

1819: Isa Kamari on the Foundation of Singapore¹

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Abstract

1819 is the year of the British “founding of Singapore.” Early in that year Sir Stamford Raffles signed a preliminary treaty with the Temenggung of Johor permitting the British to set up a trading post on the island (Turnbull 1). By 1824, the request for a trading post had grown into a treaty through which the British claimed control over the whole of Singapore. *1819* is also the title of the English translation of the novel by the major Singapore Malay writer Isa Kamari on that same series of events (Malay: *Duka Tuan Bertakhta*, Sadly You Rule, 2011). In that book, Raffles, the Temenggung and the newly-installed Sultan Hussein of Singapore all play leading roles, but their actions are also balanced by those of the saint Habib Nuh, the *silat* master Wak Cantuk and the writer Munsyi Abdullah, who provide their own perspectives on the impact of the British colonisation of Singapore. In this paper I am interested in the way Isa tells the story not of the founding of Singapore in 1819 but of its loss, specifically to the Malay community, and the implications that he draws from that story for the contemporary Malay community of Singapore.

Keywords

Isa Kamari, Foundation of Singapore, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, Sultan Hussein, Political leadership, opium

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Introduction

History always sides with those with the power and the knowledge... the weak, the simple and the selfish will be exploited and pushed aside. (Isa Kamari, *Rawa* 126)

1819 is commonly considered to be the year of the British “founding of Singapore.” As C.M. Turnbull writes at the beginning of her book *A History of Singapore*: “Modern Singapore dates from 30 January 1819, when the local chieftain, the Temenggong of Johore, signed a preliminary treaty with Sir Stamford Raffles, agent of the East India Company, permitting the British to set up a trading post” (Turnbull 1).³ The agreement did not confer ownership of land or the right to make laws; these followed later (Turnbull 21). *1819* is also the title of the English translation of the major Singapore Malay writer Isa Kamari’s novel on that same series of events (Malay: *Duka Tuan Bertakhta*, Sadly You Rule, 2011). In this paper I am interested in the way Isa tells the story not of the founding of Singapore in 1819 but of its loss, specifically to the Malay community, and the implications that he draws from that story for the Malay community at that time, in Singapore and beyond, and for Singapore Malays today.

Isa Kamari was born in Kampung Tawakal near Whitley Road, Singapore in 1960; his father worked at various jobs, including typewriter repair and gardening, while the mother supplemented the family income by working as a maid. When Isa was still in his teens, the family moved to a Housing Development Board apartment in Ang Mo Kio. He was educated at Whitley Primary School, then at the elite Raffles Institution. Graduating with the degree of Bachelor of Architecture (with Honours) from the National University of Singapore in 1988, Isa is currently Deputy Director, Commuter Infrastructure Division, Land Transport Authority, Singapore. He also holds a Master of Philosophy degree in Malay Letters from the National University of Malaysia (UKM), for a thesis on “The Politics of Culture in the Singapore Malay Novel” (*Budaya Politik dalam novel Melayu Singapura*, 2007). His literary work has been widely honoured; he received the SEA Write Award in 2006, the Singapore government’s Cultural Medallion in 2007, and Singapore’s highest Malay literary award, the Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang in 2009. In 1989 he married a distant cousin, Sukmawati Sirat (PhD in Politics and International Relations, University of Southern Carolina, 1995; thesis topic, “Trends in Malay Political Leadership: The People’s Action Party’s Malay Political Leaders”); they

³ The precise date of the foundation of Singapore seems remarkably uncertain. Compare with Emily Hahn’s statement in her book *Raffles of Singapore*: “The official date of Singapore’s founding is January 29, 1819 ...” (487), and Isa’s statement in *1819* that the 1st February 1819 “is the day the British founded Singapore” (Isa 34).

have two daughters, Dhuha (b. 1990) and Iman (b. 1998). In 2001 the family completed the *haj* pilgrimage to Mecca.

Isa is a prolific author. As the blurb to the English translation of his first novel, *One Earth (Satu Bumi)*, 1998, translated by Sukmawati Sirat, states: “An architect by day, Isa Kamari works far into the night writing stories, play scripts, songs and poetry....” His short stories include *Sketsa Minda*, 1993, and *Celupan: 16 Cerita Jima Resab*, 2010. His novels in Malay (and English translation) include *Menara*, 2002 (The Tower, trans. Alfian Sa’at, 2013); *Kiswah*, 2002; *Tawassul*, 2002 (*Intercession*, trans. by Sukmawati Sirat 2008); *Atas Nama Cinta*, 2006 (*Nadra*, trans. Sukmawati Sirat 2008); *Memeluk Gerhana*, 2007 (*A Song of the Wind*, trans. by Sukmawati Sirat and R. Krishnan, 2013); *Rawa: tragedi Pulau Batu Puteh*, 2009 (*Rawa*, trans. by R. Krishnan, 2013); and *Duka Tuan Bertakhta*, 2011 (*1819*, trans. by R. Krishnan, 2013). His volumes of poetry particularly deal with Muslim topics and include: *Sumur Usia*, 1993; *Munajat Sukma*, 2003; *Ka’bah: 33 puisi tanah suci*, 2006; *Lorong Wahyu, 33 puisi tanah suci*, 2006; *Cinta Arafat: 34 puisi tanah suci*, 2006; and *Menara*, 2010. He has published one volume of plays: *Pintu: tiga drama pentas*, 2009. Isa also writes songs and lyrics for television drama serials and documentaries, and is a member of the spiritual musical trio Sirkfillsirr, which has released several albums.

Being Malay and a Sense of History

Many of Isa’s novels have a historical foundation. In the Introduction to his essay, “Some Personal Reflections on Political Culture in Contemporary Singapore Malay Novels,” which draws on his UKM thesis, he movingly explains the reason for this:

One day my child, who was eight years old at the time, came home from school crying. She hugged me tightly and would not let me go. I responded by caressing her hair and waited for her to speak. After a few moments she asked me this question: ‘Am I Chinese, daddy?’ I was dumbfounded. I did not expect such a question from her. She repeated it. ‘Am I Chinese, daddy? My friends at school called me Chinese.’

