

Find Your Place in History: South West

Of fishing folk, pirates
and swampland | *Carolyn Oei*



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Take a quick dive into the different time periods in Singapore history, the stories and legacies of our different communities. Discover lesser-known histories of people, places and events. Each nugget offers a unique glimpse into the layered lives and histories of our people, going into topics as diverse as natural history, architecture and religious practices.

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The Singapore Bicentennial marks the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the British in Singapore, a turning point in our history. But our story starts way before that.

Travelling back in time to 700 years ago, the Singapore Bicentennial is an occasion for us to reflect on our extensive and textured history: how we have evolved, from a place with a geographically strategic location, into Singaporeans with a unique DNA.

This commemoration features a huge cast of contributors, as well as the regional and global developments that have shaped our lives and identities.

Find Your Place in History: South West

Of fishing folk, pirates and swampland

The strategic location offered by the South West was exploited by sea-faring people for their livelihood and security way before the arrival of British colonialists. Malay fishing folk set off in koleks from the tanjongs or headlands along the southwestern coast, netting their day's catch, with their homes protected from overland access.¹ The very same coastline was eyed by British colonialists in the 19th century, with a strategic view to control trade with the Straits Settlements. Their political and commercial agenda fundamentally changed the shape and course of life along the southern coastline and the whole of Singapore.



Image 1: View of Malay houses on stilts and boat known as the "kolek Johor" which is used for fishing and ferrying passengers. 1900.

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Commerce, at the same time, brought in resources and influences that transformed the imagination of both indigenous inhabitants and settlers. The uplifting of living conditions, accompanied by exposure to imported ideas and practices, created an appetite for culture and education in the well-to-do and the increasingly educated among them. The effects of this combination of aspiration and inspiration can be seen in the industrial growth and establishment of community schools in the South West region in the first half of the 1900s.

The Temenggong moves to Telok Blangah

By the time Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in Singapore in 1819, there were already Malay settlements dotted across many parts of the island. There was one by the mouth of the Singapore River

headed by Temenggong Abdul Rahman: he owed allegiance to Sultan Abdul Rahman of the Johore-Riau-Lingga empire, whose position as political figurehead was acknowledged and safeguarded by the Dutch. This proved a little inconvenient for the British who were looking to establish a trading hub in direct contest against the Dutch. The success of the British in outmanoeuvring the Dutch, establishing political control over Singapore by coopting Temenggong Abdul Rahman and a puppet Sultan Hussein Shah, led to their overlordship of Singapore. The British administration would eventually broker a resettlement deal with the Temenggong: on condition of financing by the British, he agreed to move his people to the less bustling area of Telok Blangah.²

In his seminal autobiography, *Hikayat Abdullah (Stories of Abdullah)*, Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (b. 1797–d. October 1854), also known as “the father of modern Malay literature”, “contrasted the Malays of Melaka with those in the Temenggong’s following. The latter were men of violence who went about armed and were accused of committing acts of violence and intimidation in the town as well as piracy at sea.”³

The American historian Carl Trocki further notes:

“In the 1820s and 1830s, many Europeans considered the Teluk Belanga (sic) kampong to be a pirates’ lair. It is certain that the sea people or maritime Malays of the Riau-Lingga archipelago who came to Singapore gravitated there. Although there are no descriptions of the kampong in that period, it was made up of the Temenggong’s residence, those of his wives, his followers and extended family, and the homes of orang laut, who were seen as “slaves” of the Temenggong. We must also assume that there were a number of fairly committed women and truly dedicated followers in the grouping. Abdul Rahman, the Temenggong who made the agreement with Raffles, died in 1825 and was succeeded by his son Ibrahim, who was only about 15 at the time. During the

next decade or so, the Malays of Teluk Belanga reinforced their reputation for piracy. Various groups of orang laut, particularly those of the Gallang suku, were notorious pirates. By the 1840s, however, things had begun to change. The Temenggong and his men began to grow wealthy, first from the trade in gutta percha and later from the increasing settlement of Chinese pepper and gambier planters in Johor.”⁴

Historical accounts suggest the Temenggong expended his new-found wealth on beautifying the royal dwellings at Telok Blangah with European designs and tasteful paintwork.⁵ The Temenggong’s mansion was named Istana Lama and it was replaced by what still stands today, and interestingly as property of the State of Johor, the Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim Mosque.⁶

Munshi Abdullah, missionaries, and the Malay school

Pirates or not, the Temenggong understood the importance of education. And it was the educated Malays in society who paved a way forward for the rest by pushing for vernacular Malay schools in the latter half of the 19th century.

