
Asian Seafaring Communities and the Blood-Red Seas:

Maritime Violence and the Waters Surrounding the Malay Peninsula, 1825-1885

SCOTT C. ABEL

Northern Illinois University

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Scott C. Abel is originally from New Jersey and became interested in maritime-related topics at a young age. He studied at Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland, which is a community proud of its maritime heritage. Later, he worked on his MA at Rutgers Newark and is currently working on his doctorate at Northern Illinois University. Scott's current project is to better understand the causes of economic transformation in seafaring communities during the 19th century in Malaya.

Throughout much of nineteenth century, seafarers sailing the waters off Malaya often experienced violence, as the era witnessed shifts in wealth and power. Although new technology and colonialism are associated with the pacification of the region in Southeast Asia's historiography, Asian seafarers in the region employed such forces for their own economic and political gain. Some Asians used institutions created supposedly to reinforce European power to conduct piracy, while others exerted influence on colonial structures to act within their interests by attacking their enemies and protecting their assets at sea

In the twilight of the golden age of Malay piracy, a court of law convicted five suspected pirates of capital murder in a case sensationalized by the Singaporean press. As they departed the courthouse for jail under heavy guard, a diverse crowd of people gazed upon them with great scrutiny. The court had convicted the pirates of attacking a *tongkang*, or a boat, and butchering the crew without mercy. One man had survived the fierce attack despite sustaining various injuries, losing his hands to the attacker's blade. The pirates had thrown the deceased crew overboard and left the handless man to die. Miraculously, he was saved from certain death by the crew of a steam launch under the command of Pilot Davies.

The murders so disgusted the pirates' fellow villagers that they handed them over to the colonial police to be tried in court. Such brutality had become unusual by the time of the trial in 1884, but this was hardly the case for much of that century.¹ This particular instance represented the end of an era dominated by maritime violence in the seas of Malaya as piracy became unac-

ceptable to most seafaring communities there. The villages used the colonial justice system to dispose of the pirates using state-sanctioned violence so peaceful traders no longer needed to fear those pirates.

The seafaring communities along the coasts and rivers of Malaya have long depended on the sea for a critical means of communication and trade with the rest of the world. Maritime violence thrived during the nineteenth century as people of various backgrounds took to the seas in search of plunder, threatening the livelihoods of other seafaring communities. Malayan society, with its weak political centers during the mid-nineteenth century, provided opportunities for pirates² to attack vessels vulnerable at sea. They attacked vessels throughout the waterways off Malaya with little likelihood of punishment by the authorities. Although scholars often associate colonialism and new technology with piracy's decline, these forces also strengthened pirates' effectiveness. This study will show that particular seafaring communities in or near major British colonial ports of the Straits Settlements exploited the

changes caused by colonialism to achieve greater success in their use of maritime violence from the period 1825 to 1885.

The geographic and chronological parameters of this investigation include waterways that became increasingly important to European powers and traders during the period of 1825 to 1885. The Straits of Malacca were a critical waterway in the Malay World with extensive trade flowing between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra. Another important waterway was the South China Sea of which the southwesterly part formed the shores of eastern Malaya. In Malaya, the British East India Company expanded first to Pulau Pinang or Penang in 1786 and later to Singapore in 1819, which placed the company in competition with Dutch interests in the region. The East India Company governed territory like a state but ultimately answered to the British government. This study examines maritime violence close to the shores of the states of Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, and Kelantan. The timeframe of this investigation commences after the consolidation of British authority over Singapore when no particular power controlled commerce in the aforementioned waterways. Although piracy in the waters off Malaya never ended, the year 1885 represents a time when piracy had already significantly declined. This work will focus particularly on instances of maritime violence related to the seaborne trades and vessels of the British Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore from 1825 to 1885.

This study will examine how Southeast Asian seafarers employed aspects of colonialism and Western technology for their own gain mainly through anecdotal evidence. Tacit agreements allowed particular Malay leaders to conduct piratical raids on commerce, while the colonial governments protected them for political and strategic reasons. Singapore's high volume of trade attracted merchants from throughout the region, which in turn lured pirates who threatened the government's legitimacy. The development of a new passport system gave opportunities to local seafarers to gain wealth and prestige. Technology from the West enhanced local seafarers' abilities to act in their own interests that occasionally included attacking colonial assets. Overall, Southeast Asian seafarers were able to take advantage of colonial institutions not only to defeat their enemies but also to raise their status in society. The next section will examine the relationship

between colonial authorities and local rulers in matters of maritime commerce and piracy.

Colonial Governments, Commerce, and Response to Piracy

Malay rulers, supposedly under the influence of British and Dutch colonial authorities at Singapore and Rhio-Lingga respectively, ignored piracy and in some cases, even participated in it. British officials questioned the promise by the Sultan of Lingga, a Dutch client, in 1831 to suppress piracy because a multitude of vessels sailed to Lingga with pirate booty and fitted out there for further expeditions. Witnesses alleged that the sultan's *perahu*, or sailing vessel, carrying his brother-in-law to Terengganu attacked a *sampan-pukat* or boat.³ British authorities wrote to the Dutch resident of Rhio, contemporary Riau, about the possibility that the Sultan of Lingga had ordered unprovoked attacks on vessels despite his pledge to cease such activity. The resident accepted the possibility that the sultan and the populations of the archipelagos of Rhio and Lingga engaged in such attacks, but that such allegations lacked sufficient proof of their involvement.⁴ Submitting to a colonial overlord thus meant protection from other powers in the region even if these local rulers disobeyed colonial policies regarding piracy during the early nineteenth century because of the weakness of European rule.