I said spontaneously, ‘No dear, you are Malay.’ But deep inside me I knew I had not fully answered her question.

It is true that I registered her as a Malay on her birth certificate. But I know that my mother-in-law is Chinese. A Malay family adopted her during the Japanese Occupation. My late father-in-law’s mother is Japanese. His father is Malay. I have both Malay and Javanese blood running through my veins. So what type of blood runs through my daughter’s veins?

And he continues:

More questions came into my mind. Is blood type, skin type or ethnicity important to one's identity? Are they important to one's development and sense of humanity? Is home upbringing the determining factor? Is the culture that permeates one's life the main influencing factor? As it turned out my daughter's simple question has become mine. (66)

So, who is a Malay and what does it mean to be a Malay in Singapore today? *1819* is part of a wider historical and personal project, that of writing "the Singapore story" ("Lily's Room"), past and present. *Satu Bumi* (One Earth) deals with the life of a Chinese woman adopted by a Malay family during the Japanese Occupation and was the beginning of Isa's fascination with the role of history on Singapore Malay identity. The book includes Isa's early comment on the founding of Singapore:

Anyone who studied history will know that from the very beginning, the colonial power, which regarded itself as a civilised nation and the saviour, had stabbed and manipulated the Malay Sultanate of Riau. The Sultan was guilty of wrongdoings too. A single land was separated and divided. (*One Earth* 60)

Nadra deals with "the Maria Hertogh Controversy and its aftermath" of 1951 (see Noraini Md Yusof and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, and Syed Muhd. Khairudin Aljunied). *Rawa* is a story of the indigenous Orang Selatar ("sea gypsies") and the extensive changes to their way of life that took place from the 1950s to the 1980s. It too offers a comment on the various stages of the historical processes of the subjection of "all the islands in the Riau-Lingga region part of a Malay kingdom" (*Rawa* 126). While, finally, *A Song of the Wind* (*Memeluk Gerhana*, "Embrace the eclipse") is a semi-autobiography, which spans the years from the 1960s to the 1990s. The project of writing the Malay history of Singapore has, thus, moved in various directions, although the recently published translations, *1819*, *Rawa* and *Song of the Wind*, can be framed to form a chronological sequence, as many reviewers of the trilogy have done (including my own review in *Asiatic*, 2013).

The Founding of Singapore: History

As Isa has said:

What better way to write 'the Singapore story' than to write about its founding in 1819? In *Duka Tuan Bertakhta*, I offer an alternative history of the founding of the island by Stamford Raffles. He has always been portrayed as a hero in the official version of Singapore's history but I discovered that he was really a scoundrel who had blood on his hands.

The novel also relates how the British took advantage of the conflict between the families of the Sultan of Johor and the Yamtuan Muda of

Riau, and duped the greedy and weak Sultan Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman into ‘selling’ Singapore to the British East India Company, which took full control of the island in 1823. (“Lily’s Room”)

Let us begin with a very simplified version of what is an incredibly complicated story, as told by historians (Collis; Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*; Turnbull; and Wake). In 1819, Singapore was “a swampy thinly populated island belonging to the Sultanate of Johore” (Collis 43). It lay, obscurely, at a point of intersection between two wider contemporary trajectories of conflict in the Malay archipelago: one formed by the Dutch and the British companies seeking commercial benefit and territory, the other by Malay and Buginese groups seeking to establish and consolidate traditional forms of royal authority – and commercial benefit as well.

Singapore was a fragment of a larger, extremely divided political unit (Trocki, *Prince of Pirates* 15), which included the Riau-Lingga archipelago, as well as the Peninsular provinces of Johor and Pahang (Wake 49). The wider unit, conventionally referred to as the Kingdom of Johor, had its main courts not on the mainland of the Malay Peninsula (“Modern Johor” to use Trocki’s term, *Prince of Pirates* 21), but at Riau on the island of Bentan and at Lingga. Riau was the capital and main commercial centre, ruled by the Buginese descended Yamtuan Muda (The Junior Majesty), but was in theory subordinate to Lingga, which was ruled by the more Malay Yamtuan Besar (The Senior Majesty). The Dutch claimed authority over both areas.

The Sultan of “Old Johor,” Sultan Mahmud, died in January 1812, leaving two sons by non-royal secondary wives to dispute the succession. The elder son, Hussein Tunku Long (“*Sulong*,” first born sibling), was away at the time of his father’s death, being married in Pahang, so the younger brother, Abdu’r Rahman, claimed the throne with the support of the Buginese but without receiving the royal regalia which was in the possession of the late Sultan’s royal widow who refused to give it up. Abdu’r Rahman continued to live at Lingga, while Hussein lived at Riau. Singapore, the neighbouring islands and parts of East Sumatra, were ruled by the Temenggung, also called Abdu’r Rahman, one of the Sultan’s two senior ministers (Turnbull 5). The Temenggung had only moved from Riau to Singapore in 1818, where he continued carrying out the “traditional functions of his office,” including managing trade, collecting taxes and “policing the harbour and the surrounding seas” (Trocki, *Prince of Pirates* 61). Turnbull estimates that in January 1819, the island of Singapore had a population of “perhaps 1,000 inhabitants, consisting of some 500 Orang Kallang, 200 Orang Selatar, 150 Orang Gelam in the Singapore River, other *orang laut* in the Keppel Harbour area, 20-30 Malays in the Temenggung’s entourage, and a similar number of Chinese” (Turnbull 5, also see Trocki, *Prince of Pirates* 58-59 for his comment on the category of “Malays” – “whatever the

word meant at the time” and an analysis of the Temenggung’s following of 6-10,000 in the wider region. On “*orang suku laut*,” see Chou, *The Orang Suku Laut of Riau, Indonesia*).

In October 1818, soon after returning from leave in England and taking up his position as Lieutenant-Governor in Bencoolen, Sumatra, Sir Stamford Raffles visited Calcutta to discuss with Lord Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of India, his plans for spreading British influence in Sumatra and maintaining a passage for the British to sail between the Cape of Good Hope and China. Hastings did not fully agree with Raffles’ plans but authorised him “to secure an agreement with Aceh... and establish a post in Riau, Johore or some other southern point, provided that he did not bring the Company into conflict with the Dutch” (Turnbull 7). On his return to Penang in December, Raffles was advised that the Dutch had already pre-empted him in Riau during the previous month, annulling an earlier treaty that Colonel William Farquhar, the Resident of Malacca (1803-18), had made there in August, and claimed authority over all of Riau’s dependent territories, including Johor and the neighbouring islands. Raffles therefore announced that he had decided to send Farquhar to choose and establish a base in the south while he intended to go to Aceh. Although Raffles was forbidden by the Governor of Penang to go to Aceh without further instructions from Hastings, he surreptitiously left Penang on the 17th January 1819 and followed Farquhar south.

Raffles landed in Singapore on 28 January 1819. The next day, he, Farquhar and one sepoy went straight to the house of the Temenggung, where they asked for a lease to make a settlement (*loji*), offering an attractive rent for the privilege. The Temenggung replied that as the island belonged to Johor, he would need the consent of the Sultan of Johor before he could do so. Nevertheless, Temenggung Abdu’r Rahman was persuaded to sign a preliminary agreement, to be endorsed later on, authorising Raffles to bring his troops ashore and establish the post. Farquhar was dispatched, with forty soldiers and sailors, to seek Sultan Abdu’r-Rahman’s consent to the settlement in Singapore, while the Temenggung sent his own messengers to bring Hussein to Singapore. As expected, Sultan Abdu’r Rahman rejected the proposal but Hussein did come, arriving on the first of February. He was not of prepossessing appearance and was rather afraid of the Dutch (Collis 136), but Raffles easily won him over, not least by the promise of restoring his rightful status. On the 6th February 1819, Raffles signed a more extensive and formal treaty with the Temenggung and the newly installed “His Highness the Sultan Hussein Mahomed Shah Sultan of Johore,” which confirmed the right of the East India Company to establish a post, subject to the payment of 5000 Spanish dollars per annum to the Sultan and annual grant of 3000 dollars to the Temenggung. Presents were distributed, including opium and arms, and the ceremony was followed by several hours of drinking into the late afternoon. Farquhar was installed as

Resident and Commandant, under the authority of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen.⁴

Following these limited acts, Raffles quickly returned to Penang the next day, to begin the defence of his actions against criticism from the Company – and the Dutch. Farquhar oversaw the rapid and successful development of the settlement until 1822, when, as a result of deep-seated personal differences, Raffles took over the responsibilities of Resident himself in April and then in May became its Commandant as well. (Turnbull suggests that “Raffles’s treatment of Farquhar was perhaps the shabbiest episode in his career, the unfair repudiation of a friend, who had withstood all the difficulties and dangers in the first precarious years and nursed the settlement into the life and vigour which so inspired Raffles on his return in 1822” [19; see also Wake 48]). Raffles independently designed an extensive realignment of the layout of the town and its port; imposed English law as the general law of Singapore; abolished slavery; and established the Singapore Institution as “[his] last public act” (Turnbull 24). His relations with the Sultan and the Temenggung went from bad to worse. Turnbull writes:

He despised Hussein, distrusted the Temenggung, and was not prepared to tolerate any obstruction of his plans. He attempted to reform their ways and offered to arrange shipments of goods from Calcutta for them to sell on commission, but they scorned the role of trader as beneath the dignity of Malay princes. They also rejected Raffles’ offer to educate their sons in India at the Company’s expense. After that Raffles gave up any attempt to turn the chiefs and their successors into enlightened partners in government. He paid their allowances promptly but gradually eased them out of public life. In December 1822 he commuted to a fixed monthly payment all their claims to a share in the revenue, and on the eve of his final departure in June 1823 he made an agreement to buy out their judicial power and rights to land outside of the areas generally reserved for them. (21-22)

The establishment of Singapore as a permanent and fully British possession was finally completed in 1824, under the administration of Dr. John Crawfurd, following the signing of two treaties: the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of London, March 1824, which divided the territorial rights of the Dutch and the British to separate sides of the Straits of Malacca, and the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance between the East India Company, Sultan Hussein and the Temenggung, August 1824. Under the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, the Sultan and the Temenggung ceded to the East India Company and its heirs

⁴ Trocki comments that: “The dubious legality of Sultan Hussain’s title was the only basis of the Company’s claim to Singapore” (*Prince of Pirates* 66).

perpetual title to Singapore and all islands less than ten miles from her shores, agreed to live on the land that had been reserved for them, accepted that they could have no dealings abroad without the Company's consent, and noted the inducement that if they should ever decide to withdraw from Singapore the Sultan would receive \$20,000 compensation and the Temenggung \$15,000. Turnbull suggests that: "these measures failed to dislodge the chiefs and their continued residence in Singapore brought embarrassment to the British administration, but the treaty effectively removed them from any control over Singapore's future" (28).

From another perspective, the measures did much more than this: they destroyed the legal function of the Sultan and the Temenggung, deprived them of their major sources of finance and greatly reduced the areas of the island in which they were permitted to operate (Wake 65-67). As a consequence of these increasingly unilateral impositions of British will from 1819 to 1824, Singapore was no longer a fragment of a Malay kingdom, no matter how divided the kingdom already was, in which the Sultan and the Temenggung had their own rights to administration, traditional sources of revenue and to land. It had become a British Settlement in which they had a minimal role and almost no power (Wake 48).⁵

⁵ There are at least two, mid to late nineteenth century, accounts in Malay of this founding of "modern Singapore," both of which place more emphasis on Farquhar's activities than on Raffles'. The *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (Matheson and Andaya) suggests that Raffles sent Farquhar to Singapore, while he himself went to Bengal. "So Colonel Farquhar sailed to Singapore where he met Temenggung Abd al-Rahman. They conferred together and Farquhar's request for Singapore was granted and agreement reached about the installation of Tengku Long as king." Farquhar, however, was reluctant "to settle everything he had discussed with the Temenggung" completely, until Raffles returned from Bengal. When Raffles arrived, Farquhar and the Temenggung went aboard his ship and reported about their discussions. Angry that Tengku Long had not yet been installed as the king of Singapore, Raffles demanded that someone be sent to fetch him immediately, "so that we can complete this quickly" (Matheson and Andaya 227). The *Tuhfat* provides the wording of the second treaty in which "the Governor-General of Bengal has appointed Tengku Long and has entitled him Sultan Husain Syah, son of the late Sultan Mahmud Syah in the state of Singapore and all its subject territories"; records the building of a palace for Tengku Long's wife together with the removal of his "people" from Riau to Singapore; and somewhat flatly concludes: "The English established a settlement on Singapore, and many Malays, sea people, and Chinese gathered there, receiving daily wages for constructing the settlement. Many traders came" (Matheson and Andaya 228).

