



A boat race that took place in the 1950s off Kampong Amber, a Malay village that used to exist between East Coast Road and Amber Road. Maps from 1822 and 1825 show that a large "Bugis Town" occupied the entire eastern bay of Singapore town, before the British re-organised it into plots in the 1830s to 1840s. ST FILE PHOTO

Debunking myth of the sleepy fishing village

This is the fifth of six weekly articles covering the Singapore History Series – Seven Centuries In Six Episodes, organised as part of the SkillsFuture Festival in collaboration with the Singapore Bicentennial Office.

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Among Singapore's early landowners – whose presence predated a treaty allowing Raffles to set up a trading post here in 1819 – was Hajjah Fatimah, a Bugis trader from Melaka.

She and her husband were drawn to the island due to its viability as an alternative trade port to Riau. Hajjah Fatimah, who was widowed

soon after, not only owned her own boats but also had plots of land near present-day Beach Road.

She was one of several examples cited by Assistant Professor Imran Tajudeen from the National University of Singapore's department of architecture, in a lecture at Fort Canning Centre last Thursday, as he drove home the point that the British did not arrive to a sleepy, uninhabited fishing village.

Colonial records from 1843 show that the British had marked out Hajjah Fatimah's land as "gratis (free)",

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indicating she owned it and that they could not charge her fees for it. This was unusual as all land plots in colonial Singapore required leases as part of the British effort to raise revenues.

Maps from 1822 and 1825 also show that a large "Bugis Town" occupied the entire eastern bay of Singapore town, before the British re-organised it into plots in the 1830s to 1840s.

Prof Imran, who spoke in a lecture titled Viewing Singapore From A Broadened Straits Malay Perspective, 1699-1819, pointed out that the local chieftain, the Temenggong, was in charge of the economic use of lands in Singapore up till 1824.

The British had jurisdiction over a limited area from Tanjong Malang to Tanjong Katong.

Singapore had at least three existing major settlement centres: the Orang Selat were based at the Singapore River, the Orang Gelam and Orang Biduanda Kallang occupied

the Kampong Glam and Kallang area, and others lived along the East Coast in areas such as Tanah Merah and Bedok.

Many of them were involved in shipbuilding activities. Scottish sea captain Alexander Hamilton noted that Singapore in 1703 was known for quality hardwoods for sea-going vessels as well as for buildings.

Pre-colonial Singapore was held in high regard by the Johor-Riau polity and Straits Malay community, said Prof Imran. For instance, Raja Kechil and his nephew Raja Ismail of Siak (present-day Riau province in Indonesia) depended on Singapore in the 18th century for the construction of their naval vessels.

Economic activities also defined Singapore's physical landscape.

Prof Imran said the island was home to an extensive plantation economy for gambier and coconut. It was managed by the Temenggong and preceded the British arrival. Malays, Bugis, Javanese and



MOVE BEYOND COLONIAL GAZE

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The way we handle our history is so neo-colonial and is such an insult. We need to move beyond this colonial gaze once and for all. If there is any way to do this, it should be through the Singapore Bicentennial, if we are truly mature in wanting to look at our longer history in the region.



ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IMRAN TAJUDEEN, on how people in Singapore were already trading with the region before the British East India Company arrived.

Teochews owned plantations.

Prof Imran noted that the myth of the sleepy fishing village could have stemmed from the narrative that Singapore had fallen into silence after the death of Johor's Sultan Mahmud Shah II in 1699, which shifted the kingdom's capital from the Johor River to Riau and reduced the role of Singapore's harbour master.

However, he said the examples he cited proved otherwise. He added that the people of Singapore, who went by the term "rakyat Singapura" in the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (a work of Malay literature), were already trading and having cultural and technological exchanges with the region before the British East India Company (EIC) arrived.

Hajjah Fatimah's husband Karaeng Chendera Puli, a prince-merchant from the royal dynasty of Gowa (Makassar) who relocated from Riau following a dispute there in 1818, was central in making Singapore attractive to Makassar and Bugis traders in the early 1800s.

Prof Imran said: "We keep talking about what 'white men' did as though the Malays did nothing but fish, and the Bugis did nothing but piracy."

"The way we handle our history is so neo-colonial and is such an insult. We need to move beyond this colonial gaze once and for all. If there is any way to do this, it should be through the Singapore Bicentennial, if we are truly mature in wanting to look at our longer history in the region."

Prof Imran added that when the Temenggong and Sultan Hussein Shah of Johor signed the 1819 treaty with the EIC, they had done so with the knowledge of the recent violent and deadly colonial invasions of neighbouring ports and kingdoms.

For instance, the British had destroyed and looted Palembang and Java between 1811 and 1812.

"In Singapore, we say that's their colonial experience and that our colonial experience was benign. When I hear this, my ears go red."

"We were not saved by the EIC. If anything, the people of Singapore had heard of the latest wave of European violence and were wary of it."

Prof Imran said the ports in the region were illustrious and doing well without the intervention of colonial rulers. For instance, just one Chinese junk docked in Melaka when the Dutch held sway in 1696, while the Johor port played host to as many as 11 such Chinese trading vessels in the same year.

These non-colonial ports, based on Malayo-Javanese culture, were known for being open and multi-ethnic, added Prof Imran.

"Our early immigrants did not come from places like China and India alone. Some Chinese came to Singapore from Semarang and Riau, the Babas came from Melaka, many Arabs came from Palembang."

Prof Imran said these traces of Singapore's pre-1819 past have been forgotten and that many of these early communities have been dispersed in modern Singapore. He urged for more rigorous study into these communities and their former settlement areas.

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