Malay leaders, including the *temenggong* in the British sphere of influence, also used the cosmopolitan port of Singapore as a base for their own piratical expeditions according to Dutch authorities. In response to the allegation that the Sultan of Lingga participated in piracy despite his promise to the contrary in 1831, the Dutch resident retorted that pirates hid in Singapore. The resident stated with certainty that the *temenggong*, residing at Telok Blangkah on the island of Singapore, engaged in piracy and ordered his associates in the Singapore harbor to gather intelligence for him on *perahu* departure times. His men attacked the particularly valuable vessels using gunpowder and shot purchased in Singapore. Having stolen the various cargoes, he sold the goods below market prices for funds to acquire more stores and to continue plundering the waterways of the region. The resident argued that piracy was more common near Singapore than his territory because the former enjoyed higher trade vol-

umes. He noted much of the islands' populace participated in piracy, which made its extermination quite challenging.⁵ Both the Dutch and British authorities knew of the complicity of their allies' involvement in piracy, but kept the relationships cordial for political reasons. Local rulers benefitted from piracy by allowing trade with them while acknowledging to the Europeans the evils of piracy as instructed. Piratical seafarers benefitted from the port of Singapore as it provided them with a unique concentration of weaponry and vulnerable prey relatively unprotected by local authorities.

A raja of Johor amassed a sizeable fleet and had material support from the merchants of Singapore despite the British government stance against the raja plundering vessels. Jadee, a mariner and warrior under a raja of Johor operating from a secret base near Cape Romania, recalled nostalgically from his time with the raja, "We were all then very rich-ah! such [sic] numbers of beautiful wives, and such feasting! but [sic], above all, we had a great many most holy men in our force!"⁶ The fleet of thirteen *perahu* bought weapons and supplies in Singapore, likely including brass cannons, and then attacked Chinese and Bugis vessels sailing throughout the archipelago.⁷ Plunderers of vessels at sea had a mutually beneficial relationship with the arms merchants who benefitted from the violence. Singapore profited from the sale of materials employed in attacks on shipping in the region despite attempts by the government to suppress piracy.

Societies such as Thian Tai Huey engaged in piracy near Singapore with near impunity because shipping converged on the port, which lacked sufficient protection for vessels outside its anchorage. For instance, a big group of Thian Tai Huey members assaulted a large Siamese vessel that was unable to reach the anchorage of Singapore and therefore remained in the straits off Tanjong Katong. During the night, the followers boarded the Siamese vessel by boat and slaughtered much of the crew. The Thian Tai Huey pirates loaded the cargo into their boats and retreated into the interior of the island with their plunder. Only four crewmen survived and reported the massacre to the police who investigated the vessel on orders of the magistrate. The stricken vessel had multiple decomposing bodies with various hack wounds lying on deck, while the culprits left much of the cargo scattered throughout the blood-drenched vessel. The police brought the vessel

to the anchorage and continued the investigation but failed in convicting anyone.⁸ The pirates gained from Singapore's commerce by attacking vulnerable vessels attempting to enter its anchorage. Groups such as the Thian Tai Huey ruthlessly exploited Singapore as a base for piracy to attack unsuspecting vessels in the vicinity.

Although piracy devastated the Chinese merchant community in Malaya, governments seemed incapable of effectively dealing with piracy, even when merchant vessels operated in convoys. In April 1833, pirates blockaded the harbor at the mouth of the Terengganu River. The Straits Settlements government responded inadequately even as reports emerged that pirates trapped four *sampan-pukat* loaded in total with \$200,000 worth of cargo.⁹ Three of the vessels escaped unharmed but the fourth came under attack; pirates forced the fourth vessel into the Terengganu River after killing the commander and nine of the crew, along with wounding five more. The local government fired on the pirates to keep them away from the vessel. In response, forty Chinese merchants on May 4 petitioned the Straits Settlements governor to protect Asian merchants from piracy. Piracy had been increasing at an alarming rate, especially on the east coast of Malaya where trade valued one million Spanish dollars a year. The governor ordered the schooner *Zephyr* to investigate the seas, but the pirates disappeared.¹⁰ The merchants hoped to take advantage of the British colonial presence for the protection of their trading vessels through a naval campaign against the pirates. The failure to prevent pirates from capturing valuable cargoes threatened the legitimacy of the colonial state because it failed to protect its inhabitants and their property. The Chinese merchants of Singapore needed the British authorities to clear the seas of pirates, while the Britons needed the Chinese to make Singapore prosperous. The occurrence of piracy on the Malayan east coast was so prevalent that even Chinese convoys were vulnerable to pirate attack.

Singapore's Bugis community also requested help from the Straits Settlements government in defeating the pirates so that it could trade with less risk. The chief of the Bugis *kampong* or village in Singapore complained in 1831 to the government about the twenty-two piratical *perahu* lurking not far outside the harbor at Pulau Tinggi. Most of these vessels were double-banked with oars that carried one hundred or more

men onboard. The pirates inhibited trade between Singapore and much of Southeast Asia with their attacks on seven trading vessels that sailed from as far away as Bali. Losses included the vessels, gold dust, diamonds, tin, and sarongs. Although three of the crews survived by swimming ashore once attacked, others perished or became slaves. The kampong chief criticized the British anti-piracy efforts as being inferior to the Dutch and threatened to leave Singapore for elsewhere if the government failed to act effectively.¹¹ Many merchants resided in particular ports because of their economic potential, such as the Bugis in Singapore, but losses from piracy became so bad that it threatened the economic viability of Singapore. If the situation failed to improve, Bugis merchants had the option of moving to Dutch territory, where the government was more vigorous in hunting down pirates. The issue of maritime violence posed such a great threat to various communities within Singapore dependent on maritime trade for survival that it pressed the government to place more effort in destroying piracy. One such method colonial authorities developed in response to piracy was a new passport system.

