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Revisiting the History of Early Settlements in Pulau Pinang: The Contributions and Legacies of Rawa People

Suhaila binti Abdullah*
Fauziah binti Fathil**

Abstract: It is common that the history of Pulau Pinang is often affiliated with the British as pioneers even among Malaysians, almost to the point of no return. This is despite the fact that there have been Malay groups of both local and regional origins who have made Pulau Pinang their homeland long before the coming of the British. Of the second group, Rawa people from West Sumatra are strangers neither to Pulau Pinang Island nor the mainland area that formed part of the northern state i.e. Seberang Perai. Adopting a content analysis approach via library research and qualitative methods, plus interviews involving the Rawa people of the state, the paper aims to highlight the often-dismissed fact that the Rawa people along with some other Sumatran migrant groups have contributed to the early development of Pulau Pinang. Only recently that several studies come to prove the existence of Malay settlements on the Island prior to its so-called foundation by a British explorer representing the British East India Company, Francis Light in 1786. This paper is to provide further proof in that direction as the early Malay settlers deserved acknowledgment for the contributions made and recognition for the legacies left behind. Apart from assessing various reasons for the Rawa migration and their early areas of settlements, more importantly, the paper demonstrates that the Rawa migrants throughout their long years of existence in the state have contributed to the socio-economic and political developments of Pulau Pinang.

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Keywords: Rawa, Pulau Pinang, early settlement, contributions, legacies

Abstrak: Umum memaklumi bahawa sejarah Pulau Pinang sering berafiliasi dengan British sebagai perintis bahkan dalam kalangan rakyat Malaysia sendiri, pemahaman sebegini hampir tidak dapat ditukar. Pada hakikatnya, terdapat kumpulan masyarakat Melayu tempatan yang menjadikan Pulau Pinang sebagai tanah air mereka jauh sebelum kedatangan Inggeris. Sementara itu, kumpulan kedua masyarakat Melayu iaitu orang Rawa yang berasal dari Sumatera Barat bukanlah orang asing di Pulau Pinang atau di utara tanah besar iaitu Seberang Perai. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan analisis kandungan menerusi penyelidikan perpustakaan dan kaedah kualitatif, berserta kaedah temubual yang melibatkan orang Rawa di negeri ini, artikel ini cuba mengetengahkan fakta yang sering diabaikan, iaitu bahawa orang Rawa bersama beberapa kumpulan pendatang Sumatera lain telah turut sama menyumbang kepada pembangunan awal Pulau Pinang. Hanya mutakhir ini, terdapat beberapa kajian yang membuktikan kewujudan penempatan orang Melayu di Pulau Pinang sebelum penubuhannya oleh penjelajah Inggeris yang mewakili Syarikat Hindia Timur Inggeris, Francis Light pada tahun 1786. Justeru, artikel ini cuba memberikan bukti lanjut bagi mengukuhkan hujah bahawa peneroka awal Melayu wajar mendapat penghargaan atas sumbangan yang diberikan dan pengiktirafan untuk warisan yang ditinggalkan. Selain daripada menilai pelbagai alasan berkaitan migrasi Rawa dan kawasan penempatan awal mereka, yang lebih penting, artikel ini membuktikan bahawa pendatang Rawa yang telah sekian tahun berada di negeri ini telah memberikan sumbangan besar kepada perkembangan sosio-ekonomi dan politik Pulau Pinang.

Kata kunci: Rawa, Pulau Pinang, penempatan awal, sumbangan, warisan

Introduction

The ‘Rawa’ or ‘Rao’ is a Malay ethnic group that originated from an area called Rao, a district in Pasaman, West Sumatra, Indonesia (previously known as Rao Mapat Tunggul). Due to historical affinity between Rao and Minangkabau (centered at Pagarruyung) where the former was made to be part of the latter by Dutch colonizers in 16th century CE (Drakard, 1999), it is not surprising that to some people, the Rawas or people of Rao are part of the larger Minang ethnic group, i.e. the people of Minangkabau. The ethnicity of Rawa is, in fact, less known in Indonesia as it is viewed to be synonymous with the Minang group although, in some aspects of their language, customs, and traditions, they differ (Sanusi & Pa, 2010).

Meanwhile, the term 'Rawa' carries a more distinct meaning in the Malay Peninsula referring to a particular ethnic group whose descendants migrated from Rao in West Sumatra. The integration process in Indonesia explains the amalgamation of the Rawas into the larger Minang group, yet in the Malay Peninsula, according to one view (Bungo, 2012), the ethnic name 'Rawa' is preserved due to the tendency among the migrants to remind themselves of their homeland and identity.

