

Penana and the Indian Ocean abstracts



Gathering “Knowledge” in the Bay of Bengal: The Letters of John Adolphus Pope, 1785-1788

Barbara Watson Andaya, University of Hawai'i

In 1992 the poet and independent researcher, Anne Bulley, published the letters of a youth named John Adolphus Pope who at the age of fourteen became Third Officer on an English country ship, the *Princess Royal*. These letters have been little used by historians of Southeast Asia, but they are an extraordinary rich source for this period. On his arrival in India Pope was recruited by the Orientalist, Sir William Jones, to collect information and specimens of places he visited. Beginning in December 1785 and ending in September 1788, his letters to his friend George, provide a personal view of trading operations in ports stretching from Madras, Kolkata and Mumbai) to Rangoon (Yangon), Aceh, Penang, Kedah and ultimately China. Drawing on the books available to him, the information supplied by fellow country traders, his own observations and particularly the material supplied by local informants, Pope's letters offer intriguing insights into the ways in which a younger mind determined the kind of knowledge that was useful and worthy of transmittal. Written at a time when British ascendancy was an ambition rather than an actuality, his opinions and attitudes highlight an environment where competition could reinforce European bigotry and prejudice, but where the need for commercial co-operation could also foster genuine cross-cultural communication.

Introduction to the CenPRIS Ocean Research Cluster - ORES

Azhari-Karim, Universiti Sains Malaysia

The initial main theme of CenPRIS's ocean research cluster is "connecting oceans" - an allusion to CenPRIS's eventual focus on the Straits of Malacca as a body of water or maritime space that connects its littoral states - Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore - with the larger ocean space, the Indian Ocean. Focusing on the maritime potential of nations represents the other principal component of CenPRIS's ocean research cluster. The development of the "CenPRIS Ocean Index" will measure the level of utilisation of a nation's maritime resources and act as a policy planning instrument within Malaysia's new Ocean Policy. Another research project under the cluster will examine the development of Penang as a knowledge hub in the Straits of Malacca region. A third project that will build upon the two research frameworks is on the governance of ethnic and bio-diversity along the Straits of Malacca, examining in greater detail the importance of sea passageways. For the governance of diversity, the participation of the natural sciences - marine biologists, oceanographers and other scientists - will bring more depth to a complex field that demands an interdisciplinary approach.

Trade and Traders: Economy and Cultures between South India and the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia

Badriyah Haji Salleh, Universiti Sains Malaysia, retd.

Archeological findings in Lembah Bujang in Kedah and its surroundings show that trade between these areas and India has long been established even before the beginning of the Common Era (CE). Religious artifacts excavated from the sites denoted that trade was not the only objectives of the Indian traders, but also their commitment to spread their beliefs. Local beliefs blended easily with the new influences creating new kinds of cultures. Different periods of time and different dynamics of trade go hand in hand with the spread and syncretism of dominant religions of the different times. Such phenomenon became more significant from the 18th century until the present, especially when Indian traders from the south brought along their Islamic influences. This can easily be illustrated by the dominance of Indian Muslim traders in the west coast of peninsular Malaysia, especially in Penang after the occupation of the island by the British. These traders domiciled on the island and became part of the most influential population that also shaped the economy, politics and social characteristics of the island in particular and in the peninsula generally .

Collaborations and Contestations: The South Asian Commercial Networks in Penang in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Jayati Bhattacharya, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

The gradual penetration of the European powers into the Indian Ocean and the Pacific brought about many fundamental changes in the inter-regional networks in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. On the one hand, the complexities of power relationships facilitated the emergence of new classes of people like the "dubash" (interpreters) initially small-scale merchants who later assumed positions of considerable financial significance. On the other hand, the clamour for territorial and commercial dominance among the European powers led to decline of earlier important ports and gradual emergence of new ports and entrepôts. China's trade expanded rapidly, but a thriving India-Southeast Asian trade altered its course to feed into the China trade. Along with this was the rapidly increasing entry of European entrepreneurship and capital and consequent rise of European settlements.