The *Hikayat Abdullah* describes the events in Chapter 11. Hill notes that Abdullah was not present at the time and overplays the role of Farquhar: "[Abdullah's] version of the story is a garbled one, culled from incorrect information obtained after the events he attempts to describe" (1970: 13). Or, as Emily Hahn says in recounting these events: "Throughout any direct quotation from Abdullah which may follow, for 'Farquhar' read 'Raffles'" (463). On the other hand, Abdullah's account of the Sultan's humiliation after the "Convention" of 7 June 1823 is deeply moving: "About five days after the agreement had been concluded Mr Crawford ordered gongs to be sounded all around Singapore and in Kampong Gelam and a proclamation read: 'Be it known to all men in this settlement that full judicial and legislative control throughout Singapore has passed to the East India Company, and that neither Sultan Shah nor the Temenggung retains any power."

A Fictional History of the Founding Events of 1819

A work of fiction that is based on actual historical events offers many exciting opportunities to a writer. As Noraini Md Yusof and Ruzy Suliza Hashim note, the writer may imagine events taking place in a different way from the way in which they are normally constructed, create new personalities and motivations for the main actors, and alter or even negate previous interpretations of those events and actors (10). A work of fiction does not, after all, need to follow the confusing facts of history and Isa certainly works with the basic details in an extremely creative way.

1819 includes a range of characters based on a politically-based hierarchy of cultural types. The characters are defined by their similarities to other members of their own group and their significant differences from those in other groups. The Englishmen, Raffles, Farquhar and Crawford form one group, and are joined later by Sir Samuel George Bonham (Governor of the Straits Settlements from 1836 to 1843). They have high levels of authority but are quite different from the traditional Malay aristocrats, the Temenggung and the Sultan, the second group of characters. The Temenggung and the Sultan are similar to, but also very different from, the two Malay community leaders, the Muslim saint Habib Nuh bin Habib Muhammad (1788-1866), of Arab descent, and the *dukun* and *silat* master Wan Cantuk (1765-1835),⁶ of Buginese descent, who are both highly respected for their particular skills but not of noble descent. Further, there are the fictional, more youthful and definitely Malay figures of Nuraman, Wak Cantuk's leading *silat* student; Marmah, Wan Cantuk's adopted daughter; and the boys Ramli, Sudin and Ajis. These adolescents are prominent in the novel but not directly involved in the foundation narrative, so we shall not have a lot to say about them until the very end of this paper. The additional but marginal figure who has important comments to make on all of these groups is the author Munsyi Abdullah (1796-1854).

The novel opens and closes with Habib Nuh, "the grand saint of Singapore" as Muhammad Ghouse calls him, and he appears at regular intervals throughout it as well. Let us begin with him too. Some Singaporeans will know the importance of his tomb, *maqam* or *keramat*, (37 Palmer Road), as being the major Muslim pilgrimage site in the Republic. Sayyid Nuh bin Sayyid Mohamad bin Sayyid Ahmad A-Habshi, to give him his full name, was born during a storm, around 1788 CE, aboard a ship making its way from Palembang to Sumatra – hence his dedication by his parents to the Prophet Noah. He was raised by his aunt Sharifah Seha in Penang, where his father received a small

The Sultan can make no order except on the authority of a magistrate.' When the Sultan heard what the town criers were saying he realized at last in the position of a man bound hand and foot. As the Malays say 'To repent in time is gain, to repent too late is of no avail'" (Hill 221).

⁶ "*Cantuk*" is a reference to a type of cup (*bekam*) used to stimulate the flow of blood in certain forms of folk medicine. On Wak Cantuk, see Abdul Ghani Hamid.

allowance from the newly established British government for his compassionate social work among the poor and needy. “Around 1819,” to quote Muhammad Ghouse (33), Habib Nuh received an invitation from Habib Salim bin Abdullah Ba Sumayr, a Naqshbandi sufi from the Hadramaut, and moved to Singapore, leaving behind a daughter whose mother had died in childbirth. (Ghouse notes that: “During that time Singapore was being rapidly developed by Sir Stamford Raffles of the East India Company” [33], so the date of 1819 may be mainly symbolic.) Nuh remained in Singapore for some “fifty years” (the figure given in his obituary in the *The Singapore Free Press*, 2nd August 1866, following his death “a few days ago” [Ghouse 54]).

Ghouse notes that Habib Nuh frequently gave talks, encouraging his listeners to live upright lives, devote themselves to religious study and the recitation of the Qur’an, and to defend the poor. He also “frequently visited Johore and other states in the Malay Peninsula” (Ghouse 33). Ghouse notes the saint’s extreme piety, although he does not record Nuh’s teachings but has a comparatively long chapter on his eccentricities and “saintly miracles” (*karamah*). Among his eccentricities was a tendency to take objects, and money, from shops and to give them to the poor, a custom of appearing in public without a shirt, and a fondness for Chinese opera. His miraculous gifts included the ability to read people’s thoughts, diagnose and cure their illnesses (often at a distance), to disappear suddenly from one place and to reappear in another, to transform water into milk, to escape imprisonment, and exercise power over animals – especially horses, including one being ridden discourteously by Crawford at one time, and even over the horse taking him to his burial at another. He was also said to have met the Prophet Muhammad on several occasions and to have prayed regularly on Fridays at the Ka’abah (Ghouse 37-45). On account of his eccentricities and spiritual powers, Ghouse classifies Nuh as a “*wali majzub*,” a saint who lives in a constant state of absorption in the divine, oblivious of social conventions and normal social rules (Ghouse 21, 42: the American scholar Georg Feuerstein speaks of such persons as “crazy-wise adepts” and “holy fools”).⁷ In 1819, Habib Nuh is also the anchor-point for the actions of the minor Malay characters, with whom he shares his teachings, watches Chinese opera and divides his fried bananas. He is revered by the wider community, blesses their children, cures illnesses and refuses to be covered by the British, the Sultan or Wak Cantuk). Habib Nuh’s, “mad” piety (see especially page 184) provides a major but ultimately inadequate framework for the moral judgment of many of the other major characters in the book.