Development of a Colonial and Sultanate Passport System

The British colonial state in the Straits Settlements commenced the distribution of passports to all trading vessels departing from its territories as a means to better detect and stop piracy in 1836. By this time, piracy plagued the Straits of Malacca with the disappearance of untold souls, cargoes, and vessels, with pirates from the old Johor kingdom proving the most troublesome in the area to British authorities.¹² British authorities and Malay rulers overseeing ports in the Straits of Malacca region thus established a pass system for maritime traders. This entailed paperwork that included information on the destination of the vessel, the type and quantity of cargo, and a description of the arms onboard. *Nakhoda*, or masters of Malay vessels, received such passes and presented them upon inspection by marine patrols. Various states along the Straits of Malacca, including that of the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore, required that all trading vessels departing the port obtain and carry passes. Failure in presenting a proper pass to the authorities or other suspicious activities justified the detention of the vessel.¹³ The Straits Settlements enacted the passport

system as a means for tracing the legal ownership of cargoes, making pirates more vulnerable to naval patrols, which ultimately benefitted local seafarers and Malay sultanates. The passport system helped prevent piracy and apprehended suspected pirates by allowing for easier identification without excessively trampling on the rights of merchant vessels or extracting large fees from them in the Straits of Malacca and other waterways.

The new passports protected honest ship owners and their seafarers from accusations of piracy and saved the state time from unnecessarily determining the origin of cargoes. Passport systems gave an advantage to peaceful traders who had little to hide from British colonial authorities because the passes, in theory, prevented authorities from accusing merchants and crews of piracy without sufficient evidence. The rationale for the passport system concluded that if seafarers could not provide the correct passes, these seafarers had only themselves to blame for the detention of their vessel and cargo while authorities conducted an investigation.¹⁴ The colonial authorities required that vessels, owned by Chinese, Malays, and other groups, to carry authentic passports and documents. Passport systems, although hardly new to the Straits of Malacca, permitted European and Malay governments in the region to better track maritime trade and investigate incidents of piracy rather than extort traders for their cargoes as the Portuguese had done in the 1500s. The passport system allowed government officials to detain vessels that were potentially engaged in illicit activity and saved officials' precious time by providing an efficient means of narrowing in on suspicious traders.

The colonial and local governments employed a combination of military force and civil administration, including the development of a passport system, to protect local seafarers from piracy during the nineteenth century because strategies based solely on killing or capturing pirates proved ineffective. In 1836, Captain Henry Ducie Chads of HMS *Andromache* joined the counter-piracy campaign in the Straits of Malacca in coordination with the local government.¹⁵ Later that year and shortly after Captain Chads' campaign against the pirates, the Straits Settlements government initiated its passport program.¹⁶ The successes of military action alone proved temporary as pirates simply returned to their old bases when European military presence decreased.¹⁷ Local governments re-

quired policies aside from military force for the prevention of piracy in part because the British government decided against permanently stationing a significant naval force in the Straits of Malacca. The deployment of a Royal Navy warship suggests the failure of colonial governments to protect shipping and coastal villages from piracy. Subduing pirates in the Straits of Malacca in the short term permitted colonial authorities to establish long-term institutional measures to prevent further occurrences of piracy and protect seafarers from their attacks.

The British and Indian colonial governments' passport system hence developed in the wake of an anti-piracy campaign as a follow-up policy to suppress piracy in the waterways of Malaya without incurring too high of a cost at a merchant's expense. Although the Indian government commissioners considered the issuance of passes unnecessary, Governor-General George Eden, the head of India's Supreme Government and Baron of Auckland,¹⁸ insisted on the development of a pass system at the discretion of the Straits Settlements government. Importantly, the order gave colonial authorities the right to search vessels on the high seas for evidence of piracy. The governor-general also permitted the Malay authorities and Dutch authorities at Rhio to examine the passes to stop piracy. The Dutch governor-general in Batavia and various other Malay rulers approved similar measures.¹⁹ The British Indian government persuaded various states and colonies in Maritime Southeast Asia to adopt the passport system with relative ease. Aside from making the task of identifying pirates easier for colonial officials, the passport system, when various states in the region cooperated, protected the rights and property of seafaring merchants.

The creation of an effective passport system frequently required international cooperation. One particular incident highlighting this necessity concerned the Sultan of Terengganu and a Chinese junk that supposedly carried a British colonial passport. The incident exposed the need to gain international cooperation for the creation of an effective passport system. Governor H. J. Butterworth of the Straits Settlements wrote to Sultan Omar of Terengganu concerning the sultan's dispensing of justice toward twelve seafarers with a passport from Singapore. The sultan's men arrested the twelve seafarers on suspicion of piracy and brought their sinking junk into the harbor. The local

government released them to the Chinese community in Terengganu who claimed to know them, while it inquired with Singapore about the vessel and her crew. According to Butterworth, "...people came from Lingga to Trengganu [sic] who said that they were wounded and (their houses) burnt by the pirates of a junk and asserted that the 12 men who were under guarantee were the people who wounded them...because of a mark on his [one of the Chinese sailors] arm." Sultan Omar executed all twelve Chinese seafarers on the accusations of the Lingga islanders to the displeasure of Gov. Butterworth and likely the Chinese merchant community.²⁰ The implementation of the passport system thus required the cooperation of foreign powers including the Dutch East Indies, Malay sultanates, and seafarers of various national backgrounds because the passports were mere pieces of paper without foreign governments respecting their authority. The rather hasty executions of British passport carriers showed one reason why the British colonial authorities wanted more influence over the Malay sultanates such as Terengganu.