British domination in the Indian Ocean realm altered the structures of trading commodities, networks and technologies and led to the emergence of new commercial centres like Penang and Singapore. The heydays of Malacca and the Malayan archipelago were over and shifting paradigms of trading networks and commodities brought about economic, political and social contestations and collaborations in the new space. Rising to prominence at the end of the eighteenth century, Penang was directly connected by British administration to the Indian subcontinent. Raffles' advent of Singapore in 1819 and eventually shifting the seat of political administration of the Straits Settlements to the new entrepot in 1832, diminished its political significance to certain extent, but Penang continued to remain as a colourful confluence of Asian and global mercantile bodies till the Japanese occupation in the 1940s.

The new wave of transnational mobilities linked by the British political hegemony across the Bay of Bengal created new areas of interactions and accommodations. Set in this trajectory, the paper will examine the South Asian merchant networks and diasporic settlements in Penang in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The political and economic nexus of these merchant networks with the colonial powers as well as with other ethnic commercial networks will be the main focus of study. The research thus seeks to draw attention to the colonial commercial connectivities in the Bay of Bengal region and contribute to the larger scholarship on Indian Ocean studies.

Looking East, looking West: Penang as a Knowledge Hub

Hans-Dieter Evers and Solvay Gerke, Universiti Sains Malaysia

Penang has always been a focal point, absorbing knowledge (and popular culture) from civilizations to the East and West. In modern Penang the pattern of cultural contacts has changed over time. Research institutes and universities in Penang cooperate with foreign partners to produce research papers and reports. Based on an analysis of joint research output, the changing international position of Penang as an emerging research hub will be analysed. The paper will show that international cooperation has increased considerably between 1970 and 2010, but that there has also been a remarkable shift from European, Australian and American partners to East Asian and to South Asian partners. The latter will be analysed in greater detail to show the development of Penang as an increasingly important Asian knowledge hub. One of the highlighted results of our paper will be the increasing importance of research ties across the Indian Ocean.

The Maritime Potential of Penang

Hans-Dieter Evers and Sezali Mhd Darit, Universiti Sains Malaysia

Location at the entrance /gateway to the Indian Ocean and its long coastline provide Penang State with a substantial maritime potential. The maritime potential and its utilization by a maritime economy have been captured by an index, developed by the Centre for Policy Research and International Studies, USM. Using data of the CenPRIS Ocean Index the paper will analyse the competitive position of Penang in relation to Singapore, Johore, Melakka, Selanggor and Kedah. The question will be asked and at least partially answered, whether or not Penang has realized its maritime potential and has moved ahead of its competitors along the Straits of Malacca, serving as a gateway to the Indian Ocean.

Ensuring Safe Passage to and from the Prince of Wales' Island: An Historical Perspective

'English Penang', 1786-1846

Vivian Louis Forbes, University of Western Australia

Know that the basic qualities required by the navigator are intellect and much experience. When a man possesses both experience and intellect then he will be accurate and reliable.

Sulaimān al-Mahrī, ca. 11th century

It is often of the utmost benefit, and always very satisfactory, to Navigators to be possessed... of particular plans of the Places whereto they may, by chance or accident, be carried, as well in as out of the common tracks.

Alexander Dalrymple, 1777

The evils of having no sound administration of the colonial lights were early foreseen.

Alexander Gordon, 1845

Mariners who are equipped with accurate marine information, who maintain an effective seamanship at all times, and, who can rely on efficient aids to navigation are confident in delivering the cargoes that they are consigned to carry on ships. The early development of Penang's maritime trade can be traced from 1786. The natural harbour of Penang in an historical context was an attraction to mariners and shippers. The hydrographical surveying and charting undertaken by the English East India Company and establishment of aids to navigation in the Malacca Strait were major contributions to the enhancement and development of Penang harbour over the past centuries. This study alludes to the principal organisations and individuals that were instrumental in this development.

