The Naning War, 1831-1832: Colonial Authority and Malay Resistance in the Early Period of British Expansion

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The Naning War, long dismissed by historians as a 'little war', was part of a more expansive drama in the history of the Malay world. The war expressed traditional modes of power-broking and opposition, as well as anticipated later political developments in Malaya. From the wider perspective of imperial history, this important but neglected episode of British expansion in the East merits a modern treatment. This article seeks to rectify deficiencies of existing histories of the Naning War by exploring the nature of indirect rule and formal control from the metropolis, and authority and conflict at the 'periphery'. It sets the war both within the cultural context of Malay warfare, and within the regional context of indigenous resistance and Islamic protest against British incursions.

Introduction

A mammoth historiography concentrates on 'official' British intervention in the Malay states after 1874. Little wonder, then, that the Naning War of 1831-32 has been written off as an 'egregious blunder', a 'petty but costly war', a 'ludicrous campaign'. Later intervention, however, can only be understood against the backdrop of such earlier episodes. With British incursions into the archipelago enabling the territorial acquisition of Penang (1786), Bencoolen and Java (1811), Singapore (1819) and Malacca (1824), there were bound to be 'ripple effects'—notwithstanding the East India Company's policy of 'non-intervention'. The Company aimed to minimize conflict as...
far as possible. Except for the Javanese ‘interregnum’, its concern lay with trading entrepots, not the hinterland. But this had been contested by visionaries of empire like Stamford Raffles and John Crawfurd, who pressed for reformation of native political economy and society. In crisis, the Company insisted on an inflexible interpretation of their own rights and sovereignties in the periphery. British influence and colonial authority therefore spread in ever-increasing circles, as local polities peripheral to these centres of British control interacted with the alien commercial and administrative systems of the Company, reacted to them, and got ‘counter-acted’ in the process. Naning was one such ‘peripheral’ area. To examine the circumstances surrounding the outbreak of war there, is to probe more deeply into the nature of colonial authority and resistance in the Malayan and regional milieux, forge links with contemporary conflicts of the wider colonial experience and enter into current debates on colonial wars. By doing so, new light can be shed on the making of ‘British Malaya’, still over forty years in the future.

In an age of small-state formation in the Malay peninsula, Naning presented the classic case of a local ruler of middling rank staking his claim to his particular plot of the political field. The scramble for resources amid a state of flux and his jostling for power alongside other chiefs and petty raja inevitably attracted British concern from the nearby Straits Settlements. It was also an age of British expansion on a global scale. With their desire to consolidate a local fiscal base and their tendency to regard Malay rulers as mere officials rather than kings, the impulses of enlightened self-interest and the incoming tide of local settlers played a pivotal role in placing the Company on a war footing in Naning. The need and opportunity to impose the British rule of law and order over native despotism, with an eye to the riches of the interior, would push the problem of protection and paramountcy into higher gear:

It is impossible that Malacca can long remain in this state. It must follow the routine of our Indian conquests, and strengthen its frontier by an accession of territory... it is no longer Nanning, but the Malay Peninsula, that is to be subdued.

3 Seminal work by Khoo Kay Kim, e.g. The Western Malay States, 1850–1873 (London, 1972), and that of other historians of British Malaya warrants reconsideration in the light of the dynamics of expansion advanced in this article.
4 Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register (SCCR), 1 December 1831.
The ultimate clash would be between two civilizations undergoing transformation, over juridical and cultural differences, in the competition for land, labour, capital and commerce.

A Brief Narrative of the War

Nanping was a small inland state of 240 square miles situated ten miles north of Malacca town. By the census of 1829, the population stood at 4,875, of whom only a few hundred were actually fighting-fit. Some of the older works portray Nanping as 'a poor unprofitable possession, for the most part covered with jungle' yielding meagre quantities of padi, timber, tin and other Straits produce (tropical fruits, gambier, rattan).

Between August 1831 and July 1832, however, the English East India Company was at war with Nanping. The costs of war amounted to nine months of campaigning, 1,200 Indian troops, and a phenomenal expenditure of £100,000 to secure a paltry annual revenue of $100. Yet this was neither the first nor the last time that empire-builders were motivated by 'myth'. The war in Nanping was fought not so much over what the district was actually worth, as over its projected value: matters concerning land revenue and jurisdiction were bound up with issues such as agricultural and commercial potential and access to its labour.

The ultimate cause of the conflict was the peculiar status of Nanping. In the Company's eyes it was a vassal territory, whose ruler owed his appointment and authority to them. Historically and technically, they found support for this view in the Dutch treaty of 1641 and the British one of 1801. But in the eyes of Minangkabau and Malay inhabitants of Nanping, their ruler—with his four heads of clans (ampat suku)—was de facto ruler of the territory in all general aspects of internal government. He was invested with the sacrosanctity (kedaulatan) of Malay kingship, and he belonged to a family that had supplied rulers to Nanping for over a century.

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7 SCCR, 11 Aug. 1831.
A major flash-point had been the variation over the terms of the arrangement with the Dutch, in turn confirmed by the British. The ruler of Nanning—known by the traditional title Penghulu Raja Merah—agreed to pay a yearly tenth on his rice crops for due recognition of his title, though the British continued the practice of accepting instead a token tribute of rice and fowls. In 1807, however, in consideration of his role as a mere functionary of the Company, they stripped the penghulu of his right to inflict the death penalty and required him to send capital cases to Malacca for trial.

When the British occupied Malacca permanently by the terms of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty (1824), they were eager to take the treaties made in the past by the Netherlands and Britain at face value, assuming that Nanning must be an integral part of Malacca. By 1827 the Company was losing money over Malacca and wished the penghulu, Dol Syed, to pay his tithe on the total crop as estimated by some legal fiction churned up by William Lewis, deputy Resident Councillor of Malacca, and Robert Fullerton, Governor of the Straits Settlements. