sup>5</sup>. Another custom for which Malays were renowned was their openness to adoption of abandoned children, often Chinese girls, as *anak angkat*, who were then raised without prejudice as Muslim Malays. In terms of ethnicity, the Malay population has long been hybrid<sup>6</sup>, and has rarely claimed blood, biological or genealogical metaphors as emblems of identity or purity. By the same token, the Malays in Southeast Asia are simultaneously local and of immigrant origin.

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<sup>3</sup> Eaton, 2001, *ibid*:257; Eaton also claims (p.255), that the most effective bond among Mughal officers of diverse religion was a non-confessional ritual of salt, as a symbol of mutual obligation

<sup>4</sup> For the most comprehensive and wide-ranging historical account of the notions of Malayness, see Leonard Andaya., *Leaves of the same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Malacca*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008; also Judith Nagata, “Boundaries of Malayness: ‘we have made Malaysia, now is the time to (re-) make the Malays’.....” .Ch. 1 in: *Melayu: the Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*. Maznah Mohamad & Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (eds). Singapore, NUS Press.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller account, see Nagata, *ibid*, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> The essential hybridity of Malay populations has been recognised by Anthony Reid since as early as the fifteenth century, see his: “Hybrid Identities in the Fifteenth Century Straits of Malacca”, ARI Working Paper, No. 67, National University of Singapore, 2006; for a similar conclusion, see also: Joel Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*. Singapore: Asian Studies Association of Australia, in association with University of Hawaii Press, 2006.

In the Penang context, the relations between Malays and new arrivals to the island, particularly with other Muslims from the Indian sub-continent, from Aceh and other islands of the Nusantara, and with Arabs, who traced their origins to the Hadhramaut and points in the Near East, replicated some of the social themes chronicled for Bombay and the ports of Bengal. Among these were frequent intermarriages, exposure to different varieties of Islam and a gradual re-assortment of populations as a new economic and social pluralism took shape. It so happens that the records by Eaton and Green for nineteenth century urban India overlap closely with the period of substantial repopulation of Penang, as all three areas shared a common colonial experience through contacts with British trading companies.

From the early nineteenth century to the present, Penang Malays have charted new paths within the evolving complex society of immigrant Muslims, largely by means of customary adaptive mechanism of creative kinship and marriage relations. In the absence of the tutelage of a local Malay sultan or state, identity options remained open and fluid, as did perceptions of Malayness, by self and other. It was only with the rise of Malay nationalism and the eventual independent state that the fluidity of Malay identity and expression was subject to political management and compression, giving rise to debates over relative ethnic purity. In what follows, I dissect different interpretations of the Penang Malay experience, beyond official histories of all eras, to representations in a growing heritage literature and movement. Lastly, I recap new trends in official school history texts, together with an evolving sense of entitlement claimed more recently by politically conscious and mobilised Malay citizens of their eponymous state.

### HERITAGE AS HISTORY?

In this account, I highlight the representations of Penang's Muslim Malay populations as produced by local heritage organisations. These accounts do not bear the stamp or finality of official histories, but more in the manner of ethnographies, reveals the nuances and intricacies of identity selection and perception within the local community. Unlike ethnographies, heritage stories do not attempt to draw attention to or make an issue of inconsistencies or the logic behind the stories. Nor do they attempt to arrive at generalisations about their topics—say, ethnic identity, religious or even political correctness. In principle, heritage organisations cultivate an image of political and social impartiality, although not always succeeding in avoiding controversy in practice. But the impact of heritage activities and publications are often more immediate and accessible than those of formal histories, although certain pro-active movements involving land and building rights do venture into political realms. In Penang since the last two decades of the twentieth century, "heritage" has grown increasingly controversial, and gradually moved in more political directions and been at the centre of wider policy debates, including on matters related to Malay issues.

Heritage movements, like other interest groups, and like most historians, tend to be selective in their interpretations of the past. Like many histories too they may arise serendipitously and quickly in response to current events. Rarely neutral, as the rather bland word implies, heritage has more in common with the "invented tradition"<sup>7</sup>, in the sense of an after-the-fact enshrinement of past acts, deed and material things as bedrock institutions, to be retrieved and preserved as a foundation of what is most valued, cherished or important to the present. Unsurprisingly therefore, heritage themes and policies are subject to, and may project backwards the issues and policies of the day.

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<sup>7</sup> As illustrated in the volume edited by Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1983

Any assessment of the role of heritage raises questions as to: whose heritage is selected, and why? Who are the protagonists—academics, historians, architects, architects, dedicated amateurs, engaged elites, tourist operators, NGOs? What is included in the heritage mandate: built environment and material items; written, living performative arts; ritual/religious tradition—even identity? How far do heritage organisations embrace broader social justice, environmental, planning or human rights objectives? Are the perspectives of heritage in the manner of a critique of the present?

Heritage organisations in many countries reflect national priorities or promote tourism ministry missions, although these may create disagreements at local sites. In multicultural, multi-religious Penang, the most contested heritage projects often revolve, if indirectly, around matters of identity and the visions of particular local communities. Some heritage historians are simultaneously cultural insiders and “stakeholders”. But few can ignore the encompassing Malaysian state’s ethno-religious worldview, imprinted in school history texts, where the identity map promoted today is projected backwards on the historical landscape. Heritage projects may display some political bias in terms of selection and representation of topics, which may be at variance with official, more teleological versions.

In this paper the broad theme is one of how Malay identity has been recognised and represented in over two centuries of population re-assortment in the island of Penang, and of intensive mixing within the overall Muslim community. While intermarriages among Muslims were not new, the relative balance between Malays and non-Malays was changed, and with it the perception of Malayness. Sometimes distinguished from, at other times used as a synonym for Muslims more generally, the issue of Malayness was often confused by the enhanced cultural and linguistic diversity within mixed multicultural families. Who really, were the Malays? When did an immigrant spouse become a Malay? As immigration continued apace, the proportion of Malays, by any measure, decreased, drawing very little attention. Only after 1957, when Malay ethnicity was promoted and rewarded by the state, was renewed attention directed towards population proportions and boundaries, central to the national political project.

Understanding the evolution of a consciousness of identity over several generations requires references to historiography, other anecdotal sources and extant records, and eventually the social history as presented through the lens of folklore and heritage. Finally, given the current preeminent ethno-national status of the Malays in the eponymous state, how and where are Malays identified in the Muslim saga, and how far have Malays been a particular focus of heritage agendas? How have national party politics and a growing sense of Malay entitlement contributed to the quest for more recognition as a political majority?

This trajectory will follow the process by which a generic term “Malay” was incorporated into a larger multicultural vocabulary, wherein an assortment of mostly immigrant Muslim populations in Penang aligned themselves in different ways as new situations presented themselves Malays, as they had done historically, were able to identify with (and be accepted by) other Muslim groups and be accepted as such. In the early nineteenth century as will be seen, the most common elision was that of Malay-Arab, and later often used interchangeably with Indians. Today in modern Malaysia, such links are still often privately recognised, but may be less often publicly helpful. It is in this climate that heritage activities and accounts have to navigate with care.

**CHRONICLE OF THE EARLY POPULATIONS OF PENANG ISLAND: THE INGREDIENTS OF HERITAGE**

Accounts of the early peopling of Penang island are somewhat determined by the choice of evidence and epithets used by the chroniclers for the various groups encountered. Systematic written records in English began with the founding of the free port of Penang, initially known as Prince of Wales Island, under the jurisdiction of the British East India Company (EIC) in 1786. Of course the island was not totally *tabula rasa* or *terra nullius*<sup>8</sup>, an impression left by some early British accounts. The first Lt Governor, Sir George Leith, seems to have passed over lightly<sup>9</sup> the presence on the island of Muslim tombs, and made little of the scattered Malay settlements and cemeteries encountered on their arrival. Nor is much space given to the Chinese who had for centuries traded opportunistically along the coasts of Kedah and north to Siam, as everywhere else in Southeast Asia.

Vestiges of earlier Arab or Indian Muslim presence on the island were the numerous *keramats*, or tombs and shrines of holy men, some attached to remains of mosques. At least twenty-four such *keramats* have been preserved across Penang island, clearly indicating previous habitation, or frequent sojourning by itinerant teachers and scholars who must have had sufficient followings to provide an enduring recognition of their life. Such *keramats* had long been the object of veneration and offerings by Muslims in India, and the tradition had been carried to Southeast Asia, notably Penang and Singapore, where even non-Muslims, including Chinese, are among their devotees<sup>10</sup>.

Better chronicled in the European sources, including in the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago* (often known as *Logan's Journal*, after its editor, J. P. Logan), is the fact that Arabs of Hadhrami origin had long been trading in the ports of North Sumatra, the Malay peninsula, Kedah and Penang, and since the thirteenth century C.E. had made alliances with sultans in Aceh and Kedah, who often sought Arab advice and protection. Some of these Arab families already had a history of settlement and marriage in Bombay, Bengal, Temasek (precolonial Singapore) and the Dutch East Indies, as described by Eaton and Green respectively. These patterns were repeated throughout maritime Southeast Asia, where in the eyes of some observers, the Arabs were indigenised enough to be recognised as part of the local "Malay" population. In such spirit, a pair of prominent Arab merchants, lately from Aceh, were reported to have arrived on Penang island in the last years of the eighteenth century, whom Francis Light<sup>11</sup> described in 1792 as "Malays of Arabian extraction". According to Light, the Arabs enjoyed special reverence from the Malays, *who did not object to the glow of shared status* (my emphasis), with these well-connected Muslims. Arabs were so much respected by "Malay princes that their persons are held too sacred for punishment...and they trade duty free..." (ibid). This respect was evidently shared by the Europeans, who negotiated with some of the Acehnese Arabs certain immunity in matters of (legal) authority over their own families and entourage of dependents and slaves.

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<sup>8</sup> A European image thoroughly challenged by Anthony Reid in his, *Malaysia-Singapore as immigrant societies*. ARI Working Paper, No. 141, National University of Singapore, 2010

<sup>9</sup> Leith, George A. *A Short Account of the Settlement, Produce and Commerce of Prince of Wales Island*. London: J. Booth, 1804; J J.P. Logan (ed), *Articles by J.D. Vaughan on the Malays of Penang and Province Wellesley*. Vol. 2, 2:655-6, Singapore 1850

<sup>10</sup> Historical Survey of the Mosques and Kramats on Penang Island. Malayan Teachers' College, m.s., 1932

<sup>11</sup> As described in the account by Abdur-Razzaq Lubis, *Traders, Teachers and Pilgrim Brokers: Penang Arabs in Regional Network*. Penang, ms. n.d.

More Arabs arrived in Penang, or Prince of Wales Island, as it came to be known officially, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as a result of the civil war in Aceh. Arab merchants had been implicated there in a succession struggle within the royal family, into which Arab merchants had intermarried. One of the contenders was the son of Tengku Syed Hussein Aidid, at the time resident in Penang, who eventually succeeded to the Acehnese throne through a coup in 1816, partly engineered by his father's Penang allies. Meanwhile, Tengku Syed Hussein became associated with the founding of the Acheen Street Mosque, established on a piece of land willed by a previous occupant, another Arab, Syed Hassan, whose tomb lies near the mosque<sup>12</sup>. To the present this mosque has enjoyed a dual status or interchangeably as the Masjid Acheen (popularly sometimes, as Masjid Aceh), and the Masjid Melayu. This quarter was or over a century the centre of a lively printing industry, international trade, and most importantly, the site of pilgrimage (*hajj*) departures to Mecca.

### The Malay Populations

At the time of Light's arrival, Penang was still under the nominal suzerainty of the Sultanate of Kedah from whom the island was leased for 6,000 pounds<sup>13</sup>, when the sultan was preoccupied with resisting Siamese assaults from the north. In Light's embrace of Malay, Arab- and Indian-origin allies, not to mention his own marriage to a local Eurasian woman of Portuguese and Siamese descent, the impression is left that he was playing for advantage on several fronts. One conspicuous exception is Light's relations with the Chinese about whom he had little to say. Possibly, like other British colonial administrators he was more familiar and at ease from his career in India, with Indian- and Arab-origin Muslims. In his responsibility to the EIC<sup>14</sup>, human resource management was crucial to the company's success, and Penang was in line of succession to the commercial ports of India.

To Light,<sup>15</sup> the island was in the late 1770s "thinly inhabited", a sparse residue of old trading and fishing communities, "kampungs [whose] inhabitants [were] mostly employed in smelting tin after gathering near the surface of which they sell to their lords dattoos at about two thirds of its value". Some locals "subsisted by fishing and extracting from the trees damur and wood-oil"<sup>16</sup> Other evidence<sup>17</sup> suggests that earlier inhabitants of the island had in fact been expelled by the Kedah Sultan in about 1740, and that a descendant, Maharajah Setia, later returned to reclaim his lost inheritance. From the above, it may be concluded that there was a considerable Malay presence, independent of Arab or Indian attachment, in Penang at the time of Light's arrival, and that many were connected to Kedah. However, of even those few Malays, some were documented as of Minangkabau origin in Sumatra, along with others, such as Javanese, Buginese, Bataks, Boyanese

<sup>12</sup> *Handbook of the Mohamedan and Hindu Endowments Board*, 1932:17

<sup>13</sup> E. Cullin & W. F. Zehnder, *The Early History of Penang, 1792-1827*. Penang: Criterion Press, 1905 (microfilm)

<sup>14</sup> More recent versions of this history (A. Shukor Rahman, *Flying Colours of Tanjung: The Story of Penang Malays*. Penang: Pintra Printing 2011) suggest that Light was duplicitous in his dealings with both the EIC and the Sultan. Richard Winstedt, in his book, *Britain and Malaya, 1786-1943*, that the acquisition of Penang was the blackest spot on the record of British Malaya.

<sup>15</sup> According to Light's biographer: *Malaya's First British Pioneer*, London: Luzac & Co. 1948

<sup>16</sup> Norman Macalister, *An Historical Memoir relative to Prince of Wales Island*. London, 1803

<sup>17</sup> V.W.W.S. Purcell, *Early Penang*. Penang: Gazette Press, 1928:21-22

and Dayaks as well as Filipinos, from other parts of the Indies archipelago<sup>18</sup>. At the time, these as well as those classified as “Other Indonesians”, were generally acknowledged to be Melayu or part of the Malay world.<sup>19</sup> Until as late as 1921, these groups were recognised in the Malayan census, as distinct sub-communities with their own occupations<sup>20</sup>.

Nordin<sup>21</sup> shows how the role of Malay merchants in the late eighteenth century was critical to the establishment of the EIC, and that independent Malays may have accounted for over 60% of all shipping arrivals in Malacca and Penang, together with their own slaves at that time. A census report of urban Penang (George Town) in 1822 shows that the Malays and Chinese each constituted 24% of the population, and along with smaller communities of Burmese and Siamese, formed the basis of a fairly classic plural society, familiar in other British territories, where each group was indirectly ruled by its own headman charged keeping order and with the right to preserve its own civil and religious particularities. For the Chinese and Indians, these were the Kapitan Cina and Keling respectively, and for the Malays, a penghulu. As will be shown the plural populations “mixed and combined” somewhat more freely than in Furnivall’s<sup>22</sup> fabled market place.

### **The East India Company and the Arrival of Indian Immigrants to Penang**

In 1786, the deal between the Sultan of Kedah and Captain Francis Light on behalf of the British East India Company (EIC), probably forged under pressure and possibly with Arab help, opened the way for expansion of trade from India en route to China. Due to Siamese incursions in the north and Bugis to the south of Kedah, the ruler decided to move its original coastal capital to the present Alor Star.

Then followed a substantial importation of Indian labour, traders, soldiers (sepoys), most of them Muslims. One of the largest contingents was that of the Tamil-speaking Malabar from south India, and others were of Kerala, Gujerati, Benggali and possibly Pashtun origin (the latter called “Pakistani” in the 1881 census). Their occupations and trades included construction, shipbuilding, port and cargo agents, jewellers, goldsmiths, betel nut and grocery supplies and bread-makers. Later many Indians entered government service and the professions. Within the Indian Muslim community there began to emerge an internal hierarchy based unsurprisingly, on wealth, but often this economic capital was converted into social and religious status which brought a measure of community power. By endowing religious charities, especially *waqf* (discussed further below), some prominent Indian Muslims established impressive mosques, such as the Masjid Kapitan Kling in George Town. Through their reputation of piety, philanthropy and personal patronage, their position in an emerging hierarchy of wealth and rank allowed the most successful the privileges of marrying

<sup>18</sup> Several of the sites recorded as existing on Penang island from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries by *the Historical Survey of the Mosques and Kramats...* (ibid), were identified variously as “the three Minangkabau brothers” or the three Nakhodas”, reportedly connected to a Minangkabau royal family., and with permission from Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin of Kedah,. Nakhoda Kechil in fact continued to be a Malay headman under Light, referred to in Light’s own journal, *Notices of Pinang*. See also: Logan’s Journal, Vol. 4, 1850,

<sup>19</sup> As discussed in the volume edited by Maznah Mohamad & Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2011

<sup>20</sup> Low, Patrick (ed), *Trends in Southeast Asia. No.2 Proceedings and Background Paper of Seminar on Trends in Malaysia*: Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies:125-6, 1972

<sup>21</sup> Nordin Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka; Dutch Melaka and English Penang, 1780-1830*. Singapore: NUS Press:190

<sup>22</sup> See: J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*. New York: New York University Press, 1956

into Malay royal families, as when a Kedah princess, Wan Maheran, became the wife of Kauder Mydin Merican (Cauder Mohideen)<sup>23</sup>, the acknowledged chief of the early nineteenth century Indian community, successful businessman and initiator of the building of the premier (Kapitan Kling)<sup>24</sup> mosque of Penang. This marriage probably took place around 1821, when the bride's father, the sultan, had fled to the island from Siamese invaders. Thus both Arab and Indian Muslims were eligible as consorts for Malay royalty, and no doubt these alliances politically and economically benefitted all parties concerned, including the British for whom these enhanced the social cohesion of their colonial creations. For the Malays of the region, as noted above, this openness to intermarriage continued a tradition customary in the archipelago for centuries. Finally, Penang like Singapore, may be seen as the last vestiges of the type of colonial society and religious economy well established in the Indian sub-continent, prior to the rise of nationalism.

Whereas Indians, Arabs and Malays participated in a common faith, they were each recognised for their own distinctive practices within Islam. Malays who are officially Sunni, usually of the Shafie school, were noted to have been less influenced initially by the more expressive ritual practices from India. To one early observer of Penang, the Malay "resembles more the Arab in the simple mode of his worship than the Mussulmans of Hindoostan, tainted and contaminated by the admixture of many Hindoo observances and ceremonies"<sup>25</sup>. Vaughan goes further in stating that "the Malay stays at home when the Indians have their orgies in the Muharram ( Muslim new year) season"<sup>26</sup>, while Wynne<sup>27</sup> has chronicled the elaborate processions and "mummery" inspired by the martyrdom of Hassan and Hussein, as developed by the Indian Muslims .In matters of Hindu religious influences on Malay Islam, such as the prolific use of henna and "red powder, puja styles of worship, purificatory bathing in the sea and the bersanding marriage ceremony, these are known to have appeared in an earlier era, before the ascendancy of Islam, and to have been subsequently redefined as custom (*adat*) in relation to religion and was an issue in Muslim reformist debates in the early twentieth century. In retrospect, the planting of a rich variety of Sufi and Shi'ah elements in Penang Muslim culture can be traced largely to the arrival of Indian Muslims.

As early as the 1850s a prominent Javanese religious leader of Arab descent, Abdul Ghani (Gunny), launched a league to combat what he felt to be disreputable customs introduced by the Indians, and advocated a return to the authority of the Koran<sup>28</sup>. Abdul Ghani appears to have had a substantial following and managed to polarise some of the wealthiest Indian Muslim merchants of the day, who retaliated by endowing their own mosques, using vernacular languages, such as Tamil and Benggali,

<sup>23</sup> Among the early kramats recored by *the Historical Survey of Mosques and Kramats.....(ibid)*is one *makam* (tomb) of a woman, Wan Maheran, who had become known for her holiness and charity. Later it is said that she asked her Indian husband to find her another husband who must be a Malay and a holy man. Her tomb still exists in George Town under the name Ma'mah.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, the epithet, Kapitan Kling was a direct reference to the colonial appointment of Kauder Mydin, to that named position of responsibility for the Indian community on behalf of the British. It shows that colonial society was already organised and administered along ethnic lines, although these were sometimes more dynamic in practice than the policy envisaged..

<sup>25</sup> T.J Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account of the British. Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*. Vol.I. Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints (original in London, 1839). Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971:247

<sup>26</sup> J.D. Vaughan, Notes on the Malays of Pinang and Province Wellesley. *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*. New Series,2 (2): 115-168, 1857

<sup>27</sup> Mervyn L. Wynne, *Triad and Tabut: A Survey of the Origin and Diffusion of Chinese and Mohammedan Secret Societies in the Malay Peninsula, AD 1800-1935*. Singapore, ms 1941

<sup>28</sup> J.D. Vaughan, Notes on the Malays.....(ibid):153ff.

and supporting their own leaders in a “Freethinkers league”. Subsequently, in the turn-of-the-century polemics over *adat* and reform Islam, the Arab scholars were aligned with prominent educated Malays, as well as some more assimilated Indians or Jawi Peranakan (see below), in opposition to the more economically aggressive Indian Muslim merchants.

Shi’ah elements continued to be visible among George Town’s Tamil-speaking Chulias until recently. The Chulia Daudi Bohra masjid had long been recognised as somewhat socially exclusive, known for their strong ties to other Daudi and Bohra mosques in Singapore, and for their colourful Boria passion play performances at Muharram. Until as late as the mid-1980s, these caricatures were merely local knowledge, of no political consequence in the Muslim community. Less than two decades later, casual questioning by the writer about locating the current site of the old mosque, which was no longer identified by a gate, nor on the (Chulia) street map, elicited evasive responses and dissimulation from local residents. The Daudis had been caught in the recent official targeting of alleged Shi’ah elements, now proclaimed as heretical by the state. It appears that substantial number of these Daudi followers had emigrated in recent years, in response to shifting religious attitudes in Malaysia.

### **MULTICULTURAL MUSLIMS: MIXING AND COMBINING BEYOND THE MARKETPLACE**

Within the Muslim community, Furnivall’s mixing and combining extended from the market to intermarriage. In 1867, Penang formally became a Straits Settlement distinct from the Malay States, and was never under the direct rule of a sultan. For the Malay population the absence of a traditional political leader with its symbolic attachments and hierarchical obligations left the community with fewer constraints in matters of social and cultural connections. As Indian and Arab males married Malay women with increasing frequency, so did some Chinese, where necessary converting to Islam and “becoming Malay” (*masuk Melayu*). In subsequent generations the mixing continued among their offspring, crossing lines of origin, but thereafter largely confined within the Muslim community. This generated a biologically complex polyglot population, whose default language was usually Malay, the old lingua franca of the region. In their homes were spoken Tamil, Gujerati, Bengali or even Acehnese, but the Malay language was the vehicle for public communication and local administration, while Arabic and the Jawi script were used in the Muslim religious schools.

### **Peranakan: Avoiding the Ethnicity Trap**

Rather than trying to tease out “racial” or “ethnic” boundaries or identities in modern, social science or bureaucratic senses, or using terms like “hybrid”, with its connotations of less than pure, I prefer to follow local custom and use the more delicate vernacular “peranakan”. This word, used widely in Southeast Asia, may be loosely glossed as “descendant”, or derivatively as “local born”, but without necessarily referring to any specific ancestry. This manages to avoid the over-determined and often derogatory overtones of “race” with its historical baggage. Peranakan thus covers gradients rather than definitive identities, allowing for much fluidity in between. It may even become a distinct identity status in its own right.<sup>29</sup> It spans the Muslim/non-Muslim divide, and may be paired with a more specific qualifier, such as Cina-Peranakan, which would indicate a mix of Chinese and other, including Malay, origins. Chitty Peranakan (or Chitty Melaka) evokes combinations involving Hindus who adopted Malay customs and language, but not their religion. Finally, Jawi Peranakan was widely

<sup>29</sup> The peranakan concept may also be deployed strategically or politically as a descriptive means of portraying (the ideal of) a multicultural society in the process of social assimilation, as seems to be the trend in Singapore, depicted in its Peranakan Museum themes.

used in Penang to refer to the ever more intricately intermarried Muslim populations of Indian and Malay (and sometimes of Arab) descent. A variation or distortion, sometimes used by administrators or less delicate observers was Jawi Bukan (with the implication of “not really Jawi” or not fully Malay). Thus the *peranakan* term with its qualifying nuances suggest a more assimilative than divisive social process, but still without any definitive pole or direction towards a dominant ethnic/cultural group. A broader range of optional labels, such as *Keling*, in reference to a region of origin in South India, co-existed with the more unifying *peranakan*, and were used situationally. Thus in daily interaction, terms of address and reference between *peranakan* individuals, one or other of their multiple origins could be invoked according to the topic or mood of the moment, reflecting social distance, personal sentiments or expedience<sup>30</sup>. Hybridity creates opportunity as much as dissonance. This situational code-switching showed a certain resistance to the congealing of permanent ‘ethnicities’, Malay or other, and was current until the era of the independent state in 1957.

### **Peranakan Cina, or Baba and Nonya**

One variation on the *peranakan* theme evolved uniquely in the Straits Settlements, including Malacca and Singapore, This was a community of local-born and long resident Chinese who had adopted a significant number of Malay cultural and linguistic traits, including cuisine, costume (sarung-kebaya for women), and domestic customs, but not religion. Males were known as *Baba*<sup>31</sup> and females as *Nonya*, the latter sometimes signifying the entire *peranakan* subculture. The language was a form of Malay patois with many Hokkien additions—a true hybridisation—and continues to be spoken in Penang today. Until the World War II era, relations between the *Peranakan* and Malay communities were close, with many social reciprocities. In Penang, the *Peranakans* (without any qualifier) came to stand for the entire community and culture, and reached its apogee during the “*belle époque*” interwar years, as a social class of merchant/bourgeois , families, usually English educated, often mingling with the Anglo elites, thus triply “hybridised”. All retained their Chinese surnames, and religiously ranged from traditional and ancestral to Christian. This particular combination of traits was unique, and as an endogamous group, were distinct from other “*Eurasians*”, who were not born in, and did not share the particular sub-cultural and class attributes. The *Baba/Nonya* material and living culture, of architecture, dress ,and dance and music are well preserved, and in the 1960s, there was a resurgence of awareness of identity, now the object of much heritage attention today, as discussed below. Despite its cultural and numerical impact on Penang life, however, the *Peranakan* or *Baba/Nonya* category, unlike the *Jawi Peranakan*, has never been enshrined in any official census.

### **“Arab *peranakan*”?**

A more active rethinking of identity emerged with the rash of nationalistic ideas and rhetoric brought to the Straits Settlements by Indian and Arab Muslim intellectuals<sup>32</sup>. Many were English-educated, and familiar with breaking ideas from European nationalism and about reform ideas in Islam. As writers and journalists, they propagated their ideas widely across the region, making use of

<sup>30</sup> This has been described in greater depth and detail in Nagata, “What is a Malay? Situational selection of ethnic identity in a plural society”. *American Ethnologist*. 1(2):331-350, 1974

<sup>31</sup> The word “*Baba*” seems to have originated from Persian or Urdu, there used as a term of respect, while *Nonya* is probably from Portuguese, and during the colonial period was often used to address respectable non-married Malay ladies on the peninsula.

<sup>32</sup> For a full account, see William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967

the Arab-operated printing presses in Acheen Street, Penang, as well as Singapore. Hands were wrung over what they perceived as the lack of a clear sense by Malays of their status as a *bangsa* or strong community, in their own land. These writers pointed to the difficulty in identifying “pure Malays” (Melayu jati) in this multicultural peranakan environment. This notwithstanding that some of the critics were themselves local Arabs with high standing in the Malay community (or Malays of Arab descent), and who were simultaneously members of the Penang Malay Association and Chamber of Commerce. One of the journalists was Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, a “Malay [teacher] of Arab descent” credited with putting Penang on the Malay literary map, as author of the “first Malay novel”.<sup>33</sup>

For all their consciousness-raising about identity, Penang Arabs were part of the scene on which they wrote their commentaries. Never, however, has the term “Arab Peranakan” ever been part of the ethnic currency in Penang. It could be argued, from the evidence of the reception of the Arabs in Penang in the late eighteenth century and from their relations with local Malays presented above, that in fact most Malays welcomed Arab incorporation into the Malay world. Reciprocally, Arabs were happy to claim Malay identity, for their historical and political status and for social advantage when in Malay territory. Malays respected Arabs for their connections with the Holy Land and proficiency in Islamic learning, although sometimes criticised them for their wealth, greed and pride. On the other hand, Arabs, as residents, needed a stake in Malay society, from royal marriages to ranking positions in important Malay commercial and religious associations. Among these, titles of Syed and Sheikh are prominent, and central to family networks in Penang, Singapore and across the region.

When Arabs intermarried with Malays, they were able to confer a prestigious and enduring genealogy otherwise absent among most Malays. Their distinctive surnames and titles survive marriages with non-Arabs, even after several successive generations of inter-marriage. Thus several wealthy Penang Arab businessmen have acquired fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law and sons-in-law as successive business or political partners after bestowing their daughters in marriage. As a consequence, it is estimated that one or two Penang Arab families are biologically more non-Arab, even Chinese, than their lineage name and prestige suggests. This practice continues to the present, in the “diverse family of Datuk S.M. Aidid” as he presided over the wedding of his daughter to a third generation a Chinese business partner.<sup>34</sup> Datuk Aidid’s own father was born in Aden, Hadramaut, and the local-born son speaks Hokkien as well as Arabic, Malay and English. He claims to have “....prospered, because I took a Chinese [Nonya] wife.....that’s why I am successful today”. Of course, there is always the required conversion to Islam of the non-Muslim partner, but in Datuk Aidid’s words, “we harmonise Malaysian culture, not to suit society’s needs, but to suit our own needs”<sup>35</sup> In the same vein, it should be noted that among elite Malay families with known genealogies, at least five of Malaysia’s Prime Ministers<sup>36</sup> had non-Malay or non-Muslim ancestry.

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<sup>33</sup> As reported in the ‘literature’ section of the journal *Pulau Pinang*, 1(3):9-1236-7, 1992

<sup>34</sup> Marriage recorded in the local Penang journal, *Pulau Pinang*, 1(4): 32-35, 1989

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, above

<sup>36</sup> Including Tun Hussein Onn (Turkish ancestry); Tunjku Abdul Rahman (whose mother was a non-Muslim Thai); Tun Abdul Razak (Bugis), Abdullah Badawi (Chinese mother; Eurasian wife); Mahathir (Indian descent);

Provisionally, it may be concluded that in pre-independence Penang like the laissez-faire Indian ports before it, identities and intergroup relations were fluid and weakly regulated by any single political authority. It also seems evident that Malays were often identified as Muslims first or else as part of a Malay-Muslim unity, and were so regarded by others. It took the rise of a new national state to invent its own ethnic order and boundaries and to determine the place and scope of Islam in Malay life.

### POST-INDEPENDENCE MALAYSIA: NEW VOICES ON MALAYNESS

After 1957 ethnicity became a centrepiece of national policy and nation-building particularly through its economic and educational programmes, under which Malayness became a source of entitlements.<sup>37</sup> Under the authority of the Malay-based governing political party UMNO, and its affirmative action economic programmes, Malay identity was one of privilege, to be politically insulated from *peranakan* contamination. In a multi-ethnic nation, this required strict government control of boundaries with other groups, to protect Malay rights. Further, in order to push the proportion of Malays in the total national population above fifty percent, in the mid-1980s, a creative project to adjust ethnic boundaries was devised to allow the inclusion of other Native peoples, even non-Muslims, as “sons of the soil” (*bumiputera*) as a new census category. This new statistical majority was founded on an assertion of Malay indigeness, running counter to both ethnological and popular knowledge which had long chronicled and celebrated the diverse and far-flung origins of most Malay, and the fact that most Malays are “from somewhere else”. By this new indigenous measure, Penang Malays were clearly exceptional.

Since 1957, Malays’ relationship with Islam has been ever more closely circumscribed by the state. It began with a constitutional definition of identity which required Malays to profess Islam, despite another constitutional clause allowing “freedom of religion” for non-Malays. This left in suspension the status of any Malay who wished to change religion. In fact, it became legally impossible to be a Malay non-Muslim or even atheist (“freethinker”), as permitted today in Singapore. Conversely, where several hundred Malaysia-born, Malay speaking Chinese converted to Islam in Penang in the mid-1970s via a government-funded Muslim missionary association, PERKIM, in the hope of qualifying for Malay status, the UMNO majority in parliament refused to allow the claim<sup>38</sup>. Thus the traditional *masuk Melayu* custom of becoming Malay through conversion, familiar in the early nineteenth century especially in Penang, was arbitrarily cut off. These two measures enhanced the effect of ring-fencing Malays within an increasingly narrow band of permitted Islam.