While the Rawa people are known to have migrated to and settled in particularly west coast states such as Pulau Pinang, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Melaka, it is worth mentioning that the term 'Rawa' is believed to have first become prevalent in the Malay states due to its affiliation with a renowned figure in Pulau Pinang namely, Haji Abdullah Nordin al-Rawi. A migrant from Rao, Abdullah Nordin was famously known as the owner of United Press, an established printing and publishing company in the first half of the 20th century Pulau Pinang (Abdullah, 2007; Harun, 2005), through which the dissemination of knowledge particularly of religious nature to the public took effect. It is possible that the fact that his direct descendant, Haji Yusof Rawa made a name for himself particularly during the 1960s until the 1980s as a respected politician and religious figure, also caused the term 'Rawa' to stand out and be known even more among the people of this country.

This paper aims to trace the migration of the Sumatran people, particularly Rawas to Pulau Pinang, against the existing theories pertaining to the formation of early settlements and their contributions to the development of the state. Given the view that the migration of Sumatran people to the Malay Peninsula had occurred long before the arrival of Western colonial powers, possibly as early as 5th century CE (Bungo, 2012; Omar, 2005), not to mention the special connection between Pulau Pinang and Sumatran Island and other feasible reasons, the history of the state is, therefore worthy to re-look into.

Literature Review

The study of the Rawa community in the contemporary literature on Malaysian history is generally still quite scarce. While there have been some studies on the Rawa people, particularly in recent years, the number is still very few and lacks in-depth investigation or detailed information. The two most relevant pieces of literature are the edited

work of Lubis, Saludin & Samat (2009) and that of Ismail & Samat (2013) which provide accounts on the Rawa community in some Malay states such as Perak, Selangor, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Pulau Pinang, Melaka and Kelantan, the history of their migration, settlements and some contributions. Yet, as the works are meant to cover the history of the community across the various states, detailed accounts on the Rawas of Pulau Pinang are limited and very few. There is also a work by Manaf (2009) specifically on the relation between the Rawa people and Pagarruyung, their migration to the Malay Peninsula, and settlements, yet the focus is mainly on the Rawa people of Pahang. Another relevant work is by Ismail (2013) on leading Rawa figures and their contributions in various spheres, yet the scope is mainly of 19th Malaya and 20th century Malaysia. This paper, on the other hand, aims to trace the history of the Rawa people in Pulau Pinang well before the 19th century until the 20th century. There is an autobiography of a prominent Rawa figure of Pulau Pinang namely, Haji Yusof Rawa was written by Rawa (2001) which also provides some information on the background of the community in the state, yet as to be expected, the work mainly deals with the life and family of the individual understudy.

Several works by Indonesian writers are also worthy of note, such as those written by Jorajo (2009) and those by Undri (2009 & 2010). Nevertheless, as intended by the authors, the studies are more concerned with the general history of the Rawa people, namely their roots and origin, and socio-cultural traditions with limited information on their migratory movements. There are hardly any detailed accounts on the Rawa community in Pulau Pinang.

A few remarks should also be made here pertaining to the issue of the foundation and early settlements of Pulau Pinang. Different views can be found ranging from the British role i.e. Francis Light as the founder of the Island, ancient Chinese travelers, and traders as the first to discover the island, and local people as well as migrating communities from nearby islands particularly Sumatra as early settlers long before the coming of foreign powers. Projecting a Euro-centric view, Mills & Blagden (1925) claim that Pulau Pinang Island was almost uninhabited prior to the coming of the British except for a few Malays, and this goes in contrary to the view of Merican (2015) who maintains that the local people and Sumatran migrants have been living in some parts of the Island, forming small villages like Batu Uban, well before the arrival of

the British colonizers. Of the same view is Adnan (2012) who asserts that when the British first came on August 17, 1786, there had already been few Malay settlements on the Island. The place where the British landed, known as Georgetown today (previously known among the locals as Tanjung Penaga) had only a small Malay settlement. Larger Malay settlements, however, were in Jelutong and Batu Uban to the south of Georgetown. Navigating in the middle is Broeze (2010) who maintains that upon the arrival of the British, the island was sparsely populated, yet, providing no further information regarding the people who were residing there. In the meantime, Ludher (2015) dwells on one of the existing claims that Pulau Pinang was discovered by a famous Chinese admiral, Zheng He during his visit to Southeast Asia in the 15th century, yet falls short of necessary details as to whether this led to the establishment of early Chinese settlements.

