

Anti-Colonial History: Pulau Pinang from the Point of View of Local Historian and Writer

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Abstract

History of Southeast Asia has been heavily influenced by the colonial writing. The colonial historiography always favoured the Euro-centric view of history and often omitted the contribution of the native people. This paper attempted to analyze Southeast Asian historiography and look into the birth of a new stream of history, the anti-colonial history. The anti-colonial historiography aimed to redress the various omissions of the colonial narratives. By using Pulau Pinang as a case study, this paper will challenge the colonial narrative that Francis Light was the founder of the island. The paper will analyze the narrative and portrayal of the establishment of Pulau Pinang by colonial writer and later historian. Then, by using a much more recent study made by historian such as Mahani Musa and Ahmad Murad Merican, this paper will argue that the establishment of the island should be attributed to a much more earlier native population. Evidence will be provided to establish the presence of Malay population pre-1786. Among the notable early Malay leaders in Pulau Pinang such as Nakhoda Intan and Datok Janatun were then identified. By centering the native in the historiography, this paper argued that a much more honest and accurate portrayal of the past can be achieved.

Keywords: Post-Colonial Study, Anti-Colonial History, Southeast Asia, Pulau Pinang

Interpretation and Representation in History

The study of anti-colonial history is the study of representation in the historical narrative. The advent of colonialism in Southeast Asia has disrupted local history, it has constructed a discontinuity, where local indigenous history been sidelined, and in some cases erased to justify the new colonial history. The colonial history always centered in eurocentrism, where the coming European colonialist was regarded as the founder of the new administered land. The local population that exists prior to the arrival of European vessels to Southeast Asian shores were pushed into the footnotes, they were regarded as a poor villagers, fishermen, farmers, and peasant with no civilisation or significant to the land.

The representation of local indigenous people is an important part of Southeast Asian history, as we understand story and history based on how they were presented. This is why, in history, the interpretation part plays a significant role in historiography. As the famous historian, Edward Carr wrote, that the fact cannot speak for themselves (Carr, 1964: 11). Document and historical sources need a historian to sort them out, put them into a context, gave them a logical narrative, and presented them as an important event. In other words,

interpretation and representation is at the heart of history. Anti-colonial history seeks to amend the colonialist portrayal of local indigenous population and re-centered them back to the discontinued historical narrative.

Due to the important part of interpretation and representation in history, in his analysis, Carr noted that reader of history must first understand the historian. The reader needs to know in which society the historian is from, because, historian, like everyone else, is the product of his society. Carr went further to task the reader of history to understand the time and era of the historian in which he writes (Carr, 1964: 11). All of these factors will shape how the history is interpreted and represented, as the historian cannot detached himself from the history he is producing.

The place of the colonial historian, therefore, need to be critically examined. This is why, Edward Said, in his seminal book, talk about “strategic location” (Said, 1991: 20-21). Strategic location is the methodology in which the reader critically examine where are the author situated in his writing. In this way, we can understand the problem of the author, whether he tried to dominate his subject, and how actually he represented them. For example, in reading colonial history and text, we need to understand about the colonial officer writing the history, and what is his relation to the local indigenous population in which he ruled over. By using this methodology, we can better understand the interpretation and representation in history, especially the colonial history.

Before the writing of Edward Said, the Eurocentric analysis of people considered as ‘others’ by the Europeans are pervasive. This Eurocentric tradition of writing can even be seen in the Enlightenment period and continue to shape the analysis up to the present time (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 35). Edward Said along with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha were important figures in the postcolonial studies (Young, 2004). In the Malay world in particular, Syed Hussien Alatas was the prominent figure in the post-colonial discourse (Abdul Mutalib Embong, 2018). These figures provided a ground work for anti-colonial history, their ideas and writings provided the impetus to decolonialize history.

Decolonizing Southeast Asian History

One of the most influential anti-colonial histories in my view is *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn. The book first appeared in 1980, it spread like a wild fire and became the nation’s bestselling American history book. It is a very influential book and literally changed generation. It is so influential that 39 years later, his opponent still publishing book trying to discredit him (Grabar, 2019). Zinn noted in the book that we should not accept the memory of states as our own, he seeks to point out the conflict of interest between conquerors and conquered (Zinn, 2010: 10). The book started with the story of the destruction of the indigeneous Arawaks tribe. Following the landing of Christopher Columbus, the indigeneous Arawaks were captured, shipped to Europe as slaves, and enslaved to work on plantation and mines. Their villages were systematically depopulated (Zinn, 2010: 10). These crimes often left out by the colonial historical narrative who celebrated Columbus. Breaking from the colonial narratives which celebrated Columbus as the discoveror of the New World, Zinn set out in his book to document his crimes.

