



# THE CHANGING FORTUNES OF THE RAJA NEGARA AND THE ORANG LAUT OF SINGAPORE IN THE 18TH CENTURY

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*Nauwkeurige kaart van het oostlijk gedeelte van Straat Malacca behelzende de passagie van Malacca naar de Chinesche Zee* [An Accurate Map of the Eastern Part of the Straits of Melaka, containing the Passage from Melaka towards the [South] China Sea]. Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest COLLBN 006-14-015. Leiden University Libraries.

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ISSN: 2705084X

# The Changing Fortunes of the Raja Negara and the Orang Laut of Singapore in the 18th Century

Benjamin J.Q. Khoo

## ABSTRACT

*The Raja Negara was the leader of the Orang Laut in the Straits and resided in Singapore until the late 18th century, but little is known of him and of his activities. This paper explores how the contestations in and around the sea-spaces of Singapore in the 18th century, and the Raja Negara's involvement in them, shaped the gradual decline of the island and its associated settlements before Raffles' arrival. Drawing on underexplored Dutch archival sources, this paper expands our understanding of patterns and events in the Malay world that determined the trajectory of Singapore's history during this period, and ties its peoples and seascapes to the wider archipelagic world surrounding Singapore.*

## INTRODUCTION

DESPITE THE RECENT WORK OF HISTORIANS AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS on Singapore's premodern past, comparatively little is known about Singapore in the 18th century.<sup>1</sup> A longstanding assumption has always been that the settlement of Singapore was caught in the crossfire between Johor and Aceh in 1613 and then faded from view, lapsing as it were into irrelevance until the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 (Turnbull 2009: 22; Kwa et al. 2019: 131–132; Gibson-Hill 2018: 229). In order to fill this gap between 1613 and 1819, which forms part of the 'dark space' of Singapore's history (Borschberg 2015a: 12–13; 2018: 33), the use of cartographic references such as Manoel Godinho d'Erédia's map of 1606 and André Pereira dos Reis' map of 1654, both of which locate a 'xabandaria' on the eastern coast of the island, have been used to indicate a key settlement well into the middle of the 17th century (Barnes, 1911: 30; Borschberg 2012: 222, 223fn103). However, surprisingly little else is known beyond learned speculation and a few textual sources. This temporal vacuum raises two important questions regarding the history of Singapore and the wider Straits region.<sup>2</sup> Was Singapore, or more specifically, the sea-space around the island of Singapore,

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1 For a useful bibliography, see Kwa 2017. For a representative selection, see Borschberg 2010, 2015b, 2017, 2018; Heng 2009; Lim, 2012; Miksic 1985, 2004, 2013; Kwa 2021.

2 The geographical scope of the Straits region is fairly elastic but roughly extends from the environs of the Johor River down to the Straits of Singapore, south of the main island of Singapore (including the smaller islands and maritime passages in between), towards (and inclusive of) the Riau islands. From east to west, one may take the outcropping of Pedra Branca, extending towards the Karimun islands as well as other maritime passages including the Kundur, Durian an Riau Straits, and the Bengkalis. For a definition, see Borschberg 2012: 194.

so obscure and absent of record before the modern era to merit such a silence? Second, why is it that when Raffles arrived in Singapore in 1819, he found it so unremarkable and depopulated despite it possessing an advantageous location for trade? (Barr 2019: 57; Kwa & Borschberg 2018: 2–5; Borschberg 2018) These questions are two sides of the same coin, rendering as they do a paradoxical tension in Singapore’s history: if Singapore was so key, why was its immediate 18th-century past so strangely mute?

This paper proposes three linked arguments to tackle this mystery. First, it will revise the narrative that Singapore was a place that played a minimal role before its colonial establishment. The paper does so by contending that the settlement of Singapore and its surrounding waters in the 18th century were not only distinct as a separate and knowable space but were also a strategically pivotal place for trade and power in the Malay world. These developments can be traced through the contestations of competing princes trying to build power, develop trade, and gain mastery through the seascapes in and around Singapore. Second, this paper will show how the Orang Laut of Singapore played an important role in significant events in the Malay world. The involvement of the Orang Laut in regional politics and conflicts can be examined through their chief, the Panglima Rayat Raja Negara, who, although mentioned from time to time, has never found a central place in Singapore’s historiography, despite playing a vital and occasionally defining role in the struggles for power in the Straits in the 18th century. Third, the paper will offer an alternative explanation for the depopulation of the settlement of Singapore, as well as its diminished significance upon Raffles’ arrival in 1819 (Turnbull 2009: 22; Barr 2019: 57). It will evidence how the Raja Negara’s departure from Singapore after 1767—due to the struggle between the Bugis and the Malays in particular—precipitated the settlement’s decline. Indeed, this decline was only slowed, not halted, when the island and its associated Orang Laut transitioned to the leadership of the Temenggong. In essence, the paper argues that shifting alliances between Malay princes and rulers, as well as the choices of the Raja Negara of Singapore and its Orang Laut population therein determined the overall decline of the island in the 18th century.

This paper builds upon the detailed research of notable scholars of early Singapore, the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, hereafter referred to using its historic initials, the VOC) in Melaka, as well as the Malay world and the Orang Laut (Borschberg 2010, 2015b; L.Y. Andaya 1975, 2008; Barnard 1994, 2003, 2007; Lewis 1995; Netscher 1870; Vos 1993; Trocki 2007). These works deal with aspects of Malay political history and/or their intersections with the VOC, all of which enable this paper to set the historical context and unpack the role of the Raja Negara more closely in the 18th century. Based on a close reading of the literature, the paper’s author was also able to identify previously overlooked materials and weave them together into a new narrative. In addition, this paper borrows liberally from the conceptual frameworks of the geo-cultural space called the ‘Malay world’ (Milner 2016; B.W. Andaya 1976), and combines them with insights from anthropological/historical studies on the Orang Laut (Sopher 1964; Virunha 2002; Chou 2010). These latter studies have been essential for contextualising and better understanding the actions of the Orang Laut during the 18th century.

This paper’s main intervention, however, is in the use of primary sources. It relies notably on the VOC archival records to reconstruct the involvement of the Raja Negara and the Orang Laut of Singapore in the 18th-century Malay world. Furthermore, it presents, whenever possible, other novel observations on Singapore in this period. Diplomatic correspondences of the VOC with Johor and Siak, internal Company memoranda, Dutch

ship-logs of vessels patrolling the waters in and around the Singapore Straits, and accounts written by passing traders enable the paper to piece together a little-known story of the Orang Laut and the Raja Negara in history. Beyond the VOC archives, European travelogues were used to illuminate certain aspects of the Singapore region and the Orang Laut during the 18th century.

Finally, to balance the perspectives of the outsider (the Dutch), the paper uses Malay chronicles to supplement the narrative and provide some internal perceptions from local sources. In this, the paper's author has relied mainly on translations of the *Sejarah Melayu*, *Syair Perang Siak*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, and *Tuhfat al-Nafis* into English, and has also consulted the *Hikayat Siak* and the *Hikayat Negeri Johor* in Malay. Despite the court-centric focus of these Malay texts, they are invaluable for reconstructing and corroborating historical events involving the Raja Negara and often provide crucial insights into the motivations behind the actions initiated by the ruler, the royal court, and the Orang Laut.

In narrating this roughly 100-year history, the paper contributes to the received narrative of Singapore's '700-year past' (Kwa et al. 2019). The main innovation and thesis of this approach is its use of a longer timeframe as a structural scaffold to incorporate evidence that resist immediate interpretation, and to illuminate recurrent patterns of actions and events that might explain the centrality and strategic significance of Singapore (Hack et al. 2010: xiii; Kwa et al. 2019: 7–9; Heng 2011: 49–50). It is this cyclicity that has been useful for lending greater regional coherence to events of the 18th century and their associated shifting alliances, while adding to the argument that the people of and sea-scapes around Singapore have been vital to the regional politics of the Malay world in this period. Indeed, as Derek Heng has pointed out, the history of Malay polities consists of 'a mosaic of several smaller narratives that may be set within the parameters of a regional and Maritime Asian "frame"' (Heng 2011: 50). This will become evident in the discussion below.

After beginning with a brief introduction of both place (Singapore) and person (the Raja Negara), the remaining sections will present the Singapore region as a nexus of six different episodes of contestation and activity. This paper begins by showing how sea-spaces around Singapore re-emerged in the early 18th century as desirable places of occupation and control. This revival will be examined through the activities of two rebel princes: the Pangeran Depati Anum of Palembang, who sought refuge at the mouth of the Johor River in 1715, and Raja Kecil, who, in his initial assault on Johor in 1717, depended on the Raja Negara of Singapore for support. The paper then moves on to the period between the 1730s and 1740s, when the sea-spaces in and around Singapore gave rise to increased reports of trade and piracy. The discussion then shifts to the interval between 1745 to about 1760, when the Orang Laut of Singapore and the Raja Negara became enmeshed in struggles for power between Siak and Johor, and were both impoverished as a result. Conflicts continued into the 1760s, when a thwarted invasion from Singapore was quickly followed by the collapse of Malay rule on Riau. As the Malays plotted to restore themselves in Riau, the Raja Negara of Singapore allied with the roving Siak prince Raja Ismail in an attempt to oust the Bugis. The Raja Negara's alliance with Raja Ismail culminated in a decisive confrontation with the Bugis around Singapore in 1767, triggering the flight of the Raja Negara from Singapore in the aftermath of defeat and the island's subsequent depopulation and decline. The last section examines the transition of the Orang Laut and the

island of Singapore under the new leadership of the Temenggong, thus setting the stage for Singapore's eventual transformation in 1819. Finally, the paper concludes by reiterating the three linked arguments mentioned earlier, and posits how these mini-revolutions expanded and resolved what is a discernible downward cycle in Singapore's 700-year past.

## 1. SINGAPORE AND THE RAJA NEGARA

Singapore, situated at the tip of the Malay Peninsula, was on the eve of the 18th century one of several settlements under the rule of the Johor Sultanate. By this time, the island already had a rich history. In the 14th century, it was known as Temasek, a kingdom of some renown with a thriving port, in turn becoming a feeder port of the Melaka Sultanate in the 15th century (Lim 2012: 22–50; Kwa et al. 2019: 66–69). Communities in premodern Singapore were likely heterogeneous and loosely organised, consisting of several *suku-suku*<sup>3</sup> of Orang Laut, who occupied kampung(s) along the rivers of Singapore while also living in boats on the island's littoral. Of these, we can perhaps count the Orang Biduanda Kallang, the Orang Gelam, and the Orang Seletar as the original inhabitants, groups that were all still found living in the vicinity of Singapore's rivers in the early 19th century (Skeat and Ridley 1969: 114–116). Sea raiding, hunting-gathering, and bartering formed the basis of their ancient livelihood (Sopher 1964: 84–114; Barnard 2007: 34). The chieftain of the Orang Laut of Singapore was deeply integrated into the ruler-centric polity, the *kerajaan* of Johor, and was bound by tribute, service, and ties of loyalty to the ruler (Gullick 1958; Milner 2016). The Orang Laut were exempt from paying tax, but were expected to be *orang kerahan* (nobility's vassals), performing *kerahan* (traditional or corvée services) for the Malay rulers (Chou 2010: 20). This connection was crucial throughout history. The Orang Laut of Singapore were also valuable clients to the Malay rulers, helping them establish kingdoms, generating trade through the collection of sea produce, operating as rowers, capturing booty, enslaving people, and serving as a veritable fighting force during times of war (Barnard 2007: 34, 38–41; Andaya 2008: 180–183). Each Orang Laut group likely roamed within specifically demarcated areas, yet they were not immune from rivalry with each other (Andaya 2008: 180). In the aftermath of the 1699 regicide, in which a group of Malay nobles conspired to get rid of their ruling sultan, hence breaking the sacred bonds that had bound the Orang Laut to a ruling house, the Orang Laut had lost some of their primacy as one of the traditional pillars of the kingdom of Johor (Andaya 2021: 50–52). However, they remained confined to their own territorial boundaries, open to patronage and alliances, and continued to be important and active participants shaping shifts in power in the region.

