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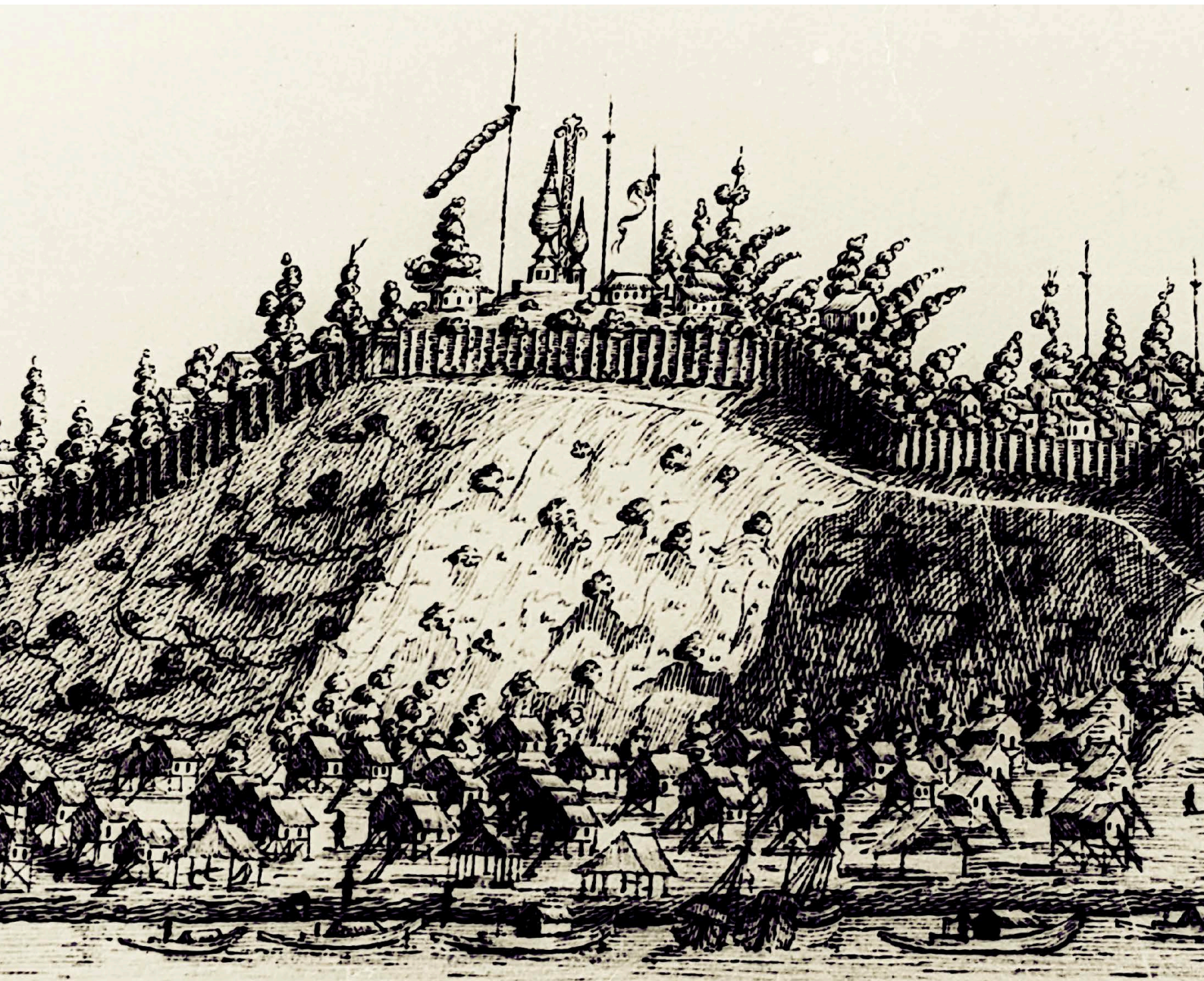


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NEITHER INDIGENOUS NOR FOREIGN: RECONCEPTUALISING THE PORT CITIES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

JEFF KHOO

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View of the town and port of Mergui, as seen from aboard the *Brillant* during the winter of 1777/78. French National Archives, Marine series 2JJ.

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Neither Indigenous nor Foreign: Reconceptualising the Port Cities of Southeast Asia

Jeff Khoo

ABSTRACT

A dichotomy opposing the foreign and the indigenous prevails in the historiography describing early modern Southeast Asia. This is problematic when applied to the region's port cities, which find themselves paradoxically celebrated as indigenous expressions of cosmopolitanism. In particular, cosmopolitanism has been used as a marker of dynamism, when instead it should be interrogated. How were the boundaries between foreignness and indigeneity negotiated? A survey of three well-known 18th-century sources makes clear that foreignness and indigeneity were not dichotomous, but part of a spectrum on which populations experienced displacement, hybridisation and subjugation. The conceptualisation of port cities as the accretive outcomes of these continuing processes offers a way of stepping beyond the limitations of ethnic, nationalist, colonial, and post-colonial historiographical paradigms.

INTRODUCTION

AN IRONY SOMETIMES ENCOUNTERED in the historiography of early modern Southeast Asia is the replacement of Eurocentric and colonial perspectives with narrowly nationalist paradigms. As prominent scholars have long observed, it remains possible to write and read the history of Thailand as the history of the Thais, the history of Burma as that of the Burmans, the history of Malaysia as that of the Malays, *et cetera*, as though the association between these modern states and their eponymous ethnicities were unproblematic (Anderson 1978: 221; Salem-Gervais 2012; Lieberman 1978; Andaya and Andaya 2017; Kheng 1996: 37). Where Southeast Asia has been studied as a region, there has prevailed a dichotomy opposing 'European' against 'Asian'.¹ The two categories are historiographical constructs that arose from a well-meaning desire to correct the Eurocentric narratives established by colonial scholarship. It is nonetheless questionable whether 'European' and 'Asian' can adequately describe historical circumstances in Southeast Asia, and whether they were relevant categories to its diverse inhabitants.

¹ Both 'European' and 'Asian' are problematic terms. Americans, whose commerce became an important factor in the archipelago from the closing decade of the 18th century, fit in neither. 'Asian' includes so wide a swathe of humanity as to be almost devoid of analytical value. The use of these two terms in this paper is not intended to suggest that either is a coherent historical actor, nor that the world of the Southeast Asian port city can be neatly divided into its 'European' and 'Asian' halves. This choice of terminology merely reflects the categories that have emerged in the elaboration of an early modern period in Southeast Asian history.

Nowhere does this problem manifest itself more clearly than in the historiography of the societies that lived and traded in the port cities of the archipelago. The city of Malacca provides an example. Here, a combination of early modern historiography, colonial scholarship and modern nationalism has had the effect of casting the history of the Malacca Straits in ethnic terms, with a narrative arc stretching from the Portuguese capture of Malacca in 1511 to the final demise of the traditional Malay polity during the 19th and 20th centuries (Reid 2001: 84, 295). This is a stirring story that contrasts imperial expansion against the valiant struggle and admirable resilience of indigenous actors, and that has sometimes been cast against a larger regional context of the ‘last stands of Asian autonomy’ in the face of advancing European power (Reid 1997: 7). Where the Malacca Strait is concerned, the problem with this perspective is that its ethnic categories obscure important continuities in the political economy of successive port-settlements that have prospered and declined in the area over the past 500 years. The most successful among these—Portuguese and Dutch Malacca at times, 17th-century Johor and its 18th-century Bugis-Malay iteration at Riau, and the later British factories in Penang and Singapore—all prospered as entrepôts for long-distance trade, while differing substantially in the languages, religions and political ideologies they adopted, as well as in the composition of their inhabitants. These entrepôts, like others in the region, provide the historian with opportunities for fruitful explorations of cross-cultural interactions beyond the simple European/Asian dichotomy. Before this is possible, however, it is necessary to step away from existing historiography that casts these entrepôts as ‘Southeast Asian’, ‘Malay’, or ‘colonial’, and to attempt to reconceptualise them based on their common underlying political economy.