“...A Most Valuable Acquisition” – Penang & the East Indiamen: The Interaction of Ships and a City, 1786-1833

James Frey, History Department (South Asia), University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh

The acquisition of Penang significantly changed the way the East India Company conducted trade between South Asia and the markets of Southeast Asia and China. What the British dubbed Prince of Wales Island quickly became a rendezvous point and hub not only for the Company's fleet of East Indiamen, bound for the Far East, but also for “country trade” ships and indigenous vessels from Indian and regional ports. Penang furthermore became a supply depot and base for the Company's merchant fleet and navy, and for the Royal Navy. However, unlike other Indian Ocean ports, Penang's development was fully documented, while its early trade has been the subject of recent research by Professor Loh Wei Leng. My paper will focus specifically on evolving maritime connections between India and Penang during the period 1786-1833, examining the transformation of the entrepot from a fishing village into a major port capable of handling and provisioning several large ships simultaneously. In particular, I will explore the relationship between the port and visiting East Indiamen, addressing questions related to improvement of navigation, logistics, infrastructure, security, economic impact, and cross-cultural exchange. My paper is part of a larger project examining the East India Company's Maritime Service and its influence in the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, and East Asia during the period 1746-1833. The research presented in my paper is based on little-known, rarely-used primary sources, including the journals and logbooks of visiting ships. My paper contributes new information and new insights to the historical record of the connection between Penang and India during the city's early decades.

‘The British Historiography of Malay Music in the Nineteenth Century’

D. R. M. Irving, King's College London

Descriptions of Malay culture made by British observers in the nineteenth century often included observations on music, and sometimes music notation as well. One of the most extensive published collections of ‘Malayan airs’ – which appeared alongside Siamese and Burmese airs – comes from an article entitled ‘History of Tennasserim’ by Captain James Low of the Madras Army, in the fourth volume of *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1837. Low cited Che Draman, ‘an inhabitant of Penang’, as his source for the musical notations that he published, and implied that this person was a violinist. The publication raises numerous questions about the ways in which the melodies were notated, how local musicians were involved in the gathering of ethnographic data, and how Malay music was positioned in British colonial discourse, especially in terms of its comparison to traditions from neighbouring regions and across the Indian Ocean. This paper addresses such questions and explores some of the wider contexts of nineteenth-century British writings on Malay music, pointing out connections with ethnographic precedents established on the Indian subcontinent since the late eighteenth century.

'Fugitive images': Penang and the Indian Ocean, c.1840-1867

Andrew Jarvis, University of Cambridge

In this paper I intend to focus on mechanisms that drove photographic activity across the Indian Ocean. I will consider how the work of photographers might be recuperated from archives and utilised to illuminate broader patterns of activity (i.e. spatial flows of people, knowledge and technology) and facilitate comparisons concerning the subjects of representation and the density of photographic traffic from multiple radials to various 'marginal' locales. From the 1850s photographers traversed territories administered by the East India Company – including Penang – in addition to Crown colonies and 'extraimperial' polities, which were increasingly connected to British India and one another through networks of travel and communications. An exemplary practitioner is Frederick Fiebig, a German-born resident of Calcutta, whose photographic journeys in the early 1850s encompassed Bengal, Madras, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and the Cape Colony.

In the first part of the paper I will focus on a short-lived photographic society that was established in Moulmein in 1856. I will suggest that the existence of this society was contingent upon the waxing and waning fortunes of Moulmein itself: a small fishing village prior to its conquest by British India, Moulmein was initially administered from Penang, and became an important administrative and trade hub in the 1830s and 1840s.