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<sup>37</sup> Beginning in 1972 with the New Economic Policy, which allowed special occupational, educational and stockmarket quotas for ethnic Malays. These have been maintained in some form ever since. This policy is in contrast to the Singapore response to people management following its independence. There, the colonial administrator Raffles became a national role model for change and innovation, with an “ethnic” policy based on merit or competitive multiculturalism, cf Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *Singapore in the Malay World: Building and breaching Regional Bridges*. Abingdon: Routledge press, 2009. Interestingly, as Lily Zubaidah notes, Singapore has retained the Article 152 inherited from Malaysia, whereby Malays are still recognised as indigenous.

<sup>38</sup> Judith N. Nagata, ‘The Chinese Muslims in Malaysia: New Malays or New Associates’ In: *The Past in Southeast Asia’s Present*. Ed. Gordon Means (Ed), Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Council of Southeast Asian Studies. McMaster University, Waterloo, 1978:102-22, 1978

The UMNO version of Islam was promoted as part its vote-drawing strategy in opposition to the other Malay party PAS. Initially both parties followed the path of ethnic nationalism, but during the 1970s, PAS began to move in the direction of a more universalistic Islam, where ethnicity acquired some of the taint of racism. Meanwhile Prime Minister Mahathir's approach to Islam remained somewhat ambivalent and contradictory. In the battle for Malay votes against PAS, Mahathir responded by the co-option of Anwar Ibrahim, one of the early leaders of the new Islamic movements in Malaysia, into the UMNO cabinet. At the same time, he meticulously surveilled and controlled Muslim religious schools and activities, as part of his "carrot and stick" strategy.. But this was not sufficient to contain Malays' exposure to the global *ummah* more directly, mediated through travel, overseas education and encounters with Muslims from different backgrounds independent of Malaysian institutions. Religious identity began to challenge and even transcend that of ethnicity, and for some, even the sense of Malay primacy and privilege. These were sentiments which animated the various *dakwah* movements which flowered for about three decades from the late 1960s, all embodying an implicit critique of the UMNO brand of Islam and its ethnic pillar<sup>39</sup>.

This was the era when Malays began to adopt variants of Arab religious attire, which has since evolved into an ethnic Malay dress, when public performance of Islam became the badge of the new Muslim Malay. Sensing the threat to its brand of ethnic nationalism, UMNO reaction initially was to redefine its notion of Islamic orthodoxy. There was little tolerance for the Sufi leanings of one of the *dakwah* groups (Al Arqam), perceived by the Sunni ulama and government officials, and the religious affairs department, JAKIM, as a challenge to their own authority. The official orthodoxy was enforced in all universities and public institutions, and Al Arqam was eventually banned. Under this gradual compression of religious diversity in Malaysia, anti-Sufi, anti-Shi'ah political correctness has now become a matter of heresy, while keramats and many forms of Malay *adat*, such as wedding rites coloured by their Hindu antecedents, deemed to be *shirik*. Shari'ah law, both substantive and procedural, is rapidly penetrating the entire legal system<sup>40</sup>, for Malay citizens, while by Article 121, decisions of the civil courts, in cases concerning religious conversion and interfaith marriage, or where jurisdiction is contested between the two parallel court systems, may be overridden by the Shari'ah court. Many twenty-first century Malays regard themselves as part of a wider Muslim community, which transcends ethno-nationalism, while a smaller minority even give priority to the authority and political causes of world Islam. Mahathir's final declaration of Malaysia as an "Islamic state" in 2003 at the end of his tenure, was more a recognition of the religious changes he had tried to contain, than the dawn of a new era.

Thus within the space of less than fifty years, Malay Islam has been ethnicised, politicised and stripped of its religious diversity and fluidity. The effect of the state has been to impose a form of national piety for Malay citizens, reinforcing ethnic boundaries and Malay entitlements, and eliminating prospects of social and cultural assimilation among all Malaysians. The ultimate coup came in the form of a national educational project to rewrite the school history texts, proposing a form of a teleological social evolution of the Malay-Muslims. In the early 2000s, the education ministry, with jurisdiction over all national Malay medium schools, began to tailor the curriculum according to the religious cloth. Thus the fourth form history text, in use until 2002, *Sejarah Peradaban Dunia* (World Civilisation History), originally included chapters on the following: How

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<sup>39</sup> For a fuller account of the *dakwah* movements, see: Judith Nagata. *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1984

<sup>40</sup> For a recent analysis of the growing power of Malaysian Shari'ah courts, and the relationship between secular and religious courts in an otherwise secular state, see: Maznah Mohamad, "The Ascendance of Bureaucratic Islam and the Secularisation of the Shari'ah in Malaysia". *Pacific Affairs*, 83, 3:505-24, Sept. 2010

Islam changed Human Civilisation; the Transition of the European Society and its Impact; Revolution and New Phase Human History; Western imperialism and local reactions; and finally, Moving towards International Co-operation. In this edition, the contributions of the pre-Islamic era of Hindu-Buddhism to Malay history was acknowledged. However, in the revised version of the same text in 2010, five out of ten chapters are devoted to Islamic history: Islamic Civilisation and its Contribution in Mecca; Islam in Medina: Formation of Islamic Government; Islam in Southeast Asia; Islamic reform and its Influence in Malaysia before the Arrival of the Colonial Powers; This last chapter serves as the vehicle for the message that modern Malays are the product an evolutionary process of Islamisation, culminating in the Malay-Muslim of today, where Islam is the foundational religion of the Malay people. The teleological sub-text is inescapable. It requires some ingenuity to reconcile this most recent official version of history with those of the archives of Penang keramats, Sufi and Shi'ah street performances at Muharram, of generations of peranakan living through intermarriage and conversion.

### **ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES: THE VOICES OF HERITAGE**

The question as to when and how the re-visioning of the past under the rubric of heritage came about in Penang can probably be traced to the accumulation of social responses to multiple land issues. These in turn were linked to the national drive for economic development and modernisation as promoted in the national development plans of the 1970s and 1980s, and particularly the social outcomes of unregulated urban renewal in George Town. Almost two decades of rampant destruction of historical buildings without permits accompanied by promiscuous unofficial rezoning of traditional neighbourhoods, were beginning to have their effects on the social quality of life in the city. This pervasive discontent was first brought to a head publicly in a dramatic case surrounding *waqf* religious lands in George Town. For a single issue, *waqf* touched on many related concerns: about Islam, Malay identity, urban land use, affordable housing and the importance of community life, and ultimately on non-commercial values. These were eventually to coalesce into the heritage movement.

#### **Special Case of *Waqf***

In matters of land status and use, Penang differed in certain respects from the Malay States. In 1913, Malay land reservations were set aside in the States for exclusive occupation by Malays, immune from sale or predatory takeover by non-Malays, and intended as secure zones of rice production for the peninsula, as part of the colonial racial division of labour and food security. More subtly, however, these lands were to protect Malays from themselves, from selling off their birthright for development by others. All land sales were restricted to other Malays, and required official approval. Penang, however, was never granted Malay land reservations. In the absence of such constraints, Malays there are known to have sold off substantial areas of lands originally granted by the EIC for short-term profits, whether to buy cheaper and larger plots in neighbouring Kedah, to finance their children's religious education, or for the pilgrimage to Mecca. The land concern has resurfaced in the present, where Malays now routinely complain of land poverty, rural and urban, in comparison with non-Malays, as a slight to their modern perception of their national political status and rights. One of the few remaining land rights for Malay-Muslims was provided by *waqf*, which was endowed and managed, first by colonial authorities through a Muslim administrator (*mutawali*), and after 1905 by the colonial Mohamedan and Hindu Endowments Board. Since 1960, the State Religious Council of elected officials Majlis Agama Pulau Pinang (MAIPP) has overseen all *waqf* and other religious properties.

Some of the most enduring material legacies of the Penang Muslim community were in the form of *waqf*. Most of the early nineteenth century mosques recorded in the *Historical Survey of Mosques and Kramats...* (ibid) were attached to some form of *waqf*<sup>41</sup> and many were also the site of residential communities. The concept of *waqf* in Islam has a long history, in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Several *waqf* mosques in Penang bear the eponyms of their ethnic founders, such as the Masjids Pakistan, Benggali, Acheen, as well as Kapitan Keling. Generically, *waqf* is a donation of land or other material property, for the benefit of the Muslim community, collectively or for a specific purpose, such as a mosque, school cemetery or market. Such economic capital may further be converted to social or political capital: in 2000, a gift of land was “*di-wakafkan*” in rural Permatang Pauh (Penang) to the PAS political party as a *pusat asuhan tunas Islam*, a base for Islamic morality; others commonly fund religious schools to help shape young minds.

Frequently, *waqf* land was occupied by a residential community in a kampung, where Muslims could construct houses in return for a nominal rent, today in Penang to the State Religious Council. In the absence of a sultan, the Religious Council is the highest court of appeal. The institution of *waqf* in Penang is the closest in function to Malay reservation lands elsewhere, although distinct in its religious symbolism. Since the early twentieth century access to low-cost *waqf* sites has been important in protecting urban Muslims from market place rents and escalating real estate values of rapid development. Not all *waqf* residents are necessarily poor or indigen, however: some professional and small businessmen have built well-appointed stone houses and enjoy a comfortable existence in the choicest (i.e close to the mosque) parts of the kampung. Some even sub- let their properties to tenants, while the “owners” themselves move to more prosperous suburbs. Although these are market transactions within an ideally non-market institution, they have to be accepted by MAIPP, and undeniably contribute to alleviate housing pressures for Muslims.

From the early days of the EIC, when lands were generously distributed to all the local ethnic and religious communities in Penang, some Muslim teachers and scholars were able to convert these donations into *waqf* and build spectacular mosques, as in the case of Kapitan Keling. In other cases, villagers who had received a government allocation of residential land, were able in turn transfer it to a respected leader or teacher, for a school or other religious purpose.

Prior to 1905, the haphazard and ill-recorded accumulations of *waqf* donations had left a trail of legal tangles for posterity. Original deeds had been lost, whether by the mutawali or the Lands Office. Burial grounds were overgrown, markets neglected while some sites had been rented out to Chinese shopkeepers or even sold, as the colonial authorities discovered in 1905, when they made the first and only survey of the Muslim and Hindu endowments under their jurisdiction. The results were eventually published in the *Historical Survey of Mosques and Kramats on Penang Island*, in 1932 (ibid). Retrospectively it emerged that some *waqf* plots had been sold and used for non-*waqf* purposes without either public knowledge or record. These trends have continued until the present. One cemetery had become the site of a block of flats some time in the 1950s, a transaction described decades later by a disgruntled Malay observer, as “*Malays selling out to Indians*” (personal communication), without any concession to their common religion. At the time of that sale, there was no MAIPP to pass judgment, but some mosque imams in George Town began to warn about the growing risk of *waqf* being pawned (*gadai*) to non-Muslim developers. At this time, the

<sup>41</sup> For a general description of *waqf* in comparative perspective, see: Mohd Zain Othman, *Islamic Law with special reference to the Institution of waqf*. Universiti Malaya, Dept of Religious Studies, 1982; Abdurrazzaq Lubis, “Clarification of Wakaf Land and what it means to Muslims”. Letter, *Sun*, Dec. 28<sup>th</sup>, 1999; Miriam Hoexter, “Endowment, Rulers and Community: Waqf al-Haramayn in Ottoman Algiers. *Studies in Islamic Law and Society*, (.6), Leiden: Brill, 1998; and Richard Van Leeuwen, “Waqfs and Urban Structures: the case of Ottoman Damascus”. *Studies in Islamic Law and Society*. (11), Leiden: Brill, 1999

interchangeability of the epithets “Malay” and “Muslim” continued largely unremarked, particularly with reference to *waqf*.