The Orang Laut of Singapore and the wider Straits region were led by the Raja Negara. In historical records, he was known, or referred to, as Ketua Orang Laut, Sri Raja Negara (or Nugara), Raja Nagar, Raja Negara Selat, Raja Negara di Laut Singapura, or the Shahbandar (harbourmaster) of Singapore. Some authors have associated him with the role of a *hulubalang* or captain-in-chief (Andaya 1975: 288; Netscher 1870: 9, 48, 50; Hashim 1992a: 111; Andaya 2019: 45–47).<sup>4</sup> The title 'Raja Negara' indicates that it was a position initially bestowed or validated by the Malay Sultan or the Malay court. Besides the prospects of protection and tangible rewards that stemmed from being associated with

3 See Glossary on p. 32.

4 For a glossary entry, see Borschberg 2015b: 516.

the kingly line, the possessor was given authority to head and command the allegiance of the Orang Laut in the realm. For this reason, he was often referred to as the ‘King of the *Celates*’ or ‘Chief of the Rayat Laut’<sup>5</sup> Falarti, in describing the Laksamana, notes that he held undisputed political capital, with his prowess at sea like that of a *raja* on land (2013: 101). As a sea lord, the Raja Negara’s prowess would have been similar. In times of war, the Raja Negara helped gather and lead a part of the Sultan’s fighting force. He could also be summoned for rescue or patrol operations, build *perahu*, and relay intelligence from the Singapore Straits. In times of peace, he would have been of service in generating wealth that contributed to the ruler’s power and prestige, such as providing protection to visiting traders, conveying royal missives, and other special services that might arise (Andaya 1975: 47; Chou 2010: 42; Virunha 2002: 149). Most importantly, as the Shahbandar of Singapore, or leader of the Orang Laut *suku-suku*, he was at the centre of social and material life on the island, occupied with maintaining civil order and organizing local and foreign trade. Based on observations of a Dutch colonial officer in the 19th century, the Raja Negara by this time was likely elected by the chiefs of the various tribes in Singapore and the surrounding islands, and then confirmed by the ruler or court. The post was not hereditary, but the holder occupied it for life (Van Anrooij 1885: 343). Beyond the inhabitants of the island of Singapore, the Raja Negara likely extended his authority over the Orang Laut who lived up and downstream of the Johor River. Due to his links to the Johor court, he and his men likely possessed greater prestige and were possibly ranked above other Orang Laut groups in the 17th and 18th centuries (L.Y. Andaya 2008: 181). However, we know little of his relationship with other tribes and whether he was able to command the *suku-suku* on other islands beyond the Singapore Straits (L.Y. Andaya 1975: 44).

The presence of the Raja Negara in the Malay world, or the period when he made Singapore his base, cannot be precisely dated. Whether the Raja Negara can be traced back to the Palembang and Srivijaya periods has not been verified. Furthermore, whether this title was created during Singapore’s early days as a kingdom when the Orang Laut formed the backbone of the ruler’s power and whether he and his people rebelled during the expansionist rule of Muzaffar Shah of Melaka (1445–59) is still a matter of great doubt (Hashim 1992a: 110–111; Pires 1944, II: 244). However, during the period of the Melaka Sultanate, Singapore was likely already a significant fiefdom or appanage of the Raja Negara. Together with other senior princes, such as the Sri Bija Diraja (Laksamana), the Raja Negara possibly shared an establishment in Singapore; this settlement was noted in the *Sejarah Melayu* to include a naval base of 40 three-masted cruisers at the time of the Melaka Sultanate (Brown 1952: 117–118, 243n517; Hashim 2018: 131–138).

The Raja Negara continues to be evidenced after the fall of the Melaka Sultanate. Tomé Pires’ *Suma Oriental* (1512–15) relates the presence of some Orang Laut villages around Singapore at the turn of the 16th century (Pires 1944, II: 262). More tellingly, in the Shellabear recension of the *Sejarah Melayu*, the Raja Negara was one of two leaders in Singapore noted for helping to capture Portuguese ships on behalf of Sultan Al’auddin Riayat Shah II of Johor (c. 1530–64) (Shellabear 1915: 250; Gibson-Hill 2018: 229). During the early 16th century, the Raja Negara was accompanied by another leader, the Panglima Setia Raja of the Batin Kallang, suggesting the presence of two distinct communities (and settlements) in Singapore at the time, each led by their own chieftains. We also know that

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5 Extract from the Diaries of Malacca, 26 May 1718, 32, 8604, Nationaal Archief, VOC, The Hague [henceforth NA VOC].

later, in 1606, when the Johor court returned to the upper reaches of the Johor River, the Raja Negara (explicitly named the Shahbandar of Singapore) was dispatched to receive the incoming fleet of the Dutch Admiral Cornelis Matelieff and to assess its strength (Rouffaer 1921: 402–403; Borschberg 2015b: 64). This activity showed that the Raja Negara was still present on the island and continued to be of service to the Johor court. Even though the VOC sources say little of other encounters during the 17th century, the Raja Negara would make many appearances again in both the Dutch and Malay records of the 18th century. These mentions of the Raja Negara are crucial for clarifying the history of Singapore in this period.

## 2. THE ARRIVAL OF REBEL PRINCES, C. 1715–28

Instead of beginning from the first years of the 18th century, I propose to examine Singapore and the region with the arrival of rebel princes who took advantage of the chaos after the 1699 regicide to stake their claims to power. This approach is motivated by the reappearance of the Raja Negara, and also because the impact of the 1699 regicide in Johor on the psyche of the Orang Laut has already been the subject of intensive study (Andaya 1975: 189, 259; Andaya 2008: 200). Furthermore, this focus allows us to examine more clearly how Singapore and its surrounding sea-spaces re-emerged as a strategic site for power-building and the involvement of the Raja Negara in related conflicts. During this interval, the arrival of two rebel princes from Sumatra, the Pangeran Dipati Anum and Raja Kecil, both in the space of four years (1715–19), in and around the Singapore Straits, highlights how important the region was. The ability to use prestige to gain a following from the Orang Laut and rapidly become a naval power was crucial for an *anak raja* to gain mastery in the Straits (Wolters 1970: 118; B.W. Andaya 1976a: 162–186; Barnard 2003: 125–135).

Almost 400 years after the arrival of Parameswara, another prince of Palembang arrived in the Singapore region. In close parallel with the story of Parameswara in the Portuguese chronicles, (Albuquerque, 1774, III: 83–86; Barros, 1777, II: 3–10; Pires, 1944, II: 231–232; Khoo and Borschberg, 2021: 80–82) the arrival of this renegade prince was related to courtly factionalism and a succession dispute in Palembang. In 1715, Sultan Agung Kamaruddin of Palembang seized the throne and drove the heir, the Pangeran Dipati Anum, into exile. Fleeing with his followers and supporters, said to be 2,000 souls with 70 small *perahu* from Bangka, the prince, in danger of being assassinated—like Parameswara, centuries ago—was forced to seek refuge further afield.<sup>6</sup> It was under this peculiar yoke that the young, agile, and enterprising Pangeran Depati Anum found himself a shelter in Johor territory.

The circumstances and the ambition of the Pangeran Depati Anum were made plain in a series of letters to the VOC in Batavia, whose assistance the prince was eager to enlist (B.W. Andaya 1993: 179).<sup>7</sup> Not only had he fled with gold and silver, weapons, and provisions; he also had the loyalty of a sizeable retinue and was actively looking for assistance and refuge. However, after being forcibly repulsed from Bangka by his uncle, Sultan

6 Letter by C. Hasselaar to Governor-General of Batavia C. van Swoll, 22 December 1714, 33, 8337, NA VOC.

7 Letter by Pangeran Depati Anum to Governor-General of Batavia C. van Swoll, 22 November 1715, 17, 8378, NA VOC.



Agung Kamaruddin, the Pangeran was forced to decamp even deeper into Malay lands, sailing with his remaining ships and retinue to the mouth of the Johor River, near the island of Singapore (Coolhaas 1979, VII: 203).<sup>8</sup> The length of time he spent in the area is not known, nor are his activities and interactions there. However, we know that the Pangeran arrived in Johor at a time when it was wracked by conflict. Johor was at open war with the Bugis and had already suffered revolts among its dependencies (L.Y. Andaya 1975: 227, 228–231). As a prince from Palembang bringing manpower and support, the Pangeran was initially warmly welcomed, and he was granted refuge by a troubled court. The Raja Muda went out himself to meet the Pangeran's group, receiving the refugees at the mouth of the river of Riau, and plans were made to form an alliance by marrying the Pangeran to the daughter of the Raja Muda (L.Y. Andaya 1975: 23; Coolhaas 1979, VII: 203–204).<sup>9</sup>

But this friendly encounter soon turned sour. Falling out with the Johor court over the activities of his Bugis retainers (L.Y. Andaya 1975: 240),<sup>10</sup> Johor later showed little inclination to help the Pangeran regain his kingdom or trusted him enough to form a marriage alliance (Coolhaas 1979, VII: 220).<sup>11</sup> Thus, taking his followers along, the Pangeran was forced into exile again, moving to Siantan, another important Orang Laut area, where he established himself by force, forming marriage alliances with the daughters of local Orang Laut leaders and raiding local ships (B.W. Andaya 1993: 180; Heidhues 1992: 5).<sup>12</sup> Later, with a fleet of 50–60 armed ships, swelled by the Bugis and other sea-peoples, the Pangeran was able to return to Palembang in 1717 to reclaim the throne (Coolhaas 1979, VII: 297).

At first glance, the peregrination of a Palembang prince seems to have little to do with Singapore and its surrounding sea-spaces. But upon closer inspection, two crucial factors can be discerned, pointing to the Johor River entrance's importance, and, by extension, that of Singapore and its vicinity as a highly sought-after area for shelter, well into the 18th century.

The attraction of a riverine location for Malay princes can be said to be both mystical and strategic. First, the narrative confirms the great spiritual significance that river mouths held in Malay culture. For example, Drakard has told the tale of a Barus prince and his retinue, who searched 'in the manner of the Malay *rajas* for a country that lay on a river mouth' (1990: 76). Finding a river mouth was considered a sign of propitiousness, providing an opportune location for the successful qualities of the kingdom to be transposed to. Locating the mouth also functioned as an act of 'geo-piety', demonstrating reverence to family and homeland (Airriess 2003: 88–90). These concerns might have attracted the Pangeran and Parameswara to Singapore and its vicinity centuries earlier.

More importantly, from a practical point of view, it was likely that the Pangeran would have been attracted to the opportunities that the Singapore region offered. Not only

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8 Ibid.

9 Extract from the Diaries of Jambi, 2 November 1715, 10–11, 8446, NA VOC.

10 Relation by Hiamko to the Government of Malacca, 18 July 1716, 91, 8379, NA VOC; Letter from the Chinese Captain of Riau to the Chinese Captain of Malacca Lacqua, 29 July 1716, 92, 8379, NA VOC.