1. IS THE ENTREPÔT COSMOPOLITAN OR INDIGENOUS?

There have been remarkably few attempts made to analyse the port cities of the archipelago as a conceptual category. The most sustained attempt to do so appears in *The Southeast Asian Port and Polity*, an edited volume by Villiers and Kathirithamby-Wells (1990). In her introduction to the volume, Kathirithamby-Wells argued that the port-polity was the dominant form of indigenous political organisation in Southeast Asia, a region that has historically been the site of emporia mediating trade between Orient and Occident. By providing access to and control over commerce, entrepôts became the chief source of the symbolic and material resources that allowed the establishment of political authority. In this model, port-polities are the leading sites of commerce, and commerce is the leading driver of political consolidation and political evolution. The ruler of the port polity gains political potency by functioning as a mediator and regulator of external cultural influences (Kathirithamby-Wells and Villiers 1990: 5).

In presenting the port-polity as Southeast Asia’s dominant form of political organisation, Kathirithamby-Wells’ model could not avoid some compromises. Most importantly, it downplayed the importance of power bases outside of commerce, arguing that even agrarian states needed ports to gain external markets. Mataram’s destruction of the Javanese *pasisir* in the 17th century was thus dismissed as an aberration in the dominance of the port-polity in the region’s political development. It would be simpler to acknowledge that the importance of the port-polity in Southeast Asia did not rule out other potential bases of political power: the agricultural production of settled populations, the military potential of sea peoples, prized products accessible only by through inland and

upland communities, and deposits of iron or precious metals and minerals, could equally be harnessed by ambitious leaders. This is an objection that scholars of the Southeast Asian mainland have raised concerning the work of scholars of the archipelago, who have placed greater emphasis on the role of commerce as a driver of historical change (Lieberman 1995: 796). Port-polities were only part of a broader picture, and to focus exclusively on them inevitably accentuates the European impact, which maritime polities were more exposed to than land-based ones (Lieberman 2008: 694; Lieberman 2003), while downplaying historical dynamics involving the larger polities of mainland Southeast Asia. The sack of Syriam by Arakan in 1599, the conquest of Pegu by Alaungpaya in 1757, and the fall of Ayutthaya before Hsinbyushin's armies in 1767 cannot be explained only, or even primarily, in terms of indigenous port-polities and their encounters with Europeans.

The Southeast Asian aspect of Kathirithamby-Wells' model becomes problematic when colonial factories and entrepôts are brought into the analysis. Arguing that European intrusions from the second half of the 17th century onwards resulted in the gradual decline of the Southeast Asian port-polity, Kathirithamby-Wells nonetheless notes that the European entrepôts that grew out of these intrusions gave 'new meaning and renewed strength' to the concept of the port-polity; Singapore's 19th-century rise was 'the natural outcome of the overall expansion of long-distance trade and the evolution of port-polities in Southeast Asia' (Kathirithamby-Wells and Villiers 1990: 11). British Singapore, in other words, greatly resembled earlier Southeast Asian port-polities, but as a colonial creation, could not be treated as 'Southeast Asian'. Kathirithamby-Wells does not address Portuguese Malacca and Dutch Batavia, both of which experienced their heyday well before the posited late 17th-century decline of the Southeast Asian port-polity. This omission reflects a recurrent tension in the historiography of early modern Southeast Asia, stemming from the difficult reconciliation of the 'indigenous' and the 'foreign'. Drawing too firm a line between these two categories leads to two historiographical consequences. First, it downplays conflict and competition *not* involving European actors, such as the competition between Johor and Aceh over primacy in the Malacca Straits region, the gradual destruction of Cham polities by Vietnamese polities (Li 2006: 147), and the friction and displacement generated by Bugis migrations into the Western archipelago (Andaya 1995: 136). Second, it tends to overlook continuities and convergences between indigenous and European port-cities in areas as disparate as the generalised role of the *shahbandar*, the socio-political salience of sumptuary norms, and their common reliance on non-local labour and merchants.

Despite its disadvantages, the historiographical dichotomy between 'European' and 'indigenous' has robust origins. As mentioned earlier, it stemmed from a desire to correct the Eurocentric narratives established by earlier colonial scholarship. To do so, a generation of historians conceptualised an 'early modern' period during which Southeast Asian participation in long-distance commerce created cosmopolitan courts and cultures. The resulting paradigm emphasised the active agency of Southeast Asian actors in a period where long-distance commerce and voyages were bringing the world closer together. This was a marked improvement over earlier narratives focused on discovery, expansion and conquest, and immeasurably deepened our understanding of the Southeast Asian polities that both pre-dated and evolved in parallel with European influences. Nonetheless, although one well-established pioneer of the early modern approach did emphasise from the onset that it was not his purpose to 'glamorise the age of commerce or to portray its ending as defeat or failure' (Reid 1993: 329), much of ensuing historiography has done

precisely this. To some scholars, studying early modern Southeast Asia serves principally as a prerequisite to understanding what the region later lost to European intrusions (Gin and Tuan 2015: 4). Such a paradigm is poorly suited to the study of cosmopolitan entrepôts; it is nonetheless the dominant paradigm applied to the history of the Malacca Straits, in which the 1511 Portuguese conquest of Malacca casts a long shadow.

In Reid's influential but much-debated 'Age of Commerce' thesis, a central idea is that early modern Southeast Asian port cities, epitomised by the Malacca Sultanate, were cosmopolitan urban centres marked by constant innovation and cultural adaptation (Reid 1993: 64). These arguments have been much developed by Barbara and Leonard Andaya, who describe the Malacca Sultanate as having simultaneously been a cosmopolitan and multicultural polity and the origin of 'traditional' Malay culture (Andaya and Andaya 2017: 42). Here, they argue that Malay-Indonesian commerce and politics have displayed 'a cyclical pattern of alternating unity and fragmentation' for well over a thousand years, and that had it not been for Portuguese, Dutch, and English intrusions, the Malay entrepôt would most likely have reconstituted itself.² This is not the place to critique the Andayas' presentation of Malacca and its legacy; for the purposes of this essay, it will suffice to highlight that in their analysis, the entrepôt is no longer merely Southeast Asian, but specifically Malay. This has the side effect of marginalising 'non-Malay' historical actors, which is precisely what happens in Leonard Andaya's *Leaves of the Same Tree*—an investigation of the origins of the Malays—in which interactions involving 'non-ancient' ethnic groups are summarily dismissed, as if these interactions played no role in the formation of modern understandings of ethnicity in the Straits (Andaya 2008: 13).

How did a focus on cosmopolitan port cities evolve into ethnicised historiography? Part of the problem, as we have seen with Kathirithamby-Wells' model, seems to be the dichotomy between a celebrated 'indigenous' past and a regrettable 'European' encounter. Yet, to simplify the early modern paradigm in this manner not only does a great injustice to it, but also renders a disservice to the related historiography. To better understand the problem, it is worth revisiting the paradigm introduced by Reid in some detail. Reid argued that indigenous control over maritime commerce created cosmopolitan, dynamic, and innovative cities; the loss of indigenous control over commerce in the 17th century led to a distrust of external ideas, and to rulers resorting increasingly to symbolic assertions of primacy (Reid 1993: 328). Unpacked, the argument rests on a trio of uncertain premises: that innovation arises from cross-cultural commerce, that withdrawal from commerce leads to distrust of external ideas, and that rulers turn to symbolic forms of self-legitimation only when unable to compete commercially. Reid formulated this model in the early 1990s, when globalisation was still a buzzword and the political populism we are now so familiar with was still a fringe phenomenon.