Results and Discussions

Rawa Migration to Pulau Pinang

The coming of Western powers to the Malay world was primarily driven by economic motives and to a limited extent military or security reasons, as in the case of the British who decided to have Pulau Pinang as an economic and military base in 1786. Used to be part of the Kedah state, the Island of Pulau Pinang was leased to Francis Light, a representative of the British East India Company by Sultan Abdullah Mukarram Shah. Later, an adjacent area on the mainland known in present-day as Seberang Perai (previously called Province Wellesley) was handed over to the East India Company following a treaty with Sultan Dhiauddin Mukarram Shah II in 1800.

Unlike the British, the Rawa migration to the Malay Peninsula in general, inclusive of Pulau Pinang, involved all-encompassing reasons. Given the similarities among different Malay ethnic groups i.e. in terms of the natural landscape of their places of origin, their past histories, culture, language, and religion, migration to other parts of the Malay Archipelago is no more than a natural process (Wiharyanto, 2005). It has been a long-established tradition among the people of the region out of necessities or various socio-economic and political reasons, to travel and eventually settle in certain parts of the Malay lands or islands.

Additionally, among the Rawa people, the migrating practice is second only to their nature as it has been part of their culture and tradition

since ancient times. Known as '*adat merantau*', the practice is widely practiced by the people (adult males) of West Sumatra or Minangkabau region initially in pursuit of knowledge and life experience, a quest for new economic opportunities, and due to religious motives. Nevertheless, following the occurrence of religious and political conflicts in West Sumatra, migration is also meant to escape persecution and save lives. Murad (1980) and Hadi (1981) maintained that due to the widespread practice of the tradition, it has become an institutionalized norm among the people of West Sumatra.

Apart from the *adat merantau*, as with other migrating communities who came to the Malay Peninsula, the migration of the Rawa people to Pulau Pinang was also motivated by other factors. The need to search for a better socio-economic life is one common reason that prompted farmers and peasants from the Rao region to migrate to the Malay states as early as the 5th century CE. Such migration continued in the subsequent centuries as coastal ports on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula grew in importance (Lubis & Sanusi, 2009) resulting primarily from the flourishing trade between East (China) and West (India) (Hussin, 2007b). By the 15th century CE, Malacca stood out as one of the most prosperous ports in the Malay world and this must surely have a weight on the choice made by the Rawa people to migrate to the Peninsula. This was substantiated by Western travelers such as Tome Pires and Godinho de Eredia who, in their journey to different parts of the Malay world, noted that the migration of Sumatran people to the Malay Peninsula occurred since the early 16th century onwards (Andaya, 2008; Naim, 1979).

By the 17th and 18th centuries, gold and tin mining industries in the Malay states started to take off and this further contributed to the Rawa migration (Fathil, Sulong & Manaf, 2018; Undri, 2009). It is worth stating here that the Rawa people prior to the development of those industries in the Malay Peninsula had long been involved in similar mining activities (gold and tin) in Sumatra. Hence, given their experience and the prospects of uplifting their economic state, it is only natural that some Rawas opted to migrate to Pulau Pinang from where they then continued their journey to the tin and gold-producing states such as Perak, Selangor, Pahang, and so forth. Of these migrants, some could have decided to settle in Pulau Pinang for good. This scenario was in line with the accounts by some Arab traders who, upon their arrival in

Pulau Pinang at the end of the 18th century, remarked that migrants from Sumatra had already established settlements there (Bajunid, 1978).

Additionally, religious motives and the Rawa migration are inter-linked following particularly the rise of Melaka as the center of Islamic da'wah in the 15th century and the rise of Islamic reformist movements in the Malay world in the later centuries. Consequently, not only did the Sumatrans including the Rawa people travel to the Malay Peninsula to learn and teach Islam; but to transit there for a while before continuing their journey to the holy land for hajj (Fathil, Sulong & Manaf, 2018) or to the Middle East in order to pursue religious studies (Bungo, 2012). Apart from Melaka, Pulau Pinang used to be a very well known transit center for hajj pilgrims not only among the local people of the Peninsula but also those from Sumatra.

Finally, the Rawa migration to the Malay Peninsula was prompted by political reasons, i.e. the outbreak of the Padri War (1803-1837) in West Sumatra which saw at first the struggle between Muslim clerics (known as Padri) and traditional chiefs and later, between the Padri and Dutch colonizers. Consequently, there was an influx of migrants from the Rao region leaving for the Malay Peninsula, some to escape the harsh religious policies of the Padri group who, during the early stage of the war managed to rule over a large area in West Sumatra, while some to escape the Dutch persecution following the eventual Dutch victory in the war. According to Milner (1978), the migration of the Rawa people occurred mainly around the late 1820s, yet, it is likely that even a larger number fled in the 1830s as a result of the fall of Rao district and Bonjol area, the last Padri strongholds to the Dutch in 1832 and 1837 respectively. Fearing for their lives, Burgst (1827) noted that the Rawa people had left their villages idle two years before the Dutch arrival, thus indicating the great impact of the war on the Rawas that it served as one main reason for their migration to the Malay Peninsula including Pulau Pinang.

