Debunking myth of the sleepy fishing village

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Among Singapore’s early landowners – whose presence predates a treaty allowing Kuffies to set up a trading post here in 1819 – was Rajah 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. Rajah Fatimah, who was widowed soon after, not only owned her own boat but also had plots of land near present-day Beach Road.

She was one of several examples cited by Assistant Professor Lim Ann Tijoh 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 Rajah Fatimah’s land as “grazier (free),” indicating she owned it and that they could not charge her for it. This was unusual for 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 Perpsective, 1899-2009,’ pointed out that the local chiefman, the Temenggong, was in charge of the economic use of lands in Singapore up till 1834.

The British had jurisdiction over a limited area from Tanjong Malacca to Tanjong Katong. Singapore had at least three existing major settlement centres: the orangSelat were based at the Singapore River, the Orang Gelam and Orang Bihandin Kallang occupied the Kampong Glam and Kallang area, and others lived along the East Coast in areas such as Tanah Merah and Belak.

Many of them were involved in shipbuilding activities, Scottish sea captain Alexander Hamilton noted that Singapore in 1873 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 royalty and Straits Malay community, said Prof Imran. For instance, Raja Iksul and his nephew Raja Iskandar (present-day Bintan in Indonesia) depended on Singapore in the 16th 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 ginger and coconut. It was managed by the Temenggong and preceded the British arrival.

Malays, Bugis, Javanese and Touchew owned plantations.

Therefore the myth of the sleepy fishing village could have stemmed from the narrative that Singapore had fallen into silence after the death of Sultan Mahmod Shah II in 1859, which shifted the kingdom’s capital from the Arab River to Riau and reduced the role of Singapore’s sharifian master.

However, he said the examples he cited proved otherwise. He added that the people of Singapore, whoever by the term “native Singapore” or the ‘Halal at Saffa (a week of Malay literature),’ were already trading and having cultural and technological exchanges with the region before the British East India Company arrived.

Rajah Fatimah’s husband Karamat Chendera Pulai, a prince-merchant from the sultanate of Gowa (Makassar) who relocated from Java in the mid 18th century and 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 in-suit. 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.”

In summary, the Temenggong and Sultan Hussein Shah had signed an agreement with the EIC, they had done so with the knowledge of the recent violent and deadly colonial invasions of other European nations.

For instance, the British had dep- osited the Kuching and Java between 1811 and 1812.

The Singapore, we say their colonial experience and that our colonial experience in the region. When I hear this, my ears ring.

“We should see the EIC. If anything, the people of Singapore had heard of the latest news of European nations and were wary of it,”

Prof Imran said the port in the re- gion was illusory and non-existent without the intervention of con- tinent China. The British only entered one Chinese junk docked in Melaka when the Dutch held sway in 1646, while the Johor port played host to as many as 17 such Chinese trading vessels in the same year.

These non-colonial ports, based on Malay-Javanesie 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 Indians 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 their contributions and their for- mer settlement areas.

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