11 Letter by W. Moerman et al., to Governor-General of Batavia C. van Swoll, 29 December 1716, 11, 8379, NA VOC.

12 Letter by W. Moerman et al. to Governor-General of Batavia C. van Swoll, 29 December 1716, 11, 8379, NA VOC; Letter by C. Hertog et al. to Governor-General of Batavia C. van Swoll, 3 April 1717, 56, 7795, NA VOC.

was the region well-integrated into the economic networks of the Johor River estuary and tied to the island networks of Riau, it was also a well-established area of naval resources such as boats and manpower. With sufficient natural resources to sustain a settlement, a recently arrived prince with prestige could appeal to the people who lived in Singapore—many of whom had already lost their unalloyed devotion to the Malay sultans—draw them into his employ, and make a living by raiding (Wolters 1970: 118). Similar to other Orang Laut settlements at the mouths of rivers such as Simpang in Jambi and Sungsang in Palembang (L.Y. Andaya 2008: 178), it is likely that these strategic considerations would have appealed to an ambitious prince seeking to make his fortune (*mencari rezeki*) and build his power (Airriess 2003: 85–86; B.W. Andaya 1976a: 167; Miksic, 2013: 381–382). Trocki has observed that the distinction between the mainland-riverine systems and island entrepot was never sharply defined. This meant that rival Malay rulers—and even rebel princes—who could generate a sufficient following from a local Orang Laut group could then rise out of the hinterland, seek power at the centre, and possibly establish a new kingdom in the region (Trocki 2007: 16–17).

Shortly after Pangeran Depati Anum left the region, an enigmatic prince known as Raja Kecil entered the fray, recruiting both the Raja Negara and his Orang Laut to pose a more serious threat to the Johor Sultanate. The origins and exploits of Raja Kecil from Pagar Ruyong, Minangkabau, have been eloquently told in court chronicles and closely examined by Leonard Andaya and Timothy Barnard (L.Y. Andaya 1975; Barnard 1994). A man of myth as much as action, Raja Kecil's figure has been tied to the cataclysmic transformation of the Malay world, the emergence of Siak as a political force in the Straits, and the further fragmentation of the loyalties of the Orang Laut (L.Y. Andaya 1975: 250–278). Raja Kecil claimed to be descended from the extinguished Melaka royal line, which gave him legitimacy and a claim on the throne of Johor.

To stake his claim, Raja Kecil first needed to gather a powerful following. According to the Bugis chronicle *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, Raja Kecil dispatched an expert in cajolery and deception to Singapore, where the Raja Negara resided, to charm the Orang Laut and their leaders with sweet words and convince them that he was the true son of their murdered lord. To win their favour, gifts were presented to local chieftains and to the Raja Negara. In addition, promises of rewards were given to those who sided with Raja Kecil, while divine punishment were said to await those who rejected him (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 48–49). Swayed by this crafty speech, the Orang Laut of Singapore accepted Raja Kecil as their overlord. The *Hikayat Siak*, which is more partial to Raja Kecil's claims, emphasises on the contrary that it was the decision of the Raja Negara to lead all the *rayat laut* to join Raja Kecil in the Bengkalis (Hashim 1992b: 125; Netscher 1870: 50). The *Hikayat Siak* then states that Raja Kecil convinced the *rayat laut* under the Raja Negara to work together with the people of Minangkabau, preparing small and large boats, and once the time was right, Raja Kecil sailed to Johor, 'accompanied by the people of the Strait and all those who were at sea' (Hashim 1992b: 125). Having reached the Johor estuary, Raja Kecil then proved his descent from the kings of Melaka to the doubtful inhabitants of Johor by making seawater fresh, thus winning them over (*ibid.*).

With the Orang Laut and other Johor inhabitants convinced of Raja Kecil's claim, Raja Kecil launched an invasion of Johor, but not without first raiding in the Singapore Straits with his vessels. The *Syair Perang Siak* notes that Raja Kecil headed first for Selat Sembulan (Jurong Strait), before passing the night at Tanah Merah, near the eastern end of Singapore, preparing for an incursion up the Johor River (Goudie 1989: 88–89). Without

the Raja Negara to warn the Johor court and act as its first line of defence, the invader took Johor unprepared, leading to a successful invasion (Andaya 1975: 266; Winstedt 1992: 63). This view is strengthened by reports by foreign observers who happened to be in Johor at the time. For example, the Portuguese Captain Tavares, who was in Johor in 1717, noted how Raja Kecil had entered the mouth of the Singapore Straits with only 30 badly armed vessels (Hughes 1935: 129).<sup>13</sup> But once he was accompanied by the Orang Laut naval force of the Raja Negara, he was able to enter the Johor River with a large and powerful fleet. A local Malay named Encik Talib gave a separate eyewitness report to the VOC, disclosing that Raja Kecil had amassed 108 large and small vessels of around 2,000 men when he was sailing up to attack Johor.<sup>14</sup> This sizeable band was a worthy testament to the power of the Raja Negara and his ability to raise a formidable force of Orang Laut almost two decades after the 1699 regicide. Confronted with Raja Kecil's military might and organisation, and the defection of its own nobles, it was no wonder that the Johor court, despite its preparations and fortifications, was so quickly thrown into chaos and disarray. Both the Malay and Dutch sources are therefore in agreement that the Raja Negara and the Orang Laut of Singapore were crucial to the rapid collapse of Johor's defences.

However, if the Orang Laut forces gathered by the Raja Negara were critical to Raja Kecil's initial success, their subsequent withdrawal of support also precipitated his decline. This divergence would occur almost immediately after the sacking of Johor. According to the accounts reported to the Dutch in Melaka, there was some disagreement between Raja Kecil and the Orang Laut regarding the looting of the city, which may have prompted a switch in loyalties by the Raja Negara (L.Y. Andaya 1975: 281). Indeed, when Johor's Bendahara Tun Abdullah fled the torched capital, he came upon the large fleet of the King of the *Selates* while sailing down the Johor River en route to Melaka. At this meeting, the Raja Negara not only attempted to discourage the Bendahara from escaping, but also pledged himself and his Orang Laut to assist him in retaking Johor from Raja Kecil's Minangkabau forces. However, this offer was rebuffed by the Bendahara, who stated that the Sultan had already lost his kingdom (L.Y. Andaya 1975: 256).<sup>15</sup> This little episode serves to indicate that the alliance between the Raja Negara of Singapore and his Orang Laut forces and Raja Kecil was weak to begin with and fell apart rapidly after the conquest of Johor.

As Johor's new sovereign, Raja Kecil's alliances with other Orang Laut forces gradually deteriorated as time passed. By 1720, signs of cracks had begun to appear in this partnership. Having destroyed Johor, Raja Kecil then transferred the capital to Riau, where he was said to be difficult to dislodge unless the Orang Laut conspired and attacked him as he had ordered a few prominent Orang Laut chiefs to be krissed (L.Y. Andaya 1975: 287).<sup>16</sup> The weakening of Raja Kecil's authority over the Orang Laut was also noted during battle. In 1721, the VOC observed that Raja Kecil had little success on land and water against Daeng Marewa, a Bugis warrior and leader who had taken up the cause of the Malay sultans, especially since Raja Kecil's Laksamana was being abandoned by various *panglima* (chiefs) in the middle of the fight (Coolhaas 1979, VII: 562). All the while, rumours continued to

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13 The Dutch noted instead 30–40 vessels (Coolhaas 1979, VII: 343).

14 Extract from the Diaries of Malacca, 26 May 1718, 33, 8604, NA VOC.

15 Extract from the Diaries of Malacca, 26 May 1718, 32, 8604, NA VOC.

16 Letter by the Governor of Malacca H. van Suchtelen to the Governor-General of Batavia H. Zwaardcroon, 23 October 1720, 4–5, 8598, NA VOC.

rage regarding the uncertainty of Raja Kecil's legitimacy, dividing the loyalties of the sea people (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 52–53). Indeed, during his short reign, Raja Kecil could only count among the myriad groups who formed the backbone of his strength the Orang Suku Bintan, Orang Suku Bulan, and others from Lingga and Siantan as part of his Orang Laut entourage (L.Y. Andaya 1975: 305–306).

Thus, in the 1720s, while battles raged in the Straits, the Orang Laut of Singapore and the Raja Negara remained conspicuously absent, likely remaining a pillar of support for the Malay Sultan and his heirs, or else took to raiding and offering their services elsewhere. Indeed, the list of arriving ships in Dutch Melaka in December 1723 included that of a certain Pasie Daya, a Malay inhabitant of Muar, who had hired two *balloors* manned by 12 men of Singapore to trade 600 pieces of *kajang* with the Dutch.<sup>17</sup> This later testimony seems to suggest that the Raja Negara and his men possibly approached other individuals of means, offering their services in exchange for goods to sustain the local *negeri* during this period of upheaval and chaos (Chou 2010: 51).

By 1722, Bugis forces led by Daeng Marewa were able to drive Raja Kecil out from Riau and set up a new condominium of power with the Malay sultan Sulaiman. With the collapse of Raja Kecil's authority in Riau, the defeated prince retired to the Minangkabau region, where he established a new kingdom, Siak. Despite the challenge posed by Raja Kecil from his new base throughout the 1720s, the Bugis were now ascendant in the Straits region. By defeating Raja Kecil, they had created a new axis of power that dominated and expanded the Malay world. After the last threat from Raja Kecil ended in 1728, peace and trade returned briefly to the Straits region. With Riau becoming the new centre of the Johor Sultanate, Singapore and upstream Johor were sidelined. However, the pattern of rebel princes arriving in and around Singapore to build power would continue throughout the century.

### 3. TRADE AND PIRACY, C. 1730S–40S

With the decisive defeat of Raja Kecil, the main theatre of war shifted from the Straits region to the Malay mainland, where the Bugis consolidated control over tin-rich areas in Kedah and Selangor. Bugis communities and networks became entrenched throughout the Peninsula. With relative political stability in Riau and the opening of new cultivation and extraction regimes in pepper, tin, and gambier, the Straits region recovered some of its former vitality, presenting new opportunities for the enterprising (Koh 2017: 390–413; Trocki 2007: 33). Under these new circumstances, underlined by significant trade and piracy, an increasing number of references to Singapore begin to appear in the historical record.

Toward the end of the 1730s, Singapore began to feature in European travelogues and the VOC records as a calling station for passing vessels for trade and refreshment. In 1738, the Austrian Jesuit Gottfried von Laimbeckhoven recounted how the ship encountered three Malay boats in the Singapore Straits, with whom the crew exchanged pots, salt, rice, and brandy for fish. Near one of the islands close to Singapore, they spotted the ship *Piatade* resting at anchor, where it was loading water and wood (von Laimbeckhoven 1740: 405–406). Around the same time, the English ship carrying the surgeon William Fergusson crossed the Old Straits of Singapore on 20 July 1738, where the crew 'saw great

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17 Secret Extract from the Records of Arriving Ships in Malacca from September 1723 to end-December, 1723 by C. van Riel, 30 January 1724, 60, 8607, NA VOC.

numbers of small fishing boats, called proes, of which some came aboard and brought us fish for which they were paid' (Elliot 2021: 135).

More testimonies are found in the VOC archives. For example, a prominent source of information came from the VOC *pencalang Jaffnapatnam*, which was dispatched on patrolling expeditions in the area over several years and made several visits to Singapore. On 19 August 1740, *Jaffnapatnam* called at the island during one of its patrols and found at anchor the native vessel of a Peranakan Chinese from Semarang named Encik Janban. This trader was visiting Singapore en route to Selangor and was carrying 20 *kojang* of salt.<sup>18</sup> The sailors on board the *Jaffnapatnam* also met and conversed with the inhabitants of the *Long Island* (Singapore), who stated that they belonged to the king of Johor. Gestures of amity were shown on both sides.<sup>19</sup> The *Jaffnapatnam* visited again on 21 August 1743, anchoring off the island to retrieve fresh water. While they remained at Singapore, the ship's crew witnessed some *balloors* returning from the Melaka Straits, presumably with goods, sailing up towards 'the *negeri* located inside the bend of a river'.<sup>20</sup> The crew of the *Jaffnapatnam* then met with the Shahbandar of Singapore (the Raja Negara), who reiterated that the loyalty of the inhabitants was to the king of Johor.<sup>21</sup> These accounts clearly show that there was a riverine settlement surviving in Singapore well into the mid-18th century, one that continued to trade with passing ships in the region and maintain commercial traffic and contact with Melaka and Java.