Also noteworthy is that, unlike the earlier migrations which mainly involved Rawa laymen, farmers, peasants, traders, and miners, the 19th century Rawa war refugees were mostly of royal blood, comprising Muslim clerics, scholars, warriors, commanders, and so on (Sanusi & Pa, 2010; Rajab, 1976). This fact by itself carries some importance in that the Rawa community now having all the various talents within its

ranks could actively involve and contribute even more to the socio-economic and political developments in the Malay Peninsula in general and Pulau Pinang in particular.

Early Rawa Settlements in Pulau Pinang

As mentioned earlier, there are different views regarding the early settlements in Pulau Pinang state, in particular with respect to the Island of Pulau Pinang. The prevailing Euro-centric view is that Pulau Pinang Island began to attract people only after the coming of Francis Light and that the Island was practically unpopulated prior to 1786. With regard to the account of the Chinese discovery of Pulau Pinang, there is so far no solid evidence to suggest that the discovery made in the 15th century led to the settlements of Chinese people on the Island. That said, there is nevertheless, a view among some quarters of the present-day population of Pulau Pinang that Chinese migrants have founded Tanjung Tokong, a predominantly Chinese area, several decades before the coming of the British i.e. around the middle of the 18th century (Kim, 2006). The mainland part of the state that is Seberang Perai, however, elicits almost no controversy as to the issue of early settlements since it has been generally accepted that there have been a substantial number of local Malays who populated the area since ancient times.

In the meantime, as far as the Rawa people are concerned, in view of the various reasons for their migration to the Malay Peninsula, as discussed earlier, it is highly probable that the Rawas began to establish their settlements in Pulau Pinang Island at least a few centuries earlier before 1786. Kedah coast for one; was once known for its trading ports since ancient times, hence, naturally, the Island which is facing the Kedah coast might have well become destinations of the local or migrating communities to establish their settlements. Hussin (2007a) somewhat substantiates the view when he maintains that since the early 18th century, there have already been small towns established in Pulau Pinang Island due to trading activities, and the community was multi-ethnic comprising people from Sumatra, Coromandel coasts, China, and Europe. In view of the commonalities between the Sumatran migrants (including the Rawas) and the local Malays in culture, language, and religion, it is to be expected that the former gradually adapted to or blended into the local environment via assimilation process (Yaakub, 2013) and this is what sets the Sumatrans and the Rawas apart from the

other migrating communities of non-Malay origin where the assimilation greatly facilitated their settlement in Pulau Pinang.

The earliest evidence of the early settlements of the people from Sumatra was following the migration of Dato' Keramat, a Muslim cleric from Aceh to Pulau Pinang Island in 1710. He settled down in the area around the banks of Sungai Pinang and upon his death, he was buried at Kampung Dodol cemetery (Sahar, personal communication, May 10, 2019). As a pioneer, a street was named after him, that is, Jalan Dato' Keramat (Stevens, 1929; Merican, 2015).

Of the many parts of Sumatra, Aceh is the closest to the northern Malay Peninsula. Consequently, many Acehnese found their way to Pulau Pinang and due to their relatively big number, a street was named after them, that is, Lebuh Aceh or Acheen Street. For the same reason too, i.e. the close distance between Aceh and northern Malay states, people of other ethnic groups including those from West Sumatra used to travel across the Melaka Straits to Pulau Pinang via Aceh, which served as a major transit point for traders, migrants, refugees, and others departing from the Sumatran Island.

Pertaining to the early settlers from West Sumatra, three siblings who had links with the royal family of Minangkabau had traveled to Pulau Pinang Island prior to the arrival of Francis Light in 1786. They obtained permission from the ruler of Kedah, Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Adilin Muazzam Shah II (r. 1710-1778) to settle in Batu Uban in the early 1730s with their followers. There, they built the earliest mosque in Pulau Pinang in 1734 (Othman, 1990; Merican, 2014). The three siblings were Nakhoda Bayan, Nakhoda Intan (Haji Mohammad Salleh or Raja Nan Intan bin Tuanku Patis or Pateh Nan Sabatang), and Nakhoda Kechil (Nakhoda Ismail). They controlled the coast of Bayan Lepas and Balik Pulau, Gelugor, and Tanjung in Pulau Pinang (Merican, 2015). Other leading figures of the same origin include Tuanku Syed Hussain and Nakhoda Kecil, famously known as successful merchants who were responsible to forge of a close trading connection between Pulau Pinang Island and Aceh in North Sumatra (Hussin, 2007a).