⁷ Ghouse advises his readers: “Our obligations towards the *Wali Majzub* are to always think well of them, no matter how odd their actions may appear. Their actions should not be construed as transgressions because *jazbah* would not take hold of them if their inner beings were inclined towards immorality and evil” (Ghouse 21).

In the first chapter of *1819*, Habib Nuh is horrified by a thrice repeated dream of events “that had happened recently or were currently happening in [Singapore],” which cast a dark shadow over the pleasure invoked in him by an invitation from Habib Salim to come to that island to “help” (Isa, *1819* 9). Through his gift of clairvoyance, Habib Nuh sees “a young, well-built Englishman with wavy hair, whose arms appeared to be constantly folded across his chest”, being carried on one of a number of small rowboats leaving a ship anchored near Pulau Sekijang Bendera and heading for the mouth of the Singapore River near the Temenggung’s house (Isa, *1819* 9). The dream draws on events narrated in Syed Hussein Alatas’s book *Thomas Stamford Raffles: Schemer or Reformer?*, which was written to “correct the persistent historical canonization of Raffles as a lovable and gentle personality surrounded by jealous competitors... an heroic reformer who wanted to bring peace and progress to the people of the area in which he operated” (51). Habib Nuh is disturbed by “the smell of blood” (we have already heard Isa’s comment that Raffles “was really a scoundrel who had blood on his hands”). In his dream, Habib Nuh sees:

Images of the vicious conflict between the Dutch and the British military forces in Sumatra.... The British, led by the same young Englishman, had attacked and sunk a small ship in the Palembang River on its way to Batavia. The ship carried twenty-four European passengers, mostly Dutch prisoners, and sixty-three locals. He hears, too, the cries of anguish and horror of another 1,500 prisoners from Java, including women and children, who have been kidnapped on the orders of the same cross-armed young man as they are transported to Banjarmasin to build a fort there for the British. (Isa, *1819* 9-10, also 56; compare Syed Hussein Alatas’ *Thomas Stamford Raffles* 8 and Chapter 2 throughout, 37 and Chapter 4 throughout).

The next four chapters, pages 13 to 35, describe the events of 1819. Three of them begin with specific dates – 19 January 1819 (chapter 2, “The Keystone”), 28 January 1819 (chapter 4, “Rambutans and Durians”) and 1 February 1819 (chapter 5, “Fishing”). In chapter 2, The *Indiana* sails from Penang on 19 January and eight days later, 27 January, Raffles is joined by Captain John Crawford on the *Investigator* and the former Commandant and Resident of Melaka, William Farquhar, on the *Enterprise*. These details have the purpose of locating the grotesque events that are to follow squarely within an apparently objective history. The analysis of the motives behind the events is very much Isa’s own and he does not hesitate to paint them with broad brush-strokes.

Farquhar and Raffles are united by a common malicious mission: the “chaos” which has dominated the kingdom of Johor since Sultan Mahmud’s death, presents “the most opportune time for the British to do what they did best, to fish in troubled waters and dominate the region” (Isa, *1819* 14). Farquhar is the more positive of the two characters. He has made an attempt

over his long period in Melaka to understand the Malays. He knows of the background behind the “chaos”; he knows that the island is inhabited “not only by the Orang Laut and pirates, but also by many Malay, Chinese and Indian communities”; and that it has long been an important Malay trading centre, although it is not now what it used to be (Isa, 1819 15). He also knows through his “research,” presumably in the *Sejarah Melayu*, of the history of the kingdom established by Sri Tri Buana, who ruled from 1299 to 1347, and of its invasion by Majapahit in 1393 (Isa, 1819 17; Shellabear 27-29, 32-33). (At a later stage we also learn that Farquhar “was perhaps partial towards the Malays because he was married to one, Nyonya Clement, of French-Malay parentage, with whom he had six children, the eldest of whom, Esther, was reported to have delivered her first child, Agnes Maria Bernhard, in British Singapore on July 26, 1819” [Isa, 1819 99]).

Raffles has little respect for Farquhar but he cynically needs him “for a few more years”: Farquhar “was important to his plan. He needed the experience and knowledge of that old man about the customs and cultures of the Malay people” (Isa, 1819 16). Raffles himself has no respect for the Malays. In Chapter 2, he regards the letter “written in fine calligraphy, obviously by a man who had a high regard for the fine arts,” that he received from the late Sultan Jalil in 1811, as being “written in a savage tongue,” worthy only of his disdain and savage contempt (Isa, 1819 14). He persists in believing that Singapore “had no agricultural potential, and was currently inhabited only by the Orang Laut and pirates, as his Chinese spies had reported” (Isa, 1819 15). His particular “dream” is “to build a prosperous British commercial base, at peace in the region, thus weakening the position of the Dutch” (Isa, 1819 16). And as for the Malays:

Starting with trade, British influence would spread to all aspects of life and culture in the region. The Malayan people, in particular, would be civilized and taught to live like the British. He vowed not to rest until he had realized his dream.

He saw himself as the chosen one. He folded his arms proudly across his chest. He’d light the torch of imperial Britain in the region. And that tiny island of Singapore would be the keystone of that enterprise. (Isa, 1819 18).