In Australia, the colonial history promoted James Cook as the founder, this narative denied the earlier history of the Australian Aborigines (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 10). As if prior to the arrival of Cook, they have no civilisation, spoke no language, and did not develop a unique non-European culture. This narrative being challenged as more and more anti-colonial history emerged. In the case of Australia, the new trend of history placed the Aboriginal people at the centre of the historical writing. Stephanie Mawson for example, wrote that human occupation of Australia dates back at least 65,000 years, this means that the Aboriginal have

always been in Australia. The Aboriginal history according to Mawson should not be written as static and unchanging but should be viewed as dynamic and in keeping with the human technological innovation of the time (Mawson, 2021: 1477-1499).

As countries break from their colonial past and people become more conscious of history and the way it was written, a new stream of anti-colonial history emerged. No more confined to the writing of their former colonial administrator, they embarked in a journey to portray history from their own perspective. The anti-colonial narrative did not only inform academician and student of history, it also had a wider and profound influence on the social, economic and political dynamics throughout the world. In South Africa for example, the post-colonial study has informed how research on education should be done, it gave greater emphasis on indigenous knowledge and systems (Westhuizen, 2013: 689-708). Anti-colonial narrative also has greatly influence the political dynamic of nation states. This can be seen for example in the nationalization of oil industry in Iran in 1951 to break away from British colonial grip followed by the nationalization of Suez Canal in Egypt to break away from British and French colonial grip in 1956. The indigenous people become more aware of their predicament and based their political struggle from their past colonial experience. In Asia, we can see that some country no longer looking into the colonial western states for their economic models, instead, they instituted policies that look to the East.¹ In my opinion, the anti-colonial narrative not only shape nation states in the past, it continues to shape political dynamics today. For example, we can clearly see today how the anti-colonial narrative give birth to world-wide resistance to Israel's colonialism, apartheid and genocide in Palestine.

In Southeast Asia, the colonialist is not interested in developing education for the native. In Malaya, this can be seen in the late establishment of Universiti Malaya in Singapore in 1949. The university was established in the British settlement and not in Tanah Melayu. In the beginning, the history department were filled with expatriate whilst local historian was in the minority. The head of history department in Universiti Malaya, C.N. Parkinson realized that the colonial narrative was pervasive whilst the study of Malaya itself was pushed into the foreground. Parkinson came to realize the need for local history to be re-written, not from the deck of European colonial ships, but from the shores of Malaya itself (Qasim Ahmad, 2000: 23). Similar statement also echoed by K.G. Tregonning in *The Straits Times* in 1958 where he cautioned that history of Asia should not revolved on the phenomena of the coming of the European but must be about Asia itself. Asia is about Asia, not about European in Asia (Qasim Ahmad, 2000: 24). In case of Malaya, emphasis should be about the Malay and other native, whilst the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British, should be treated as a mere foreign element.

Post independence, when Tanah Melayu finally became Malaysia, the result of this realization was the birth of a new breed of historian freed from the shackles of the colonial perspective. In 1967, Rollins Bonney submitted his thesis to the Department of History, University of Malaya critically re-examined the history of Kedah and the acquisition of Pulau Pinang. The study later published as a book in 1971. Bonney challenged the common conception and argued that Francis Light act of taking Pulau Pinang in 1786 as premature, illegal, and without formal treaty (Bonney, 1971: vi). Bonney's analysis displayed a shift in the historiography of the Malaysian history where he studied the history of Kedah from the view of the natives. For example, in understanding the offer given by the Sultan of Kedah to lease Pulau Pinang, Bonney critically investigate the point of view of Sultan Abdullah (1778-1798) at that time, he did not take Francis Light's words for what it is but often question and dispute them (Bonney, 1971: 52-61). In this paper, we will expand further Bonney's analysis with the view from other contemporary anti-colonial historian and writers.

Further trend of historiography that break from the traditional colonial past can be seen in the writing of Khoo Kay Kim who studied the traditional Malay state before the advent of British colonialism. Instead of writing about the native as a background of European

colonialism, Khoo Kay Kim placed them at the center and look at the events happening from their point of view. This can be seen from various letters written by the Malay rulers and Sultan quoted extensively in his study (Khoo Kay Kim, 1975). The anti-colonial history can also be seen in the political analysis of Malaysia. Firdaus Zainal for example, analyzed the downfall of the Malay political power throughout history. His analysis was full of anti-colonial narrative and emphasized on the need of indigenous people to strengthen their unity to sustain their political survival (Firdaus Zainal, 2024).

In the contemporary term, the anti-colonial historiography can be seen in the work of a revisionist historian like Azmi Arifin who challenged the colonial narrative and re-wrote history from the newly emerging sources. Azmi for example challenges the British narrative about the civil wars and anarchy in Perak in 1871-75 which become the pretense for the British to intervene in the Malay states affairs. Sifting through the records, Azmi concluded that the Perak sultanate was rendered unstable due to interference from triad leaders and the European-Chinese capitalist in the Straits Settlements. Taking advantage of the situation, the British orchestrated a direct engagement to pave way for their colonization project (Azmi Arifin, 2012: 51-74). Perak was not a unique case, Malaysian history was riddle with colonial narrative and perspective that await new historian to look into the records, and re-write them from a native perspective. Through this vantage point, we shall cast our attention to the historical narrative of Pulau Pinang.