Meanwhile, data compiled by Francis Light from 1786-1794 on incoming and outgoing ships at Pulau Pinang port is also worth mentioning as it contained information regarding the arrival of Malay traders by *perahu* (Malay small boats). Although the data did not reveal

the nationality of the captains or crews of the ships and *perahu*, it is most likely that some of the Malay traders and their crews were from Sumatra, possibly from the Rao region too. This is substantiated by the fact that there had already existed trade relations between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula for centuries that by the 18th century, Pedir and Aceh in North Sumatra were supplying pepper, betel nuts, and other forest products to Pulau Pinang (Hussin, 2007a).

To further demonstrate the close connection between Sumatra and Pulau Pinang, Wells (1993) mentioned that there were trade activities between Siak with Singapore and Pulau Pinang in the late 18th and early 19th century, i.e. from 1791-1821. Among those who came in the 19th century was Haji Muhammad Rashid Talu from Kampong Pinang in the district of Talu, West Sumatra, who reached Pulau Pinang in the 1880s. In 1884, Abu Bakar, the son of Raja Pinayungan Lubis who visited Pulau Pinang from Deli in East Sumatra noticed that there was a colony of Rawa tribe living in Acheen Street or Lebu Acheh (Ismail, 2013).

From the above information, it is arguably safe to say that the early settlements of people from Sumatra in Pulau Pinang Island have taken place well before the 18th century as proven by the existence of some villages inhabited or associated with Rawa people in both the Island and Seberang Perai.

Kampung Rawa, Jelutong

One of the early settlements of the Rawa people in Pulau Pinang is Kampung Rawa, Pulau Pinang. Named after the ethnic group, Kampung Rawa was once a settlement for people coming from Sumatra located on the bank of Sungai Pinang, i.e. in Jelutong, Georgetown. Prior to the coming of the migrants, as testified by a local inhabitant of Rawa descent, it used to be a swamp area and the Rawa migrants built their houses there before the arrival of the British (Ismail bin Mahmud, personal communication, December 28, 2019). Being near the main river, the place was strategic for trade as traders can travel upstream by boats.

At present, however, there are only six families of Rawa origin in Kampung Rawa, Jelutong, Penang, which comprise 30 peoples. Many have migrated to other Malay states due to marriage and employment opportunities, while some returned to their homeland in West Sumatra

to run their own businesses (Ismail, personal communication, December 28, 2019, & Sahar bin Harun, personal communication, May 10, 2019). Intermarriage with local Malays, which resulted in the assimilation of the Rawas further contributed to the weak presence of the Rawa community in Kampung Rawa in particular and Pulau Pinang, state in general. With the passing of time, as confessed by few Rawa descendants, the present-day Rawas in the village consequently could no longer speak Rawa dialect, nor do they practice traditional Rawa customs such as '*adat berjajak*' and '*pantang tanah*'.

Rawas in Lebuh Acheh

In the inner city of Pulau Pinang Island, there was a Malay town along a street known as Lebuh Acheh or Acheen Street. As can be derived from the name, it was after the Acehnese community from north Sumatra who came and built their settlement in the area in the late 18th century. Among these early settlers was Tengku Syed Hussain al-Aidid, a prominent and wealthy merchant of Arab descent who migrated to Pulau Pinang where he set up a new trading base following the creation of a British trading post there, by Francis Light (Lubis, 2009b).

Apart from Acheh, there were other ethnics such as local Malays, Rawas, Mandailings, Minangs, and other Sumatran groups (Rahim, 1994), as well as people from southern Thailand who formed their settlements in the vicinity of Lebuh Acheh. The present-day Rawa descendants who added that there were some Rawa settlements in several other parts of Pulau Pinang namely, around Gelugor and Bayan Baru confirmed this.

At Lebuh Acheh, the Rawas together with the Mandailings, Minangs, and Talus were said to have formed a close-knit community since they were all *anak dagang* (literally means foreign traders) or migrants. The settlements continued to flourish until the late 19th and early 20th centuries particularly as Lebuh Acheh served as the transit center for hajj pilgrims from all over the Malay Archipelago. Due to its popularity, Lebuh Acheh was known as the 'Second Jeddah' where a large number of pilgrims would congregate here while waiting for the ships destined for Makkah (Lubis, 2009b).

Rawa Settlements in Seberang Perai

There are few villages in Seberang Perai named after 'Rawa', i.e. Kampung Permatang Rawa, Penaga in northern Seberang Perai and Kampung Permatang Rawa, Bukit Mertajam, in central part of Seberang Perai. Being predominantly Malay areas, these villages were once believed to be inhabited by the Rawa community from West Sumatra. In addition, there is one area in the southern part of Seberang Perai that also bears the term 'Rawa' namely, Pengkalan Rawa in Nibong Tebal. Through oral history, it was said that the place obtained its name '*pengkalan*' (jetty) following an event where some refugees from Rao district who traveled by sea, landed in the area.