I will suggest that photographic traffic in the 1850s and 1860s was diverted elsewhere, as *Leviathan Indicus* was refashioned and trade routes were reconfigured. (1) I will conclude with a discussion of early photography in Penang, with particular reference to its Indian Ocean connections and a photographic journey that John Thomson intended to undertake from Penang to the interior of Sri Lanka in 1865. I will attempt to recuperate the activities of Thomson's assistants, guides and porters during his peregrinations in Asia. (2)

- 1 J. S. Furnivall, 'The Fashioning of *Leviathan*: The Beginnings of British Rule in Burma', *The Journal of the Burma Research Society*, 29, 1 (April 1939)
- 2 John Thomson, *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China, and China, or Ten Years' Travels, Adventures and Residence Abroad* (London: 1875)

Maritime Trade and Economic development of Penang, 1786-1830

Tomotaka Kawamura, Faculty of Humanities, University of Toyama, Japan

My paper will examine the maritime trade, population, urban improvements and the development of spice plantation economy of Penang between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The main question is that to what extent the “Chinese century” influenced the socio-economic development of Penang and the hinterland. My argument emphasizes an Indian world of Penang situated near the Bay of Bengal and in the eastern part of the Straits of Malacca.

Penang experienced the attraction of long, regional and short distance merchants, traders, labours, and others. The rapid increase of population in early Penang brought the thriving Georgetown to the drastic transformation into a multi-ethnic immigrant society. The overwhelming majority of inhabitants were the Asian ethnic groups such as the Malays, Indians, and Chinese. The growing spice economy of early Penang also provided a great impetus for the movement of Chinese pioneers by opening the island to the growing markets in Western Europe and China. The immigration of the Chinese plantation labours from the Malay Peninsula and China was encouraged. The “Chinese century” was certainly an important factor for the understanding of Penang.

However, the most prominent population in early Penang was Indian merchants from the Coromandel Coast, Bengal and the Malay Peninsula. They were dealing mainly with a variety of Indian goods from the Indian subcontinent. Especially much closer trading links with the Bay of Bengal and the Straits of Malacca was much more important. On the other side, the economic improvement of the interior of the island required the constructions of infrastructure for the linkages between Georgetown and the hinterland. A serious problem was the shortage of labour for public works. As a solution, those unduly works were almost charged upon Indian convict workers transported from the Indian subcontinent. From the early history of Penang, therefore, the “Indian century” in the Straits of Malacca should also be taken into much more consideration.

Tamil Muslims in the Penang Port

Khoo Salma Nasution, Penang Heritage Trust

Evidence of trading connections between the Coromandel coast and Southeast Asia go back to ancient times. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Muslim traders entrenched in the Coromandel ports held sway over this sea trade. From 1786, the Chulia community of Kedah became a founding community of Penang, making this East India Company outpost the Southeast Asian port of choice for the regional Chulia network, operating between the Coromandel ports and those of Penang, Kedah, Aceh, Melaka, Singapore, Padang and Rangoon. This diaspora community extended in tandem with subsequent British and Dutch expansion, spawning and also consolidating satellite colonies in other parts of Southeast Asia. However, by the late 19th century, Indian shipping was doomed by competition from the steamship as well as British regulations which confined native vessels to the coastal trade.

The early 20th century saw the formation of two Penang associations reflecting the differentiation of roles within the Tamil Muslim society. The first group was made up of agents and purveyors, now subservient to British shipping, but still directly involved in the Penang port cluster and the business of moving peoples and goods across the Indian Ocean. Hybridised identities were more prevalent among the second group, which consisted of Muslim merchants and commission agents with long-term property and plantation interests in the British Straits Settlements and the Malay States in the Penang port hinterland. There was a close interface, and at times overlap, between members of the two associations.

Investing part of their wealth locally, the rich participated in shaping the townscape and spiritual landscape, reproducing but also diversifying their cultural practices. At the same time, social hierarchies were underpinned by the principle of colonial patronage of a few to enable the exploitation of the many. Adapting themselves within their various ecological niches, this diaspora came to be recognized by multifaceted identities which evolved through the ages - Chulia, Kling, Maraikkayar, Merican, Tamil Muslim, Jawi Pekan and finally Penang Malay.