While these testimonies present a positive picture of Singapore as a site of small-scale regional interaction and trade, they are countered by accounts of the constant peril of conflict and sea raids in and around the Singapore Straits. Many patrol reports and incidents related by victims of raids in the area found their way into the Melaka records, around the end of the 1730s and early 1740s, testifying that the Singapore region was a zone where piracy was still all too prevalent. For instance, in October 1739, a Dutch cruiser patrolling the Melaka Straits, encountered a *balloor* sailing from the Karimun islands into the Singapore Straits. Deciding to tail the vessel, the Dutch patrol came upon an aggregation of 8–10 other *balloors*. A chase ensued, with the Dutch ship following the group of *balloors* as they sailed along the coast before slipping into 'a bend of a river'.<sup>22</sup> The ship then anchored in a shallow bay and noticed a few *balloors* with flags sailing down towards them, holding 37–38 men armed with *kris* and native spears. Here they had a short skirmish at the mouth of a river, where the Dutch repelled the inhabitants with gunfire.<sup>23</sup> Although this location is not stated, the lay of the forested land, the settlement in the river bend, and the context of this encounter seem to suggest that it took place around Singapore.

Reports to Dutch Melaka corroborate the view that conflicts in and around Singapore waters grew in frequency in the 1740s. As Bugis activities intensified after 1740, Bugis

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18 Letter by L. Lorenszoon, J.F. Nieuwhouzen, Hendrikszoon to the Governor of Malacca R. de Laver, 28 October 1740, 295-6, 8628, NA VOC.

19 Letter by L. Lorenszoon and J.F. Nieuwhouzen to the Governor of Malacca R. de Laver, 23 September 1740, 422, 8628, NA VOC.

20 Report by L. Lorenszoon and J. Schotenberg to the Governor of Malacca R. de Laver, 19 November 1743, 448–449, 8630, NA VOC.

21 Ibid.

22 Letter by J. Coulom, G. Kleijn and J.F. Nieuwenhuijsen to the Governor of Malacca R. de Laver, 16 November 1739, 316–319, 8626, NA VOC.

23 Ibid.

ships sailed to war, leading to a series of raids in and around Singapore waters (Lewis 1995: 65–66). Indeed, around this period, the Dutch complained of the ‘piratical activities’ of the Bugis as ‘daily increasing’ and that the Bugis were attempting to reroute the Chinese trade to Riau (ibid.: 66). In 1743, the Chinese trader Hhi-Ju informed the Dutch in Melaka that he had encountered six large *ghurab* and 300 small fishing *perahu* while anchored between the Johor River and the Straits of Singapore (near present-day Changi Point). These vessels constituted the fleet of the Yamtuan Muda Daeng Chelak (Daeng Marewa’s brother and successor) and the Penggawa Siantan,<sup>24</sup> who were heading to war in Selangor. Since the Chinese ship was unable to flee due to the stillness of the sea, the Bugis fleet had hastily taken the ship’s rich cargo for their own benefit.<sup>25</sup> A similar report was made by the Portuguese Alexander Carvalho, who was heading to Manila. On his way there, Carvalho had observed more than 60 ships anchored around the islands in the Singapore Straits having designs on his own ship. On his return voyage to India, the danger was still apparent as he spotted 35 to 40 ships anchored along the coasts between the Johor River and the Singapore Straits.<sup>26</sup> A third account was related by the captain of the ship *Jerusalem* from Manila about the sorry fate of another Chinese junk, this one belonging to the *nakhoda* Hein Hen, which had been overwhelmed in February 1743 by the Bugis. The predatory force spent two days unloading the junk’s precious goods into their *sampans*, leaving the Chinese ship with just a few scattered porcelains and other trifles. After this robbery, the Bugis ships retreated to the “Hook of the Singapore Straits” (between present-day Changi and Pengerang, Johor).<sup>27</sup>

Looking at this brief interval, we thus see evidence of continued settlement in Singapore in the bend of a river. This was likely the residence of the Raja Negara, and it was populated by Orang Laut. Water bodies and forests on the island provided refreshment and wood for repair for European ships that passed through. Furthermore, this settlement was occasionally visited by regional traders, as indicated by reports from Dutch patrol ships. The trade carried out around the islands usually consisted of necessities such as rice, salt, sugar, tobacco, and other small products (*grabat*), which comprised the bulk of the cargo found in these regional trade ships. These goods were likely bartered with the local inhabitants in exchange for dried fish, *kajang* palms, seaweed, trepang or turtle shells, fruits, and other forest produce (Chou 2010: 48). However, the nearby waters of the Singapore Straits continued to throng with piracy, posing a danger to passing foreign vessels. Foreign ships that traversed the Singapore Straits sought refuge between the eastern end of Singapore and the Johor mainland. This little nook was a double-edged sword, providing a place to anchor and protection from the wind and turbulent sea, while also leaving ships exposed to attacks since it was a well-known sheltering zone. Yet, compared to the widespread disturbances that broke out during Raja Kecil’s campaigns, this interval was a relatively peaceful one for the Straits. However, this state of affairs was not to last for long.

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24 A headchief from Siantan, the main island in the Anambas group and a dependency of Johor.

25 Relation by Hhi Ju to the Government of Malacca, 26 March 1742, 127–128, 8630, NA VOC.

26 Relation by A. Carvalho to the Government of Malacca, 25 March 1742, 138–140, 8630, NA VOC.

27 Relation by J.B.L. Gazon to the Government of Malacca, 25 March 1742, 141–144, 8630, NA VOC.

## 4. SINGAPORE IN THE SIAK-WOVEN WEB, C. 1745–60

As Raja Kecil retreated from the stage of history, his mantle of leadership came to be contested by his two sons, Raja Alam and Raja Mahmud. As Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells has observed, this intense rivalry between brothers was often externalised and resolved within the wider political arena of the Straits (Kathirithamby-Wells 1997: 217–223). Much of the havoc arising from this succession dispute between the two competing Siak princes would come to unfold in and around Singapore waters.

In Siak, even though Raja Mahmud took the throne first, his reign was not secure. Not only did he have to fend off the animosity of Sultan Sulaiman of Johor, but his position was also threatened by his elder half-brother Raja Alam, who contested his rule by raiding on the high seas. Driven out of Siak, Raja Alam and his followers made Siantan—another Orang Laut region linked to Johor, and where the Pangeran Depati Anum resided in 1717—their base in 1745, raiding and sacking their way through ships and compromising security in the region. This was a lucrative enterprise; Raja Alam once murdered the entire crew of a captured ship from Macau, enriching himself to the happy tune of half a million Spanish dollars, on top of goods and a wealth of cannons and arms (Winstedt 1992: 68; Netscher 1864: 7–8; Vos 1993: 81). With this material largesse, improved firepower, the promise of more booty, and a growing maritime reputation, Raja Alam was able to attract support from a larger following of Orang Laut, which was crucial to his attempts to gain other allies among Malay and Bugis princes and challenge the Siak throne (Vos 1993: 80–81). By the 1750s, open warfare had become commonplace, and reports of piracy and danger increased as both brothers jostled for influence and support from the neighbouring powers (Vos 1993: 94, 97; Lewis 1995: 75–76).<sup>28</sup>

The Siak conflict quickly became intertwined and complicated by events in Johor. In Riau, the then capital of the Johor Sultanate, the Malay-Bugis conflict came once again to the fore. The Bugis, as we remember, were strangers who had become elevated to ‘junior kings’, thanks to their timely assistance in driving out Raja Kecil and ‘restoring’ Johor in the 1720s. However, the Malay-Bugis union grew increasingly strained over two decades, as the Bugis exerted an unwanted dominance over the Malay king and kingdom, first through Yamtuan Muda Daeng Marewa (1722–28) and then his brother, Daeng Chelak (1728–45). However, following the death of the Daeng Chelak in 1745, his succession by the younger Daeng Kemboja (who welded little influence from his fief in Selangor), the maturing of Sulaiman as Sultan in Riau, who felt he had been ‘deprived of his magnificence’ (Vos 1993: 74, 77), and the growing influence of Sultan Mansur of Terengganu in the politics of Riau, the conflicts surrounding Siak provided an opportunity for the Malays to reassert themselves in their own realm against the Bugis. As Siak was nominally a dependency of Johor, both the Bugis Daeng Kemboja, who was fighting to retain his position as regent and protector, and Sultan Sulaiman, who was opting to cast off his and his court’s role as dependents and restore Malay ascendancy in the region, become gradually involved in the disputes and the forming of alliances between the two sons of Raja Kecil. With politicking and fighting intensifying after 1755, Daeng Kemboja departed from Riau, establishing himself and all the Bugis in Linggi, near Melaka.<sup>29</sup> The battle lines were thus drawn up,

28 For the pattern of hostility, see Barnard, 2001: 331–342.

29 Letter by W. Decker et al., to the Governor-General of Batavia J. Mossel, 27 September 1755, 70f, 8643, NA VOC.

with the Malays, Raja Mahmud of Siak, and the VOC on one side, and the Bugis and Raja Alam of Siak on the other. Between 1756–58, war occurred between the parties and caused great misery to all and sundry (Barnard 2003: 79–103).

In the ensuing chaos, the waters in and around Singapore were not spared any of this drama. The Raja Negara and Orang Laut of Singapore's involvement in the Siak troubles is evident from a series of Dutch reports throughout the 1750s. In 1753, the Dutch envoy Arij Verbrugge was sent to sound out the opinion of Johor regarding Raja Alam's coup in Siak. Even though Verbrugge's letters and diary have not survived, the general report of 1754 noted that the Dutch emissary had taken the trouble to meet Sultan Sulaiman near Singapore. He presented the usual diplomatic letters and gifts to the Sultan in the narrow of the Singapore Straits (likely the Old Strait of Singapore, near Batu Berlayar).<sup>30</sup> There, Verbrugge found the Sultan assembling 12 warships with the intention of sailing to Siak (Vos 1993: 86).<sup>31</sup> Raja Mahmud, who had by then been ousted by his brother, had appealed to Sultan Sulaiman for assistance for which this trip was planned (Winstedt 1992: 69).<sup>32</sup> Even though it is not stated, it was likely that the Raja Negara and the Orang Laut of Singapore were part of this force, since Sultan Sulaiman had taken the trouble to make the trip from Riau to Singapore.

Several years later, when Raja Mahmud, who had regained the throne of Siak thanks to the help of the VOC, faced a renewed threat from Raja Alam, Sultan Sulaiman called upon his naval forces, notably the Orang Laut of the Raja Negara, to assist with Raja Mahmud's defence. According to the Dutch records of 1757, Raja Alam had taken a *bantin* and a *balloor*—both manned by the Orang Laut—during one of his raids around the Siak River. These captured vessels had been initially dispatched by Sultan Sulaiman for Raja Mahmud's security and belonged to the Laksamana and the Raja Negara, 'the chiefs of the Johor court', respectively.<sup>33</sup> Letters (which have not been identified to date) were also sent by the two admirals of the sea to Melaka, affirming their roles in aiding Raja Mahmud in his defence against his brother.<sup>34</sup> These mentions indicate that the Raja Negara and the Orang Laut of Singapore remained an extension of Johor's sea power.