Merchants in the region found advantages to operating from colonial Singapore because they received additional protection from the British government and, to an extent, from the relative unfairness of the Malay sultanates' judiciary through the passport system. Butterworth's letter to Sultan Omar criticized him by stating "...these passports are indeed respected by all those who know our customs." The governor suggested that the Chinese resisted the sultan's patrols because they feared that the Terengganu patrol vessels were pirates. He claimed that Chinese from Hainan, the place of origin of the twelve crewmen, were not known for piracy. Butterworth encouraged continued cooperation between the colonial and Terengganu governments.²¹ The passport system offered merchant vessels a degree of legal protection from state naval patrols in the region. The sultanate likely executed subsequent crews convicted of piracy only after the local government waited for Singapore's response to passport inquiries, which benefitted those suspected of piracy. If masters of vessels received passports, they essentially took advantage of the British colonial system by seeking its protection from the arbitrariness of Malay governments' executions.

The differences between the judiciary of Terengganu and Singapore resulted in the latter needing to exert its

authority over the former to protect the interests and lives of merchants and seafarers. Governor Butterworth acknowledged to the sultan the existence of invalid passports, "...these passports are sometimes obtained from false sources..." and that the twelve Chinese seafarers executed for piracy likely carried false paperwork.²² Butterworth criticized the executions because the sultan did not check with the British Resident Councilor Thomas Charles in Singapore whose duty was to investigate the validity of passports. Had the sultan's government completed a thorough investigation, the colonial government would not have complained about the issue.²³ The inadequate judicial review in Terengganu disturbed the colonial government of Singapore because of the vulnerability of local merchants' lives and property in its waters. The seemingly arbitrary execution of passport-wielding merchants required the colonial government to interfere with Malay legal systems. Whether by design or circumstance, the passport system, once enforced, gave the Straits Settlements a fair amount of political power over the various Malay states along the Straits of Malacca. The system incorporated the British legal system into these states, because colonial officials found their legal systems lacking. The passport system gave the British Straits Settlements reason to interfere with the judicial process in Terengganu and prevent unfair executions of British subjects.

The Terengganu Sultanate lost portions of their sovereignty during the implementation of the passport system but continued with the system because its rulers suffered from pirate attacks. Cooperation with European authorities allowed a degree of protection of their wealth. During June and July of 1851, the Sultan of Terengganu dispatched his war *perahu* on counter-piracy patrols to protect merchant vessels from pirate attacks, which eventually led to the sultan's confiscation of the aforementioned junk and the arrest of the twelve crewmen.²⁴ Furthermore, the sultans of Terengganu suffered the loss of their own trading vessels. In 1832, around thirty or forty piratical *perahu* attacked the sultan's vessel of eighty tons burthen carrying a valuable cargo of coffee, pepper, and tin near Pulau Tinggi while en route to Singapore. The pirates slaughtered the crew and took the prize to Kemaman on the eastern side of the Malay Peninsula.²⁵ The Sultan of Terengganu found British governance of the Straits Settlements potentially advantageous as the

colonial officials returned the sultan's lost vessel when his government provided the necessary paperwork proving his ownership in 1835.²⁶ The strength of colonial and European navies yielded benefits to Malay rulers when they cooperated with authorities in Singapore. The sultan found working within the passport system advantageous, as did other Malay rulers, because it provided an avenue for the return of their lost vessels and the protection of trade.

Simultaneously, the Straits Settlements employed Southeast Asian seafarers for naval patrols and protected them from external legal actions. In the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements, a merchant named Lim Bee sued Jadee, the Malay commander of a British gunboat named *Emerald*, who had confiscated the former's boat and cargo during a counter-piracy patrol. Jadee had detained Lim Bee's vessel because he had an expired passport from another merchant. Sir William Norris, the Straits Recorder, made a judgment for the lawsuit regarding the vessel and its cargo in 1842.²⁷ Mr. Garling, the Resident Councilor and Chief Executive Authority of Penang, testified for the defense to maintain that Jadee had acted lawfully. The Sultanate of Perak, where Jadee had detained Lim Bee's vessel, had agreed to the adoption of the passport system a year earlier in 1841. Lim Bee departed Kurow, Perak while illegally carrying opium to Penang, some of which he attempted to throw overboard but which the crew recovered. The gunboat crew sent him to Mr. Ferrier, the local magistrate for his detention and eventual prosecution.²⁸

With the backing of the colonial government, Jadee brushed off the legal challenge to his prize, or a captured vessel and cargo, earned lawfully as a naval patrol leader and hence benefitted from the British passport system by enforcing British law near Penang. The recorder decreed that Jadee had sufficient cause for detaining the vessel and ruled in his favor with expenses to be paid by the plaintiff. The only caveat was that the government had to return the seized arms to the plaintiff, but Jadee and his crew kept their prize.²⁹ Norris ruled that Jadee acted according to the orders of the Indian government that instructed "the Commanders of the Gun Boat forming part of the Marine Establishment... to examine the passes of Native boats and to detain them in cases of suspicion."³⁰

Southeast Asian seafarers were important agents of the state during the early nineteenth century as they

filled critical roles necessary for the success of the colonies. The incentive of plunder lured experienced seafarers to the ranks of colonial establishment. Jadee used his position as a gunboat commander and the pass system to his advantage by confiscating the cargo whenever he apprehended smugglers. The colonial state, in turn, sanctioned the seizure because it needed people such as Jadee to enforce its authority. Additionally, the colonial state needed other advantages over local seafarers but a shortage of resources forced the government to rely on new technologies to increase its authority. In the next section, the study examines how colonial governments used such technology for their own gain and how local seafarers employed this same technology for the advancement of their interests.

Technology and Colonialism in British Malaya

Western technology played a vital role in strengthening the colonial mission in Malaya, but local seafarers also employed Western technology to their advantage. Steamboats played an important role in advancing British colonialism, but local seafarers also employed one for a piratical purpose in at least one incident. At the same time, Western firearms were so pervasive that colonial authorities had great difficulty in preventing local seafarers from obtaining them. Even fixed structures built to establish colonial authority such as light-houses and police stations were exploitable by local seafarers.