Thirty years on, our perspectives have become less rose-tinted. We are now acutely aware that societies respond to foreignness and cross-cultural encounters in complex and morally ambiguous ways, on a spectrum that stretches from cosmopolitan hybridisation to nativist revival. Diversity, foreignness, and prosperity are sometimes the basic ingredients of inequality, hierarchy, and discrimination. Cosmopolitanism, even when understood as cultural innovation, adaptation, and hybridity, does not improve all lives.

² Dianne Lewis (1995) adopts a similar argument in her study of VOC involvement in the Malacca Straits in the 18th century, concluding that Dutch actions impeded the re-consolidation of the 'traditional Malay entrepot' that would otherwise have taken place.

Similarly, it is difficult to reduce distrust of external ideas to withdrawal from foreign trade. Trade can and does take place despite deep distrust—it would scarcely be cross-cultural otherwise. Conversely, openness to external ideas sometimes has little to do with trade. In the premodern world, conquest and the local accommodation of conquerors could equally be vectors of cultural, political, and religious innovation. Trade is at best one of many pathways along which ideas cross cultural boundaries, and one ingredient among many when it comes to determining the openness of a society to external ideas. A more straightforward explanation is that societies welcome external ideas that are useful, unthreatening, or irresistible. This is not a very useful generalisation, but societies are complex.

In recent years, the evident complexities of 21st-century cosmopolitanism have attracted a good deal of intellectual attention. Among scholars of political economy, it is now widely accepted that the post-1990 acceleration of globalisation has widened domestic inequalities and fuelled populist backlash. Dani Rodrik, an influential voice in debates concerning the political economy of modern globalisation, has sought to explain the mechanisms through which globalisation has driven a wedge between cosmopolitans and communitarians (Rodrik 2018: 12). Whereas technological change has empirically been a much greater driver of inequality than cross-border trade, disruptions caused by cross-border trade awaken and amplify latent cultural prejudices. Unlike technological change, global economic interconnectedness provides obvious ‘outsider’ targets—foreign firms, immigrant labour, international capital—on which societies can pin the blame of economic disruption (Rodrik 2021: 162). Globalisation, in other words, drives *both* cosmopolitan and communitarian attitudes.

Recent reflections by European historians have highlighted the uncertain relationship between cosmopolitan attitudes and outcomes that can be described as ‘innovation and adaptation’. German historian Stefan Berger, working on comparative European national historiographies, has described the limitations of the ‘cosmopolitan memory’ adopted in post-war Western Europe as a response against the antagonistic nationalisms that had accompanied the continent into war and genocide. This cosmopolitan mode of remembrance is self-consciously European, supra-national, rooted in the ideologies of liberal capitalist democracy and focused on the experience of victims (rather than perpetrators or bystanders). While a marked improvement over the nationalisms it defines itself against, post-war European cosmopolitanism nonetheless tends towards becoming an ‘unassailable orthodoxy’ of its own, with its own exclusions. The cosmopolitan European mainstream has been consistently unwilling to engage with those who do not share its parameters, notably the anti-capitalist left and the populist right, and ill-equipped to respond to the latter’s highly successful revival of antagonistic nationalisms (Berger 2021: 27). Cosmopolitan attitudes can very well fall short of the demands of their changing times.

On closer inspection, Rodrik and Berger mean rather different things when they refer to ‘cosmopolitanism’. Rodrik is referring to the relative winners of globalisation, those successful in navigating intensified cross-border economic competition. Here, cosmopolitanism is an outcome, not an ideology. On the other hand, the European cosmopolitanism whose limits Berger traces belongs to an ideological lineage that stretches back to the Stoic contrast between the narrow *polis* and the broader *cosmopolis*, within which one finds Kant’s theories of perpetual peace, Woodrow Wilson’s vision for the League of Nations, and Jurgen Habermas’ calls for European constitutional patriotism. This tradi-

tion is primarily concerned with transcending narrower claims to political loyalty, from the Greek *polis* to the 20th-century nation-state. To these two understandings of cosmopolitanism can be added a third, in which emphasis is placed on respect for legitimate difference and acceptance of multiple loyalties. This is Kwame Appiah's celebration of diversity and mankind's shared humanity, with its moral injunctions in favour of openness towards cultural exchange and accepting plural or hybridised cultural forms (Appiah 2006: 7). Whether it is in fact possible to treat cosmopolitanism as an ethical doctrine with no political implications is the subject of contemporary philosophical debate. Multiple loyalties are fine until they come into mutual conflict; emphasising the equal human dignity of all members of the species does not sweep away differentiated moral obligations to kin, neighbour, friend and stranger (Miller 2002: 82).

Returning to Reid's paradigm, the issue is that the sprawling and contested concept of cosmopolitanism was used narrowly, in very specific context, for a very specific purpose. This was to demonstrate that early modern Southeast Asian polities were not in any state of decay or stasis prior to European colonisation. Instead, they were dynamic, vibrant and cosmopolitan societies that welcomed people and ideas from afar. 'Cosmopolitanism' was not problematised, but used merely as a synonym for modernity and diversity; Reid was not primarily concerned with the moral or political attitudes that stemmed from the culturally diverse context of the Southeast Asian port city, nor with the politics of cosmopolitanism. Thus, while it was not Reid's purpose to 'glamorise the age of commerce or to portray its ending as defeat or failure', this has in practice been the historiographical outcome of the paradigm he adopted. The experience of 21st-century cosmopolitanism suggests that it would be useful to take a step back from celebrations of early modern cosmopolitanism, albeit without reverting to an older historiographical paradigm of indigenous decay. Developing such a middle ground involves treating cosmopolitanism as a problem to be explained. Rather than try to assess how cosmopolitan or inward-looking societies were, it is necessary to think in terms of how they negotiated the relationship between the 'local' and the 'foreign', between 'us' and 'them'. In trying to understand this process of negotiation, the meanings associated with the term 'cosmopolitanism' makes it less useful than one would suppose.

The challenge then is to approach the history of Southeast Asia's port cities in a way that reconciles their roles as sites of cross-cultural encounters with notions of their 'indigeneity', and that casts light on the relationship between the two. In Stoic terms, the 'cosmopolitan city' is a contradiction in terms; a *polis* filled with citizens enamoured of Kwame Appiah's cosmopolitanism would have difficulties with political loyalty. The economist's idea of cosmopolitans as beneficiaries of globalisation is less acutely problematic, but points to the need to look within the port city for winners and losers of economic change. How then should we reconcile cosmopolitanism and indigeneity in the Southeast Asian port city? To explore this question, the remaining sections of this paper will draw on late 18th-century published accounts to describe contemporary impressions of ethnicity, indigeneity, foreignness, and political authority in the port cities of Southeast Asia. Working its way southwards from Pegu, it will focus on a few basic questions: who were the inhabitants of these cities and where did they come from? What languages did they speak? Who wielded political authority, and how was this authority maintained? It will be fairly evident that 18th-century port cities were sites not only of European-Asian encounters, but also maritime-mainland interactions, intra-Asian, and intra-archipelagic encounters. The protagonists of these encounters were seldom obviously 'indigenous' or

‘foreign’, but more often than not something in between. The paper will then conclude with a discussion on how Southeast Asia’s port cities may best be understood as sites of constant negotiation between indigeneity and foreignness, through which the boundaries of political authority are defined and redefined.