Chapter 3, “White Bears,” has no date: it occurs between the chapters dated 19 and 28 January 1819, and concerns Tengku Hussein, who is hiding out near a Chinese pig farm in the Karimun Islands. Like Habib Nuh and Raffles, Tengku Hussein too has had a dream: a dream of being attacked by a white bear that was so terrifying “that he had wet himself in his sleep” (Isa, 1819 19). The dream is fulfilled the next morning when he is captured by three British soldiers and is so afraid that he defecates inside his own sarong (Isa, 1819 20). The

soldiers take the bodily disgraced prince, with his hands tied, to the coast where nine British ships are anchored. “What happened next shocked everyone on the vessel” (1819 20), Isa writes. The “big white man” in the midst of the group of three senior British officials berates the soldiers, covers Tengku Hussein in a blanket, and, arm in arm, takes him to a cabin where he is handed “a set of ceremonial clothes befitting a Malay ruler.” His “wavy-haired captor” then bows respectfully and leaves the cabin (Isa, 1819 22). Raffles is a manipulator, the prince is a fool.

Once Hussein has changed, Raffles takes him back to the deck and, cunningly calling him “Your Highness, Sultan Hussein,” invites him to come with them to Singapore to be crowned as the Sultan of Singapore. To Tengku Hussein’s protest that he is “the Sultan of Johor, not of Singapore,” Raffles “gently and smoothly, as though he had memorized every word,” replies: “The British will help you get your throne back, Your Highness, but the first step is for you to become the Sultan of Singapore” (Isa, 1819 23). Hussein is suspicious (“There surely is a shrimp under this rock, he thought” – a rather literal translation of conventional Malay metaphor) but, once left on his own again, he is so overwhelmed with such childish delight that he begins to dance (Isa, 1819 24).

On the morning of 29th January, Farquhar lands on Singapore, accompanied by a British soldier. Raffles, it is emphasised, is still sleeping aboard ship. Farquhar studies the Temenggung’s settlement and reflects:

Singapore was not uninhabited as Raffles had portrayed it. He was sure it was a deliberate ploy by his senior officer to depict the island as wild and abandoned, so he could establish his legacy as the founder and developer of a thriving port city in the region, just as Francis Light had done with Penang. He was aware how devious and opportunistic Raffles could be. He smiled cynically. (Isa, 1819 27).

Farquhar and the Temenggung amiably chat over rambutan and papaya about the possibility of developing Singapore as the British had done in Melaka. Later that afternoon Raffles does come ashore. His conversation is more direct. Raffles tells the Temenggung that Hussein is now “Sultan Hussein” and will sign a formal agreement in the next few days, when he arrives. In the meantime, Raffles deviously urges him to sign a draft agreement – “an early agreement... brief and sketchy” – “a draft letter of agreement allowing the British East India Company to set up a supply base in Singapore,” with the understanding that the formal agreement would be signed in two days (Isa, 1819 30). The Temenggung agrees, after humiliating Raffles by forcing him to eat durian (compare chapter 6 of the *Hikayat Abdullah*, set in Melaka, where Raffles’ intense dislike of durian is

described [Hill 79]), and foolishly remembering the opium Raffles had sent him the previous evening (Isa, 1819 29).

Finally, on 1 February 1819 (Chapter 5), Sultan Hussein does arrive. He postpones the signing of the agreement for a further five days “after consulting our pawang, our soothsayer,” thus further enraging Raffles at the “superstition” of the Malays (Isa, 1819 34). In this chapter Raffles is variously angry at having been made a fool of by the Temenggung (Isa, 1819 31), surprised that Singapore is not a den for pirates as his spies had told him (Isa, 1819 31), irritated at the “Malay propensity for soliciting bribes” (Isa, 1819 32), angered again by the Sultan’s “childish display” and his “lackadaisical attitude” (Isa, 1819 33), and surprised once more by the Sultan’s request for a promised gift from China, more opium. Nevertheless he accepts the delay, declaring “as though it was his idea”: “That’ll take us to February 6.... We’ll make that our historic day.” Then he continues:

“However... with the powers vested in me as the British Lieutenant Governor at Bencoolen, I declare that it will be noted that today is the day the British founded Singapore.” (Isa, 1819 34)

The Sultan and the Temenggung are stunned by the audacity of the statement. They remember the long history of Singapore and its importance as a trading port. However, they can only shake their heads and stare at the white men “through their opium haze” (Isa, 1819 34).

The chapter ends: “Their stoned minds concluded that it would be good working with the British though. They could still consider themselves blessed” (Isa, 1819 35: on the addiction of the Sultan and the Temenggung to opium, encouraged by the British to their own advantage, see also pages 73, 75, 78, 86, 124, and especially 140. It is suggested by Crawford that the early death of the Temenggung is due to the mixing of a slow poison into his opium – and that this was “a gift” from Raffles, “in return for the durian he was forced to eat” [135]).⁸

It is clear, I hope from this summary, how *1819* works to depict Raffles and the British as malevolent schemers, intent on betraying the Malays, who have a natural right to Singapore as well as a proud history there, and to present the Malay chieftains as greedy, drug-bedazzled, childish fools, who had only their own interests at heart. It completely undercuts the myth of Raffles’ benevolent foundation of Singapore.

⁸ On the high importance of opium in nineteenth century British trade in Asia, see Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*. In *Prince of Pirates*, Trocki notes that opium was “the mainstay of Riau’s international as well as local commerce” from as early as 1740 (35 and 43).

The Significance of Isa Kamari's Account of the Events of 1819

Let me now return to our earlier questions: "Who is a Malay and what does it mean to be a Malay in Singapore today?" For our present purposes, the definition of "Who is a Malay?" can be answered in general terms. Rather than follow scholarly attempts at essentialising the Malay identity – discussed in various ways in Kahn, Milner, Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, and Trocki (*Prince of Pirates*) – I will adopt the approach proposed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, where he speaks of "family resemblances":

Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games.' I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called "games" – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that....

We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. (Wittgenstein, para. 66)

A "Malay" in Singapore is someone who considers him/herself to be a Malay and is generally accepted as such. Like Isa's daughter, "Malay" is written into their official and unofficial documentation; a Malay is a person who shares in certain "family resemblances" and is not a Chinese, Indian or a European. It is an ongoing social construct and can readily change in different circumstances and for particular purposes. A person may trace his/her biological origins, fully or in part, to Arabia, India, China, Sumatra, Java, Bali, Lombok, Bawa, Borneo, Makasar or other parts of Indonesia, and still be primarily considered a "Malay" for most purposes. Even a European who has married a Malay wife and embraced Islam is considered to have "*masuk Melayu*," entered the Malay community. (If they subsequently divorce, he need not necessarily be considered to have "*keluar Melayu*"; it depends on his future relationship with the community and practice of Islam.)