The colonial narrative of Pulau Pinang prior to the arrival of Francis Light is that the island was *terra nullius* (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 9). Meaning that the island was uninhabited prior to the arrival of the European therefore can be legally taken. This idea of *terra nullius* is pervasive in the colonial discourse and was not unique to the case of Pulau Pinang. For example, Nur Masalha in discussing the history of Palestine, talked about how Zionism was rooted in European colonialism. They, like the British, claimed that the land that they stole was *terra nullius*, therefore justifying the land theft and their settler-colonial project (Nur Masalha, 2020: 307). To justify and legalize colonialism, the colonial history was promoted and the history of indigenous native were suppressed. From this perspective, this paper aimed to re-visit the history of Pulau Pinang, dissecting the colonial narrative and re-centered the story of native people.

The Colonial Writing on the Acquisition of Pulau Pinang

In 1591, Captain James Lancaster sailed to Pulau Pinang on his vessel *The Edward Bonaventure*, he noted that the island was devoid of any human population (Mahani Musa, 2008: 20). According to L.A. Mills, when Francis Light first arrived in Pulau Pinang, the island was uninhabited, it was just an island filled with unexplored jungle. Mills narrated the history of Pulau Pinang and placed the arrival of Francis Light as the beginning of history for the island (Mahani Musa, 2008: 23). By doing so, Mills gave credence to the idea that it was Francis Light who founded Pulau Pinang.

In the writing of *A History of Malaya* by R.O. Winstedt, the colonial administrator noted that Singapore was not the first British settlement in Malaya, the British settlement in Malaya was first planned by a young Suffolk man, a former naval officer turned trader by the name of Francis Light. In 1771, Light wrote to his firm that the Sultan of Kedah is willing to give Pulau Pinang in return of assistance against the Bugis of Selangor (Winstedt, 2020: 197). The Sultan later did not approve this plan as he later discovered that the company will not support Kedah against Selangor (Winstedt, 2020: 198).

Undeterred, Light again opened negotiation with the new Sultan of Kedah in 1785 and promised protection to Kedah against any hostile power coming from eastern or western sea. Light however were cautious, as he made a distinction between an enemy aiming to destroy

Kedah and a mere dispute with the King or Minister of Kedah. The British government in India according to Winstedt gave their blessing to this plan and recommended Light as a superintendent in Pulau Pinang (Winstedt, 2020: 198-199). By this time, Kedah faced a larger enemy than the Bugis of Selangor, which is the powerful forces of Burma and Siam.

Without any treaty, Francis Light landed on Pulau Pinang on 17 July 1786, hoisted a British flag and took possession of the island in the name of British Majesty. According to Winstedt, Light don't have any cession treaty when he took possession of Pulau Pinang, what he had instead was an indefinite letter which is inconsistent and consist vague wording regarding the defence of Kedah. The British Government position regarding defence of Kedah is clear, that they will not provide assistance in case of confrontation with Burma and Siam. This can be seen in the writing of Anderson, the Governor-General in India.

“This protection, however cannot be effectually given, without involving us in disputes with the Burmahs or Siamese, the latter of whom are the most powerful” (Winstedt, 2020: 201)

From the start, it is clear that the colonization of Pulau Pinang has no legal basis, it is done without any treaty by Francis Light. Even the mere promise to protect Kedah from their enemy was a false lie, inserted in vague term in a letter to fool the Kedah Sultanate in giving the British part of their sovereign land. The protection of Kedah by the British was never materialized. Not only that, the British in later years attacked Kedah when they wanted to recover their land in 1791.

In the word of Winstedt, Anderson himself realized that Light has promised something that cannot be fulfil (Winstedt, 2020: 202). The Sultan of Kedah was not fooled by Light dishonest promise, the Sultan refused to let Pulau Pinang separated from Kedah. Winstedt recognized this and went to wrote that the sultan has ceased to believe the words and promise made by Light in his letter (Winstedt, 2020: 203). Although Winstedt did portrayed the unlawful taking of Pulau Pinang by Light from the Kedah Sultanate, he did not mention any early Malays populating Pulau Pinang prior to the arrival of Light.

This pattern of attributing Pulau Pinang to Francis Light as its founder without mentioning early Malay population was continued by later historian. For example, in the celebrated *History of Malaysia* by Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya which was published in their third edition in 2017, the establishment of Penang was discussed in the backdrop of Siamese and Burmese threat to Kedah. It did not mention early Malay leaders or population in Pulau Pinang. Instead, at the end of the first paragraph it straight away was written that Francis Light took formal position of Pulau Pinang in 1786 in the name of King George III of Britain (Andaya and Andaya, 2023: 115). In my opinion, the failure of mentioning the native population in the colonial historiography thus justified the work of anti-colonial history to redress the native perspective of the past.