Authority beyond the Ganges: The Politics of Predation on a Maritime Frontier

Simon Layton, University of Cambridge

From the late eighteenth century, Britain's pursuit of commercial and strategic advantage took the form of a dual proliferation east and west from the shores of the Indian subcontinent, along what the economic historian Om Prakash has described as 'the great arc of Asian trade'.⁽¹⁾ Penang was bartered for the East India Company just two years after the Commutation Act slashed Britain's import duties on tea, and in the decades that followed, rapid expansion over the Indian subcontinent provided the necessary exports for trade.

Yet Penang's position as a site of empire's extension, and as the farthest eastern outpost of the Company's government in India, changed dramatically as the old imperial mercantilism gave way to the world of private merchants. While it was the rise of Singapore from 1819 that ultimately reoriented trade and production across Southeast Asia, Penang retained a distinct importance as the Company's commercial role was dismantled in the early nineteenth century. It was within this maritime frontier that British commerce and authority finally diverged.

This paper explores this symbolic disjuncture in terms of the physical maritime space that separated these two parting spheres of empire, namely, the Straits of Malacca. In particular, it shows how a study of maritime predation and the attendant discourse of piracy can reveal the nature of imperial authority and its limits in the peripheries of Britain's Indian Ocean world. The increase of piratical attacks in the 1830s was arguably a product of Singapore, but its suppression ultimately lay with Penang and Bengal. I argue that maritime space presents historians with a field of conquest concomitant to territorial expansion, in which the discourse of piracy formed the ideological basis of extraterritorial authority against local actors and small states, for whom violence at sea was one of very few means of meaningful resistance.

1 Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India* (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5-6.

Being Modern in Penang: The Story of Muhammad bin Hanif *Rachel Leow, St Catharine's College, University of Cambridge*

This paper resurrects the ideas and life story of an almost forgotten Penang Malay intellectual, Muhammad bin Hanif. Little is known about Hanif, despite the fact that he appears to have moved in the circles of some of the most prominent Malay political and literary figures of late colonial Malaya, including A. Samad Ahmad, Ibrahim Yaacob and Ahmad Boestamam. Born some time in the 1920s, Hanif lived through the Great Depression and spent his prewar years working as a journalist in Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Ipoh; during the Occupation he moved among the radical Malay left and was actively involved in underground anti-Japanese groups. In postwar Malaya, Hanif published a series of unique and surprisingly modern texts, including a Jawi dictionary of politics and a serialized magazine on Malay economics.

My paper is a biographical history of Hanif's ideas: it seeks to place him and these texts in historical context. I suggest that Hanif's story provides a counter-critique to standard notions of Penang as a world of cosmopolitan, multicultural, globetrotting, Anglophone elites. There were other ways to be modern in Penang. Intellectually, Hanif was a what you might call a parochial cosmopolitan--but perhaps he was no less, or more, modern for it.

Introduction

Loh Wei Leng, University of Malaya, retd.

This introduction addresses the concept of a region, raising the question of the validity of regional studies. What is the worth of such a focus? Are there any common features and are they sufficient to bind the varied lands of a region together? It is suggested here that we should seriously consider Kenneth McPherson's proposition, that the Indian Ocean's "unique maritime trading system...provided the peoples of that world with an economic unity and *certain* cultural commonalities..." To substantiate this argument, ample evidence can be called upon to demonstrate that trade facilitates other exchanges - cultural, social, religious, intellectual and political - resulting in a shared history.

A second subject touches on some features associated with port cities, with Penang a prime example of a multicultural, cosmopolitan hub at the northern sub-region of Southeast Asia, well-placed to make the most of its connections with the Indian Ocean Region.

Assimilation and Acculturation of Malayali Diaspora in Penang

Rathi Menon

A Diaspora is created as a result of displaced immigrants, either by force and victimization or voluntarily migrating for better opportunities and quality of life, trying to maintain a collective identity by reference to the geographical space they have left. The interaction between communities with varied backgrounds leads to the exchange of culture, thereby creating alteration in the prevalent cultural pattern or acculturation. Such Diasporic cultural development, over a period of time, is often different from the original place of settlement as there would be conscious intervention from social groups, and also outcomes of mediation, negotiation and contestation within and between these self-defined social groups.