Besides providing men and ships, Singapore was an important surveillance post for Sultan Sulaiman and the Malay court at Riau, since it commanded an unrivalled view of movement up and down the Straits. This feature was made plain in 1759, when intelligence was relayed from Singapore regarding Raja Alam and the Suliwatang of Selangor, who had passed the Singapore Straits with 40 *balloors*, presumably as part of his suspected plans to attack Riau. This large fleet raided in and around Singapore waters, keeping the court at Riau fearful of an invasion.<sup>35</sup> Singapore thus operated as a crucial watch post for political developments in the Straits.

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30 Letter by W. Decker to the Governor-General of Batavia J. Mossel, 28 September 1754, 151, 8641, NA VOC; Letter by G. Zeeman to the Governor-General of Batavia J. Mossel, 19 July 1755, 13, 16–17, 8643, NA VOC.

31 Letter by W. Decker to the Governor-General of Batavia J. Mossel, 28 September 1754, 151, 8641, NA VOC.

32 B. de Wind to Governor-General of Batavia J. Mossel, 3 December 1752, 37, 8641, NA VOC.

33 Letter by J.J. Craan to Governor-General of Batavia J. Mossel, 26 August 1757, 51–53, 8645, NA VOC.

34 Ibid.

35 Letter by A. Salice to the Governor of Malacca D. Boelen, 8 May 1759, 23, 8674, NA VOC.



However, because of the ongoing conflict, the settlement of Singapore was greatly afflicted by food shortages and the collapse of commerce. Jungle-covered Singapore was hardly a food-producing area. Even though the population likely depended on fish, which was abundant in the area, it is not difficult to see how squalor could be visited upon the people when fishing and trading were disrupted by conflict at sea. Food scarcity in this interval can be linked partly to the departure of the Bugis, who helped generate trade in the Straits with their own trading networks, as well as the activities of Raja Alam's forces, which were massacring and raiding ships in the nearby Durian Straits, disrupting the flows of commerce and supplies (Vos 1993: 94).<sup>36</sup> Moreover, food deprivation and the capture of men were closely related, since food and manpower sustained fleets and supported armies (Sutherland 2015: 138). What grain could be obtained, either in Riau or in Singapore, was exorbitantly priced (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 113). As a result of this shortage, many were reduced to subsisting on sago (ibid.). Even much later, in 1760, Stephen Arkissa, a prisoner in Singapore, complained about how 'they subsisted on sago in place of rice [...] as the last-mentioned food (rice), was not available at all'.<sup>37</sup>

These general insecurities may have encouraged the Orang Laut to organise raids on the rich commerce that passed through the Straits. For example, the VOC general report of 1755 lamented that the Melaka Straits had become insecure and that merchants from Siam, Cambodia, Pahang, Terengganu, etc., had been kept from passing through the Straits of Singapore due to the 'pirates' of Riau and Lingga (Vos, 1993: 94). Traders feared for their lives and loss of goods.<sup>38</sup> This preying on merchant ships can be seen as an act of necessity rather than an act of malice (Trocki 2007: 17). Indeed, the Sultan of Terengganu makes mention of the sorry plight of the Orang Laut to Melaka, noting how ruined they had become since the time of Raja Kecil, and that they would quickly turn to piracy if Sultan Sulaiman abandoned Riau, thus revealing the straitened conditions of a once-proud fighting force.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, while in 1759 Riau had expected an attack from Raja Alam, an attack was to come from another direction entirely.

##### 5. A THWARTED INVASION, C. 1760

By 1758, Raja Mahmud had failed to sustain his *negeri* in Siak and ostensibly for reasons of reasserting his authority, began turning decisively against his allies (Barnard, 2003: 103). In 1759, he ambushed the Dutch garrison on Pulau Gontong at the base of the Siak River and sought assistance from his former enemies, the Bugis. To complete the volte-face, and undermine his uncle, Sultan Sulaiman of Johor, Raja Mahmud sent his sons in the opening months of 1760 to gather support from the Orang Laut of Singapore to prepare for an invasion of Riau.

In January 1760, two Malay traders named Encik Ladang and Encik Dul testified in Melaka regarding their encounter with a fearsome Siak fleet of 40 ships, counting

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36 Letter by J.J. Craan to the Governor-General of Batavia J. Mossel, 30 April 1755, 30–31, 8643, NA VOC.

37 Relation by C. de la Cruz, S. de Campo, F. de la Cruz Atjiko, and S. Arkissa, 29 May 1760, 140–143, 2993, NA VOC.

38 Letter by J.J. Craan to the Governor-General of Batavia J. Mossel, 30–31, 8643, 30 April 1755, NA VOC.

39 Translated Malay Letter by the Raja of Terengganu to the Governor of Malacca, 26 April 1759, 176–177, 8669, NA VOC.

among them two very large 40-oar *penjajaps* in the Kukup Straits, near the tip of the Malay Peninsula.<sup>40</sup> This fleet had been dispatched by Raja Mahmud to invade Riau and was commanded by his sons. Fearing thus for their safety, the two merchants retreated to Singapore, sailing upriver to the residence of the Raja Negara to seek refuge. Four days afterwards, the first 13 of the 40 vessels of the Siak armada arrived in Singapore, demanding that the two Malays be handed over, likely out of fear that their invasion might be made known to Riau. In response, the Raja Negara not only refused, but later helped the two Malay merchants escape from Singapore, before sending advance notice to Sultan Sulaiman about this impending threat from Siak.<sup>41</sup> Sultan Sulaiman then ordered vessels to be gathered and appealed to the Bugis for support as part of his preparations for war.

While the Siak fleet waited off Singapore, they took to raiding in the heart of Johor's territories, reports of which were conveyed by passing traders to Dutch Melaka. An incident was related by a Melakan Portuguese named Mathias de Rosario, who, sailing past the Singapore Straits, witnessed how the Siak princes attacked a ketch from Manila heading for Madras, the *St. Francisco de Lacrimas*, that had foundered off a rock. Rosario had watched in horror as twelve Siak ships emerged from the 'red beach' (Tanah Merah) of the island of Singapore. Thereafter a medley of gunfire ensued, both sides furiously bombarding each other with cannons and firearms. The crew then watched as the ketch was engulfed in flames, completely consumed within half an hour. Thereafter, the predatory fleet encircled the destroyed ship to salvage any rescuable prize, returning with their loot back to Singapore.<sup>42</sup> This report about a sudden spike in danger in Singapore waters was corroborated by some Indian merchants, and Chinese *nakhoda* who were prevented from returning to Batavia.<sup>43</sup>

As it turned out, the Siak forces had captured several Europeans on this Manila ketch. Four of the 20 shipmates—Carlo de la Cruz, Sabina de Campo, Francisco de la Cruz Aciko, and Stephan Arkissa—managed to escape, subsequently giving their testimonies in Melaka. They had been brought by the Siak forces to the Singapore River, where the Raja Negara had his settlement. As mentioned earlier, while they resided in Singapore, they subsisted for a month like the Siak raiders on sago in place of rice. Although they did not provide a description of the settlement in Singapore, the fact that a large number of Siak troops, Orang Laut, and the captives themselves managed to subsist on the island during a period of deprivation is testament to the durability of the settlement. Another important observation made by Stephen Arkissa was that this 'pirates' lair' was out of sight from Company ketches that were patrolling the Singapore Straits, which meant that the settlement was likely well-concealed by the lay of the land and foliage.<sup>44</sup>

The informants also conveyed that, at the end of their month's stay on the island, the crown prince of Johor, Raja di Baroh, had arrived in Singapore with 19 ships loaded with rice and dried fish, distributing them among the Siak forces (likely including the Orang Laut).<sup>45</sup> For four days, the young prince conversed with the two sons of Raja Mah-

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40 Relation by Encik Ladang, Resident of Malacca, 28 January 1760, 63–66, 8649, NA VOC.

41 Ibid.

42 Relation by M. de Rosario, Resident of Malacca, 10 February 1760, 66–68, 8649, NA VOC.

43 Letter by D. Boelen to Governor-General of Batavia J. Mossel, 23 February 1760, 19, 2992, NA VOC.

44 Relation by C. de la Cruz, S. de Campo, F. de la Cruz Atjiko, and S. Arkissa, 29 May 1760, 140–143, 2993, NA VOC.

45 Ibid.

mud, one of whom was Raja Ismail, on board his ship, urging them to retire from the Straits. Raja di Baroh then convinced them that he would report to the VOC that they had departed and that they could return later and come to an understanding. It was only necessary to pretend to be enemies to deceive the Dutch.<sup>46</sup> This deceitful behaviour, which hinted at some sort of secret alliance, was of grave concern to the VOC who noted that ‘nothing good could come of this prince’ (S’Jacob 2017, XIV, 1: 71–72). After the departure of Raja di Baroh, who was presumably sent to Linggi to fetch Daeng Kemboja to restore the alliance with him in Riau (Winstedt 1992: 70), the captives were taken to Bukit Batu, and subsequently brought up the Siak River to Mempura, where Raja Mahmud held court and was preparing for war.<sup>47</sup>

A variety of letters offer competing interpretations on this encounter and the reasons for the thwarting of this invasion, ranging from the testimony of the Tamil merchant Allegappa, who said Raja Ismail and his ships departed for Siak because of insufficient necessities in Singapore, to that of Temenggong Abdul Jamal, who argued that Raja Ismail left because of the Temenggong’s preparations for war.<sup>48</sup> But here context was key: the evolving regional political situation arguably had a far greater impact on the invasion’s failure than the diplomacy of Raja di Baroh or any of the factors suggested above. The most important change was events occurring in Siak, where the reign of Raja Mahmud was unravelling into chaos. Quarrels at court, Raja Mahmud’s worsening health (Goudie 1989: 295–300), coupled with the fear of Dutch repercussions after the massacre at Pulau Gontong in 1759, for which Raja Mahmud himself was responsible, seems to have necessitated a recall of his sons from Singapore, including Raja Ismail. Raja Mahmud was noted to be at this time busy reinforcing fortifications as the VOC formed an alliance with his brother Raja Alam in preparation for an invasion of Siak.<sup>49</sup> This observation is corroborated by the *Hikayat Siak*’s own account, in which Raja Ismail was said to have returned to Siak to take the throne from his father and prepare for Raja Alam’s assault (Hashim 1992b: 152–154). The invasion from Singapore was thus thwarted by a confluence of factors rather than by any one cause.

Nonetheless, in the troubled months of 1760, when the Malay world stood on the cusp of great change, the Raja Negara contributed to the wider politics of the Straits by forewarning Riau of an impending attack from Siak. The timing of the Siak threat, which sought to use Singapore as a base for the attack, cannot be understated. Having come at a time when Johor’s power was significantly weakened, it could well have been a factor in convincing Sultan Sulaiman to restore the Bugis to power in his kingdom to shore up his rule. Fortunately for Sultan Sulaiman, the Raja Negara was not party to this act of aggression. His aloofness towards the Siak princes stood in contrast to his loyalty to Johor and the Raja di Baroh. It can also be seen that the Raja Negara of Singapore and his Orang Laut forces were valued and appreciated by the crown prince and still found a place in the Johor court structure.

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46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Extract of a Malabar letter by the Gentile Merchant Allegappa, 7 March 1760, 97–100, 2992, NA VOC; Translated Malay Letter by the Temenggong to W. Decker, 8 April 1760, 100–104, 2992, NA VOC.