Similarly, Permatang Rawa in Bukit Mertajam was believed to have been populated by the Rawa people from Sumatra in the past. It is now a Malay village surrounded by a large area of paddy fields. During the early 19th century, the place was said to be a swampy area full of bushes and that apart from the Rawas, there were some families from Aceh and Batu Bara, Sumatra, and from Jawa who also resided in the area (Abdul Rahman, personal communication, July 17, 2019). Nowadays, however, there are no clear traces of the Rawa presence in the area. This may be due to the assimilation of the Rawa migrants with the local Malays resulting in the eventual loss of their identity over the course of time. The same experience might have befallen others namely, the people from Aceh, Batu Bara, and Jawa who once resided in the area since they too cannot be traced today.

Meanwhile, although Kampung Permatang Rawa in Penaga also has the term 'Rawa' to its name, there are even less indication of Sumatran people of Rawa descent still living in the area today. Nevertheless, the location of Kampung Permatang Rawa is worthy to contemplate in tracing the origin of the name of the place and its connection with the migrants from Sumatra. Located at the seafront area facing Pulau Pinang Island, migrants or refugees from other parts of the Malay Archipelago including Sumatra who traveled by sea could easily land there. Being close to the sea, the people in the area are mainly involved in fishing activities, while some in paddy planting.

Another supposition on the Rawa connection is based on an oral history where it is revealed that the areas around Kampung Permatang Rawa, including Bakau Tua and Pasir Gebu, housed the people from

Acheh (Faridah, personal communication, April 9, 2020). Although no traces of the existence of the Rawa people is to be found currently in these places, the presence of the Acehnese originating from north Sumatra entails that other ethnic groups from the same Island might have also migrated to the areas. Secondly, given the popularity of Lebu Acheh in nearby Pulau Pinang Island, it is possible that the locals knew various migrant communities from Sumatra who resided in the areas simply as Acehnese. In fact, looking back in history, it is interesting to note that West Sumatra where the Rawa people came from had once been under the tutelage of Acheh. This was during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636) whose dominance stretched from the northern region of Sumatra to Deli (Aru) in the east and Padang in the west part of Sumatra (Hussin, 2007b). This could well explain the generalization made by the local people, calling all migrating Sumatran groups Acehnese.

Compared to the Rawa people in the Island of Pulau Pinang, the existence of the Rawa community in Seberang Perai, despite the term 'Rawa' associated with certain villages, cannot be easily mapped out. This is perhaps partly due to the activities of the Rawa people in Seberang Perai, i.e. mainly as paddy planters and fishermen causing them to appear as mediocre people of no high standing, and partly due to their small number in comparison to the local Malays. On the contrary, the Rawa migrants in Pulau Pinang Island were generally well-to-do traders, businessmen, religious teachers, etc. thus enabling them to acquire eminent positions in the society. Their number too; must have been greater and this is not difficult to understand especially in view of the increasing importance of Pulau Pinang as a trading port in the northern region of the Malay Peninsula. Surely, this attracted not only established and wealthy businessmen and traders, but also many people of various backgrounds from nearby Sumatra.

Contributions and Legacies of Rawa Community

Islamic Da'wah

Not only was Pulau Pinang since the early 19th century known as the transit center for hajj pilgrims, but also as the center of religious education. On the former, Lebu Acheh was renowned as the place where pilgrims assembled prior to their journey to the holy land. From there, they boarded pilgrim vessels to Makkah.

Meanwhile, as the center of religious teaching and learning, Muslims from various backgrounds and places in the Malay Archipelago came to Pulau Pinang in order to study Islam. Some joined learning activities held at Masjid Lebuah Aceh or Lebuah Aceh Mosque in Pulau Pinang Island, while some chose established *pondok* schools in Seberang Perai. The *pondok* schools were also preferred by pilgrims to deepen their religious knowledge, especially that related to hajj rituals. As the pilgrimage season approached, they headed for the Island, gathering at rented houses around the Masjid Lebuah Aceh while waiting for the arrival of the ships bound for Makkah (Fazil, 2014; Lubis, 2009b).

It is worthy to mention here that the Rawa community in the Lebuah Aceh was considered as an elite group alongside the *Jawi Peranakan* (sayyid) and Acehnese. One obvious reason being there existed some figures from Rao who were actively involved in the dissemination of Islam, particularly in Pulau Pinang. Among them include Sheikh Muhammad Murid Rawa (Syahbandarawi), Sheikh Muhammad Shalih Rawa (Saghir, 2007) and Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin al-Azhari al-Falaki (Mustajab, 2003). Yusof Rawa, a 20th-century religious scholar, and politician in his interview, substantiated this in 1998 with Lubis (2009b) that many Rawa people of the past were religious scholars (*alim*) and good businessmen for which reasons, they were highly revered.