Early Work on Pulau Pinang Anti-Colonial History

One of the earliest anti-colonial histories of Pulau Pinang was a book edited by Muhammad Haji Salleh titled *Sejarah Awal Pulau Pinang* which was published in 2008 (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2008). The book looks the history of Pulau Pinang in native term. The book includes chapter on archaeological evidence by Mokhtar Saidin, Pulau Pinang and Seberang Perai history prior to 1786 by Mahani Musa, and Pulau Pinang linguistic history by Noriah Mohamed. From all of these studies, Muhammad Haji Salleh concluded that Pulau Pinang indeed were populated by the Malay prior to 1786. For the purpose of this writing, I will focus on the historical narrative by Mahani Musa in giving a native history of Pulau Pinang.

The writing of Mahani Musa can be seen as an early anti-colonial history of Pulau Pinang. In her work she noted the irony of local Malaysian historiography which failed to put forward native perspective although it is well known that the taking of Pulau Pinang from Kedah was done by deceit. The deception was well known, it is even written explicitly by some of the colonial writer. The taking of Pulau Pinang has severed the island's identity, from her original root in Kedah, it has grown to become a British colony (Mahani Musa, 2008: 19). Mahani cited Bonney who argued that Pulau Pinang was taken illegally, against international law, and was an act of deceit against Sultan Abdullah of Kedah (1778-1798) (Mahani Musa, 2008: 20-22).

According to Mahani Musa, the notion that Francis Light was the founder of Pulau Pinang as alluded by Mills and other writer was contradicted by the writing of Light himself. In one of his notes, Light wrote that he met 30 Malays just 4 days after he landed on the island at Tanjung Penaga. The leader of this 30 Malays was Nakhoda Kechil, from this, it can be deduced that the people that Light met was Malays from Sumatera. With the help of this Malay people, along with Malay people from Kedah brought by Light, the jungle of Pulau Pinang was cleared for development. Some people argued that the early Malay population in the island was not a permanent resident. This notion was promoted for example by Dickens who was appointed as a judge in Pulau Pinang in 1800. Dickens argued that the early Malays were fishermen who occasionally came to the island. They were the one who met Light four days after his landing (Mahani Musa, 2008: 24-25).

The Malay people have their own story of Pulau Pinang. For the Malay in the Sumatera, the island is known as Pulau Kesatu, because it is the one island that they met when they gone back and forth to Malaya from Sumatera. For the Malay people in Kedah and Seberang Perai, the island was called Tanjung Penaga, the name was derived from Penaga tree which was abundant in the island. The name Tanjung Penaga was even used by the British government, this can be seen on the land titles their produced until 1800 according to Mahani Musa (Mahani Musa, 2008: 26). The early Malays, prior to Light can also be traced from the writing of an English Captain, Macalister. He interviewed local people and said that there are 2-3 fishermen in the island when Light landed. He was told by the local that previously there are some 2,000 people living in the island, they were pirates that constantly raided ship which destined to Kedah. The writing of Macalister according to Mahani Musa was further strengthen by the discovery of burial ground with significant size in Pulau Pinang. From this burial ground it is estimated that the Malay has been populating the area at least since 1705 (Mahani Musa, 2008: 27). The work of Mahani Musa in my opinion was very important in giving the groundwork of re-exploration of the history of Pulau Pinang through the lens of the native and using the anti-colonial approach.

Nakhoda Intan and Datok Janatun: The Early Malays of Pulau Pinang

Before the arrival of Francis Light, Pulau Pinang was not a mere island which was visited by local Malay fishermen from time to time. Captain Walter Alves in 1763 drawn a map which marked a town area between Batu Uban and Datok Keramat area. This is a clear indication that the island indeed was populated by the natives. Mahani Musa explained that the first port established in Pulau Pinang was Batu Uban, this port pre-date the port established by Francis Light at Tanjung Penaga which was later renamed as George Town (Mahani Musa, 2008: 28-29).

The population area of Batu Uban was opened by the Malay from Sumatera. According to Mahani Musa, the establishment of Batu Uban was done by Raja Nan Intan Ibni Almarhum Tengku Pateh Sebatang, known locally as Nakhoda Intan. Other notable early Malay in Pulau Pinang was Nakhoda Intan younger brother, known as Nakhoda Kechil. His younger brother

was among the early Malay that Light met four days after his landing. Although the exact date of the establishment of Malay population in Batu Uban are not known, historian estimated that the Malay population in Batu Uban was established between 1710-1734. As Nakhoda Intan was responsible for Batu Uban, Nakhoda Kechil was the early Malay leader that manages Tanjung Penaga. After meeting with Light, he established a good relation with the British East India Company (EIC). He was then tasked to control the flow of armed Malay men to the island by the British (Mahani Musa, 2008: 29-31).