### When Waqf Became Heritage

The 1970s were the years of the national New Economic Policy, ushering in decades of development and urbanisation across Malaysia, and George Town was in the eye of the storm. A certain Kampung Makam<sup>42</sup> became the locus of one of the first public battles over ethics and quality of life versus economic interest in urban development. This presented the opportunity to propose *waqf* communities as a traditional solution to a modern problem, a position which percolated through various civil society and NGO activist groups in Penang.

Kg Makam was a typical urban kampong with a population of about 1,000, but its distinctive feature was the tomb (*makam*) of a long deceased holy man Haji Kassim, which was under the custodianship of a resident, Salim at the gate to the community. Salim was a member of Party PAS, whereas the majority of the more prosperous and professional inhabitants were supporters of UMNO, and lived close to its branch office, to the mosque and the imam. The acknowledged identities of the inhabitants were a Penang classical mix of Malays, Indians and Arabs, whose identities shifted somewhat with the situation at hand<sup>43</sup>.

One day came news of a proposed new development to construct a block of low-rise flats and a petrol station at the front of the kampong, thus displacing not only some petty vendors near the street, but also many of the residences. Public speculation immediately followed predictable local plot scenarios, whereby the developers and villains of the piece were Chinese, against *kita orang Melayu*. Soon it was apparent that some of wealthier residents and the UMNO branch supported a project to “improve the economic level of *Malays*” and that it had party backing. Then MAIPP weighed in, with soothing statements about “*Muslim* welfare” (italics mine) being on of the basic tenets of *waqf*. Poorer residents, however, feared more costs than benefits. Eventually it was revealed that the “Chinese” threat was in fact a partnership between members of the Malay Chamber of Commerce (MCC), some of whose leaders bear Indian and Arab names. Moreover some MAIPP councillors, also including some Arabs and Indians, were implicated. Most were members of UMNO, and this inflamed PAS and the guardian of the *makam*, who declared such development as “un-Islamic”. Ultimately this project never came about, but it was the first test of commoditisation of *waqf* and its diversion to the capitalist economy.

These events coincided with already simmering unrest among the moving and shaking public over the lack of control and consultation about development in Penang. This was a city and state where economic development and modernisation had become a holy grail, where private property is sacred and where “old houses” (the closest translation of “heritage” in colloquial Hokkien Chinese) had no place. The response was the mobilisation of existing and new networks of historians, academics, architects, environmentalists, consumers’ and civil society groups mostly idealist and middle class, of all ethnic and religious backgrounds, whose interests began to converge in a loosely linked opposition to the status quo. From this assortment of activists emerged the germs of a reactive social and cultural movement. Ten years later, in 1986, some of them formed the core supporters of a new Penang Heritage Trust, (*Badan Warisan Pulau Pinang*), known as PHT, which

<sup>42</sup> Kg Makam was built on land originally donated by the EIC, after which the occupants re-gifted it to a holy man, whose tomb is now the object of veneration.

<sup>43</sup> The Kampung Makam saga was described in detail, on the basis of fieldwork in 1972, by Nagata, “What is a Malay? Situational Selection of ethnic identity in a Plural Society”. *American Ethnologist*, 1(2):331-50, 1974

quickly widened its scope beyond material heritage to the living, performing, artistic kind and to the urban environment writ large. At this point there were many alliances between PHT and international heritage organisations, and an exchange of consultants, from France, Germany, the UK, Australia, Japan and India to share and advise on their experiences.

In its early days, through the 1980s, much of PHT's inspiration came from an activist with fine arts training overseas, with wide connections. She was then Khoo Su Nin, scion and guardian of historical archives of her own Chinese family, the locally illustrious Khoo clan. Her marriage to a Penang-born Muslim of Sumatran Mandailing descent could be seen in one sense as a replay of multicultural marriages of earlier generations, although in nineteenth century Chinese/Muslim unions, the usual, though rare, pattern was that an immigrant male Chinese would marry a local female. Another variation in this case was the male party's self description as "Mandailing". When born in Malaysia, Mandailing, like scions of other groups generally assigned to the "Malay world" or the Nusantara region, such as Minangkabau, are officially eligible for full Malay status, but in this case the continuing use of an ancestral sub-identity is, a reminder of Malays' multiple ancestral strands and their symbolic importance to certain individuals. In Malaysia, inter-religious marriages involving a Muslim must be accompanied by ritually correct conversion to Islam and appropriate public comportment. Thus Khoo Su Nin became Khoo Salma Nasution, retaining a snippet of her Chinese genealogy as well as being inducted into a Mandailing clan. Today, she is self-described as simply, as a Peranakan.

Khoo was responsible for several individual pioneering publications before the establishment of PHT, including the richly chronicled and illustrated, *Streets of George Town, Penang*<sup>44</sup> where she provided an integrated synopsis of the salient social, cultural, religious, ethnic, architectural and historical features of the city, accompanied by detailed profiles of the most iconic landmarks of the city. This was at the crossroads of history and what was then an emerging field of heritage which was able to situate historical issues in the context of the present, and to interpret material artefacts in terms of a polyvalent social and cultural tradition. At time of writing, Khoo is in 2011, also President of PHT. Until the present, PHT members, officials and supporters have their own individual interests, different faiths, ethnic and social networks, and do not always agree. Some have conflicts of interest from other positions they hold in Penang society, a case being a recent PHT President who is also a prominent doctor, and whose wife is the Penang Minister of Tourism. One constant is PHT's parrying of the Municipal Council and its opaque decision making, concessions to rapacious developers and lack of respect for heritage. This opposition is supported when necessary by a range of NGOs according to their speciality, such as city planning, housing, ecology, consumers' issues. The lack of reliable support for PHT by Penang Municipal Council has remained a constraint until the present.

### **WAQF, THE MARKET ECONOMY AND MALAY-MUSLIM IDENTITY**

The issue of *waqf* was unquestionably one catalyst of a wider debate about quality of urban life, as well as for its own sake. It also raised the question of its relation to the market economy and making profits. As George Town was beginning to face larger population and housing pressures, the PHT thought it timely to convene an international conference, "The Revitalisation of *waqf* in the Inner City of George Town" as a selected example of tradition versus development. About the same time, the MCC and MAIPP too began to create rationalised arguments for using modern land and resource development methods in the cause of Islam and of needy Muslims. The process of reconciling the

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<sup>44</sup> Khoo Su Nin, *Streets of George Town, Penang: an illustrated Guide to Penang's City Streets and Historic Attractions*. Janus Print and Resources. Penang, 3<sup>rd</sup>. 2001

economic, ethical and religious aspects of *waqf* with modern business pressures happened to coincide with heightened awareness of Malay issues at the national level. Although state organisations, MAIPP and MCC most members also belong to UMNO and play to audiences beyond Penang, where the influences of Malay political orthodoxy and Malay entitlements are more potent. One short-lived development holding company managing *waqf* lands, and involving Chinese partners, was headed by then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim (founder of the *dakwah* organisation, ABIM.), under the name of Shahadah Holdings. This project ended with Anwar's career, but paved the way for new ideas about *waqf* use in a modern society.

In the late 1980s, MAIPP, with the co-operation of a federal Urban Development Authority (UDA), provided funds to initiate the cleaning and conversion of a neglected cemetery near the Kapitan Keling Mosque and of surrounding shophouses in the same *waqf* zone, from which long-term Chinese renters were evicted. In its place, Muslims residing in the original *waqf* area were accommodated in a new MARA building, promoting Malay crafts and enterprises, including a new five-storey building housing 38 flats and 200 commercial stalls for Muslims. At the opening ceremonies in the presence of senior UMNO officials, it was proposed that Malaysia should learn from countries like Egypt and Kuwait in rebranding *waqf* land, given the high prices of urban property. During the restoration, issues of identity were always close to the surface. Even as MAIPP emphasised the unity of Malays and Islam as an ethno-religious fusion, (and presumably for public relations), there were occasional unexpected moments. At a meeting<sup>45</sup> of the women's section of the Kapitan Keling Tamil-speaking congregation in 1992, a member asked when UMNO would deliver funds to restore the old *waqf* wet market (*tarik balik waqf*), only to be told to join UMNO first: a less than subtle reminder of their marginal Malayness.

For almost two decades (from the 1990s to the 2000s), MAIPP was engaged in a similar shophouse project as part of the revitalisation of the *waqf* community of the Acheen St. Mosque, founded by Acehnese immigrant, Tengku Syed Hussain Al-Aidid. Customarily known as the Masjid Melayu, reflecting the easy elision of identities, in relation to Malays, Muslims and Arabs, over the centuries. Throughout the project, MAIPP consulted with architects and historians within the PHT who had previously published on these topics, over their designs and social implementation.

The rehousing of Malays in concrete high-rise flats, on the other hand, challenges one of the cherished myths of rural Malay society: that life in single-dwelling attap houses, where openness and accessibility to the community for petty trade, weddings, funerals and religious events, usually involving feasts or *kenduri*, was always a social and cultural priority. As late as the 1970s and 1980s Malays were said deprecatingly by developers to be stubbornly resistant to living in modern housing, so the rebranding of *waqf*, promotes a compromise with that lifestyle, with MAIPP's blessing. Trends in the 2000s reveal a growing brazenness and legal casuistry by MAIPP and developers, in promoting *waqf* for a diversity of market purposes. In 2006, two kampungs in urban George Town were rezoned to provide rental accommodation for 2,900 families, as well as relief from regular annual flooding. In 2011, one of these enterprises, the Amanah Raya group, entered into a further agreement with Mohd Yusoff Latiff, a veteran leader of the Malay association Pemenang, to develop over eleven hectares of land, some of which covers a *waqf* site, for a Malay Heritage Village, "a landmark of the Malays of Penang", planned to house over approximately 10,000 Malays in nine-story flats. Although yet to be completed, this project manages to touch a range of resonant themes: Malay culture and religious identity, Malay-Muslim entitlements (over *waqf* properties), maintaining the existence of a viable urban Malay population of modest means, allowing the percolation of the

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<sup>45</sup> A meeting of women activists at the Kapitan Keling Mosque, who were energised following a briefing on *waqf* rights by PHT delegates, attended by the writer.

market economy into symbolic/religious domains under MAIPP auspices, and in the last example by Amanah Holdings, of a commercially-created Malay heritage, in their (own) Heritage Village.