Steam-powered vessels played an important role in nineteenth-century empires as Europeans made them available in East Asia where they not only defied the winds and currents, but also challenged established political structures. Technology played a vital role in the formation of the British Empire and the projection of its power overseas by using technologically sophisticated gunboats and other vessels powered by steam. Few technological innovations were more potent for the spread of European empire during the nineteenth century than the development of the steamboat.³¹ The use of gunboats in Burma during the First Anglo-Burmese War between 1824 and 1826, along with the deployment of steam gunboats during the Opium War were critical because of their transport, communication, and combat abilities.³² However, steamboats possessed no will of their own and there was no inher-

ent reason why Asians could not use them to their own advantage when acquired from their manufacturers through colonial ports.

In Malaya, one instance of an attack on a British police station revealed that local Chinese employed Western technology for their interests at the expense of the colonial authorities. Police stations maintained colonial law and order and therefore overrunning one armed with Western technology signified a serious challenge to British authority. According to a colonial report from the magistrate of Klang in Selangor, Chinese pirates from Pinang armed with revolvers and rifles assaulted "the police station at Kota Shah at the mouth of the Perak River... on Sunday morning the 11th at 2 am" with "\$1500 taken together with one chest of opium valued at \$900." ³³ The Chinese gang's planned attack on the police station showed the usage of modern technology for their gain and to the detriment of the British imperial rulers. The police station's vulnerability to attack also showed the limits of British expansion in Malaya as the maintenance of authority relied on isolated posts with little chance of reinforcement in the event of a sudden assault. Certain inhabitants of Malaya exploited such weaknesses by employing available Western technology. The report showed how the colonial bureaucracy maintained order in colonial territory by using information regarding imperial assets and communications technology to learn about those who opposed British authority. The colonial bureaucracy responded more effectively because it was able to collect and distribute knowledge concerning their adversaries to the relevant people. The Klang magistrate wrote about the material losses and pertinent details about the attackers such as their ethnicity, weaponry, and likely means of transportation. He assessed the attack on the police station by the amount of property stolen. Local Chinese employed Western technology acquired from a colonial territory to raid a British police station, which showed to colonial officials the vulnerability of colonial posts in Malaya to assault.

In response to the attack on the police station, colonial authorities alerted officials along the straits to the possible presence of a piratical steamer. Colonel A. J. Perks' letter to the resident wrote, "I sent the Abdul Samad [government steamboat] with Inspector Cross onboard to Kuala Selangor yesterday afternoon to give timely warning there...." It also requested the light-

house keep at Klang to watch for those responsible for the “very daring piece of piracy.”³⁴ The government wanted to protect the coast against further depredations and apprehend the culprits by quickly alerting its agents in other states. The extent of British authority in Malaya often relied on the rapid delivery of intelligence about threats to its power, property, and people through magistrates and other officials separated by long distances with steamboats that quickly steamed from station to station.

The Indian government prevented the Straits Settlements government from sustaining firearm restrictions for commercial reasons, which allowed Southeast Asians to acquire Western weaponry. The accessibility of firearms allowed for groups, such as the group that attacked the police station in Kota Shah, to fight not only colonial authorities, but also local enemies throughout Malaya. Firearms become increasingly available in parts of Southeast Asia, especially in the major colonial ports such as Singapore, which discouraged the restriction of their distribution because of their importance to the local economy. During a Straits Settlements president’s meeting in Singapore on 2 March 1830, the Straits Settlements government had initially “resolved that- no person shall be allowed to manufacture gun powder or line arms without a specific license” in Singapore. Furthermore, a license would be available only if the manufacturer could provide security for the facilities.³⁵ The export of firearms became illegal without the consent and a written explanation from the police.³⁶ However, the Indian government overruled the colony, because regulation seemed futile as French and American merchants sold firearms in the region. Malay pirates at the time more commonly used brass cannons over muskets as well.³⁷ It became politically difficult for the Straits Settlements to control the firearms trade because of the demand for weapons and related materials. A robust British arms trade proved as important to the supreme government as piracy suppression, because of its economic significance. In this way, arms became more easily available to seafarers in Southeast Asia.

Despite the economic incentive, colonial governments in Maritime Southeast Asia tried to clamp down on firearms in a concerted manner for fear of violence. By the mid-nineteenth century, both men and women in Malaya of various ethnicities became proficient in the use of firearms from America and Europe. Singa-

pore attempted a ban on arms exports in 1863 but it lasted only a short while because of the importance of the arms trade to the region and to Singapore itself. In 1873, the Dutch East Indies persuaded Governor Sir Harry Ord to ban the export of arms to North Sumatra, which significantly damaged the arms trade in Singapore. The ban on exports, designed to assist the Dutch colonial government embroiled in the Dutch-Aceh War by clamping down on the arms trade in Aceh, lasted until 1900 when the Dutch colonial state was finally strong enough to deal with unrest.³⁸ The ease of accessibility to European and American weapons showed that Southeast Asians had the potential to employ Industrial-Era technology for their own interests even if such interests ran counter to that of the colonial authorities. The colonial governments of the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya thus recognized the necessity of restricting firearms for the sake of political stability.