The approach pursued in this paper differs from but hopefully complements the immeasurably more erudite demonstration offered by Heather Sutherland (2021) in her recent book analysing changing systems of exchange in the eastern archipelagoes.³ Sutherland starts from a shared scepticism towards attributing agency to ‘reified entities such as ethnic groups and states’, and sidesteps these categories by placing relationships, rather than these problematic entities, at the centre of her analysis. In this manner, although Sutherland retains the traditional distinction between ‘outsiders’ (Chinese, Arabs, and Europeans) and ‘indigenous’, this dichotomy has been stripped of much of its importance. Instead, it is the networks whose persistence and evolution she reconstructs that provide the main narrative threads for the regional histories she sketches (Sutherland 2021: 440). Sutherland is thus able, among other things, to contextualise 19th-century British colonial establishments in Singapore and Hong Kong as ‘symbiotic adjustments by long-established trading systems to take advantage of new opportunities’ (Sutherland 2021: 444). Whereas Sutherland focuses on networks, this paper focuses on the entrepôt. The two concepts are complementary and indissociable; indeed, the very title of Sutherland’s book, *Seaways and Gatekeepers*, reflects this fact. The relative importance best accorded to one or the other can perhaps be determined by one’s geographical area of interest. In the eastern archipelagoes, where societies tended to be smaller in scale, a focus on connections may naturally be favoured. In the maritime region centred on the Malacca Straits, where memories of great emporiums past continue to weigh on the contemporary imagination, it may be equally useful to focus our analysis on the entrepôt.

2. THREE LATE 18TH-CENTURY SOURCES:

FORREST, SONNERAT, AND NAKHODA MUDA

The decision to focus this paper on the late 18th century arose from two considerations. First, this period benefits from a relatively large number of published accounts, allowing the juxtaposition of the observations of a relatively diverse selection of authors. Renewed French and British interest in Southeast Asia was coupled with the institutionalisation in both countries of hydrographical efforts and a concomitant increase in voyages of scientific discovery. French and British initiatives in this region were also driven, or at least catalysed, by Anglo-French commercial, military, and imperial rivalry. The first two works that this paper makes use of were written in this context. The first is Thomas Forrest’s *A Voyage from Calcutta to the Mergui Archipelago*. Published in 1792, Forrest’s account was composed based on a voyage conducted in 1783. Its main contents pertaining to the merits of a new British establishment in the Mergui Archipelago were written no later than 1784, when they were presented to Warren Hastings and the East India Company (EIC) council in Bengal. Forrest, a seasoned country trader, also provides first-person accounts of Aceh, Mergui, Junk Ceylon, Kedah, and Pasir, some of which he had visited multiple times during the 1770s and 1780s. The second text is Pierre Sonnerat’s *Voyage to the East*

3 The ‘eastern archipelago’ analyzed by Sutherland extends ‘from the southern Philippines to the east Java Sea, and from the eastern Borneo coast to the far shores of west New Guinea’ (2021: 4)

Indies and to China (Voyage aux Indes Orientales et à la Chine). First published in 1782, this French text contains Sonnerat's account of a 1774–1781 voyage to India and China, and, more importantly, reproduces two sets of French documents: a copy of the instructions prepared by the Governor of Chandernagore for French naval officer Jean François de Trobriand's 1775 punitive expedition to Pasir, and a 1777 memorandum concerning a proposed French invasion of Pegu.⁴ Written by French colonial officials operating out of factories in Chandernagore, Pondicherry, and Mauritius, they provide glimpses of information about Pegu, Mergui, Kedah, and Pasir, as well as a handful of interesting snippets pertaining to the settlements of the Malacca Straits area.

The second advantage of looking at the late 18th century, for the purposes of this paper, is that this is when first-person Malay accounts become available. The earliest such account, namely William Marsden's 1830 translation of *Memoirs of a Malayan Family, written by themselves and translated from the original*, is informative. This text was transcribed in Bencoolen in 1788, and recounts events taking place in Semangka (in what is now Lampung province on the southern tip of Sumatra) and Bantam between 1756 and 1766. It provides some context for the situation at Pasir in the early 18th century, but more importantly gives a flavour of the manner in which ethnicity did or did not matter when approached from the perspective of a Malay sea captain and his family. Interestingly enough, the Malay protagonists of these memoirs had a brief but significant encounter with Thomas Forrest, which resulted in their departure from Semangka. The other salient first-person Malay account is the *Hikayat Abdullah*, whose descriptions of Dutch Malacca and early Singapore are of substantial value. The Munshi's account, however, belongs to a slightly later period, and will not be used here.

Taken together, the observations recorded by Forrest, Sonnerat, and the authors of *Memoirs of a Malayan Family* are adequate for the purposes of this paper, which are simply to highlight the problematic nature of 'European-versus-Asian' or 'foreign-versus-indigenous' dichotomies and to suggest ways in which the cross-cultural dimension of the Southeast Asian port city and notions of their 'indigeneity' can be reconciled. It is beyond the scope of this paper to propose comprehensive descriptions or historical accounts of the settlements it discusses. Thus, rather than attempt to synthesise the voluminous sources and secondary material relevant to these settlements, the approach taken here is to undertake a close reading of the first-person accounts recorded in the three selected texts. Similarly, this paper does not claim that the three texts are in any way more representative, accurate, or reliable than other texts produced during this period, of which there are many. Their main advantages are their accessibility and their similarity. All three texts are publicly available and easily obtained by any interested reader, and all three provide first-person impressions of an overlapping set of localities spread across the archipelago. The remainder of this paper will work its way across an arc of polities described in the three texts, starting from that sliver of land and water in which maritime Southeast Asia blends into the Bay of Bengal.

⁴ This memorandum can be found in the *Archives Nationales d'Outremer* (COL C1 21, folios 61–72). It was first written up in 1777 by a French colonial officer by the name of d'Aiglançay, who had been forced to spend seven or eight months in Pegu after that year as a result of navigational mishaps. The memorandum was subsequently re-edited by d'Aiglançay in 1789 or 1790 and submitted to the French National Assembly (COL C1 21 folio 185). The text reproduced in Sonnerat's *Voyage to the East Indies* is the 1777 version.

3. PEGU, MERGUI, AND JUNK CEYLON

During the second half of the 18th century, Pegu and Mergui received some attention from both the French and the British. In the context of Anglo-French rivalry and conflict in the Coromandel and Bengal, settlements on the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal were potentially important assets in several ways. Pegu in particular offered teak wood, ship masts, and boatbuilding facilities. Pegu and Mergui were also among the locations that both the French and the English would assess for their suitability to serve as wintering locations for ships operating in the Bay of Bengal; other locations included Junk Ceylon (Phuket), the Andamans, Aceh, and Penang, where the British would establish themselves in 1786.