Malay studies scholar William R. Roff observed, “Language has a peculiarly intimate relationship with cultural identity, both as the most expressive vehicle for a society’s beliefs, values and sentiments—for its innermost spirit—and as a means of self-recognition. It is not surprising that in Malaya, as elsewhere, one of the first signs of a conscious ethnicism ignoring local political boundaries is a concern for the nurture of the language as symbol and expression of the group. Munshi Abdullah, upbraiding the Malays in 1849, says that while they have ‘so far forgotten their own language as to have no place at all where that language is taught, ... other races of this world have become civilized and

powerful because of their ability to read, write and understand their own language, which they value highly’.”⁷

Roff identified the British colonialists’ superficial desire to educate their subjects: the Malay vernacular schools, for example, were typically staffed by inexperienced and incapable teachers, equipped with poor facilities, and the medium of teaching was either Romanised jawi or English or both. Little was done to improve standards and this might have been because the real point was “to educate the rural population in a suitable rural manner and equip them to continue to live a useful, happy rural life.”⁸

Enter again Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir. He was a prolific writer and translator who first started working as a copyist for Sir Stamford Raffles in 1810 in Malacca. He came to be known more popularly as Munshi Abdullah when Indian soldiers who were taking religious lessons from a young Abdullah referred to him as “munshi”, which is Malay for “teacher”.⁹

It was around 1815 that Abdullah established ties with the London Missionary Society (LMS), which was instrumental in kickstarting his writing, translating and publishing career. The LMS set up presses in Malacca, Penang and Singapore with a focus on religious texts and books that had been translated into Malay.¹⁰

Abdullah moved from Malacca to Singapore around 1819 when he was appointed as Raffles’ secretary and interpreter and continued to work closely with the LMS. It was through the LMS that Abdullah met Benjamin Peach Keasberry, a Protestant missionary who was passionate about proselytising to the Malays and providing them with an education. He learned his Malay from Abdullah¹¹ and both men found themselves working as colleagues at Singapore Institution Free School (later renamed Raffles Institution).¹²

Keasberry was a firm supporter of vernacular Malay education and he was instrumental in developing the Malay language

printing press in Singapore. He also translated many texts and books into Malay, including the New Testament Bible.¹³

Around 1847, the LMS pulled out of Singapore but Keasberry decided to stay in Singapore to continue his mission of evangelism and education. The LMS left the press in his care. In 1856, Keasberry set up a school in Telok Blangah, with Munshi Abdullah as one of his teaching staff, and counted among his students Temenggong Ibrahim's son, Abu Bakar, who would later become the Sultan of Johor. The school continued to educate the next generation of Telok Blangah Malays.¹⁴



Image 2: Survey Map of Telok Blangah by Singapore Improvement Trust, 1931. Map covers Telok Blangah, showing Istana Lama and Malay Vernacular School. From Survey Department, Singapore, Surveyor-General, Federated Malay States (F.M.S.) and Straits Settlements (S.S.)

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Jurong

Swamps, plantations and a new town

The Jurong of today does not betray its mangrove swamp beginnings, when it was home to the Orang Laut (people of the sea) and early Malay settlers in Temenggong days. Stories of the piracy of the Orang Lauts abound—raiding trading vessels, collecting taxes, selling slaves—they could very well have served as hired hands for feuding sultans and leaders like Temenggong Abdul Rahman.

The British were not the only latecomers to find their way to Jurong; there were also the Chinese who set up and worked on gambier and pepper plantations. Pioneering businessmen looking to get a piece of the profitable gambier and pepper pie bushwhacked their way through the swamps, cleared the land and started their plantations. Many operated without proper land titles, neither did they pay taxes on their produce.¹⁵ They cultivated the land to exhaustion without any regard for soil rejuvenation and sustainability through permaculture.



Image 3: Clearing of land in Jurong. 1930s. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

By the late 1870s, Singapore had lost almost all of its primary forests, an alarming situation that prompted the British to establish a Forestry Department in 1884 that tried to protect what little remained. These efforts counted for naught with the rolling out of Jurong New Town in the 1960s.¹⁶

The industrialisation of swampy Jurong would be one of the main economic drivers for the young nation state of Singapore. An industrial town with factories and facilities to drive production, boost employment and promote entrepreneurship, it was a vision so ambitious that it was nicknamed “Goh’s Folly” after its key proponent, then Finance Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee.¹⁷



Image 4: Factories stood where swamps once were. 1970s.
Courtesy of JTC Corporation.

The Jurong New Town project was undertaken by the Economic Development Board (EDB) and the authorities proceeded to clear the swamps, remaining forests, prawn and fish farms and plantations.

The story of Jurong is one of constant cultivation and industrialisation, each iteration driven by the motor of economic development—from sleepy fishing villages to gambier plantations and rubber estates to vegetable and fruit farms to brickworks, factories and international port facilities.