At the same time, Southeast Asians did not necessarily need to own or operate Western technology themselves in order to use them for their own end. Instead, they were able to petition colonial and Malay authorities to employ such technology to eliminate their enemies and recover property. Al Mushrifah wal Mukazamah wrote, “Chinese pirates have already started robbing [boats] sooner than last year... and... the English and all the Malay kings [will] try their very best to drown those Chinese pirates because they have caused a lot of doom and destruction ...” to trade. Mushrifah continued, “If the steamship Hooghly can be sent there at this time [for] this matter [of piracy suppression], [we] would then go ask Mr. Governor to go inspect the boat[s] [at sea] in case they already entered our friend’s state.” He continued, “...if the [pirates’] boats are no longer present in Terengganu....” Mushrifah and his associates planned to obtain passes for trade.³⁹ Malays in Singapore by the mid-century became more reliant on colonial authorities with their highly sophisticated technology. Malay sultanates also worked to reduce or eliminate pirate threats to shipping. The cooperation of the Malay and British authorities in the campaign against piracy benefitted many locals by securing waterways for trade by merchants who eventually needed less security than during the heyday of Malay piracy.

Lighthouses and other maritime infrastructure, often with benign appearances, strengthened the power of the colonial and provided economic benefits to seafar-

ers. Eric Tagliacozzo argued that lighthouses, buoys, and beacons played an important role in state development during the second half of the nineteenth century for British and Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia. They were important for an overall colonial strategy that employed maritime technology to improve their control over Insular Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ He argued that lighthouses provided the colonial states of the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya with observation points that lit up the archipelago and served as symbols of colonial authority.⁴¹ Lighthouses provided for colonial development in regions difficult for the colonial capitals of Singapore and Batavia to control.⁴² Maritime infrastructure provided a degree of security by allowing seafarers and the state to see potential threats such as pirates and environmental hazards.

Malaya's British colonial authorities embraced maritime infrastructure, such as lighthouses, as instruments of political power during the 19th century. The colonial response to the raid on the Kota Shah police station included a letter that stated, "I [A. J. Perks] have also sent to Klang lighthouse and instructed the light-keeper to send me word at once if he sees a strange steam launch hanging about the coast[.]"⁴³ Insular Southeast Asia posed challenges to seafarers navigating its critical waterways through natural obstructions such as shoals and rocks, but also people who plundered vessels sailing the waterways. The seemingly benign lighthouses along the shores of Malaya were the eyes of the state and important places for gathering information.

The isolation of maritime infrastructure in Malaya forced British colonial officials to focus on protecting these often-exposed assets from assault by pirates. For instance, during the early 1870s, Selangor, in western Malaya, was a hotbed of piracy especially around the mouths of the Jugra and Langkat rivers. Rumors abounded that the sultan's son, Raja Yaacob, was a pirate leader. The local geography well-suited pirates as the rivers, jungle, and marsh provided mazes for escaping colonial authorities. Against this backdrop, pirates, allegedly from Langkat, assaulted the Cape Rachado Lighthouse on 11 January 1874 at around 8:30 p.m. The offenders almost certainly planned the attack because the eleventh was the day when the lighthouse keeper and his assistant received their monthly pay. The attack struck fear into the crew of the boat that supplied a local lightship, who refused to virtual the

lightship on 21 January of that year. Eventually, a larger vessel with a police guard sailed with supplies for the lightship crew. The inability or unwillingness of the Sultan of Selangor to deal with the pirates led to rumors that he was too addicted to opium or too old to be an effective leader. One rumor was that he even received a cut of the plunder.⁴⁴ The series of the lighthouses became significant to the peaceful navigation of the Straits of Malacca. Lighthouses, like other colonial structures, were often located away from colonial centers and were hence very much exposed to assault.

Lighthouses and police stations served as beacons of imperial British authority in Malaya during the nineteenth century but were vulnerable to attack by pirates. As symbols of colonial authority and institutions developed for the protection of life and property, lighthouses and police stations were critical assets developed at strategic points such as river mouths and other coastal points for maximum effect. Their positions along critical waterways allowed for resupply and communication with colonial political centers by steamboat. However, the infrastructure's locations along major waterways exposed them to attack. To the local people in Malaya, the structures were symbols of wealth that were vulnerable to plunder. Locals also saw them as symbols of foreign occupation. The isolation of such structures from reinforcements, the inability to communicate with other bases in an emergency, and the lack of defenses meant that these symbols of colonial authority were vulnerable to attack by pirates. Other institutions in colonial Singapore, such as weapon shops, actively aided pirates in their goals as well.

Straits Settlements Institutions and Piracy

Although suppressing piracy became one of the main goals of the Straits Settlements government, the Straits Settlements, especially Singapore, sustained maritime violence by supplying pirates with weapons, naval stores, and knowledge. Some merchants wanted the government to purge the seas of pirates to protect their assets and associates, but others benefitted from piracy through the sale of weapons to pirates. Even Singapore's education system allowed for social advancement within pirate societies. Straits Settlements institutions helped Southeast Asians use violence in their

own interests even if this was contrary to the institutions' original purpose.

Reports and survivor accounts stated that Singapore provided Asian pirates a port of call and a vital supply base for their operations along important waterways such as the Straits of Malacca. According to Indian government reports, Straits Settlements officials knew that a large quantity of military stores reached pirates through their distribution from Singapore, Malacca, and Penang. Officials concluded that pirate fleets fitted out in ports such as Singapore before stalking their prey. Although the Indian government granted the right to arrest Asian crews and to detain their vessels in port given the suspicion of piracy under Act XII of 1857 to the Straits Settlements government, its governor was unable to gain the authority to limit the sale of military stores.⁴⁵ A *nakhoda* reported pirates boarded his vessel in 1854 and stole some of the cargo. One of the pirates remarked that they had bought their guns right next door to where merchants sold the cargo on the vessel. The piracy caused the robbed Chinese vessel to return to Singapore and report the attack to authorities.⁴⁶ Despite repeated attempts by the Straits Settlements government to restrict access of firearms, gunpowder, and other military stores, it usually failed because of their importance to the local economy. These inabilities allowed pirates to purchase weaponry that they were unable to make themselves in Singapore. Such weaponry gave them an advantage in the various attacks on other craft in the waters of the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea as Western weaponry outgunned any locally produced arms. Contrary to the wishes of the Straits Settlements government during the years under British Indian rule, Singapore provided pirates with powerful weaponry through shops that were important to its economy.