The 1806 edition of Pierre Sonnerat's *Voyage aux Indes Orientales* included a memorandum on Pegu written by a Pondicherry-based officer of the French Company. This officer visited Pegu in 1777 and called at Rangoon, the city built by Alaungpaya after his destruction of Syriam. Here, the author observed the presence of well-established Armenian, Muslim, and Portuguese merchant communities; the *shahbandar* was always an Armenian, and French merchants needed to rely on Portuguese interpreters (Sonnerat 1806: 29). Describing Pegu's substantial shipbuilding capabilities, the author claimed that the French had earlier taught shipbuilding techniques to the 'natives', lamenting how India-based French merchants and colonial officials had failed to take advantage of this (Sonnerat 1806: 23). Instead, it was the English who constructed their vessels in Pegu, through Armenian and Muslim intermediaries. Concerning the local inhabitants, the author contrasted Peguans against Burmans, describing the former as 'horrified by the sight of a foreign nation [the Burmans] in their country', and reporting unsuccessful attempts they had made to expel the Burmans. On this basis, the author believed that a military invasion of Pegu could be accomplished at low cost, for the Peguans would rise up in arms against their Burmese overlords. A conquest of Pegu would have the 'inestimable advantage of preventing the English, who, in favourable times, would not miss the opportunity to execute their project of an exclusive establishment in Pegu' (Sonnerat 1806: 37–42).

Bearing in mind recent historiography challenging the traditional portrayal of Alaungpaya's conquest of Pegu as an ethnic conflict between Burmans and Peguans (Mons), this French description is nonetheless noteworthy for the diversity it describes. This diversity takes place on two levels. Among the 'locals', the author identifies Peguans and Burmans and elsewhere also refers to an agrarian people called 'Carainers' (Sonnerat 1806: 39). Because of visible differences in language and dress, these communities would have been easily noticed by foreign visitors. What was less visible was how individuals could move relatively easily between ethnic categories, and how these categories were not necessarily exclusive. Peguans could become Burmans and vice versa, and all it took was a change of speech and dress (Lieberman 1978: 456). The conflict between upper and lower Burma was not merely ethnic, but also dynastic and geopolitical (Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin 2012: 107).

On a second level, the Armenian, Portuguese, and Muslim communities described by the author represent settled trade diasporas, to which we can add a small community of Frenchmen enslaved⁵ during the conquest of 1757. The presence of these communities

5 This took place with the capture of the *Galathée*, a French ship sent from Pondicherry to Syriam to assist the besieged Peguans, but which unfortunately arrived only after the city had fallen to Alaungpaya.

presents a curious contrast to the author's description of the dismal conditions of commerce in Pegu. Since Alaungpaya's conquest, conditions of trade had become onerous and humiliating. Foreign ships had their rudders, weapons, and ammunition confiscated upon arrival, after which their entire cargo was transferred to the king's warehouse to be weighed and taxed, before any commerce could take place (Sonnerat 1806: 28). The Armenian, Portuguese, and Muslim communities are thus likely to have been holdovers from Syriam, meaning that they had remained in Pegu despite the destruction of its chief entrepôt and the creation of a new and ostensibly less commercially oriented port at Rangoon. On this subject, Forrest suggested that Pegu did not have an indigenous merchant class; 'not being a maritime people, they are supplied with what they cannot do without by strangers' (Forrest 1792: iv). Like his French counterpart, he described high returns from the importation of daily necessities: both dwell on the profits to be made by importing coconuts.

These two levels of diversity complicate the simple questions this paper asks. The inhabitants of Pegu were by no means homogenous. Those referred to as Peguans and Burmans are seen as 'local', but the latter are also understood to be recently arrived conquerors. The Armenians, Portuguese and Muslim communities are not seen as local, but their members may well have been settled in Pegu prior to the latest Burman arrivals. Either way, the city occupied by these communities, Rangoon, is a new creation that appears to have inherited the population of Syriam, the city it displaced. In this new creation, political authority came from conquest, and had been preserved by military force. Important parts of the settled population, however, appear to have come from an earlier commercial entrepôt.

How did this situation compare with that of Mergui and Junk Ceylon, two other locations further down the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal, described in detail by Forrest? The former, in particular Saint Matthew's Island, was Forrest's choice for a new English settlement; he preferred it for its navigational advantages over Pegu, and also because it would be at an adequate distance away from 'the power of the Birmahs' (Forrest 1792: iv). In his survey, Forrest presented the Mergui Archipelago as being practically uninhabited. While the archipelago came under Pegu's authority, Forrest believed that the authorities in Pegu cared little about these islands, and would not oppose an English settlement there (Forrest 1792: vi). Pegu, he wrote, would not mind the islands being 'colonised by natives of Indostan, whose discretion of character would be most likely to assimilate with the natives of the continent, and with whom in a short time they certainly would have intercourse' (Forrest 1792: ix). An English settlement thus constituted could be useful to both Burma (the Toungoo court at Ava) and Siam, for it could present itself as an unthreatening and neighbouring third party willing to mediate in their frequent disputes. For the English, a settlement at Mergui would provide 'a seaport equal to any in the world, within a week's sail of Madras, in the vicinity of a country abounding with cattle and rice; and through that country, over the isthmus of Kraw, a speedy intercourse between Bengal and China by letter, without going round the Malay peninsula, by the Malacca Strait' (Forrest 1792: x).⁶

6 Forrest was certainly not the first to envisage a port settlement in the Mergui archipelago. In the late 17th century, Siam had granted Louis XIV an island for this purpose. French possession of what came to be called King's Island (*Ile du Roi*) was short-lived and did not survive the 1688 revolution in Siam, but the idea of a settlement in Mergui remained very much alive in French writings up till at least the mid-18th century.

As for Junk Ceylon, further south, Forrest explained that its Siamese governor had previously been governor of Kraw (Kra province), back when Kraw was well-populated, 'before the wars which, 30 years ago, between the Peguers and Birmahs or Burmahs, had greatly depopulated this quarter'.⁷ This governor had three officers, each with about fifty followers, 'who in a great measure live on the community; for, receiving little pay, they oppress the inhabitants' (Forrest 1792: 31). These local inhabitants

generally understand the Malay tongue, from their intercourse with that people (greater formerly than now), speak the Siamese language, and write as we do from left to right... They resemble in feature the Malays, with a good deal of the Chinese look... They are allowed to marry as many women as they can maintain; but the first wife rules the household, as in China. (Forrest 1792: 35–36)

With regards to the island's original inhabitants, Forrest reasoned that the name 'Junk Ceylon' (which he spelt 'Jan Sylan') derived from 'Ujung Sylan', which suggested that it had been named by Malay speakers when it was still a promontory, before it was cut off from the mainland (Forrest 1792: 30).⁸ He named seventeen towns on the island of Junk Ceylon, and estimated their total population to be 12,000 persons. Forrest himself resided with a Chinese person, whose son, named Chyfong, grew up in Pondicherry. Chyfong spoke Siamese, Malay, and 'very good French'. The Siamese governor did not speak Malay, but had an interpreter who spoke Portuguese (Forrest 1792: 33–34). On this note, Sonnerat's text reported that there were Christians and a Portuguese mission on Junk Ceylon, which could serve as an alternative to Kedah as a watering and provisioning port. Trobriand, en route to Pasir on a punitive expedition, was advised that the fathers in the Portuguese mission could be a useful source of intelligence, and that a few bottles of wine or *eau-de-vie* would make them his loyal servants (Sonnerat 1806: 52–53).

As regards commerce, Forrest informed his readers that Junk Ceylon was previously (1750s–60s) the site of a thriving opium trade. English country ships would sell opium to Malay and Bugis *prows*, who offered tin in exchange.⁹ Malay and Bugis then sold opium throughout the archipelago alongside items such as Bugis cloth, Javanese batiks and brassware, tobacco from China and Java, and Chinese porcelain. This trade had been halted by the Siamese, who imposed a ban on the consumption and import of opium, coupled with a duty on tin exports; the Bugis and the English thus stopped coming. Tin was still produced on Junk Ceylon, but the Chinese now farmed a smelting privilege, to the detriment of the miners (Forrest 1792: 32–33). The Siamese government took another 25%. The upshot was that Junk Ceylon's tin exports, while still substantial, had decreased.