Of the three Rawa religious figures mentioned above, Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin al-Azhari al-Falaki was the most outstanding. Having migrated to the Malay Peninsula in 1899, he was well known as both a religious scholar and an astronomer (Mustajab, 2003). Around 1918-1920, he was invited by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, another renowned religious scholar of Arab-Malay descent to fill up the position of a religious teacher at Madrasah al-Mashoor in Pulau Pinang, which he accepted. While his commitment to the cause of Islam must have been the main reason for his acceptance of the offer, yet, it was no coincidence that there were many students of Sumatran origin such as Aceh and Minangkabau studying at the school. Interestingly, the sense of camaraderie can be observed to be present among the migrants from Sumatra. Not only was this demonstrated in the close-knit relations among the Sumatran people of various ethnicities, but also in the way they facilitated one another in the matters of hajj. Sheikh Tahir himself had once served as a *hajj sheikh* and *mutawwif* (hajj pilgrim guide), and as with other hajj sheikh of Rawa origin, he attended particularly

to those who came from Sumatra such as Medan, Minangkabau, Deli, Langkat, Serdang, Batu Bara, Lesahan, and so on (Sarim, 2003).

In disseminating Islamic knowledge, Sheikh Tahir used to sell religious books and produce many writings either in Arabic or Malay language. While preparing ships for the return journey of the pilgrims, for instance, Sheikh Tahir used to load up religious scriptures that he obtained from Makkah on board the ships destined for Pulau Pinang for sale (Sarim, 2003). Meanwhile, as a prolific religious scholar, he wrote religious books such as, *Pati Kiraan pada Menentukan Waktu yang Lima dan Hal Qiblat dengan Logarithma* (1938), *Risalah Penebas Bidaah-bidaah di Kepala Batas* (1953), *Tatimatul al-Irshad al-Khair fi al-ilm al-Faraid* (1952) and *Tazkiratu Muttabii al-Sunnah fiarraddi 'ala' al-qaili bis-sunnati rak'ataini qabla al-Jum'ati* (1953) (Samat, 2009; Sarim, 2003).

Pilgrimage Affairs

Since the early 19th century, Pulau Pinang Island had become a major departure point for hajj pilgrims from southern Thailand, Sumatra, northwestern and northeastern states of the Malay Peninsula until the 1970s. To understand why many pilgrims chose Pulau Pinang as a transit point, the readily available and conducive infrastructure could have become the key factor. And the Island had just that; there was a mosque dated back to the late 18th century that served as an assembly point and Islamic center for the pilgrims. Famously known as Masjid Melayu Lebuah Acheh (Acheen Street Malay Mosque), it was built in 1792 by Tengku Syed Hussain al-Aidid, an Acheh royal from Sumatra who founded a Muslim community village at Lebuah Acheh. Syed Hussain, together with his family and followers had built a mosque, tower, residence, shop houses, Islamic *madrasah* (educational institution), and trading offices in the area. The construction of the mosque was completed in 1808.

For many pilgrims from Sumatra including the Rawas, they came to Pulau Pinang through Medan (Lubis, 2009a, 2009b). Once they reached Pulau Pinang, they would gather mainly around Lebuah Acheh while waiting for ships bound for Makkah. To facilitate the pilgrims, the Rawa people in Pulau Pinang used to be involved as pilgrimage agents or hajj *sheikh*, serving their fellow Sumatrans, especially those coming from the Rao region (Effendi, 1924). The agents were responsible to assist the

pilgrims for instance, in arranging transportation, processing necessary documents, etc. One such individual according to Abdullah (2007), was Sheikh Jamal Rawa, a descendant of the famous religious scholar, Sheikh Muhammad Shalih Rawa (Pa & Sanusi, 2014). According to Rawa (2013) and Sidin (1998), a family member of another leading Rawa figure (Haji Abdullah bin Nordin al-Rawi), Arifin bin Salleh also served as a hajj *sheikh* at Lebu Acheh.

Business and Trade

Based on local oral history, the Rawa community in Kampung Rawa, Pulau Pinang used to involve in the selling of religious books or scriptures written in *Jawi* (Arabic scripts). Due to the low demand on the Island, some of the Rawa villagers were reported to have moved their businesses to Pekan Rabu in Alor Setar, Kedah where there existed a bigger market for such products (Ismail, personal communication, December 28, 2019).