Assoc. Professor Lily Zubaidah Rahim, in her surely now classic book, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, has suggested three "predominant interweaving threads which have shaped the Singapore Malay identity". These are: "The Pan-Malay regional identity, Islamic consciousness, and the socio-economic marginality of the Malay community" (13). The first and third of these are written into Section 152 of the Singapore Constitution. Section 152 begins with regional identity: "It shall be a deliberate and conscious policy of the Government of Singapore at all times to recognize the special position of the Malays who are the indigenous

people of the island....” There is no direct mention of Islam but Section 152 continues with marginality: “... and who are in most need of assistance and accordingly, it shall be the responsibility of the Government of Singapore to protect, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social, and cultural interests, and the Malay language” (Lily Zubaidah 13).

“Political and educational marginality” are, of course, a difficulty to accept as part of one’s identity, the more so when they are enshrined in the Constitution. It seems logical that if the Malay community has internalised and accepted this ideology of its own inferiority, then a grudging acceptance of the “lived reality” of “relative deprivation, discrimination and unequal opportunities” can be expected to continue (Lily Zubaidah 61, Li 166-83, Suriani Suratman). The further obvious question is: If this is so, how do we explain this ongoing and deeply rooted disadvantage? I would like to suggest that Isa’s novel *1819 (Duka Tuan Bertakhta)* not only says something about the “foundation” of modern Singapore but also about the condition of Malays in contemporary Singapore.

That something has its roots in the first chapter of *1819* as well. Habib Nuh not only sees Raffles, he also has another vision of “a tall good-looking Munsyi in his twenties, with a well-trimmed moustache and beard, who knew his scriptures well and who was also a writer” (Isa, *1819* 11). The “Munsyi,” language teacher, is Munsyi Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, most famous for his autobiographical *Hikayat Abdullah* (The Chronicle of Abdullah, 1849, ed. Kassim Ahmad, 1960), which provides the material for much of the later narrative of *1819*.⁹

On pages 211-12, Munsyi Abdullah is given a long reflective passage in which he proposes certain reasons for the “weaknesses” of the Malay community – defined as abject poverty, anomie and ignorance, especially in the area of commerce (Isa, *1819* 211). These reasons are drawn not just from his experiences of Malay society in Singapore but also of Malays in Kelantan, Trengganu and Pahang, “as he had observed during one of his voyages in the service of the British, stories of which he had documented in *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah*” (Isa, *1819* 211, Abdullah 1838/1960).¹⁰

⁹ Abdullah’s sympathies for the British are often severely criticised today (see Ungku Maimunah 30-70, Aveling, “Malinche and Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir”) and Isa does indeed emphasise his dependence on Raffles and other administrators and missionaries, as well as the ambiguities of his various positions (see especially pages 151, 154, 171-73, 208-9). Nevertheless, Isa also seems to identify strongly with this fellow “writer” on many occasions (note in particular Isa, *1819* 212).

¹⁰ Another passage of reflection based on these same travels along the east coast of the Peninsula notes that, unlike Malay royalty, the British were willing to pay fair wages for work done on their behalf, avoided factionalism and applied the law equally to all persons (Isa, *1819* 64-65, Abdullah 116-19).

The first of these reasons for Malay weakness is: “rulers who were consumed by their own lust and greed, ruled as they pleased, with little justice or compassion” (Isa, 1819 211). Significantly, this criticism is directed less at Raffles than at Sultan Hussein.¹¹ Isa has certain expectations of those in political authority. These are perhaps spelled out most obviously in *One Earth*, when one of the major characters, Yassir, describes his feelings after the Second World War as being: “sad and angry.... Sad because our people were suffering at that time; angry because the British who had returned to power at that time failed to protect and safeguard our rights” (81). Abdullah reflects that:

Everything that had happened was a result of Sultan Hussein’s own behaviour, which had left an ugly scar in the history of the Malay people. Despite that, it was also true that the Malays had lost their power and honour ages ago. Now they merely existed like weeds....

Sultan Hussein was a coward with no sense of honour or responsibility. He had been played out by a trickster with a smooth tongue and an evil heart. Certainly he didn’t deserve to be sultan. (Isa, 1819 211)

The sultan could have resisted Raffles, had he not been “stoned” out of his mind (Isa, 1819 35). In his state of intoxication, the sultan had not only implicitly offended against Islam but he had also explicitly broken the primordial vow between a sultan and his followers and no longer deserved to be obeyed. The original contract, described in the *Sejarah Melayu* (Shellabear 21-22), provided both that the subjects would become servants of the ruler and that he should look after their welfare. If the subject committed a crime, the subject should be punished according to Muslim law but never verbally abused. There was to be a vast tolerance for injustice by the ruler, to the extent that subjects should never rebel (*durhaka*). But, an important final clause was imposed: If the ruler broke his oath to protect his subjects and never abuse them, then his subjects were also entitled to renounce their part of the contract in return. Elsewhere in 1819, Abdullah phrases this as: “The Malays had no rights besides loyalty to their ruler. They had no right to determine their destiny. Their lives were entirely in the hands of the ruler...” (Isa, 1819 104-5). It is a contract that allows Wak Cantuk to consider that he would be justified in murdering Sultan

¹¹ Terence Chong argues that the earlier Singapore Malay *Angkatan Sasterawan 50*, Literary Generation of the 1950s, was “a body of cultural producers who, through Malay literature, attempted to embody the Malay peasant with socialist and anti-colonialist values in opposition to the English-educated Malay elite, thus embedding notions of the rural with the concept of authenticity within a broader anti-colonial struggle” (880). Isa partially shares in this tradition but he writes in a postcolonial state that has neither a Malay aristocracy nor an exemplary Malay peasantry, and emphasises a politics of multiculturalism; his further characterisation of “ordinary citizens” in works such as *1819*, *Rawa* and *Song of the Wind* is shaped by these constraints (see Aveling, “Isa Kamari’s Singapore Trilogy”).