Forrest's proposal for an English settlement on Saint Matthew's Island in the Mergui Archipelago was not taken up but would have been an intriguing case. The only 'locals' in this hypothetical settlement would presumably have been the assimilated descendants

7 Burman forces conquered Prome in 1755, Dagon (Yangon) in 1755, Syriam in 1757, and by 1760 were laying siege to Ayutthaya, the Siamese capital. Ayutthaya repelled this invasion, but fell to a later attack in 1765–67.

8 Today, only the narrowest of straits, spanned by a short bridge, divides Phuket from the Thai mainland. When Forrest visited Junk Ceylon, those straits seem to have been submerged only at high tide.

9 In other words, the English were playing the role of wholesalers, with retail trade—involving the distribution of opium, tin, cloth, brassware, tobacco, and ceramics—still in the hands of Bugis and Malay traders.

of intercourse between ‘natives of Indostan’ and ‘natives of the continent’, and political power would have been held, interstitially between Ava and Ayutthaya, by the English company.¹⁰ As for Junk Ceylon, while the Siamese governor and his men were portrayed as newly arrived outsiders, the population defied easy characterisation. This was an ethnically ambiguous and linguistically diverse population, occupying an island previously more open to trade than it had become under Siamese rule. It is noteworthy that alongside his description of multiple ethnicities, Malay origins, and Chinese residents, Forrest did not mention ethnic chiefs, mosques (he described pagodas and alms-collecting monks) or the Chinese language. It is tempting to see Junk Ceylon’s population as the heterogenous and hybridised descendants of immigrants to an earlier entrepôt, only recently brought under the authority of a mainland polity; it is not possible however, based on Forrest’s account alone, to hold such a conclusion with any satisfactory degree of certainty.

4. ACEH AND THE MALACCA STRAITS

Among all the places he visited, Aceh may have been most familiar to Forrest, who over the years managed to be granted audiences with two successive rulers there, and who struck up what appears to be a long-lasting friendship with his local interpreter, a Hungary-born Jewish man by the name of Abraham. Forrest also befriended the king’s merchant, a Chulia man called Posally. Regarding this person, Forrest reported that the king of Aceh had monopolised the trade of his country to the exclusion of the local *orang kaya*, that all trade was conducted through the king’s merchant, and that all the assistants of this merchant, like the merchant himself, were Chulias. He explained that twelve to fifteen Chulia merchant ships came annually from the Coromandel coast and other places, to winter and trade in Aceh. The king took a 12% duty in kind, after which the Chulias were allowed to sell the rest of their goods as they pleased. These Chulias spoke the local language ‘which is not Malay, though to a man the Atcheeners understand Malay’. They were the only foreigners who traded with the locals; Portuguese and English ships also traded at Aceh, but exclusively with the king (Forrest 1792: 41–44).¹¹

Concerning the local inhabitants, Forrest noted the presence of many mosques, scattered among the equally numerous villages. The country was highly cultivated, producing pepper and areca nuts. Among the population there were many *tuan hadjees*, respectable men who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, which was not prohibitively expensive for those in Aceh (Forrest 1792: 57). Forrest saw no Chinese in Aceh, and in fact his description makes Aceh’s population seem very homogenous in contrast with the diversity evident in its court; there is a conspicuous disjoint between the two. Forrest conversed with Sultan Alauddin Muhammad Syah (r. 1781–95) mostly in French, which the king had picked up in Mauritius, where he had once spent a month incognito en route to Mecca, picking up French techniques of casting guns and manufacturing ammunition. Forrest, who was also able to communicate with Alauddin in Malay, observed that the latter ‘often mixed French with Portuguese’, and could read Arabic script (Forrest 1792: 54).

¹⁰ A settlement of this nature, in this neighbourhood, would not have been entirely unprecedented, and can be compared to Philippe de Brito’s ill-fated governorship of Syriam at the beginning of the 17th century, as well as the unrealised French settlement on King’s Island in the Mergui under Louis XIV.

¹¹ The Chulia commercial presence in Aceh had been established by the late 17th century. The gradual withdrawal from Aceh by the European trading companies meant that by the late 18th century, trade there was dominated by Chulia merchants.

Alauddin's palace was guarded by sepoys, commanded by a native of Cuddalore named Gowen Harrab. He interpreted this as a sign of the king's distrust of the local elite, namely the same *orang kaya* excluded from commerce (Forrest 1792: 49–51).

Kedah gives a slightly different impression. Like in Aceh, Forrest described a 'Malay Mahomedan prince, who, like many other Malay princes, engrosses almost the whole foreign trade of the port, excepting that of an annual Chinese junk, who pays a certain sum only as duty, and then has leave to trade freely with the inhabitants'. Kedah's inhabitants however, presented a profile closer to that of Junk Ceylon. There was a town of 300–400 houses inhabited by Chinese, Kelingas, and Malays. The king's merchant and minister, a man named Jemmal, was a Chulia. Forrest noted that there were many Chulia traders living in Kedah, and that many of their ships had been captured during an earlier Bugis raid on Kedah (Forrest 1792: 24–25). These details are comparable with the instructions provided to Trobriand in 1775, in which he was told to procure supplies from an old Christian woman in Kedah called *nonha*, previously a mistress of the king and in a position of substantial influence, whose husband, a Chinese man, was the chief of foreigners. The *nonha* was the person who provided vessels with what they needed; while she charged higher prices than what can be had from the common folk, it was important to maintain a good relationship with her, given her influence. In addition, the king of Kedah had a governor, called a *mounchi* or *divan*, who was from Malabar. It was this person who conducted all commerce, and it was necessary to present him with gifts, just as with the *nonha* (Sonnerat 1806: 53).

Forrest provided few other indications concerning settlements in the Malacca Straits. He visited Perak and was granted an audience with the Sultan, but the latter was chiefly interested in whether the Dutch would return (Forrest 1792: 28). Forrest was tasked, on the same mission that brought him to Mergui, to deliver a response to Raja Haji of Riau, concerning the English company's positive response to the former's proposal to grant it a settlement there, but Raja Haji was killed in battle before Forrest reached Riau, and Forrest aborted his mission (Forrest 1792: 29). The instructions Trobriand received were not much more informative. The salient point is that to the French in Chandernagore, Selangor, Johor, and Kedah appeared as undifferentiated locations of limited importance; all three ports were presented merely as *escales*—intermediate points on a longer journey—where Bugis sold spices to English traders. Johor, Siam, Makassar, Sulu, and Batavia were listed as locations of Chinese-Bugis trade. Trobriand was tasked to visit Selangor and Johor, but chiefly to fly the French flag, and to renew interactions with settlements that French ships had not visited for some time (Sonnerat 1806: 54). He was also given general instructions to find out more about Bugis-English commerce, and whether French traders could have a part in this. When anchored off Johor, one of the boats belonging to Trobriand's ship was surprised by what appear to have been sea robbers—the ship was boarded by *kris*-wielding assailants. Confronted by Trobriand, the *Shahbandar* claimed that the perpetrators came from a neighbouring island that lay beyond his authority (Sonnerat 1806: 70–71). Sonnerat's account unfortunately does not provide any more information about this episode.