Nakhoda Intan was a pious Muslim, due to this, Batu Uban was regularly visited by the Sultan of Kedah and also various Arabic scholars. Nakhoda Intan was recognized by the Sultan of Kedah at that time as the leader for the Malay people in Pulau Pinang. The early Malay in Pulau Pinang depended on agriculture as their main economic activities. Lands were developed and cultivated for paddy, sugar cane, coconut, and fruits (Mahani Musa, 2008: 32).

The second important Malay leader in Pulau Pinang before the advent of colonialism was Datok Janatun. He was hailed from Pagar Ruyong, and came to Pulau Pinang with his relative, Datok Maharaja Setia and 180 of their followers. The story of Datok Janatun was very similar to Nakhoda Intan. After arriving at Pulau Pinang, the Sultanate of Kedah has given him 100 acres of land from Batu Uban to Gelugor. This gift was an act of gratitude to the people of Pagar Ruyong which helped Kedah in their struggle against the Siamese. The opening of this new land was done in 1759. Beside agriculture, Datok Janatun also involved in various trade which elevated his social status among the Malays (Mahani Musa, 2008: 33-34).

Beside these two important early Malay leaders in Pulau Pinang, Mahani Musa in her studies also discussed various areas and villages around Pulau Pinang which was established by the Malays. For example, Pah Kechil, Jamaluddin, and Nakhoda Che Salleh which opened Permatang Damar Laut. Nakhoda Seedin and Panglima Long opened Teluk Kumbar. Lebai Tampak opened Balik Pulau and Haji Brunei opened Bayan Lepas. From her study, Mahani Musa concluded that the Malay has established a permanent settlement in Pulau Pinang before the arrival of Francis Light in 1786. They govern the place with their own system and was part of the Kedah Sultanate (Mahani Musa, 2008: 36-38). These early Malays were absent in the colonial writing. Their neglect gave a false pretense that someone from Suffolk was the founder of Pulau Pinang. Reading the new streams of anti-colonial history gave us a clearer picture of the real history, one that has peel off the colonial narrative which downplay the native.

Revisiting Pulau Pinang History

The history of Pulau Pinang is a living history, the battles of the narratives is still waging between the colonial interpretation and the anti-colonial interpretation. Part of the reason for the re-emergence of the narrative dispute is political. In June 2023, Kedah Chief Minister, Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor repeated the claim that Pulau Pinang belongs to Kedah sparking a nation-wide controversy. The claim was made following a water dispute between the two states where Pulau Pinang asked Kedah to cease logging activity in the Ulu Muda Forest reserve to ensure that the water catchment area from which Pulau Pinang drew its water supply was safeguarded.

Following the controversy, an article was published by Predeep Nambiar in the online portal *Free Malaysia Today*, where he provided an account of the Pulau Pinang history. The historical account follows pretty much the colonial narrative. It reported that prior to the arrival of the country trader, Francis Light, Pulau Pinang was “a vast jungle covering nearly 277sq. km. with a population of 58”. The article then cited Ranjit Singh Malhi who mention the Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1791) as a basis for the East India Company to occupy Pulau Pinang. Then another treaty was signed in 1800. The article contended that all the treaties lost relevance when the British added Pulau Pinang into the Strait Settlement under their direct administration

in 1826, the settlement was then designated as a crown colony under direct British rule in 1867 (Free Malaysia Today, 2023). This is the standard colonial narrative of the history of Pulau Pinang. The colonial narrative also perpetuated by popular culture, an article in conjunction with the George Town Festival (GTF) for example, featured that the Eurasians that was invited by Francis Light need to be given the founding status due to their role in Pulau Pinang. GTF however has forgotten the earliest community in the island prior to Light and his invitation (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 37). Other state apparatus also can be seen promoting the myth that Francis Light founded the island, this can be seen for example on the display on the official websites of Pulau Pinang government agencies (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 10-11). For example on the official website of Penang Port Commission under the section of “History Penang Port”, before the coming of Light, Pulau Pinang was said to be a “harbour for pirates”, the Penang Port Commission went on to write that “Captain Francis Light, known as the founder of Penang” (www.penangport.gov.my). The history section on the official website was clearly full of colonial tone where before the coming of the European, the place was denigrated as harbour for pirates and then went on to credit Light as the founder of the island.

For political reason, some quarters also refused to recognized that the national history and identity is rooted in the Malay history. They reasoned that if they accepted this history, it will affect their position as Malaysian citizen. Worse, they think, accepting the Malay history as the national root will render them as a second-class citizen (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: xxiv). They also think that by celebrating the British country trader as a founder of Pulau Pinang, they are celebrating their origins and the beginning of multiculturalism. By doing so, they are relegating the indigenous population pre-1786 as pre-history (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: xxvi). According to Ahmad Murad, the continuation of popularizing this colonial history is an extension of the imperialist project (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 7). I would argue that this is not the case, we should accept history as it is, history should not be weaponized to marginalized any quarters. It should be educational and become a tool for respecting each other.