Al Mushrifah wal Mukazamah, an inhabitant of Singapore, wanted the ability to trade peacefully with northern Malaya and relied on colonial institutions to bring about the necessary changes to protect maritime traders. The Chinese pirates off the waters of Malaya had dealt significant blows to seafarers and owners of maritime assets. Piracy's restricting effect on commerce clearly concerned Mushrifah. He desired that the British and Malay authorities defeat the pirates at sea and clear the waterways for commerce. The writer also seemed aware of the political circumstances in Malaya at the time in both British and Malay circles, as

he wrote, for instance, "...our Mr. Church, Resident Councilor who was made well susceptible at this time in the State of Singapore."⁴⁷ Such a statement appeared accurate with Church retiring in August 1856 after two stints in Singapore.⁴⁸ The author's awareness of the political and economic situation in Malaya showed that he had a vested interest in the political stability of the peninsula and political connections with both Malay and British officials.

The colonial port of Singapore was useful to pirates in the region for gathering intelligence and supplies according to reports on piracy. According to Inspector Blundell, piracy by the Chinese grew to a hitherto unprecedented level in the waters off the Malay Peninsula by the 1850s. Junks employed for the sole purpose of piracy frequently called at Singapore not only for refitting, but also to obtain intelligence on when other sailing vessels departed the port. In two reported instances when Blundell suspected vessels of piracy, he removed the rudders of the junks to prevent their departure. However, Blundell also cited the inability of the government to hunt down pirates and requested a low-draft steamer under the command of a Straits naval officer.⁴⁹ Gaining reliable information on other vessels allowed the pirates to attack without excessive searching and increased their odds of success, while also directing the pirates to the most profitable vessels to plunder. The need for a low-draft steamer suggests that the government had great difficulty in catching small yet fast boats that easily cleared sand banks and entered shallow waters such as rivers that were not deep enough for colonial patrol craft. Colonial ports conveniently gave pirates a place to gather information on their prey, along with obtaining the weapons for use in their attack.

Opportunistic seafarers who lived in Singapore resorted to piracy without permission of their investors or managers by attacking smaller and vulnerable craft along the vital waterways off Malaya. Born in 1832 as the son of a general dealer who owned two Malay *perahu*, Ah'moi committed his first act of piracy at the age of twelve while en route to Penang when the crew agreed to seize forcibly a smaller vessel. While the rest of the crew labored below the deck, he noticed a wounded old man who appeared to be hiding something around his waist. Noticing nine gold bars, he snatched them, disposed of the man with a knife, and hid the gold from his father whom he feared would discover

that he pirated a vessel.⁵⁰ Regional governments thus lacked the means or desire to patrol the important waterways such as the Straits of Malacca for pirates effectively, which allowed opportunistic crews based in colonial ports such as Singapore to plunder other vessels if they had significant advantages in crew strength and weaponry. If Ah'moi's crew attacked a smaller vessel without consent from their employer in Singapore, it was likely many other opportunists operating out of major ports also engaged in such behavior.

People of means residing within the Straits Settlements had the opportunity to obtain a colonial education to further their own ends as well. This education, in turn, aided their ability in conducting maritime violence. At age sixteen, Ah'moi attended missionary school, which he continued for three and a half years until the school expelled him for a prolonged absence.⁵¹ Ah'moi then joined the Taiping rebels who pillaged vessels in the South China Sea. He was able to gain status as an interpreter because of his knowledge of the English language that he had learned in Singapore as a student.⁵² The colonial education system provided an English-language education in Southeast Asia to people who would have been unlikely to gain fluency otherwise. Ah'moi, a Singapore-born Chinese pirate, used the colonial Christian education system and his command of English to distinguish himself from other Chinese seafarers to gain advancement through the ranks of his crew.

The cosmopolitan economic system in colonial Singapore, where Chinese-speaking merchants often required English translators, provided opportunities for bilingual speakers such as Ah'moi to engage in illicit activities by exploiting global connections and his important position onboard his vessel. Ah'moi gained a position as a supercargo and interpreter on a British barque, a sailing vessel, owned by a Chinese trading house in Singapore on a voyage to Shanghai, China with his father's influence. He absconded with \$800 worth of cargo. He joined Ching Ah'ling as an insurgent against the Qing dynasty and later became a pirate again.⁵³ Using, his knowledge of English and global networks, Ah'moi embezzled materials at sea for his own gain. Ah'moi thus used the skills he learned from a missionary school to act as a go-between for both British and Chinese societies. This opportunity was made available through the British colonial mission. He chose to employ his skills as a pirate, which allowed

him a degree of success because there were few places where Chinese people were able to study at British schools other than in Singapore at that time.

Conclusion

Local seafarers found opportunities in and around the Straits Settlements to prepare for and conduct violent operations at sea to extract material gain. Colonial authorities protected some Malay rulers to keep them as local allies despite their tendencies to attack commerce. Pirates operated near Singapore because of its commerce and even sailed into Singapore's harbor to gather intelligence and supplies for future attacks. The passport system allowed for seafarers in the employment of the East India Company to make a living as naval patrols against pirates and smugglers. Other locals used colonial institutions to clear their enemies from the seas or to gain rank through the colonial education system. Despite the wishes of the colonial government, local seafarers resorted to piracy with the assistance of colonial Singapore's various institutions.