As with Pegu and Junk Ceylon, describing the inhabitants of Aceh and the ports of the Malacca Straits requires us to distinguish between rulers, merchants, and local communities. In Aceh, the varied origins of the ruler's entourage contrasted with a firmly rooted local community bound by common religious faith; commerce lay in the hands of Muslim Indians, and to a lesser extent Portuguese and English merchants. Acehnese and Malay were commonly spoken, and political authority seemed to be subject to some ten-

sion between the ruler and the local elite. In Kedah, a Malay and Muslim ruler coexisted with what appears to be a settled population of diverse origins, and trade was carried on Bugis, Chinese, and Chulia ships. In Johor, the authority of the ruler seemed limited. It is notable that neither Forrest nor Trobriand's instructions spoke of the elephant in this 18th-century room, namely the power struggle between Bugis newcomers, the upstart rulers at Siak, and older Malay elites over the legacy of the Johor Sultanate (Andaya and Andaya 2017: 109). This omission should perhaps be taken as a reminder that the Bugis-Malay struggle, however consequential to its protagonists, was only one aspect of a larger regional picture.

5. PASIR AND THE BUGIS

Forrest and Sonnerat did nonetheless capture some of the 18th-century interactions between Bugis and Malays, albeit not in the Malacca Straits. Forrest described a revolution that took place in 1772 in Pasir, on the southeast coast of Borneo, in which a Bugis colony deposed and displaced the native Malay Sultan. This took place during Forrest's short visit to Pasir, together with John Herbert, who was en route to Balambangan to establish a factory there. Arriving in Pasir, Forrest described it as 'a place of great trade', whose town 'consisted of about 300 wooden houses on the north side of the river, mostly inhabited by Buggeses, all of them merchants. The Sultan, a Malay Prince, has his house and wooden fort on the south side, a little way from the river'. The Malay king had hosted Herbert, Forrest and their entourage to a dinner; the local Bugis nobles from across the river were invited but did not show up. A few days later, the Bugis surrounded the Sultan's fort, and forced him to leave Pasir for another settlement 100 miles to the south. According to Forrest, the Sultan was 'allowed to take with him all his property without the least restraint' (Forrest 1792: 83–85).

Two years later, a French ship was captured and its crew killed by a prince of Coety (Kutai, a settlement on the Mahakam River in eastern Borneo, north of Pasir). The French community and factory in Chandernagore decided to dispatch a naval frigate, commanded by Trobriand, on a punitive expedition. In the instructions issued to Trobriand, Coety is described as 2–3 days' sail north of Pasir, and as a wealthy town visited each year by 700–800 trading ships from the neighbouring islands, though not by foreign ships (Sonnerat 1806: 59). The French suspected the Sultan of Pasir of having been involved in the incident, for he did not protest when the Bugis murdered French crew members who were staying in his town, nor when the Bugis made off with the cargo of the captured French ship (Sonnerat 1806: 68–69). Was this the Bugis prince who deposed the Malay sultan in 1772, or the deposed Malay sultan who had set up a new settlement, still known as Pasir?

Both accounts reflect the physical and political displacement of Malays by Bugis in eastern Borneo. Of the Bugis, Forrest agreed with Pierre Poivre's description of them as men 'fond of adventures, emigration, and capable of undertaking the most dangerous enterprises' (Forrest 1792: 78).¹² Forrest (1792: 75) noted that the Bugis

and the people of Warjoo [Wajo] in general, have not only preserved their freedom against the Dutch, but have (the Warjoos especially) emigrated from their own country,

¹² Pierre Poivre was a French missionary-turned-colonial official whose book on his travels in Asia had been published in French in 1768, and in English in 1769.

and made settlements at Rhio, situated near the east entrance of the Strait of Malacca, at Sambowa, an island east of Java, and at Pasir, on the east coast of the great island Borneo. They always consider their colonies as emancipated from the mother country, as soon as they are able to defend themselves.

Forrest was well aware that the Bugis had their own language, script, and history, and perhaps because of this found it necessary to explain that ‘the Buggesses on the sea coast universally speak the Malay tongue, and they have many Malay phrases in their language, even whole sentences’ (Forrest 1792: 81–82). On the French side, the instructions to Trobriand displayed far less understanding of the nuances of Bugis and Malay identity, but its author knew enough to recognise that a process of displacement was under way. Noting that the natives of Borneo, referred to as *biajos*, had retired into the island’s interior, this text explained that the coasts were now occupied by ‘an impure mix of Macassarise, of Javanese, of Malay, of Arab, and of some *biajos*’ (Sonnerat 1806: 46).

Who were the inhabitants of Pasir and where did they come from? What languages did they speak? Who wielded political authority, and how was this authority maintained? The displacement of Malays by Bugis complicates these questions and illustrates how the notion of defining ethnic communities and assigning them geographically defined ‘homelands’ quickly becomes problematic in maritime Southeast Asia. The Bugis came from South Sulawesi and spoke their own Bugis language but had settled throughout the archipelago and were rapidly adopting Malay as a lingua franca. They were displacing Malay communities, which were themselves mobile societies whose migrations had displaced other non-Malay groups.

On this note, Pasir is where the accounts of Forrest and Sonnerat intersect with that of the Malayan family whose story was translated by Marsden; the grandfather of the Malay narrator was a native of Bayang (near Padang) on the west coast of Sumatra (Marsden 1830: 2). This Malay merchant settled in Pulo Laut, an island off Pasir, where commerce and gold mines worked by natives had drawn a sizeable number of Malay merchants. Pulo Laut’s wealth attracted Bugis raiders and the Malays were forced, after having braved repeated attacks, to flee. This took place in the early 18th century, and the *nakhoda* fled to Samangka, on the southern tip of Sumatra. His son, who took the name of Nakhoda Muda (Marsden 1830: 6), is the protagonist of *Memoirs of a Malayan Family*.

6. LAMPUNG / SAMANGKA

The *Memoirs* describe the Malays of Samangka as a recently established and fast-growing immigrant merchant community. On the coast, these Malays lived alongside ‘native Lampungs’ and Javanese. All came under the jurisdiction of *pangerans*, native chiefs who received their authority from the Sultan of Bantam, whose city lay across the Sunda Strait. Like the newly arrived Bugis in Pasir, the Malays in Lampung lived in a distinct *kampung malayu*, physically separate from the Lampung villages. Inland, an indigenous community referred to as *Abung* terrorised the coastal inhabitants with raiding and headhunting. Nakhoda Muda mobilised the coastal communities, forming an expeditionary force built around members of the Malay community. He then led a raid on inland *Abung* villages, razing ten of them and dispersing the *Abung* population (Marsden 1830: 4–14). When he later informed the Sultan of Bantam of this successful initiative, the Sultan appointed him as one of two royal agents in Samangka. The other, a person named Kiria Minjan, was a

'hill-man of the Bantam country' (Marsden 1830: 18). Among other responsibilities, Nakhoda Muda was given the authority to issue passes for the transport of pepper from Samangka to Bantam. This commerce was in fact the main activity of the Malay merchants of Samangka; pepper was cultivated by the 'natives', bought by Malay merchants for 6–7 dollars per *bahar*, transported to Bantam and sold to the Sultan at 12 dollars per *bahar*. The Sultan then sold the pepper to the Dutch Company at 20 dollars per *bahar* (Marsden 1830: 5).

When Bantam faced rebellion during the 1760s, the Malay community in Samangka had to choose sides. This was apparently the subject of some debate, and Nakhoda Muda's clinching arguments were recorded as follows (Marsden 1830: 22):

so long as the sultan of Bantam remains unsubdued, and the Dutch Company continues to exist at Batavia, it would be unwise in [sic] us to embrace the party of Rata Bagus Buang [the insurgent]. With regard to Kiria [the insurgent's agent], if he shall judge it proper to advance towards us, I think it will be more advisable to resist him by open force, than to be led away by any proposals; as I am fully persuaded that Bantam will not be taken by his master, however brave he may be, so long as the Sultan is furnished with succours from Batavia. (Marsden 1830: 22)

Clearly, two concurrent processes of displacement were under way at Lampung during the 18th century. The coastal community, led by a newly arrived Malay community, was displacing the inland Abung community; within this coastal community, the leaders of the Malay community were displacing the existing native Lampung elite by forging new commercially based relationships with the Sultan in Bantam. This process was not uncontested, for later in the memoir we are told how Nakhoda Muda's growing authority in Samangka provoked jealousy among others in Bantam, resulting ultimately in his departure from Samangka with his family and four hundred members of the Malay community (Marsden 1830: 74).

7. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The foregoing discussion lends itself to a number of observations. First, it is clear that the European–indigenous dichotomy needs to be set aside if we are to improve our understanding not only of the port cities of 18th-century Southeast Asia, but also of port cities in general. Each of the settlements we have explored was host to multiple non-European and non-indigenous communities speaking multiple non-European and non-indigenous languages. The Armenian, Chulia, Bugis, and Chinese communities we have glimpsed are not incidental minorities, but occupy consequential roles in the commerce and politics of the settlements in which they reside. Nor can the Portuguese community, whose language was used as a *lingua franca* in Rangoon, Junk Ceylon, and Aceh, be easily classified as either European or indigenous.¹³ In similar manner, most of the individuals described in the sources were neither fully foreign nor fully native relative to their place of residence.

¹³ The Portuguese communities that remained in Southeast Asia after the Dutch capture of Malacca have been described as 'tribal' in character. Despite maintaining only tenuous relations with their Iberian homeland, and notwithstanding extensive intermarriage and creolisation, this community clung onto its European heritage as a way of preserving its status in an Asian milieu. Communities that identified as 'Portuguese' thus survived well into the 19th century, even though these bore little resemblance to 'authentic' Portuguese from Portugal.

Chyfung, the Chinese man who hosted Forrest in Junk Ceylon, grew up in Pondicherry and spoke Siamese, Malay, and French. The Kedah *nonha* from whom Trobriand was to seek provisions was Christian, a former mistress to the king of Kedah, and the wife of the Chinese *shahbandar* placed in charge of all foreigners. Nakhoda Muda was the son of a native of Minangkabau, who settled as a Malay merchant first in eastern Borneo, then in southern Sumatra. He became the chief of the Malay community in Lampung, as well as a representative of the Sultan of Banten in that district.

Second, port cities need to be analysed outside of the national paradigm of discrete ethnic communities associated with geographically defined homelands. These are sites in which multiple and overlapping communities coexist. Likewise, conceptualising the port cities of Southeast Asia simply as *negeri*—port polities sharing a common Malay political culture—is unsatisfactory because it suggests that these entities can be subsumed within a single set of ethnically bound socio-political institutions (Reid 2000: 418; Milner 2008: 59). These approaches do not adequately reflect the multifaceted diversity of their subject. Instead, port cities should be conceptualised primarily as sites of cross-cultural interaction, in which the political and economic function of the various participants involved should be emphasised alongside any ascribed ethnic and cultural characteristics. The patterns of interaction, specialisation, and adaptation that arise in port cities create cultural legacies that persist even after their cities decline; where there were once thriving entrepôts, mixed societies remain.

Third, in thinking of port cities as sites of cross-cultural interaction, it is useful to treat such interactions with circumspection, rather than celebrating them as drivers of innovation and dynamism. The cross-cultural interactions discussed in this paper were markedly ambiguous. In Pegu and Junk Ceylon, a commercial entrepôt had come under the control of a more powerful mainland state. In Junk Ceylon and Kedah, multiple immigrant communities were found in a state of cultural hybridisation. In Pasir and Samangka, newly arrived communities were displacing older ones. Subjugation, hybridisation, and displacement were all manifestations of cross-cultural interaction, and processes through which the relationship between the ‘indigenous’ and the ‘foreign’ was negotiated.

Fourth, while it would neither be necessary nor productive to exclude European influences from any analysis of 18th-century Southeast Asian port cities, one is nonetheless compelled to acknowledge that during the 1760s and 1770s, European influences were not yet the most important forces at play. In this context, it is worth noting that both English and French saw wisdom in choosing island locations as sites for potential new settlements, such that these might be kept a safe distance from powerful Asian states. This was why Forrest favoured Saint Matthew’s Island in the Mergui archipelago; the author of Trobriand’s instructions likewise noted that ‘we must prefer a location on some island, rather than on the mainland of Borneo, for there being fewer independent princes and peoples, we would find more security in such an island’ (Sonnerat 1806: 64).

Seen in this light, the port cities of Southeast Asia can appear as accretions of successive newcomers-turned-locals, each neither fully foreign nor entirely indigenous. During the late 18th century, the port cities discussed in this paper grappled variously with Burman, Siamese, Bugis, and Malay newcomers. To these interactions we can add the growing importance of Hadhrami Arabs, British country traders, Chinese labour migration, and (to a lesser extent) commercial shipping from continental Europe, as well as, towards the end of the century, traders from the newly independent United States. Their interactions in the port cities of Southeast Asia were complex and sometimes acrimonious

but would ultimately lead to a historically recognisable outcome: new layers of hybridised cultural accretion, coupled with the emergence of new processes of negotiating the relationship between the ‘indigenous’ and the ‘foreign’, between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Such a perspective raises some historiographical questions. Conceptualising the port cities of Southeast Asia as perennial sites of cross-cultural interaction highlights the deep continuities that connect the colonial era to both pre-colonial past and post-colonial present. Acknowledging this compels a reappraisal of the place occupied by colonialism in the history of the Southeast Asian port-city. In the archipelago, it is difficult to date a transition between ‘pre-colonial’ and ‘colonial’ periods; the two bleed into each other in an almost indistinguishable fashion.¹⁴ Did the ‘colonial’ period begin with the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, the founding of Dutch Batavia in 1619, or the establishment of an EIC factory in Singapore two centuries later? A properly post-colonial response to these observations would recognise that colonisation need not be placed on any pedestal, whether of pride or of shame, and can instead be cast in comparative light. What did colonial port-cities owe to their non-colonial precedents? What impact did colonial port-cities, whose populations for the most part came neither from Europe nor from the local indigenous population, have on notions of foreignness and indigeneity? In what way did colonial port-cities differ from their non-colonial precedents, contemporaries and successors? To what extent can the colonial encounter be understood merely as part of a longer historical process of hybridisation and cultural accretion?

This paper began as a call for a reconceptualisation of the port cities of Southeast Asia based on their political economy, so as to step beyond the inadequacies of ethnic, nationalist, and post-colonial paradigms. Further research on the relationship between foreignness and indigeneity is needed. A focus on founding myths, indigenous chronicles, urban patterns, sumptuary norms, and expressions of elite status can potentially cast light on how boundaries between the foreign and the indigenous are constructed and maintained. A focus on commercial practices and maritime technology may provide insights into how port cities could become more the sum of their parts, and how the innovations they may have experienced were situated in broader regional context. Finally, a focus on Southeast Asia’s maritime interstices may prove fruitful. Locations such as Mergui, Junk Ceylon, Pasir, and Semangka lie not only beyond the core areas of major early modern and colonial polities, but also outside of regions strongly associated with modern ethno-national identities. Only sparse attempts have been made to write ‘autonomous histories’ of these places. Such histories would be most useful as a means of reconstructing the processes by which port cities acquire their diverse and hybridised populations.

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¹⁴ This phrase was suggested by an anonymous reviewer of this paper; I could not have expressed the idea more elegantly, and have retained it here.

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