Although the immigrants tend to keep their culture of origin, they may tend to move towards the dominant culture (Penaloza, 1994), trying to integrate to the social climate of the host land by consciously keeping the aspects of both their original culture as well as assimilating the culture of immigrated land (Berry, 1980). The acculturation process involves a constant negotiation between here and there, the past and the present and also between the self and the other (Bhatia and Ram, 2000). Thus, when we address the complex matters of diaspora, we have to consider it as a social process, as a type of consciousness and also as a part of cultural production.

During the British occupation of India, Francis Light established a trading post in Penang in 1786. Many Malayalees, mostly Muslims, began voluntarily coming to Penang, primarily as traders. During 1789-1860, when Penang was a penal settlement, convicts were brought to Penang from Madras presidency, which included Malabar, as labourers. The second wave of immigration, which started in 1920, saw many educated young people immigrating to Penang. By 1957, it is said that Malayalees emerged as the second largest Indian linguist group in Malaya (Arasaratnam, 1970). Thus the Malayalee diaspora in Penang, by assimilating into the local population, contributed a great deal for the development and enrichment of the socio-political domain during its formation period.

The present paper is an attempt to study the acculturation process of Malayalees in Penang, and also to explore the factors that influenced the reconstruction and reproduction of identities and socio-cultural institutions.

Penang as an Andaman Littoral Social Model in the Mid-Twentieth Century

Michael J. Montesano, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

The social and sociological influence of Penang on neighboring commercial centers along the Andaman littoral in southern Thailand and southern Burma remains poorly understood. Even beyond the mid-point of the twentieth century, that influence continued to manifest itself in a variety of ways. In the West Coast southern Thai center of Trang, the activities of a leading citizen and Chung Ling old boy who married to his progressive approach to business a vision of urban social change and development reflect one example of this variety. Manat Thammarak's approach to residential real estate development reflected a pattern of reference to Penang in a realm and in a time neglected by historians of Penang's relationship with its hinterlands. That approach met ultimately with failure, a failure that illustrates the severing—at least temporarily—of the longstanding transnational or transcolonial lines of Penang influence up the Andaman littoral by the 1960s.

Indian Influence and Adaptation in the Bujang Valley: A Discussion of the Temple Structure

Mohd Supian bin Sabtu, Department of History, University of Malaya

Temple remains found in the Bujang Valley basically show adaptation of Indian practices that originated from India. The structure of the temples found was also accompanied by sculptures such as kala, makara, fences balconies, yoni, linga, somasutra and snanadroni. Up to now about nine of the temples have been reconstructed, i.e., temple sites 5, 8, 11/3, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23 and 50 while there are three sites which have not been reconstructed, i.e., temple sites 17, 23 and 31.

These temples can be divided into three streams: Hindu, Tantric and Buddhist. Most of the temples are not big and luxurious but simple and small in nature and in close proximity to each other. It is this temple structure which was adopted and expanded by the merchants. Indian artistic iconography is evident from a statue of the Buddha which has a variety of ornamental features of the Chola. Overall, Indian culture was subjected to local influences.

Climate, ecology and cultivation in early Penang

Christina Skott, University of Cambridge

By 1800 Penang had acquired a reputation as the 'healthiest spot in India', where Europeans could seek relief from the sweltering heat of the subcontinent. At this time, high hopes were held for the island's agricultural prospects. The climate and unique topography was even thought to allow for the cultivation of European vegetables, and both Francis Light and subsequent British officials were convinced that the island would eventually produce food to support both its inhabitants and calling ships. Whereas historians have described the early history of Penang primarily through the prism of economic, demographic and political developments, this paper takes a new look at the first decades of the settlement's existence by considering agriculture, land appropriation and the ecological effects of deforestation, as well as the role of Penang in plant transfer and colonial botany.