## CREATION OF MALAY HERITAGE

### The Alatas Mansion

Once established, the PHT lost no time in engaging in major restoration projects which put it firmly on the map of international and professional heritage. Khoo Salma and her partner had for some years occupied themselves in compiling histories on Arab and Indian Muslim properties. One restoration exercise which garnered public attention and not a little contention was that of the family mansion of Syed Hussein Alatas and his son, descendants of the original nineteenth century Acehese immigrants. Restoration was completed in 1993, initially for use as a PHT training centre in restoration techniques, and with funding from the (Penang) State Bumiputra Steering Committee was designated as an Islamic museum. Promoted by PHT as an outstanding example of Arab Muslim heritage, in 1996 it was graced by a visit from then Prime Minister Mahathir, architect of Malay ethnic nationalism, who wished it to be redefined as an icon of Malay Muslim heritage, and to bring Malays on to centre stage. Thereafter it received government funding, and the State Bumiputera Steering Committee together with the Malay Chamber of Commerce, launched a drive to collect artefacts “related to the Malays and Muslims in Penang”. It seems that the Arabs, particularly the older and more influential members of the community, took no offence at this apparent appropriation of their heritage<sup>46</sup>. This attitude is in keeping with Arab flexibility in playing a Malay role in public institutions, such as MAIPP and MCC. Indeed, prominent self-identifying Arabs such as the Al Aidid and Basheer families, are open to inclusion of Arab properties and culture as part of a unique “Penang Muslim heritage, a view endorsed by Yusoff Latiff, leader of Pemenang (Penang Malay Association), and by Datuk Nazir Ariff, president of the Malaysian International Chamber of Commerce and one-time chairman of the PHT.

### The Malay House

Another project in the making is the acquisition and restoration of a Malay House, supposedly emblematic of a particular period and cohort in George Town history. The house in question known as Teh Bunga, is a stately “bungalow” in the Straits Eclectic style, was originally built on the so-called Muslim Millionaires’ Row in Hutton Lane in the latter part of the nineteenth century by a certain M.Z. Merican, son-in-law of Mohd Ariff Mohd Tajoodin, a rich merchant of the era. By their names, occupation and residential location, they were clearly Jawi Peranakan, indeed the name Merican is a known denominator of offspring of mixed Malay/Indian unions, and in Sumatra was often used for Minangkabau and Acehese who married Indians<sup>47</sup>. Other members of the Ariff family were known at the time as patrons of the Boria performances accompanying simulations of the Battle of Kerbala--another Shi’yah influence brought by immigrant Indian Muslims.

Subsequently the house was sold to a wealthy Chinese merchant, whose heirs eventually put the house up for sale, although it had remained in disrepair and unsold until 2008. Then a number of heritage groups converged on the house, each with their own heritage plan. First PHT wished to bid for the purchase, with the intention of creating a Muslim museum. However, PHT lacked UMNO

<sup>46</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, personal communication

<sup>47</sup> A. Shukor Rahman, *Flying Colours of Tanjung: The Story of Penang Malays*. Penang. Pintra Printers, 2011, P.16

connections and support, or the funds for restoration. The house also had the disadvantage of lying outside the UNESCO World Heritage zone of George Town which was already under jurisdiction of another project managed by PHT (on which more below). Into the breach came an assortment of heritage-minded scholars in a variety of disciplines, many from the local university, each promoting their own ideas, and themselves as “Malay consultants”. Among them were anthropologists, historians and specialists of Malay arts and culture, not necessarily all in agreement, of different Malay pedigree, and without funding of their own. A third cohort was the oldest local Malay association in Penang, called Pemenang, founded in 1927, whose leaders enjoy connections with their UMNO peers in Kuala Lumpur, including the federal Minister of Culture and Tourism who has been petitioned to tap the UMNO investment arm, Khazanah, for this as a possible Malay project. For Pemenang, the competing proposals all lacked the merit of an all-Malay identity, seen by them as a lacuna in Penang heritage today.

One provisional outcome of the ongoing Malay House project so far is that members of the scholar group convened a seminar, where it was proposed that, in view of the lack of consensus on matters of Malayness in Penang, they would settle for an alternate label without its own historical baggage, “Straits Muslims”—or -possibly “Straits Malays”, which draws attention to their unique local experience and provenance.<sup>48</sup> Whatever the eventual fate of the Malay House (or museum), its final interpreters will have to decide what kind of Malay profile they wish to project, in view of the many nuances raised by the house’s original owners. Unlike the seeming fate of most *waqf*, which is gradually being folded into the market economy, the cases of both the Alatas mansion and the Malay House remain in the domain of cultural capital, symbolic of imagined Malay identity. In all the cases, the key signifier, Malayness, continues to be contested.

### **A Malay Fishing Village**

Looping back to the very earliest days of recorded Malay presence in Penang, to those “natives of the island....who subsisted by fishing....piracy and plunder..”, and almost passed over by Sir Francis Light, there are currently moves afoot by some independent Malay consultants, including Prof Wazir, with the support of PHT, for a restoration and maintenance of one of the few remaining iconic fishing villages with its unique Malay maritime architecture. Under the rubric of *Muslim* Heritage Affairs, the idea is to rescue the village of Tanjung Tokong, as a *Malay* Heritage Village, where Malays are now far outnumbered by Chinese. Plans to resurrect the 200 year-old village had been circulating for over two decades. At the time of the first flurry of federal interest in things Malay in Penang, viz the conversion of the Arab Muslim mansion, and then again in the reinforcement of the renovated Kapitan Keling *waqf* lands as a dedication to Malay Muslim businesses, the village of Tanjung Tokong briefly came up, but was then shelved. It was proposed to use some Urban Development Agency (UDA) funds for this now almost suburban village, and various mapping, zoning and gazetting exercises began. One new block of residential flats, built in 1974, was the only testimony to these efforts, but the 99-year lease was retained, and revived once more in 2010.

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<sup>48</sup> This an approach promoted, among others, by Prof Wazir Jahan Karim, once of Universiti Sains Malaysia, who is now an independent scholar, author and consultant on cultural matters. Born in Malaysia to a family of Pakistani descent, she has been particularly sensitive in perceptions and practices around Malayness in a professional environment. It should be noted that the term “Straits Chinese” is more widely used for those who are otherwise referred to as Peranakan.

### Living Malay Heritage

Like heritage movements elsewhere, those in Penang have gradually moved beyond material culture to the more intangible, performative variety Living artists and craftspeople (like Japanese “living treasures”) provide a dynamic which serves both educational and conservation functions, as well as a magnet for tourism. Some of these projects, between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, were financed by foundations from Germany, Japan, as well as American Express. It was the latter who funded the creation of two “Heritage trails” for exploring George Town on foot. Other donors included the LEAP (Local Effort Asia Pacific), which encouraged the revivals of dying trades from slipper beading, fan-making, tofu skin preparation, batik dyeing, tombstone carving, rattan weaving, songkok-making, goldsmithing to local cuisine, and were by no means exclusive to Malays. Many of these programmes targeted youth, in a bid to intercept the loss of continuity in such traditions. Few of these trades are controversial, but in matters of the performing arts such as dance, drama and singing, the Malay contribution has been severely limited by some recent constraints on expressions of cultural Islam in Malaysia, which discourage such public displays and exposure of the (especially female) body in public.

In the present climate of religious correctness in Malaysian Islam, under the authority of the ever more powerful Shari’ah court and its public mouthpiece, JAKIM (Dept of Religious Affairs), and the behavioural guidance of such government institutions as the Institute for Islamic Understanding (IKIM), most public presentations of what had once been distinctive Malay performing arts, have disappeared from the scene. From Thai-influenced Mak -Yong dances, Kelantanese wayang shows featuring the once obligatory *main jampi* prayer to the spirits, to the panoply of Muharram-related spectacles, little survives today outside the academy. Penang had been famous as the place of convergence of musical, dance and dramatic styles traceable to India and Persia, such as the Boria and Bangsawan, featuring what today are recognised as Shi’ah influences and usually held around the calendrical dates for the Battle of Kerbala and the martyrdom of Hassan and Hussein. Although religious in original inspiration, these had become eagerly-awaited annual festivities, and transported beyond Penang by touring troupes. They had had been appropriated by all the communities including the Chinese, constantly evolving and adapting to local events and tastes, but are now banned, even as folkloric or for pedagogic purposes. Generations after their heyday, they are suddenly perceived, along with keramats and Malay adat, as subversive relics of Shi’ism, although they had been so thoroughly incorporated into Malay and Penang Muslim culture for most to have lost any consciousness of those Shi’ah roots.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Michael Feener comes to similar conclusions in relation to the interpretation of “Shi-ya” tabot traditions in Sumatra: “Alid Piety and State-Sponsored Spectacle: Tabot tradition to Bengkulu, Sumatra”. (ms. nd). In Penang, other latterly recognised “Shi-ya” elements are also in retreat. A certain Kampung Seronok, locally nicknamed “Matahari”, sometimes with admiration sometimes as a slur, was founded at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by a Javanese from Madura, Syed Sailuddin Jamaluddin, whose grandson is now custodian, and one of whose daughters married into the family of the Raja of Perlis, who himself has hereditary ties to an Alawiyyah Sufi sect. In Penang the Matahari movement is said by some to be part of a Taslim cult, but under any name, is now deemed deviant (sesat). Among its alleged Shi’ah elements are: praying only three times a day; substituting a quick “naik bukit” for the haj, allowing the monies saved to be invested in the family-owned Sinaran printing press; and hereditary succession of religious authority. Today, Kg Seronok is considered a model kampong, with immaculately tended padi fields and flourishing small enterprises. Today too, the current leader is said to have joined UMNO, although the circumstances are not known..

It has to be recognised that some of these performances had already begun to decline after World War II, along with *ronggeng* and *joget* dances where men and women faced each other without touching on a public dance stage, and romantic Eurasian music.. It should also be recalled that there was once a flourishing Malay film industry, featuring the unforgettable male star, P. Ramlee, who smoked and flirted with the ladies on screen. It is hard today for many Malaysians today to reconcile these bifurcated images of Malay propriety.

These cultural taboos present a challenge to heritage organisations whose mandate is to record, conserve, revive, and to perform (but not necessarily to reconcile ambiguities). One ingenious solution has been to promote those Malay practices and art forms which (minus Islam) eventually became incorporated through the medium of the hybrid Chinese Peranakan culture that so animated Penang's belle époque in the inter-war years, and has left an indelible mark on the cultural identity of the merchant classes beyond Malayness alone. In matters of content and style, there are indeed many resemblances, of costume, dance and culinary styles, between Malay, Chinese and even European women and in domestic, and public social rituals. In fact, the anchor and symbol of Peranakan sub-culture was the Nonya. Across Southeast Asia, local-born women of mixed origins in what is now Indonesia, the Malay peninsula and Straits Settlements were addressed by this courtesy title, and through their networks much of the artistic and craft culture, the music, cuisine and language (usually Malay) , was transmitted. What separated the Nonya from her Malay sisters was Islam, but in days less obsessed by religious correctness, there was in fact little to inhibit the social mingling of women in many public and semi-public venues (including dancing joget and later, enjoying P. Ramlee or western films and sharing the fabled Nonya cuisine, with or without pork, according to the situation). This inter-war era came as close to social-cultural assimilation as ever observed in Malaya. It was however, very much a social class phenomenon, of a merchant bourgeoisie<sup>50</sup>, foreign educated, heavily English-speaking and socially attached to many colonial idiosyncracies, which the war ended forever. As a social class at a particular place and time it was ephemeral and could never be reproduced except in the form of heritage. For their part, the Chinese Peranakan today are making active and vigorous efforts to keep the material and living tradition of the Nonya alive, through conferences, plays, literature, (see n 50) and the restoration of grand mansions. Now this cohort serves as a repository for some of the lost glories of the Malay heritage too.