Another field of business that the Rawa people were known for is the printing press. Malay printing press, which began to flourish in the early 20th century, was initially set up by the *Jawi Peranakans* (people of Arab-Malay descent) and Arab migrants. By the 1920s however, the business was taken over by the Rawa people in Lebu Acheh, Dato' Keramat Road, and Jelutong in Pulau Pinang (Lubis, 2009a).

Additionally, there were Rawa people who were involved in the spice business while others owned textile shops and book shops at Lebu Acheh though they lived in Kampung Rawa, Jelutong, or a few other districts in Pulau Pinang Island such as Ayer Itam, Bayan Lepas, and so on. Those who owned bookshops normally sold religious items such as religious books, wooden bookstands for the Quran, framed Arabic calligraphy, stationery, Muslim headgears, etc. (Salma ed., 1990).

Printing and Publication

Undoubtedly, the establishment of United Press and Persama Press had played an important role in the development of Lebu Acheh (Acheen Street) as a 'center' of printing operations in Pulau Pinang. It was the place where several major newspapers and magazines such as *Warta Penang*, *Dewasa*, *Suara Qalam*, *Bahtra*, and *Persahabatan* were published. Similarly, Lebu Acheh was known for the many famous writers there with different writing techniques and thoughts, including those who had

gained experience in Sumatra, Singapore, and the Middle East. With all that going on at Lebu Acheh, it is not an exaggeration to say that the emergence of the printing companies had led to the development of printing and publication industries in 20th century Pulau Pinang as well as the urbanization of Georgetown area as various infrastructures were set up in the area (Sidin, 1998).

Founded by a Rawa businessman, Haji Sulaiman al-Rawi in 1930, Persama Press was one of the famous printing companies at that time. Starting from 1934, the company that was located at no. 83, Acheen Street, Pulau Pinang was managed by his descendant, Haji Muhammad Idrus Sulaiman al-Rawi (Harun, 2005; Ishak, 1998). Another printing company owned by a Rawa individual was United Press. Haji Abdullah bin Nordin al-Rawi was the owner of the company that was initially founded by Dabab bin Haji Muhammad Salleh in 1928 along Dato' Keramat Street, Pulau Pinang. According to Mujahid Yusof Rawa, apart from the printing company, his father, Haji Yusof Rawa, and his grandfather, Haji Abdullah bin Nordin al-Rawi, had set up a company that published religious books near Masjid Lebu Acheh after their arrival at Pulau Pinang from Rao. The business premise also functioned as a center for pilgrims to obtain hajj reference books and other necessities, as well as a focal point for hajj agents of Rawa origin from Makkah such as Sheikh Amin Rawa and Sheikh Ahmad Lampong (Rawa, 2013; Sidin, 1998).

Politics

One of the notable politicians of Rawa descent was Tun Hamdan, a descendant of Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin al-Azhari al-Falaki. Born in Pulau Pinang in the year 1921, he used to serve as the Director of Education at the Ministry of Education Malaysia. He then became the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia before being appointed as Tuan Yang Dipertua Negeri Pulau Pinang or the State's head of state in May 1989 (Long, 1999, 2001; Lubis & Sanusi, 2009).

Another famous figure was Haji Yusof Rawa (Yusof bin Haji Abdullah), the son of Haji Abdullah bin Nordin al-Rawi. He was born in 1922 at Lebu Acheh, Pulau Pinang. His father was a trader who traveled from Sumatra to trade Al-Quran, Islamic religious scriptures, etc. (Rawa, 2001). Having lived and studied in Makkah for 12 years (Lubis & Sanusi, 2009), Yusof Rawa was known as a religious scholar

and had been actively involved in politics especially from the late 1960s until the 1980s. As a scholar, he published a magazine called *Al-Islah* and was awarded the *Tokoh Maal Hijrah* Pulau Pinang in 1992. As for his involvement in politics, he was once the president of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS); and used to serve as a member of the national parliament and cabinet, as well as the country's ambassador to a few countries in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Generally, the Rawa people from West Sumatra had migrated and established their settlements in Pulau Pinang long before the arrival of the British in the late 18th century. Traces of their settlements can be found in Pulau Pinang such as Kampung Rawa, Jelutong, Gelugor, Bayan Baru, Lebu Acheh, and few areas in Seberang Perai such as Permatang Rawa, Penaga and Permatang Rawa, Bukit Mertajam. Throughout their long history of existence in the state of Pulau Pinang, the Rawa people had contributed to various socio-economic and political developments of Pulau Pinang Island as well as Seberang Perai. All in all, the presence of Rawa people in Pulau Pinang state had undeniably brought about changes and positive developments, hence, enriching the history of Pulau Pinang.

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