In many ways, the founding of Penang constituted a first encounter between Imperial Britain and Southeast Asia, and the first aim of this paper is to describe aspects of the uniqueness of Penang in the story of British expansion. The island's land resources were quickly divided through opportunist distributions. For its part, the East India Company decided to set up spice gardens with a view to making the island a second Moluccas, by breaking down the Dutch monopoly, and engaging botanists such as William Hunter to transport plants from the Moluccas to Penang. Many of the experiments to introduce new crops failed and contributed to soil exhaustion, but, as this paper argues, cultivation on the island of Penang achieved considerable success due to its reliance on more intensive techniques using Chinese methods of fertilization and irrigation.

Secondly, the agriculture and ecological struggle in Penang is considered within wider contexts of colonial botany, cultivation and climactic change in India, the Indian Ocean and beyond. The example of William Roxburgh's transfer of tropical plants from Penang to the Botanical Gardens at Kew, Calcutta and Madras clearly shows that that botanical interest in the region from the start was driven by utility and economic considerations. Seen in parallel with spice cultivation on the islands of Réunion and Mauritius, the story of Penang's early nutmeg plantations becomes an important case study of how colonial economies appropriated theories of plant acclimatisation as well as local farming methods. Furthermore, Penang was increasingly used as an example in claims that deforestation could cause climate change and desiccation, reflecting increasing imperial concerns over the ecological impact of human activity in the tropics.

Exploring connected histories through circulation and migration: the Tamil factor in Southeast Asia

Lakshmi Subramaniam, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta

The idea of connected histories has been in circulation for some time now especially in the context of maritime history and linkages in the early modern period. As an alternative to global history and world history, both of which emerged in the very specific context of reactions to area studies and Euro-centrism, connected histories seems to have the potential to interrogating both older geographies and also provide us with a framework of looking at spatial connections differently. One of the most important ways of understanding space and the porousness and flexibility it accommodates over time, is to historicize migrations and movements and to look at the multiple mechanisms that mobile communities negotiated space across time and how these often contested given political and juridical and even cultural boundaries. It is from this vantage point that the paper looks at the possibility of revisiting the Tamil factor in understanding anew south and south east Asian connections anew, of revisiting existing work to ask fresh questions

Chinese Mercantile Networks and Penang's Nexus of the Indian Ocean, 1820s-1890s

Wong Yee Tuan, Socio-Economic & Environmental Research Institute, Penang

The rise of Penang as a bustling regional entrepot and prosperous business centre in the nineteenth century was not solely attributed to the British magic formula – free trade and free port policies. It was more the result of a web of mercantile networks emanating from a group of merchant families who had made Penang as their base that linked the island not only to its surrounding states but also to India and China. In other words, Penang profited from a matrix of intra- and inter-regional connections. Much scholarly attention has focused on the networks linking Penang with its adjacent states in the Straits of Melaka and China rather than with the littoral states of the eastern Indian Ocean. My paper will redress this imbalance by recovering the networks connecting Penang with the Indian Ocean through a cluster of Chinese mercantile families, namely the Gan, the Lim, the Lee, the Khoo, and the Cheah families. It is incorrect to think that these Chinese mercantile families only spun networks to Chinese maritime world of commerce and migration. Their networks extending to the Indian Ocean were equally extensive and important. More interestingly, they were closely intertwined with the prominent Armenian and Merican families of Penang, who had long and established links with Calcutta, Madras, Colombo, Rangoon, and Moulmein. To illustrate how the Chinese mercantile families' networks reached out to the Indian Ocean, I will examine four significant linkages – maritime trade (shipping and flow of commodities such as areca nuts, piece goods, pepper, coconut, and rice), inter-marriages, business partnership, and education. By expounding these four linkages, I argue, the networks of hybridity and fluidity rather than essentialist and homogeneity linking Penang and the Indian Ocean together to form one of the most vibrant geo-economic regions in Asia.