As such, successful seafarers and merchants in Malaya, especially in Singapore, often harnessed colonial policies and institutions for their own interests by using maritime violence and remaining close to the centers of those forces such as Singapore. Seafarers of various backgrounds attempted to gain advantages over others through violence. When colonial authorities introduced new measures to suppress piracy, pirates often found countermeasures to continue their lifestyle, which in turn forced colonial officials to develop new measure to defeat pirates. Ultimately, the forces of economic competition, industrialization, and British colonialism proved too strong for old Malay maritime states. Although elements of the old system survived the colonial era, the Malay maritime kingdoms shattered irrevocably in part because of their inability to protect and earn income from maritime commerce.

Bibliography

- Bin Abdul Kadir, Abdullah. "The Hikayat Abdullah." Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 28 (3): 3-354.
- Brown, Edward. *Cochin-China, and My Experience of It*. Taipei: Ch'eng Wen, 1971.
- Buckley, Charles Burton. *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*. Singapore: Fraiser and Nieve, 1902.
- Corfield, Justin. *Historical Dictionary of Singapore*. Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2011.
- Headrick, Daniel. *Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Leicester, Stephen. *Straits Law Reports- Being a Report of Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements*. Penang: Heap Lee and Co., 1877.
- Moon, Penderel. *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*. London: Duckworth, 1989.
- Osborn, Sherard. *A Midshipman's Exploits: The Blockade of Kedah in 1838 in Malayan Waters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Tagliacozzo, Eric. *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Tagliacozzo, Eric. "The Lit Archipelago: Coastal Lighting and the Imperial Optic in Insular Southeast Asia, 1860-1910." *Technology and Culture* 46 (2): 306-328.
- Tarling, Nicholas. *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World*. Melbourne: F. W. Chesire, 1963.
- "The Piracy and Slave Trade of the Indian Archipelago." *Journal of the Indian Archipelago* 3 (1849): 581-588.
- "The Piracy and Slave Trade of the Indian Archipelago." *Journal of the Indian Archipelago* 4 (1850): 144-162.

EndNotes

- ¹ "The Piracy Case," *The Straits Times*, 23 July 1884.
- ² I do not necessarily consider all seafarers who used maritime violence to be pirates, but I am not adverse to using the term in reference to Southeast Asians.
- ³ The translations from the Malay language are my own, and I am responsible for them.
- ⁴ "The Piracy and Slave Trade of the Indian Archipelago," *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, 4 (1850): 157.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 157-158.
- ⁶ Sherard Osborn, *A Midshipman's Exploits: The Blockade of Kedah in 1838 in Malayan Waters*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). 86.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 86-87.
- ⁸ Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, "The Hikayat Abdullah," *Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 28, 3 (1955): 191.
- ⁹ "The Piracy and Slave Trade of the Indian Archipelago," *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, 4 (1850): 149-151.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 149-151.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 145-146.
- ¹² Nicholas Tarling, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World*, (Melbourne: F. W. Chesire, 1963), 21.
- ¹³ Stephen Leicester, *Straits Law Reports- Being a Report of Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements*, (Penang: Heap Lee and Co., 1877), 42.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42-43.
- ¹⁵ Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, (Singapore: Fraiser and Nieve, 1902), 305.
- ¹⁶ "H. M. Ship *Andromache*," *Singapore Chronicle*, 26 November 1836; Leicester, *Straits Law Reports*, 42.
- ¹⁷ "The Piracy and Slave Trade of the Indian Archipelago," *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, 3 (1849), 581-583.
- ¹⁸ Penderel Moon, *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*, London: Duckworth, 1989, 491.
- ¹⁹ Leicester, *Straits Law Reports*, 47-8.
- ²⁰ Governor Butterworth to Sultan Omar, 6 September 1851, 2006/0035234, *Arkib Negara*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ "The Piracy and Slave Trade of the Indian Archipelago," *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, 4 (1850): 147-148.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156, 161.
- ²⁷ Leicester, *Straits Law Reports*, 41-42.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41-45.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 46-48.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ³¹ Daniel Headrick, *Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1981), 17.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 19-21.
- ³³ Magistrate of Klang, Selangor to British Resident, Malacca, 13 March 1883, 1957/0002227, *Arkib Negara*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- ³⁴ A. J. Perks to Resident, March 1883, 1957/0002227, *Arkib Negara*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- ³⁵ President's Meeting Minutes, 2 March 1830, 255 National Library, Singapore.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Letter to Governor of Straits Settlements, 255 National Library, Singapore.
- ³⁸ Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 262-263.
- ³⁹ Al Mushrifah wal Mukazamah to unknown, 4 May 1855, Document 47, *Arkib Negara*, Malaysia.
- ⁴⁰ Eric Tagliacozzo, "The Lit Archipelago: Coastal Lighting and the Imperial Optic in Insular Southeast Asia, 1860-1910," *Technology and Culture* 46, no. 2 (2005): 307.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 308.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 309.
- ⁴³ A. J. Perks to Resident, March 1883, 1957/0002227, *Arkib Negara*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- ⁴⁴ "H.E. the Governor's Visit to Langkat," *The Straits Times*, 14 February 1874.
- ⁴⁵ Meeting No. 3, Governor-General of India in Council 1858, Political Department, NAB 1668, Singapore.

⁴⁶ *The Straits Times*, 4 April 1854.

⁴⁷ Al Mushrifah wal Mukazamah to unknown, 4 May 1855, Document 47, Arkib Negara, Malaysia.

⁴⁸ Justin Corfield, *Historical Dictionary of Singapore*, (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 62, 63.

⁴⁹ Governor – General in Council, 28 January 1857, Political Department, NAB 1668, Singapore.

⁵⁰ Edward Brown, *Cochin-China, and My Experience of It*, (Taipei: Ch'eng Wen, 1971), 52-53.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 34, 52.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 54-55.