The appetite for education

As Jurong gradually opened up, the first of the Chinese settlers who took on plantation work in Jurong were Ann Kway (Anxi) Hokkiens and, by the 1930s, the Ann Kway Huay Kuan (clan association) had founded several schools, including Joo Long, Joo Koon, Sin Nan, Lokyang, Pei De and Fu Hua.¹⁸

As revealed by the research of the project team of Jurong Heritage Trail booklet, “these schools, like many other Chinese village schools in Singapore, mainly taught Confucian classical texts like the Four Books and Five Classics. Before Mandarin became the medium of instruction for most village schools in the 1930s, the schools taught in various dialects corresponding to the village majority, from Hokkien to Teochew to Hakka.”¹⁹

It was only a matter of time before the Chinese community started to aspire towards higher education. With few, if any, options of furthering their studies within Malaya, rubber magnate Tan Lark Sye pitched a proposal in 1953 for a Chinese-medium university. Through sheer dedication and determination, Nanyang University—or Nantah as it was more affectionately known—opened in 1958, supported by funding from all strata of society, from tycoons to trishaw-men. The inauguration ceremony was attended by an estimated hundred thousand people.²⁰ Among them were Tan Lark Sye and the acclaimed author, Han Suyin.

Whither the kampongs?

Not all areas in the South West industrialised at the same rapid pace that Jurong did.

In 1990, one of Singapore's last remaining kampongs, Kampong Pasir Panjang Batu Enam Tiga Suku (Kampong Pasir Panjang), was demolished. It was located along the coastal Pasir Panjang Road, around the six and three-quarter milestone, hence the name.

Kampong Pasir Panjang did not have a founder although a Mohamad Bin Yusoff was acknowledged to be one of the first settlers, which is why the village was also known as Kampong Mohamad Yusof. The researchers Powell, Savage and Kartini believe that Kampong Pasir Panjang was built by indigenous Malays who were descendants of the Orang Laut.²¹

As at 1986, there were 39 separate households in Kampong Pasir Panjang even though there were only 25 dwellings with officially listed addresses. This was because two or three households, under the same address, would use extensions and partitions to demarcate their living space.

The area was surrounded by jungle and stood on swampy ground. To deal with these natural conditions, the houses were built on stilts and roofed with first, nipah and later, coconut leaves. It was only after the Japanese Occupation that wooden houses with zinc roofs were built.

Life in the kampong was certainly simple until about the 1960s when electricity and piped water was made available to villagers. And it was only in 1982 that modern sanitation systems were deemed mandatory for the village.

In spite of this, every household had at least a portable or hi-fi set. "Over 90% of the households possessed a television set, refrigerator and electric iron. More than 80% of the families

had a telephone and fan. Fans were important at night to keep away the mosquitoes. About 70% of the families had a rice cooker and sewing machine. A rather low percentage (less than 30%), however, owned a video and washing machine. This was probably because they were considered non-essentials in their everyday life. The television provided sufficient entertainment while their clothes were hand-washed.”²²

The spirit of gotong royong in the village was not exceptionally apparent in the few official social and recreational activities. The villagers were more united, however, in religious activities, maintaining the general cleanliness of the place, helping one another out during weddings, sharing food and more informal pastimes such as bird-keeping.

Kampong Pasir Panjang was characterised by an ethnic and religious homogeneity of its inhabitants—Malay and Muslim—and a high degree of interrelationship between families. Their kinship resulted in a lack of physical boundaries and a situation where public and private space overlapped. There were two provision shops in the village, one run by Chinese and the other by Indians, but this had a negligible effect on the kampong’s ethnic mix. Even the church at the western end of the kampong, established to cater to British sailors, did not disrupt village life since there seemingly were no attempts to convert the villagers to Christianity.

After Kampong Pasir Panjang was demolished in 1990, the second last kampong on the island—Kampong Khatib Bongsu—was cleared in 2007 and with it, one of our last links to village life.²³ For now, only Kampong Lorong Buangkok remains.



Image 5: A visit to kampong houses on stilts at Pasir Panjang, 1950.

Photo: Bukit Panjang Government School Collection. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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About the author

Carolyn Oei is a writer, editor and educator. Dear to her heart are animal welfare, environmental protection and community-building. Throughout her vibrant international career, Carolyn has served as a commercial law litigator, IT and business features journalist, news editor for a state media agency in Beijing, news presenter and social commentator on Singapore radio and public relations consultant in Singapore, London and Beijing. Currently based in Singapore, she is a full-time lecturer, runs a culture magazine with her husband and serves as vice-chairperson on her neighbourhood's residents committee. www.mackerel.life

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