However, PHT and other heritage organisations have developed an indirect approach to showcasing intimate or sensitive Malay cultural forms in public. In Penang, frequent Peranakan conferences feature dance and drama officially billed as Chinese Peranakan, but quite conveniently a double for the missing Malay contributions. This substitution is quite blatant in certain circles. One ageing, but beloved Malay male traditional dancer and choreographer, Mohd Bahroodin Ahmad (affectionately known as "Cikgu"), who is also a story-teller and teacher, finds a secure site at such PHT-sponsored events to express himself under the peranakan rubric. The PHT has also managed to find resources to award "Living Heritage" prizes to Cikgu without penalty. Another female dancer, Mak Minah (who hailed from Kg Makam) also made her final performances at the age of 80, under such circumstances. Hence the paradox of preserving Malay living culture in a Peranakan setting. One particular occasion<sup>51</sup> is notable for its exceptionality: presented as Charity Performance, with the theme, "Arts in Heritage" and engaging the artistic elites of Penang, in the setting of a fine old peranakan mansion, the Malay appearances were well interspersed with Chinese and other offerings, but the real

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<sup>50</sup> The essence of this class, as articulated through the Nonya voice, is superbly captured by the play, "Emily of Emerald Hill", which resonates in Penang as in Singapore. The continued performance of "Emily..." is itself a form of intangible heritage conservation.

<sup>51</sup> Attended by the writer on March 26th 2005.

creative coup was the selection of patron of honour. This was the second wife of then Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, who is herself of Catholic Eurasian origin. This performance within a performance slipped through the vigilance net without issue—and it was also remote from Kuala Lumpur.

### **SOME ROOTS OF CONTENTION: THE BALIK PULAU ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Amid the escalation of interest in Penang heritage in the mid-2000s, one in particular has stirred up emotions at all levels of government, in several political parties and between all ethnic communities. At the end of 2010, a secondary school history project was launched in Balik Pulau, a small multicultural kampung in the rural southwest part of Penang island. It appeared to have impeccable credentials: sponsored by the Penang State government's<sup>52</sup> own Educational Council, through its Socio-Economic Research Unit (SERI). The study was facilitated by respected a multi-ethnic NGO, Arts-Ed, which makes use of theatre and street performances portraying Penang's multicultural richness, and aims to promote appreciation of history through the methods of oral history, utilising little but the memories and reminiscences of family and relatives of the senior generations. The task assigned to the pupils by the Arts-Ed advisors at the Balik Pulau school as they launched the research was to interview their parents and grandparents about their family and community history, to collect pictures where possible, and to write their results in collective report. The instructions were open-ended, and no suggestions offered as to the form the final report would take.

The results originally published in a booklet, "My Balik Pulau", and later in an annotated version by the PHT, instantly drew fire from many readers, particularly politicians from parties in coalition with UMNO. In their eyes, the findings of the report were "insulting to the Malays", among other things, for ignoring the (Malay) founder of the Balik Pulau community. This was construed as an attempt by the authors to convince their readers that the first settlers were Chinese. Furthermore, the pictures in the report allegedly paid too much attention to the non-Malay elements of Balik Pulau: Chinese shophouses, temple and school and a Christian orphanage. In fact today, the majority of the population is Chinese, but census-taking and statistical counts were not part of the mandate, which was to be purely, ethnographically descriptive, based on elicited memories and souvenirs. Also dismissed by the Malay political critics as incorrect was the assertion in the report that some of the early Malay ancestors were refugees from Thailand. It so happens in this case, that there exists plenty of independent evidence to support that claim hence the issue for the unhappy politicians was clearly one of political, not historical correctness. A particularly sensitive issue among some Malays, notably now their politicians, is the awareness that many of them can count only two or three generations on the island, sometimes fewer generations deep than those of Chinese settlers. As noted above, this had much to do with constant immigration, displacement and mobility among many Penang residents, and the recognition that "we are all from somewhere else". As noted, recognition of this inconvenient fact conflicts with the modern Malay political self-perception as "indigenous", the myth folded into the national identity of the Bumiputera, which in turn underpins the statistical Malay majority. All these matters create dissonance and angst for national politicians trying to understand the particularities of the Penang Malay population. Other sources of friction included a cartoon perceived as depicting Malays as lacking in business sense and being cheated by a Chettiar moneylender beside a Chinese businessman arrogantly getting better of the moneylender, creating an image of "bersifat perkauman" (racially inspired), according to one UMNO

<sup>52</sup> At the time of the research design, the composition of the Penang State government was of parties in the national alliance (Barisan Nasional) with UMNO. The following year, following the rout of the Barisan in national elections, the state government is now composed of by parties of the opposition and it is they who have become the target of critics, rather than its predecessor.

Malay politician. The overall effect was to “distort the facts of history for young Malays”, according to UMNO State Assemblyman Mohd Farid Saad.’

As in many historical reconstructions, “wrong interpretations got in the way”. Politicians of all parties, (some of whom seemed not to have read the original report), NGOs of different orientations, and commentators from different ethnic perspectives, all offered their commentaries. PHT also deplored the acrimony and fanning of ethnic tensions<sup>53</sup>, and for “stooping so low as to racialise a children’s project in to a political tool so as to cause divisions in our community”. This view was endorsed by thirty-two NGOs and civil rights organisations in Penang. In the end, it was the children for whom the project was intended as a hands-on learning experience, as a lesson in methodology, who were left intellectually stranded. Whose heritage was the “real” one, and what is history for?

### MALAY ENTITLEMENTS

The themes of urban Malays marginalised by development, as well as by the loss of so many original Malay rural lands, contributing to poverty and deprivation in relation to non-Malays, has in recent decades acquired a tone of loss of entitlement, even of political rights in this era of the UMNO making of the Malay majority in the context of Malay ethnonationalism. This is the platform of Ibrahim Ali, the vocal and abrasive leader of Perkasa, an ultra-Malay splinter group for Malay supremacy (*ketuanan*), whose symbol, tellingly, is a keris (Malay sword) , who inhabits the Kuala Lumpur region, regularly takes to the streets to mobilise Malays demanding protection and enforcement of their rights and imagined slights. By contrast, one internet writer counters, in opposition to Ibrahim Ali, that Malays have done little to help themselves. Since the implementation of Malay preferential quotas and opportunities in the original New Economic Policy but regularly updated since, many Malay have in his view, grown too accustomed to their privileges, and have consequently made less effort to achieve what others have to strive for. Quoting the Minister of Trade and Industry in Mahathir’s cabinet in the 1980s, Rafidah Aziz, that “Malays can achieve but can’t sustain it: (Melayu mampu daya maju tetapi tak mampu daya tahan)”, the writer goes on to deplore how lands and preferential stocks and shares (*amanah saham*) designated for Malays in the stock exchange, have routinely been sold off for short-term cash. Pace Ibrahim Ali, this blogger blames the Malays themselves, not outsiders, for their lack of competitive success today<sup>54</sup>.

Other Malays in Penang have taken up the cudgels on Malay entitlements. One somewhat inconclusive public address to mark the launching in 2010 of the Penang Malay United Congress (Kongres Muafakatan Melayu Pulau Pinang), in the presence of the Governor of Penang (whose role replaces that of sultans in other Malay states). This was offered in a keynote address by a university professor of Humanities, trained at International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur and currently teaching at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, entitled, “Malay Chronicles: Lessons to be learned for Mutual Benefit”. His main discourse focused on Malay success and the need for wisdom and willingness to co-operate with all parties in the spirit of honest camaraderie. Surprisingly (or unimaginatively), to some hearers, he chose the era when “Malay government was at its height and

<sup>53</sup> PHT Newsletter, Issue 99, March 2011: “My Balik Pulau, NGO Press Statement”.:10-11

<sup>54</sup> Somewhat surprisingly to those who have long assumed that “Penang is a Chinese state”, both culturally and demographically, recent population statistics are now showing that Malays have gained a small numerical edge over the Chinese. The Socio-Economic Research Unit of Penang (SERI) claimed that out of a total state population of 1,520,143, Malays made up 653,600 and the Chinese 623,200, or 43% versus 41% respectively (SERI: Quarter 1, 2008). On April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* , quoting the director of the Penang Statistics Dept, Wan Mohd Noor b. Wan Mohd, declared that the “Chinese are no longer the majority race in Penang”, that they are outnumbered by 18,000 more Malays.

glory (in Melaka), and proposed as his historical role model that of Hang Tuah as the “image of a man who is loyal, brave open, frank and intelligent”, and who excelled in applying his physical strength and ingenuity to his diplomatic and personal obligations to his master, the Sultan—a rather stereotyped traditional theme of bravado. However, the speaker cautioned that in Hang Tuah’s behaviour and ethics there were “boundaries not to be crossed”, specifically his conspiracy to kill his rival and the latter’s son. Other than ensuring that “we don’t repeat the same mistakes”, what new insights does this provide for enlightened self-introspection by Malays beyond appeals to entitlements?

Among his targets, Ibrahim Ali attributes the plight of Penang Malays to the fact that the state is currently under the rule of a party in opposition to the ruling UMNO. Yet this opposition, Pakatan (itself a coalition of several parties, including PAS, the Chinese DAP, and a party led by Anwar Ibrahim, once deputy Prime Minister for UMNO), has only ruled Penang since 2008. It is thus unlikely that current disaffections expressed by certain members of the Malay Chamber of Commerce over alleged infringement of their special ethnic quotas, can be attributed to discrimination by the state government alone. It is widely known that that MCC members (whose deputy president has an Arab name), have been chastising the state for requiring it to make competitive open tenders for certain import licences, whereas the Chamber wanted to claim special quotas qua their NEP privileges as Malays/Bumiputera. The MCC president (of Indian extraction), argued that “fairness” depends on allowing a special handicap for Malays “to even the playing field, since the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities are unevenly matched. No reference in this ethnic trinity to the Arabs or peranakan. The MCC also made waves in the Municipal Council, by demanding special treatment for illegal Malay hawkers, without making the effort to go through due process or attending Council meetings as required. These cases taken together provide some sense of the climate of opinion, argument and logic, as certain self-defined Malays in Penang today try to define their status through the perspective of the UMNO state, and turn it to their own advantage.

#### **HAZARDS OF DEFINING A COMMON HERITAGE: PRELUDE TO UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE STATUS**

Throughout the 1990s until the early 2000s, the combined efforts of PHT, with international funding support, were concentrated on achieving UNESCO World Heritage Site status for George Town. This required several stages. An initial step, recognition as an “Endangered Heritage Site”, was reached at the end of the 1990s, but the goal of world-class acceptance remained elusive. A series of academic conferences on the theme of the “Penang Story”, with contributions from a range of international scholars, was held over a period of three years, to which were invited the regional representatives from ICOMOS and UNESCO, as a declaration of intent to petition for the final accolade.