49 Relation by C. de la Cruz, S. de Campo, F. de la Cruz Atjiko, and S. Arkissa, 29 May 1760, 142–143, 2993, NA VOC. For the 1761 invasion of Siak, see Barnard, 2003: 107–116.

## 6. THE ROYAL PLOT AND THE DECISIVE BATTLE OFF SINGAPORE, 1767

Although Raja Mahmud of Siak's intended assault on Riau was ultimately aborted, it still helped weaken the already tenuous position of the Malay court in Riau. Prior to Raja Mahmud's preparations for war in 1760, the situation for Sultan Sulaiman was already so dire, both from within (the loss of trust from Sultan Sulaiman's nobles) and without (the withdrawal of support from the VOC in Melaka, the departure of Raja Mansur of Terengganu, the betrayal of Raja Mahmud, and Bugis rapprochement with Raja Alam in Siak) that the Sultan had been left without support. With an imminent invasion by Raja Mahmud to reckon with, Sulaiman had been forced to invite the Bugis back to Riau. The Bugis signalled their triumphant return with the arrival of Raja Haji, a fearsome Bugis warrior who arrived at the mouth of the Riau River with a fleet of 25 vessels (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 113–115; Vos 1993: 113).<sup>50</sup>

Within the year, the political situation had changed even more drastically: Sultan Sulaiman had died, as had his intended successor, Raja di Baroh (Vos 1993: 113–114; Netscher 1870: 109).<sup>51</sup> Power had changed hands; the Bugis were once again masters of Johor. Daeng Kemboja emerged triumphant in this long-drawn-out conflict, and, returning to Riau in glory and force, installed the child Ahmad Riayat Shah as a puppet ruler on the throne (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 123; Netscher 1870: 109). As far as we know, the Bugis had always relied on their own Bugis warriors, never seeking an alliance with the Orang Laut. With the restoration of Bugis power in Riau, this situation continued, leaving the Orang Laut of the Singapore region sidelined as a naval force.

In 1762, the VOC sent their emissary Everhard Cramer to Riau, primarily to settle a monetary debt incurred by the late Sultan Sulaiman (Netscher 1870: 128–129). While in Riau, Cramer found a government assembly dominated by Bugis chiefs, with the only Malays present being the Temenggong, the son of the Bendahara, and the Shahbandar of Riau (Raja Ali Haji, 1982: 123–124).<sup>52</sup> Fear of the Bugis was palpable among the Malays. For example, during his stay and visit to the Malay *kampung* in Riau, Cramer was prevented by the Shahbandar of Riau—who was fearful of the Bugis—from entering the latter's house to visit the child-ruler, Ahmad Riayat Shah.<sup>53</sup> Cramer's observations thus give us an inkling of the changing fortunes of the Malays after the death of Sultan Sulaiman and how their powers were rapidly curtailed by the Bugis. Many Malay nobles had to bide their time for a chance at regaining power, or remain compliant in the longer term. They included the Temenggong and his family, who were to play a crucial part in this story later.

Despite this picture of Bugis dominance in Johor-Riau, the first embers of resistance to their power were already forming in locations such as the waters around Singapore. During his sojourn, Cramer was informed of the 'Siak rebels and their chiefs, Raja Busu and Raja Ismail' who continued to operate on the Johor mainland, around the Singapore Straits and Siantan.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the two Siak princes spent a great deal of time harassing and plundering Bugis ships and stealing rice from Riau (Netscher 1870: 132).

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50 For the restoration of the Bugis in Riau in 1760, see the account in the *Hikayat Negeri Johor*.

51 Letter by J.J. Craan to Governor-General of Batavia J. Mossel, 1760, 36, 8650, NA VOC.

52 Report by E. Cramer to Governor of Malacca D. Boelen, 29 March 1762, 211, 8652, NA VOC.

53 Report by E. Cramer to Governor of Malacca D. Boelen, 29 March 1762, 214, 8652, NA VOC.

54 Report by E. Cramer to Governor of Malacca D. Boelen, 29 March 1762, 224, 8652, NA VOC; Letter by T. Schippers et al., to Governor-General of Batavia P.A. van der Parra, 6 April 1765, 111, 8655, NA VOC.

To deal with this threat in his realm, Daeng Kemboja appealed to Melaka for 50 kegs of gunpowder to deal with the said duo ‘who played at being masters in the dependent lands of Johor’.<sup>55</sup>

In Siak, with the help of the VOC, Raja Alam replaced his father Mahmud as Sultan. As a result, Mahmud’s other son, Raja Ismail, was forced out and began to forge a reputation with his entourage as a sea-raider. Besides gaining more legitimacy by forming an alliance with Sultan Mansur of Terengganu, who had himself long harbored hopes of taking the throne of Johor, Raja Ismail also proved his mettle in battle (B.W. Andaya 1976b: 100; Barnard 2003: 129–130). By 1765, Raja Ismail was said to be commanding a formidable fleet of 150 *balloors* and felt confident enough to court Raja Né, a daughter of Sulaiman, who would have provided him with a pathway to succeed to the kingdom of Johor.<sup>56</sup>

At some point in time, the Raja Negara and the Orang Laut of Singapore, who had been previously loyal to Raja Sulaiman and Raja di Baroh, also became allied with Raja Ismail. It is unclear when exactly the Raja Negara of Singapore switched sides. In 1759, a Dutch visitor to Riau named Anthony Salice had met with eight Orang Laut *perahu* near Singapore, who proclaimed themselves subjects of the King of Riau, i.e., Sultan Sulaiman.<sup>57</sup> It is thus likely that their allegiances switched in the years after the Bugis took power. The reason for this rebellion likely stemmed from their loyalty to the Malay sultans, who were upstaged by the Bugis at court. Furthermore, as we noted earlier, Raja Ismail had previously found refuge in Singapore in 1760, and his reputation as a princely ruler of the sea and being a true son of Johor (as grandnephew of Sultan Sulaiman) would have struck a chord with the Orang Laut of Singapore.

It was in Riau, however, where a concerted plan to overthrow the Bugis yoke began to gather pace. This royal plot—which was brutally exposed in the end—involved the Malay faction in Riau, Raja Ismail of Siak, Sultan Mansur of Terengganu, and Raja Negara of Singapore. It has been related in three different Malay manuscripts (the *Hikayat Negeri Johor*, the *Hikayat Siak* and the *Karangan Engku Busu*) as well as the Bugis chronicle, the *Tuhfat al-Nafis*. By consulting the *Hikayat Siak* and the *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, as well as letters sent to the VOC from Sultan Muhammad Ali of Siak (who had succeeded Raja Alam as Sultan) and Daeng Kemboja of Riau in the affair’s aftermath, we are able to provide a more complete narrative of events and explore their decisive impact on Singapore’s Raja Negara and its Orang Laut. The conspiracy thus deserves more elaboration and inclusion in Singapore’s historiography.<sup>58</sup>

The core narrative in the local manuscripts tells of a plan hatched by the Malay faction in 1767 to overthrow the Bugis and restore themselves in Riau. In the *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, which based its account on the *Karangan Engku Busu*, it was the Malays who ‘behaved deceitfully’ (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 127). Chafing under the yoke of Bugis oppression,

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55 Letter by D. Boelen et al., to Governor-General P.A. van der Parra, 28 September 1762, 18–19, 8652, NA VOC; Translated Malay letter by Daeng Kemboja to the Governor of Malacca, 26 June 1762, 32, 8653, NA VOC.

56 Letter by T. Schippers et al., to Governor-General P.A. van der Parra, 6 April 1765, 109, 111, 8655, NA VOC.

57 Diary of A. Salice for his commission to the Court of Johor, 1 May 1759, NA VOC 8674: 30.

58 For notable exceptions, see Buyong Adil 1972: 49, 55; Miksic 2013: 411; Tajudeen 2019: 125 and especially, Barnard 2018: 124–130.

the Malay royal family wrote and sent three letters to the Malay princes (Sultan Mansur of Terengganu, the Bendahara of Pahang, and Raja Ismail of Siak), describing their subjugation by the Bugis in harsh terms. The Bugis, as they detailed in writing, wanted to destroy and eliminate everyone ‘who is a Malay’; therefore, they beseeched these princes to come to Riau immediately to rescue them (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 127–128; Hashim 1992b: 156–157). Meanwhile, while they waited for external assistance, the Malays made plans for themselves. In the event of an attack on Riau, several Malays would desert the Bugis and join the invaders, while the Raja Tua—a senior prince in the hierarchy, who himself had Malay relations—was to ignite the powder magazine of the Yamtuan Muda to add local turmoil to the chaos of war.

Unfortunately for them, the Bugis Yamtuan Muda Daeng Kemboja learned of the Malay faction’s deceit and the imminent attack. He kept the conspirators under house arrest, exiled the Raja Tua, and made plans to meet any external collaborators in battle (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 128–129).<sup>59</sup> The stage was thus set for a maritime confrontation.

Raja Ismail turned out to be the only one to heed the call of the letters from Riau. Yet his initial objective was not Riau but Siak, where his uncle, Raja Alam, had just died, and whose throne he coveted.<sup>60</sup> However, while on a raid in Lingga, he received an emissary from Sultan Mansur of Terengganu and a letter from the Bendahara in Pahang asking him to divert to Riau instead to save the ‘children and the grandchildren of the Great King [Sultan Sulaiman] who died at Batang’ (Winstedt 1992: 71; Netscher 1870: 107). In the meantime, letters addressed to Dutch Melaka from the new Sultan of Siak, Muhammad Ali, and Raja Ismail himself, confirmed that Raja Negara of Singapore was gathering the Orang Laut in the Straits, namely ‘all the people in the environs of Riau’, to join Raja Ismail, augmenting the latter’s power on the sea (Hashim 1992b: 157).<sup>61</sup> Here, the *Tuhfat-al-Nafis* interprets the relationship as one of coercion, claiming that Raja Ismail ‘forced’ the Orang Laut to join his side, treating them harshly and making them prepare ships (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 127). Raja Ismail was also said to have written to the Tujuh Islands, asking every island to supply him with armed *perahu* (ibid.). Raja Ismail then met Raja Mohammad and Raja Prang, sons of Sultan Sulaiman, carrying letters from the Raja Tua as well as other family members of the deceased ruler, showing the involvement of the royal house in encouraging the attack against the Bugis. Whether moved by sympathy or covetousness, Raja Ismail then sailed to Singapore, returning to the Raja Negara’s residence, where he marked a rendezvous point for his 32 ships (Hashim 1992b: 157), as he planned to ‘settle the affairs’ for the house of Sulaiman.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, across from Singapore, Daeng Kemboja, bolstered by reinforcements from Selangor, readied his batteries in Riau and equipped his vessels for war (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 130; Hashim 1992b: 158).<sup>63</sup>

Both the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* and the *Hikayat Siak* relate the violence and drama leading up to the confrontation in detail (Hashim 1992b: 157–163; Raja Ali Haji 1982: 130–133). When triangulated with VOC sources, we gain a clear picture of the fighting in and around

59 For the Raja Tua, see Vos, 1987: 1–32.

60 Extract of the Resolutions of the Council of Malacca, 30 November 1767, 692, 3215, NA VOC.

61 Translated letter from Sultan Muhammad Ali Abdul Jalil of Siak to the Governor of Malacca, 29 July 1767, 464–466, 3245, NA VOC; Translated letter from Sultan Muhammad Ali Abdul Jalil of Siak to the Governor of Malacca, 4 November 1767, 473, 3245, NA VOC.