The real history, however, is not that simple. For this, I wanted to discuss the history of Pulau Pinang from an anti-colonial perspective. This perspective does not seek to legitimize British occupation of Pulau Pinang like the standard colonial narrative, instead, it wanted to deconstruct them. Among the literature on this subject, I found that the book titled *The Avatar of 1786: Decolonizing the Penang Story* by Ahmad Murad Merican was the best book to re-examined the Pulau Pinang history. To this book, I will cast my discussion.

Pulau Pinang has long been noted in voyages, travel, and maps prior to 1786. If we look into the 15th century map in Chinese sources, Pulau Pinang was marked and denoted with various names including “Bin Lang yu” and “Pin lang hsu”. James Lancaster, an English Captain sailing in 1592, marked Pulau Pinang as “Ilands of Pulo Pinaom” or “Ilands of Pulo Pinaon”. Peter Floris, sailing between 1611-1615, marked the island as “Pulo Panying”. The name of Pulo Pinaom also appeared in the Dutch map in 1595 and 1606 (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 56). All these records were solid proof that the name of the island has been in existence for a long time.

Before the arrival of the Europeans, Ahmad Murad Merican contended that the island already populated by indigenous people and had a functioning society. He previously established this fact in his book *Batu Uban: Sejarah Awal Pulau Pinang* (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: x). Batu Uban, Ahmad Murad contended, was not only a Malay settlement, it was also a port and town in the early 1700s, which dated much earlier than Tanjong Penaga (now Georgetown) (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: xxi). Batu Uban was marked as “a town here” in a map sketch by a British voyager in 1763, 23 years prior to the arrival of Francis Light. In fact, Batu Uban has already had a mosque built in 1734, 52 years prior to the arrival of Francis Light. Note that Batu Uban was marked as a “town” not a village or *kampung*, which mean that the island has been developed prior to the arrival of Francis Light. It was the center

of international activity attracting traders from Sumatera and Hadhramaut (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 50).

The early settler in Pulau Pinang according to Ahmad Murad was of Minangkabau decent. The settler traveling to Pulau Pinang was part of the *merantau* tradition where people migrated in between Malay Archipelago to build a new and better life. Because of the absence of written record of this early settlement, writing the local early history was a challenge (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 5). But the traces still can be found from artifacts, relics, genealogies and oral recollection. One of such sources, brought to light by Ahmad Murad was the genealogical writing of Abdul Aziz Ishak in his book *Mencari Bako* (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 68-77). The people of Minangkabau has long influenced the Malay Archipelago, as two nations subsequently emerged, Malaysia and Indonesia, the two nations which shared much of their culture, histories, ethnicities, and identity together subsequently developed separate history with occasional intersection and competing claim (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 57).

Among the settler prior to the arrival of Francis Light were Nakhoda nan Intan and Dato' Jenaton. Both of them was given land by the ruler of Kedah at that time, Sultan Muhammad Jiwa (1710-1778). This is a clear indication that Pulau Pinang was in fact part of the Kedah Sultanate (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 11). The descendent of the early settler such as Nakhoda nan Intan and Dato' Jenaton subsequently populated Pulau Pinang, they also intermarried and spread into Kedah, Perak and other state in the peninsular.

For Ahmad Murad, what Francis Light did was an act of criminal where he stole Pulau Pinang from the Sultan of Kedah (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: ix). Contrary to the colonial narrative which wanted to disconnect the indigenous history, Pulau Pinang was neither leased, granted, or ceded to the British by any written agreement or treaty in 1786 (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: xi). Instead, Ahmad Murad argued that what happen in 1786 was in effect the conquest of Pulau Pinang (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: xv). Therefore, it cannot be the case that Francis Light "founded" Pulau Pinang in 1786, nor can it be said that the history of the island began on the same year. According Francis Light the founding status of Pulau Pinang is the Eurocentric narrative to legitimize British illegal occupation of the island (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: xiii). The legality (or illegality) of the acquisition of Pulau Pinang was also discussed by Ahmad Murad. Because there is no treaty signed on the acquisition, according to Alfred P. Rubin, the British find it difficult to find any ground to apply any recognized system of law to govern Pulau Pinang as the act was foreign to any concept of international law. The act was not supported by any legal underpinning and can be concluded as a conquest and in violation of law (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 28-29). Pulau Pinang was in fact a part of Kedah before the arrival of Light. The history of Kedah can be trace back to an ancient kingdom in the second century (Ahmad Jelani Halimi, 2008: 100-101). In fact, it was argued that Kedah was the oldest Malay state in the peninsular (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 65). To deny this, was in fact, a betrayal of history.

Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Abdullah Mukarram Shah (1778-1798) claimed that the sultanate did not give the island away to the British, instead, the sultanate gave permission to the British to occupy the land and help protect Kedah from Siam. This narrative is consistent with the memory of the descendent of Sultan of Kedah including Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah (1804-1845) and Sultan Badlishah (1943-1958) (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: xvi). In the postscript of his book, Ahmad Merican bring to light the correspondence between Francis Light and Sultan Abdullah of Kedah (1778-1798). It is clear from the letters that the initial request by Francis Light was not to occupy Pulau Pinang or request to be the administrator of the island. Instead, Light on behalf of EIC only requested to build a harbor to repair boat and replenish their supplies. What was requested in the word of Sultan Abdullah (1778-1798) was:

“...tempat singgah baiki kapal perang tiada dipinta hendak buat negeri...”
(Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 98)

Sultan Abdullah (1778-1798) gave Francis Light permission to settle in Pulau Pinang on the condition that EIC protected Kedah from external attack by land or sea. In fact, Sultan Kedah sent many letters to EIC Governor-General via Light to finalize the term and condition especially pertaining defense. Unfortunately, EIC in Bengal did not give any conclusive reply pertaining the condition despite years of negotiations (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 95-101). From the letters, it is obvious that there is no treaty between EIC and the Sultan of Kedah because EIC never expressly agreed to defend Kedah in case of outside attack. What we have in 1786 only correspondent letters with no conclusive agreement between the two parties. If we looked at the letters after 1786, we can understand that Light did not fulfil his promise to give Kedah protection, and Sultan Abdullah (1778-1798) keep on asking for this protection. For example, in 1791, Sultan Abdullah (1778-1798) wrote:

“...my friend (Francis Light) did not include in his letter four items, this is inconsistent with my friends previous letters. Firstly, the promise that in the case of an attack from the sea by an enemy, my friends will give orders to fight the enemy. In case of insufficient provision of foods and financial needs, I will assist in providing them” (MS 40320/9, f.5).

Despite this, the Sultan of Kedah maintained a good relation with Francis Light and always initiate letters to him with praise. Kedah also continued to trade with Pulau Pinang. Among the item supplied to Kedah from Pulau Pinang was opium (MS 40320/9, f.113). To understand why Kedah was eager to seek protection from EIC, one need to understand the geopolitical tension at that time. This can be understood according to Ahmad Murad in the work of Rollins Bonney in 1971, *Kedah 1771-1821* which we had touched in the beginning of this paper. According to Bonney, Kedah had gathered intelligence that the Burmese was preparing to attack Siam in 1785. The Sultan at that time anticipate that the Burmese will be victorious, in order to protect Kedah, he reasoned that he should side with the Burmese. But equally, Siam also will demand from Kedah men, arms, and supplies. If Kedah complied with Siam, the Burmese will seek revenge on her, if Kedah assisted the Burmese, Siam will also seek revenge on her one day (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 20-21 & 46). This was the backdrop of why Kedah is seeking assistance from EIC, Kedah was in a precarious situation. Francis Light understand this situation and used the opportunity to extract Pulau Pinang from Kedah without giving any express agreement to defend Kedah either from Siam or the Burmese.

Reading Bonney, Ahmad Murad concluded that Pulau Pinang was in fact robbed from the Sultan of Kedah. Taking possession of Pulau Pinang from Kedah without a treaty in 1786 also led to some historian such as Cheah Boon Kheng described the act of Francis Light as an illegal occupation (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: xxiv-xxv). If there is no legal basis of the occupation in 1786, on what ground Pulau Pinang became a British colony? Further evidence that Pulau Pinang was in fact part of Kedah was the agreement in 1800, in which Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Dhiauddin Mukarram Shah (1797-1803) agreed with Sir George Leith Baronet to lease Pulau Pinang for 6,000 in Spanish currency and 4,000 for Seberang Perai (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 90). It was clear that Pulau Pinang was never ceded, it was merely leased. As per standard convention, once the leasing ceased, the property should be returned to the rightful owner.

Not only that EIC refused to guarantee protection to Kedah in a formal treaty, when indeed Siam invaded Kedah in 1821 and expelled the Sultan, EIC did not assist Kedah. EIC indeed has betrayed Kedah and was not true to their word through the letter they sent to the

Sultan via Light. The betrayal created a controversy in the Strait Settlement until 1845, the claim made by Sultan of Kedah about the betrayal of EIC was supported even by Europeans at that time including John Anderson, Robber Fullerton, and Stamford Raffles (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: 24). The invasion of Kedah by Siam in 1821 boosted the population of Pulau Pinang as many fled the brutality and persecution perpetrated by the Siamese. In short span of time between 1820-1842, the population of Pulau Pinang increased significantly, significant population increase also observed in Seberang Perai in the same period (Siti Noor Hafizah, 2024: 51).