There were a number of obstacles along the way, mostly political. Among them were jurisdictional struggles between the municipal, state and federal governments. The first two levels had long viewed heritage as a threat to development and private property and as a constraints on their own authority. At the national centre, where there had never existed much empathy for this marginal ex-Straits Settlement with its large Chinese population, absence of a sultan and often dubious Malayness, the preference would have been for more Islamic museums in the capital. The federal Ministry of Culture also insisted on a partnership between Penang and Malacca, a reasonable proposal give the common Straits Settlements histories and culture, and the fact that both have heritage organisations who had collaborated in the past. The only problem there was that their organisations moved at different speeds, and sometimes had different priorities. UNESCO officials too of course had their own priorities. One unsurprisingly, was for political co-operation by all levels of government in Malaysia, with a commitment to enforce heritage regulations once granted, as a

condition of continued recognition of their UNESCO status. Following the federal election in 2008, when UMNO was weakened nationally and an opposition party took over the state government in Penang, some of these issues were less intractable. In July of that year, George Town and Malacca were finally listed as Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca, as World Heritage Sites.

UNESCO recognition however did not entirely erase the tensions between different local identity groups and national visions. Attracted by George Town's ethnic, religious and cultural heritage, UNESCO wished to make "diversity" as a central theme in its own right. In practice, this had the effect of enhanced contestation between different constituencies. In particular, the question of representation of religious pluralism re-opened some differences which had simmered for over a decade without resolution. As far back as 1993, some Malaysians of all faiths had tried to promote a Global Ethic project, inspired by the World Parliament of Religions that same year. While avoiding the word itself, this ethic was mostly about religion, and interfaith harmony. The idea was readily accepted in Penang by a respected local co-founder of the Malaysian Interfaith Network, himself a Muslim, and plans were made for the creation of a Street of Harmony, featuring a new heritage trail, subsequently renamed the World Religions Walk. The Walk featured examples of all the major faiths represented in one zone of the heritage area, with interactive discovery trails for youth and tourists in Malay, Mandarin and English,<sup>55</sup> created by the NGO Arts-Ed. However, the goal of giving equal space to all religions unexpectedly resurrected earlier aborted proposals for more inter-faith dialogue and understanding going back to before 2005. This had foundered at the federal level on official grounds that "all religions are not equal". Freedom of religion, the federal Inter-faith Committee maintained, does not mean that other religions can be equated with Islam, while Prime Minister Najib as late as 2011 proclaimed flatly that "religious pluralism is wrong"<sup>56</sup>. In 2006 the same issue was addressed in a forum organised in Penang by another local political NGO, Aliran, elliptically entitled: "Federal Constitution: Protection for All". This meeting was disrupted by, among others, a group with the Malay acronym BADAI (Anti-Interfaith Commission), which had also enlisted the support of the Penang religious Council (MAIPP). Friday sermons were read out in Penang mosques warning against any interfaith proposal; the Malay-Muslim public was harangued by media releases in Malay only, while the wider public received communications in English.

During this time, interfaith plans were stalled, until rescued by a serendipitous event. This was the official visit to Malaysia, at the invitation of then Prime Minister Badawi, of an internationally known and respected Tamil Indian Muslim nuclear scientist and poet, Abdul Kalam, to attend an international conference on Religion in the Quest for Global Justice and Peace in Kuala Lumpur. Fortuitously, Abdul Kalam's visit co-incided with the UNESCO listing of Penang as a world heritage site, just when the "Street of Harmony" was at risk. Abdul Kalam was invited to visit this now world-class destination and to walk the Street of Harmony trail. This he took in stride in full interfaith spirit: he read a note of peace at the Anglican church on the trail; then he lit a joss stick at the Chinese Goddess of Mercy Temple; paid his respects at the Hindu Sri Mariamman temple; took his Friday zohor prayers at the Kapitan Keling mosque; and concluded with a stop at the Arab-founded Acheen Street Mosque, now billed simply as the Masjid Melayu. Thus he completed all the "diversity" requirements, showed empathy and enthusiasm at each destination, as well as for the interfaith concept as a whole. Meanwhile as the federal Interfaith Commission itself still languishes in confusion and discord, George Town's heritage visions were publicly vindicated.

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<sup>55</sup> For a complete account, see Khoo Salma Nasution, "The 'Street of Harmony' in the George Town World Heritage Site". In; Francois Rugg and Andrea Boscoboinik (eds), *From Palermo to Penang: A Journey into Political Anthropology*. University of Freiburg, LIT Verlag, Vienna, 2010

<sup>56</sup> Reported in the *Sun*, Feb 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011

One minor limitation of the UNESCO rules for the site has to do with territoriality. The official Heritage Site zone is concentrated in a culturally rich zone of just a few streets, a bare square kilometre. While making the principal sites accessible, walkable and tourist-friendly, it does mean that many other listed, especially Malay, sites in George Town are not included, such as the Malay House. Nor are most of the remaining *waqf* properties in this core, and some of these, as noted, are at risk of being designated for other purposes. However, there is an argument to be made for promoting the march to Muslim capitalism (via *waqf* development or other means) as a significant phase in the life of the modern Malay. Clearly it is not within UNESCO's mandate to promote or prioritise Malay—or Muslim—heritage or identity, and this may explain some of the stalling and disaffection in higher levels of government.

### CONCLUSION: THE ELUSIVE PENANG MALAY

Speakers of Malay languages across the region once called Nusantara, included those often self-identified or labelled in censuses as Minangkabau, Mandailing, Javanese, Bugis, Rawa and even Filipinos—an abbreviated list—were widely regarded as members of the Malay world, and language was not only a default marker of identity but also a vehicle of integration into a Malay community. Other facilitators to becoming Malay were cultural receptivity to immigrants and their incorporation by marriage; and the shared value system of Islam.

Although it is almost unimaginable for Malaysians today to conceive of Malays without Islam, histories other than the now official Malay school textbooks with their arguably teleological approach, do provide evidence of non-Muslims who call themselves Malay today. Among these are some Batak peoples in Sumatra and others in the Philippines<sup>57</sup>—which raise questions as to the universality of Malays-as-Muslims. In today's geopolitical order, ideas about being Malay and Malayness are often measured against the prevailing Malaysian state standard, such that the above exceptions are either regarded as anomalies or as beyond the limits of true Malayness, rather than as variations on common identity.

Demographically, the vast majority of Malays today are Muslim, and use the two epithets with one the matrix to the other. The emphasis between the two varies according to the prevailing situation and socio-political environment but is rarely challenged in principle. Even non-Muslim outsiders find it difficult to articulate any distinction, with remarks to the effect that “they are all the same”, and that includes the spectrum of Arab/Indian Muslims too. Whereas it was always considered “normal” for Malays to be Muslim, the constitutional rules of the modern Malay/sian state made Islam normative or required. This rule arbitrarily excluded religious options for Malaysian Malays, whether to leave Islam or convert to another faith. Finally, the opening up of Malays to global Islamic ideas and movements restored to Malaysians an Islam more transcendent than Malayness, and so created a challenge to the ethno-national state, particularly where use of the term, *asabi'yah*, with its connotations of racism, cast ethnicity in a more negative light. The problem is partly semantic: modern scholars use the language of ethnicity, nationalism and “religion” parsed in categories of social science, and these do not necessarily correspond with the usage of say, nineteenth century Bengali society, as described by Eaton. There the intricate networks of Ashraf, Chishtis, Mughals, Rajputs and Bengalis intersected along subtle (hierarchical and power) dimensions not readily translatable into stark categories of “religion”—or even “Islam”—or ethnicity. Nor, as noted above, has modern social science created a satisfactory vocabulary for handling hybridity (as in the case of

<sup>57</sup> See: Rommel A. Curaming, “Filipinos as Malay: Historicising an Identity”. In: Maznah Mohamad & Syed Muhd Khairuddin Aljunied (eds), *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*. Singapore, NUS Press, 2011:241-2276

the *peranakan*), or for classifying fluid societies whose boundaries are fluid rather than fixed. The quest for the “pure Malay” in such a society represents an alien idea.

As Datuk Nazir Ariff, former PHT president, leader in assorted Malay organisations, of traceable Indian/Jawi *Peranakan* descent and one of the most prominent Muslim elites in Penang, noted in the context of Penang’s social history,, “the only thing that the diverse communities that have become subsumed under the Malay race, have in common, is that they professed the Islamic faith”<sup>58</sup>. By this logic, based on lineage (or biology) alone, Malays represent only a small proportion of the population defined as Malay in Penang today (*ibid*). Even past Prime Minister Mahathir, the architect of Malay ethno-nationalism and opportunistic manipulator of ethnic terminologies for political purposes, concluded that the “civilisation of the Malay archipelago which disintegrated during the colonial era should be revived so that its people can become an ethnic group of the highest status”<sup>59</sup>—his way of transcending recent politics and seeing unity within diversity at a supra-political level.

Spanning the centuries, it appears that the Malay is being re-absorbed as the Malay-as-Muslim, where it all began. What is more complex, however, is to decode the variations within the Malay fold. Aside from the proliferation of *peranakan* possibilities, a closer reading of Penang’s history reveals a deeper presence of Arabs among Malays, and a seemingly tacit understanding of the elision between the two. Even though in Penang there was no explicit recognition of Arab *peranakan* as a parallel to the Jawi *Peranakan*, the Arab /Malay relationship seems to be an enduring unquestioned reality.

What a difference a state makes. It was the creation of Malay/sia, with its attendant constitutional and other legislative adjustments, that attempts to redefine and remake the new Malay citizen became central to political and economic ideology. At the same time, UMNO continued to remake its Malay subjects into pious but not overly intellectualist Muslims, conforming to prescribed ritual dress codes and public behaviours, while eliminating “deviant” teachings and practices as challenges to authority. In the process, much of the diversity of Malay and Penang Islam was compressed or amputated, as Sufi and Shi’a and other *shirik* elements were eliminated from the rich religious heritage. Finally, the texts for Malay-Muslim history were revised to reflect the latest UMNO ideal.

Penang, marginal in its geographical location, unique historical experience, remoteness from traditional Malay royal and religious leadership, provided a test case of the elasticity of social boundaries and religious tolerance of the Malay population. Once the influence of the Malaysian state was impressed through institutional, government and political party media, Penang Malays were not slow in asserting their ethnic economic entitlements and quotas in ways to which other Penang Muslims were unaccustomed, creating unaccustomed dissonance among their Arab and Indian *Peranakan* business colleagues in the Malay Chamber of Commerce.

Ultimately, in surveying the trajectory of the Malays over two centuries it may be questioned whether attempts to find a unique Malay identity or history, by government or heritage organisations, may not in the end, be in vain. What does emerge from the historical record, the best efforts of the Malaysian state notwithstanding, is the continuing flexibility of Malay identity and its capacity to adjust a wide range of relational and social environments through kinship and political alliances, within a broad matrix of Islam.

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in A.Shukor Rahman, *Flying Colours...*2011,:8

<sup>59</sup> A. Shukor Rahman,, *ibid*:4