62 Extract of the Resolutions of the Council of Malacca, 30 November 1767, 693–694, 3215, NA VOC.

63 Extract of the Resolutions of the Council of Malacca, 30 November 1767, 689, 3215, NA VOC.

Singapore and the involvement of the Raja Negara. In his letter to the Dutch in Melaka, Raja Ismail stated that he stayed in Singapore, during which time two battles took place.<sup>64</sup> This account accords with the *Hikayat Siak*, which states that a first skirmish took place around the estuary of the Singapore River (*Kuala Sungai Singapura*). Sailing downstream, likely from the Raja Negara's settlement where the Siak forces had made their base, the Siak men began shooting at the Riau ships encamped at the estuary, provoking the first hostilities of cannons, muskets, and rifles among opposing ships. Faced with this overwhelming attack, several Bugis ships were captured by the Siak forces, and the Bugis were forced to retreat to Tanah Merah to regroup (Raja Ali Haji, 1982: 132; Hashim 1992b: 158).

Daeng Kemboja, swelled by reinforcements from Selangor, then sailed out in full force from Riau, equipped with 60 vessels large and small,<sup>65</sup> and met the fleet of Raja Ismail off Singapore, near the prominent feature of Tanah Merah. There, as the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* relates, 'a great battle broke out, with firing and booming, the thunderous uproar of cannon like a thunderbolt cleaving the mountain, and the air hung thick with gun smoke. The Bugis boarded their sampan, taking their muskets and rifles, and closed in on the Siak fleet, firing on them amidships' (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 132). Faced with this Bugis onslaught, the Siak forces were verily overwhelmed; Siak ships were destroyed and sunk, men were lost, and Raja Ismail was forced into a retreat. In this decisive second battle, the Raja Negara of Singapore was one of the leaders who helped fight for Raja Ismail, securing his escape as well as assisting in the rescue of Raja Abdullah, the brother of Raja Ismail, from the Bugis (Raja Ali Haji 1982: 132–133; Hashim 1992b: 161). Here, the local chronicles also make an important reference to the involvement of four other chieftains of Singapore, likely of the Orang Laut, in the fight, including one Raja Kallang, who accompanied the Raja Negara (Hashim 1992b: 162; Ali Haji 1982: 132). Based on the dates provided by letters from Sultan Muhammad Ali to the VOC in Melaka, detailing Raja Ismail's movement from Pulau Durai to the first reporting of the conclusion of the confrontation between the Siak and Riau ships, we can narrow down the timings of these two battles to the months of August and September 1767.<sup>66</sup> A great victory was thus won by the Bugis, and a defeated Raja Ismail eventually fled to Siak.

This event, which took place around Singapore waters, had important consequences for the region and the histories that were subsequently fashioned. For the VOC in Melaka, their non-intervention in the battle suited them well (Vos 1993: 114; Lewis 1995: 81–98). Abstaining from the volatile and internecine strife of local politics, the Dutch observed the battle while it raged in the Straits. Once it was over, they congratulated Daeng Kemboja on his 'complete victory' while sending patrol ships to guard the newly crowned Sultan Muhammad Ali of Siak against a potential invasion by Raja Ismail.<sup>67</sup> For the Bugis, they had thwarted a dangerous coup with an iron hand.

64 Extract of the Resolutions of the Council of Malacca, 30 November 1767, 689, 3215, NA VOC.

65 Letter from the Government of Malacca to Sultan Muhammad Ali Abdul Jalil of Siak, 24 December 1767, 3245, NA VOC; *The Hikayat Siak* estimates the number however to be 50 ships. See Hashim, 1992b: 160.

66 Translated letter from Sultan Muhammad Ali Abdul Jalil of Siak to the Governor of Malacca, 29 July 1767, 466–468, 3245, NA VOC; Translated letter from Sultan Muhammad Ali Abdul Jalil of Siak to the Governor of Malacca, 7 October 1767, 469–470, 3245, NA VOC.

67 Letter from the Government of Malacca to Daeng Kemboja, 24 December 1767, 497–498, 3245, NA VOC; Letter from the Government of Malacca to Sultan Muhammad Ali Abdul Jalil of Siak, 24 December 1767, 500–501, 3245, NA VOC.

In contrast, things were disastrous for the losers. Raja Ismail, chastened by his defeat, left the Malays at the mercies of an indifferent Company and the triumphant Bugis, roaming the seas until he could build up enough power to return to Siak. The Malays suffered as they saw the complete collapse of their attempt to rescue the house of Sulaiman. Raja Tua was disgraced and left Riau. The attempts of Sultan Mansur of Terengganu to take Johor continued to be frustrated. Many Malay princes fled Riau, leaving those who chose to remain suffering under the Bugis yoke.

For the Raja Negara and the Orang Laut of Singapore and the surrounding region, their power was now definitively broken. In the wake of rebellion and defeat, the Raja Negara was unlikely to have found a place in the new Bugis power structure. Already sidelined by the Bugis in 1760, the Orang Laut of Singapore had even less reason to be relied on anymore since they were party to rebellion, having offered their services to renegade princes like Raja Ismail. The Bugis would survive on the strength of their own Bugis warriors, who by this time far outclassed the Orang Laut technologically and militarily (L.Y. Andaya 1975: 323). Furthermore, in letters written to the VOC, Daeng Kemboja's fury towards the Orang Laut and the Siak seamen, at least in the immediate aftermath, was clear. As a result, after raiding for a time in the Straits, the Raja Negara was forced to flee with several of his *panglima*. Departing from Singapore, the Raja Negara followed Raja Ismail to Terengganu, where the Raja Negara eventually died in 1770.<sup>68</sup>

The 1767 battle was thus the last event in which the Orang Laut of Singapore and their leader, the Raja Negara, exerted their strength as a united fighting force and played a crucial role in assisting the Malay *raja*. Even though the Orang Laut continued to live in and around the islands, they were now deprived of their leader. Their reach and influence were severely diminished. They were no longer relied upon by the royal court at Riau, which was now completely dominated by the Bugis. With the loss of central authority, some Orang Laut groups in the Straits appeared to have succumbed to infighting, while others likely transferred their allegiance to local chieftains who engaged them as pirate crews (Sather 2006: 265).

However, the title of Raja Negara continued to survive and passed over to Siak, where Raja Ismail returned to claim the throne in 1779. Dutch Melaka shipping records note the arrival of a *balloor* of a Raja Negara from Siak in 1786, carrying dried fish and sago, the traditional trade of the Orang Laut. At least in Siak, both the Raja Negara and the Orang Laut there were better appreciated and seemed to have found a place until the 19th century (Junus 2000: 38; Van Anrooij 1885: 343).

While Singapore slowly lapsed into irrelevance, the Straits continued to boom with activity, driven by the shrewd Daeng Kemboja. Bugis-Riau was able to scale the ladder of fortune, embarking on an economic revival that extended until the early 1780s (Trocki 2007: 32–37; Vos 1993: 121–122; Lewis 1970: 114–130; Aratsaratnam 2001: 343–344).

## 7. THE TEMENGGONGS TAKE CONTROL OF THE STRAITS, C. 1780S–1819

With the Orang Laut in the islands around Singapore left without a leader, the region was ripe for a new pretender to fill this vacuum and build his power base from the sea. This void came to be filled by the Temenggongs. This position was first held by Abdul Jamal (1760–84), then by Engku Muda (1784–1806), and later by Engku Muda's nephew,

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68 Diary of G.L. Velge, 8 November 1773, 778, 3418, NA VOC.



Abdul Rahman (1806–25). As seen earlier, the Temenggongs were a minor branch of the Malay royal family that had been sidelined by the return of the Bugis. Although the remit of his duties was originally wide-ranging, concerning the city and its environs (Hashim 1992a: 132–133; Trocki 2007: 24–25), the Temenggong's powers were severely curtailed by the dominant Bugis, who had taken over all branches of the government. By 1770, the then Temenggong Abdul Jamal had already suffered several setbacks while attempting to restore Malay power in Riau. Outcast and disdained, Abdul Jamal would have been, like many other Malay nobles, bankrupted by the Bugis monopolisation of trade, and would have sought his fortune elsewhere (Trocki 2007: 30).

In 1783, the Bugis went to war with the Dutch, an event that would dramatically shift the balance of power in the Straits. The incumbent Bugis Yamtuan Muda, Raja Haji, was killed, and the VOC, bolstered by reinforcements from the Dutch Republic, was able to reduce Riau to a vassal state. Under these new circumstances, Engku Muda, who had succeeded his father, found himself once more reinstated to a position of power, most prominently as a member of a Malay council that acted as the guardian of the young Sultan, Mahmud Shah (Trocki 2007: 39; Vos 1993: 147–185; Lewis 1995: 99–110).

However, it became clear to the VOC, once they were stationed in Riau, that Engku Muda had an alternative base of power that lay beyond the Malay court. In 1786, the Dutch Resident in Riau, David Ruhdé, reported to Batavia the exploits of Temenggong Abdul Jamal's family, namely his three sons, Daeng Chelak, Daeng Kecil, and Engku Muda. For several years, the three enterprising scions of the Temenggong had raised themselves to better conditions through the rewards of piracy from the *Selat Tiung*.<sup>69</sup> They operated widely, sailing north and south, raiding the various straits around Riau to Java's north coast and as far as Siam and Cambodia. Their ships were manned by the Orang Laut of Lingga and the surrounding islands. However, in 1783, a fatal accident killed Daeng Chelak and Daeng Kecil, leaving only Engku Muda, who had thrown himself overboard, as the sole surviving heir (see Trocki 2007: 30). Engku Muda was well placed to take advantage of the new situation with the Dutch occupation of Riau. However, his absence and disinterest in cooperating with the Dutch or being an active member at the restored Malay court that had supervision over the ruling sultan hinted at Engku Muda's alternative avenues for advancement.<sup>70</sup> With crucial consequences for Singapore and the islands around the Straits, Engku Muda, in the vacuum of power, was fully content to make his fortune from the bosom of the sea, arrogating authority over the remaining Orang Laut as a *bona fide* sea chief.<sup>71</sup>

It was during this interval that influence over Singapore shifted from the traditional fiefdom of the Raja Negara to the domain of the Temenggong of Johor. With the Raja Negara absent from the Straits, and the expulsion of the Bugis from the Straits, Engku Muda had a free hand to establish his power quickly over the island neighbourhood and bring the Orang Laut under his control. In addition, the Orang Laut of Singapore, such as the Suku Gelam, Selatar, and Kallang, would have recognised the need for a new leader and would have aligned themselves very quickly with Engku Muda, who now took over the role and authority of the erstwhile Raja Negara (Trocki 2007: 58–59; Chou 2010: 52). This arrangement was one of mutual advantage; one that would have been very profit-

69 A strait in the Riau islands.

70 Secret Letter by D. Ruhdé to P.G. de Bruijn, 29 September 1786, 96, 8668, NA VOC.

71 Secret Letter by P.G. de Bruijn to D. Ruhdé, 7 September 1786, 79, 8668, NA VOC.

able to both Engku Muda and the Orang Laut. By the early 19th century, the Temenggong as patron was providing monetary advances (*ayuman*) to defray the costs of a raiding expedition, which were then returned to him with 50 per cent interest, together with ammunition, weapons, captives, and hulls of ships captured. In return, the Orang Laut as clients retained all other booty for their efforts; more importantly, they were provided with legitimacy and protection by the Temenggong (Andaya 2008: 190). So significant was Engku Muda's rise in such a manner that a report from 1787 noted that the 'Raja Temenggong' (i.e., Engku Muda) was well established in Bulan, trading in agar-agar, taking slaves for ransom and operating as a 'chief of the pirates'.<sup>72</sup>

The long legacy of 1767—namely, the Raja Negara's loss of authority over the Orang Laut of Singapore and its vicinity—was why Engku Muda was eventually able to confidently assert that 'all the islands and islets and Johor' were under him (Winstedt 1992: 82). This realm, ranging from Karimun, Buru, Galang, Moro, Batam, Terong, Sugi, and Bulang, to Pekaka, Temiang, and Singapore, would include a total population of up to 10,000 men (Trocki 2007: 59). So significant was this rediscovery of naval advantage by Engku Muda, and his successor Abdul Rahman, that, by the early 19th century, they were said to be able to muster 1,200 men in 50 ships (Turnbull 2009: 24). Unlike what some historians have suggested (Abdullah 1970: 141; Barr 2021: 287; Trocki 2007: 58–90), this power base was not a territorial inheritance or traditional fiefdom bestowed upon the Temenggongs by the Malay sultans. Instead, this overlordship was built during a period of weak royal rule. What stands out in this period was how Engku Muda's growing influence created an opportunity for his successors to rediscover Singapore as a desirable base of operations.