Hussein: “when the sultan betrayed his subjects, he [Wak Cantuk] had felt obliged to take his life for the sake of his subjects” (Isa, 1819 221).

What are the implications of this for contemporary Singapore, where a very different, multiracial, political culture prevails? The problem becomes not one of relating to a sultan as subjects but, instead, what sort of leader is worthy of the Malay community that is part of a republic? The fictional Abdullah presents two possible models of leadership. The first is that of Wak Cantuk. He is a traditional leader: a *dukun*, and a *silat* master. He “is strong and had many followers,” but people are also afraid of him. He is also “oversensitive to criticism, quick tempered, vengeful.” Further:

He didn’t care for the welfare of the public; only his armed struggle against the occupiers mattered, and that too was not likely to succeed because his plans frequently went awry. On top of that, he often had altercations with his own fighters.

No, Abdullah concludes: “These were not the qualities of a true leader” (Isa, 1819 211). No doubt Isa could point to many such aggressive Malay politicians in the recent Singapore political history but, as far as I know, he has chosen not to.

To further understand Isa’s analysis of the weakness of the Singapore Malay community and its leadership we must now take up Abdullah’s second reason for the weakness of the Malays: Islam, “of which people only embraced the spiritual and the ritual, ignoring its teachings on business and finance, governance and administration” (Isa, 1819 212). Abdullah’s second model of a possible leader of the Malay community is the devoutly Muslim Habib Nuh:

Many Singaporean Malays considered Habib Nuh a saint. He was surely learned and good-hearted, but he had no influence in the administration of the island. To the British he was simply a lunatic and a trouble maker. He served the spiritual and religious needs of the Malays, but could do little about their abject poverty, provide counsel, or equip them with knowledge to give them a fighting chance in commerce.

However, elsewhere Abdullah comments, “No, he could not lead the Malays” (Isa, 1819 211). A Malay political leader focused only on Islam too will not succeed in contemporary Singapore because he or she cannot prepare his/her followers for the reality of a high-tech globalising world. Further, he/she will have no common grounds on which to negotiate with members of other ethnic communities. In fact, a zealous devotion to Islam may well be interpreted as an

inclination towards terrorism.¹²

The criticism of Habib Nuh leads to Abdullah's third reason for Malay weakness: "the closed Malay mind, impervious to any form of new knowledge, both secular and religious, allowing British and others to propagate the myth that they were weak and lazy natives" (Isa, 1819 212; Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*). Isa hammers at this subversive strategy of the British throughout the book. Earlier, on page 87, Raffles comments on Abdullah:

[He's] quick and forward thinking. He's not afraid to criticise the sultan and is frank in his criticism of the Malays. His values are more like ours, and he understands the civilisation that we promote. It is not sufficient for us to colonise and rule them. We have to alter their thinking and make them civilised like us.

Education is, of course, not necessary for all Malays. Raffles continues:

We only need to train some Malays to be useful to us. As for the others, let them think they are weak and lazy. Retard their thought processes, weaken their resolve. Do not give them opportunities in business; don't let them rise too high in administration. (Isa, 1819 87)

Abdullah can only lament when Sultan Hussein and the Temenggung reject Raffles' offer to educate their sons in India, and the poor example this sets their subjects (Isa, 1819 103).

Abdullah concludes his reflections on the weakness of Malay society by longing for "a Malay leader who could lead them out of this wretchedness, someone who was clever and learned, who was hungry for knowledge, someone who was calm, critical and far-sighted, someone to show them the way" (Isa, 1819 212). On the basis of these reflections, we can add to these general qualities the further attributes of a concern for public well-being, strong communal and inter-communal negotiating skills, good planning, the ability to attract and maintain the loyalty of his/her followers, an interest in commerce and the higher levels of administration, as well as a spirituality directed towards both this world and the next.

An alternative reading of Abdullah's second and third points is possible. The implicit demand of Abdullah's reflections is that all members of the Malay community need to rethink their understanding of Islam and that all should

¹² As happens in *Memeluk Gerhana*: see *A Song of the Wind* (220-34). In the "Note to the Reader" to *Intercession* (162-66), Isa also comments on the problems for Islam caused by being bound to the past and failing to adapt to the contemporary world. He points out that one of these possibilities is an inclination towards terrorism – the way of Wak Cantuk. Cantuk is ultimately, then, not so much Habib Nuh's opposite as his shadow.

foster a strong social morality and resilience. The problems require both a new leadership and a new citizenry as well.

The original Malay title of *1819* is *Duka Tuan Bertakhta*, Sadly You Rule. This is a quotation from the poem “Nisan,” Tombstone, by the Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar (1922-1949):

*Bukan kematian benar menusuk kalbu
Keridlaanmu menerima segala tiba.
Tak kutahu setinggi itu atas debu
Dan duka maha tuan bertakhta.*

(It's not your death that breaks my heart
But how ready you were to welcome it.
I never knew how high above dust
and sorrow you sat enthroned.
Trans. Burton Raffel 3)

The interactions of Raffles, Farquhar, Crawford and Bonham, the Temenggung and the Sultan, Habib Nuh and Wan Cantuk, beginning in 1819 and continuing to the present day, are all part of the ongoing tragedy of Singapore and its Malay community. “So, he finally comes,” Wan Cantuk says of Habib Nuh when he finally arrives in Singapore (apparently walking on the water!) (Isa, *1819* 39). Unfortunately, no one comes who can save the Malay community. All of the leaders fail because the social environment of which they are part is barren ground. A new community must first form itself for change to be successful. *1819* has the potential to encourage the development of a “New Singapore Malay,” unlike any of these great historical figures, who have only ruled over the passive suffering and sorrow of their peoples. Nuraman, Wak Cantuk’s leading *silat* student, Marmah, Wan Cantuk’s adopted daughter, and the boys Ramli, Sudin and Ajis, may not be such minor characters as we might first have imagined. Potentially they represent the youthful good-heartedness of a democratic Malay Singaporean society.

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