When Siam invaded Kedah in 1821, the British warned the Sultan of Kedah not to attack Siam or interfere with Siamese control of Kedah. This warning however did not deter the Sultan from taking his land back. In 1831, the Sultan of Kedah managed to take back Kedah briefly before being pushed back by the Siamese in the same year. On 03 April 1837, the Sultan of Kedah wrote to the governor of Pulau Pinang that the sultanate will fight to take back his land and repel the Siamese, the sultanate told that the British in Pulau Pinang, Singapore and Melaka should not impede this effort. The sultan was confident that without the British interference, they will regain Kedah back from Siam (Siti Noor Hafizah, 2024: 53-54). In 1843, Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin of Kedah (1803-1845) was restored and reign at Kota Kuala Muda, later Kubang Rusa was restored to Kedah. But the invasion also means that Kedah lost her territory, Perlis breakaway from Kedah and become an independent state while Setul remain under Siamese control (Winstedt, 1920: 35).

The history of the taking of Pulau Pinang from Kedah cannot be seen as an isolated incident, it is in fact a product of its time, the analysis must take into account the significant role played by EIC. Pulau Pinang is not the first territory that EIC was interested in. In his book, Ahmad Murad discussed the role of EIC in “monopoly, trade, and plunder”. The seizure of Pulau Pinang, and before her, India, was not done by the British government, but by a small unregulated private company controlled by Robert Clive (Winstedt, 1920: 44). In 1859, EIC’s Indian possessions was nationalized and put under the control of the British Crown. Soon after, Pulau Pinang, along with the Malay States were also brought under the control of the British Crown (Winstedt, 1920: 48).

Some people try to argue that Kedah was not an independent state and was the vassal of Siam, this argument was an attempt to delegitimize Kedah from exercising her sovereign claim over Pulau Pinang.² But this argument fell apart when we look at the appointment of the Sultan of Kedah. According to Ahmad Murad Merican, no approval was needed from Siam on the appointment of the sovereign, except following the Burney Treaty 1826 where Siam attacked Kedah after Kedah refused to assist Siam against the Burmese. Kedah also has a full authority to apply her own law and custom, separate and distinct from Siam (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2023: xvii-xviii). From this discussion we can understand that Pulau Pinang was indeed a part of Kedah Sultanate before it was taken illegally. The island was populated by the native Malays prior to the arrival of European vessels on its shores. The population exercise their local custom and laws at the same time engage in trading and agricultural economic activities.

Conclusion

Critics of the anti-colonial history would argue that its perspective is infused with the Malay nationalist ideology. They will argue that the insistence on the re-establishment of the historical narrative of indigenous Malay to their ancestral land is divisive in the current multi-cultural society. This paper would very much agree that this could happen, especially in the current climate in politics where identity politics take center stage. Identity can become a tool for division in society. But this paper would contend that the mainstream colonial narrative is also divisive, not only that, it is also not true and most importantly, dishonest.

This paper has shown that a much more honest and accurate history can be achieved by peeling off the colonial bias. Using Pulau Pinang as a case study, this paper found that the colonial writing always favoured a Euro-centric views although sometimes this was not explicitly written. This pattern can be detected by analyzing what was omitted in the historiography. By using the work of Mahani Musa and Ahmad Murad Merican, this study finds that indeed Francis Light was not the founder of Pulau Pinang. Prior to 1786, Malay population has been entrenched in the island. They were governing by local system that was part of the Kedah Sultanate sovereignty. Among the notable early Malay leaders in Pulau Pinang were Nakhoda Intan and Datok Janatun. Their names were omitted in the colonial and mainstream historiography to give credence that someone from Suffolk was the founder of Pulau Pinang. By using the anti-colonial perspective, a much more holistic history which accurately includes the native can be achieved.

Endnotes

1. There are multiple of countries that have a “Look East Policy”, India, a country formerly colonized by the British is a good example. Indian’s look east policy was initiated in the early 1990s and emphasized Indian ties with Southeast Asia. See G.V.C. Naidu. "Whither the look east policy: India and Southeast Asia." *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 2 (2004): 331-346.
2. The view that Kedah was a vassal state of the Siamese Kingdom was expressed by Thai historian such as Thongchai Winichakul. His view was propagated by Predeep Nambiar on the online portal *Free Malaysian Today*. See Predeep Nambiar “Kedah had autonomy despite being vassal state of Siam, says historian”. *Free Malaysia Today*, 06 November 2021. Link: <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/11/06/kedah-had-autonomy-despite-being-vassal-state-of-siam-says-historian/> Accessed on 22 September 2024. Other writer that opined that Kedah was a vassal of Siam were Wan Arfah Hamzah and Ramy Bulan, see Ahmad Murad Merican *The Avatar of 1786.*, p. xvii.

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