Engku Muda's bid for power was strengthened further in 1787, when Sultan Mahmud Shah decamped to Lingga, leaving the former as the sole force in Riau. With the Sultan gone, Engku Muda ruled Riau until about 1804 (Trocki, 2007: 39–40). Eventually his influence was checked by the returning Bugis under the leadership of the succeeding Yamtuan Muda Raja Ali, leading to conflict between the two factions. Upon Engku Muda's death, his nephew Abdul Rahman accepted the title of Temenggong from the Sultan around 1806. In the same year, the succession of the Bugis Yamtuan Muda by the younger Raja Jaafar after Raja Ali's death signified an end to the fighting and established an unspoken truce between the two groups.

However, the tensions between the lines of the Temenggong and that of the Bugis Yamtuan Muda were not resolved. A lingering sense of conflict can be found in the *Hikayat Keraja'an*, in which Engku Muda, before his death, was said to have warned his nephew, Abdul Rahman, that their family '[have] got to look after [them]selves or be worsted' (Trocki 2007: 40). Ultimately, Temenggong Abdul Rahman's control over his domain of islands, as well as his enterprising spirit for trade, were insufficient to effectively challenge the Bugis-dominated court at Riau. In 1809, Temenggong Abdul Rahman begged pardon from Sultan Mahmud for a trespass and requested to relocate from Bulan. This resettlement came to pass around 1810–11. Abdul Rahman established a new settlement at the mouth of the Singapore River. However, as the narrative has shown repeatedly, without strong alliances to exploit Singapore's strategic advantage, Temenggong Abdul Rahman's hold on the island residence of the Raja Negara counted for little (Trocki 2007: 43).

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72 Letter by C.G. Baumgarten to P.G. de Bruijn and A. Couperus, 23 September 1788, 219, 8438, NA VOC; Secret Letter by P.G. de Bruijn to D. Ruhdé, 7 September 1788, 79, 8668, NA VOC; Secret Letter by D. Ruhdé to P.G. de Bruijn, 29 September 1786, 103, 8668, NA VOC.

As Riau continued to bustle as the centre of courtly life and trading activity, Singapore's idyll stood in stark contrast. The Orang Laut of Singapore were still in residence, under a new master at Kampong Temenggong. They continued to fish, hunt boars, subsist on sago, and engaged in occasional barter trade with (and the odd raiding of) passing ships, which contrasted with the preceding intense and dramatic age in the realm.<sup>73</sup> But the world would not be passing by for long. This quiet phase in Singapore's history would be rudely interrupted one fine January morning in 1819, when the British, as the story goes, arrived on Singapore's sandy shores, offering a new alliance and configuration of power.

#### CONCLUSION

With the close of this narrative, this paper has made three important revisions to the current understanding of Singapore's past before 1819. First, the settlement of Singapore and its surrounding waters in the 18th century played a significant role in the politics of the Malay world before its colonial establishment. The Raja Negara was resident in Singapore until about 1770, overseeing a *negeri* in the bend of a river. The notion that settlements in premodern Singapore ended with a supposed destruction of a settlement in 1613 must therefore now be definitively discarded. The idea of a period of silence during the 18th century must now be exchanged for a noisier one. To those coming to this narrative for the first time, the history of the 18th-century Malay world might seem messy and confusing. Many conflicts were internal and deeply personal, with little ground gained and what gained premised on little grounds. Yet it is precisely this upheaval in the Malay world that allows us to catch glimpses of Singapore and its surrounding waters as a distinct space and strategically pivotal location that changed with over time. At different points during the 18th century, Singapore through the Raja Negara and Orang Laut acted as a gatekeeper of the capital upstream of the Johor river and later as a watchpost for Riau; it was also an occasional calling station, a rendezvous point (where rebel princes found refuge and built power in its vicinity), a place where ships and troops were raised and assaults began and ended, and a realm which witnessed alliances and contestations by princes trying to gain mastery through controlling the passages and channels in and around the Singapore Straits. Singapore and its seascapes were thus a geopolitical space intensely involved in the major regional events and conflicts of the day. Singapore was deeply integrated with the larger Malay world, and the waters that had defined its past and shaped its future.

Second, we have gained a new appreciation of the Raja Negara as a central figure in Singapore's historiography. Even though we are unable to reconstruct the personality of the Raja Negara with any degree of certainty, or come to an internal orientation of Singapore's history (Bastin 1964: 151), the actions of the Raja Negara in the 18th century, as depicted through the VOC sources and the Malay records, allow us to sketch out his motivations and see him display his reputation and control his environment (Wolters 1970: xi). We have seen how the Orang Laut of Singapore played a crucial role in Raja Kecil's assault on Johor in 1717 and only lost their relevance as a fighting force closer to the 1760s. The Raja Negara was relied upon by Sultan Sulaiman, especially in the troubles with Siak, and was an integral member of the Johor court before 1760. Undoubtedly, the chaos

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73 *Beschrijving van de volksstammen van de Saletters en Goenocoas op het Maleise schiereiland*, 1–2, 5–6, Archive of Nicolaas Engelhaard, 1620–1831 Nationaal Archief, The Hague.

of the 1760s allowed him to make his choices, giving him the chance to sustain his *negeri* differently. In choosing to first side with Raja Kecil, and then back Raja Ismail, the leader of the Orang Laut in the Straits set a course which eventually shaped the settlement and his people's destiny. Such is the evidence that brings us closer to a very different idea of Singapore as it existed more than 200 years ago.

Third, we are now able to address Michael Barr's question on why the island 'was severely and uncharacteristically depopulated when Raffles arrived in 1819' (Barr 2019: 57), and also why Raffles found the Temenggong being chief of the island. As alluded to above, this situation was the long legacy of the defeat of 1767, which had led to the flight of the Raja Negara from his traditional realm and the besting of the Orang Laut, in turn precipitating the depopulation and decline of Singapore, especially towards the tail end of the 18th century. With the absence of the Raja Negara, who was now finding patronage and abode in Siak, a power vacuum existed in the Straits that the family of the Temenggongs, notably Engku Muda and later Abdul Rahman, were able to successfully exploit. By winning the allegiance of the Orang Laut in the Straits, the family of the Temenggongs effectively transformed themselves from court nobles to pirate chiefs, for a time. The Temenggong would eventually cast his lot with a new arrival in the region, the English East India Company (EIC), signifying the continuation of their rebellion against the Bugis domination of kingdom, people, and court. Taking a long-sighted perspective of the period thus allows us perhaps to see the accident of the 19th century (*viz.* Raffles' founding of Singapore) not as shaped simply by the initiative of any one individual but also made possible by the transformative events of the 18th century.

Taken as a whole, these three revisions significantly transform what we know of Singapore's 700-year-past, offering a new understanding of the island's decline during the 18th century. By elaborating on six distinctive episodes above, we can debunk the myth of Singapore's irrelevance by showing how the fortunes of the Raja Negara and the Orang Laut shaped and were shaped by wider regional processes of conflict and alliances that convulsed the Malay world, thus demonstrating the centrality and vitality of the Straits before Singapore's colonial founding. These mini-revolutions therefore act as a narrative bridge, one that portrays the arrival of Raffles and the EIC not as a new beginning—as it is usually framed—but as the last in the long line of 'rebels' and power-making that had veritably begun in 1699. In this latter framing, the successful arrival of the British can be seen as merely another result of a shifting board of alliances and condominiums. Such an approach reflects a major shift in perspective, from privileging the main island, to including Singapore's surrounding waters, its indigenous peoples, and its maritime heritage, bringing them more closely into the structure of Singapore's 700-year history. The approach also suggests an understanding of premodern Singapore's history that is characterized more by continuity than decisive rupture.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My explorations into early Singapore owe much to Peter Borschberg and Kwa Chong Guan, who have provided both inspiration and encouragement for this paper. I would further like to thank Terence Chong for taking me on at the Temasek History Research Centre and for supporting this research. Two anonymous reviewers, as well as Muhammad Suhail and Jeff Khoo, have given me extensive comments and their perceptive insights have been critical for my revisions. Finally, I sincerely thank Geoffrey Pakiam and Andrea

Acri for several careful reads of this paper and for their excellent editorial suggestions. All errors I claim as my own.

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2992, 2993, 3215 3245, 3418, 7795, 8337, 8378, 8379, 8438, 8446, 8607, 8626, 8628, 8630, 8641, 8643, 8645, 8649, 8650, 8652, 8653, 8655, 8668, 8669, 8674.

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#### GLOSSARY

<i>anak raja</i> :	Sons of kings and pirates (B.W. Andaya 1976a: 162).
<i>balloor</i> :	Small rowboat, often used as a trading or raiding <i>perahu</i> .
<i>bantin</i> :	Also spelt as <i>banting</i> . A two-mast open boat and two rudders. Usually used for naval warfare.
<i>ghurab</i> :	Also known as <i>gurab</i> , <i>gorab</i> , or <i>grab</i> , it is a medium-sized galley-like ship with two masts, which can be equipped with guns. Usually used for trade or war.
<i>kajang</i> :	Palm leaf, usually referring to the plaited leaf of the coconut palm. Used for thatching and matting.
<i>kerajaan</i> :	The state of having a <i>raja</i> , the royal polity, or loosely, government (Milner 2016).
<i>kojang</i> :	Also spelt as <i>koyan</i> , or <i>koyang</i> . A measure of weight for rice and salt. The weight varies according to the product. 1 <i>kojang</i> of rice is measured at 1750 kilograms. For salt, 1 <i>kojang</i> is about 2420 kilograms.
Laksamana:	Sea admiral.
<i>nakhoda</i> :	Shipmaster, captain.
<i>negeri</i> :	Refers to a settlement of different types and sizes. In classical Malay literature, this could refer to a polity, emporium, city, or royal compound. However, it could also be a small township or village. The term conveys a sense of an urban agglomeration and a localised center of activity (Mahdi 2007: 248).
<i>pencalang</i> :	A planked boat, about 40–60 feet long and 8–9 feet wide, with a rectangular sail. Used often by the VOC in the Straits of Melaka to fight pirates.
<i>penjajap</i> :	Also known as <i>penjajab</i> , it is a long and fast outrigger used in the region.
<i>perahu</i> :	A small sailing boat.
Raja:	King, prince.
<i>rayat laut</i> :	Sea people or subjects, referring to the seafaring Orang Laut.
<i>sampan</i> :	A small indigenous sailing vessel with a sharp keel.
<i>suku-suku</i> :	Clans or divisions.
Yamtuan Muda:	Shortened form of ‘Yang di Pertuan Muda’. Deputy Ruler, or ‘Under King’; originally used to designate the heir apparent, it was later used to refer to the position of the Bugis leader in Riau, who was close to the throne.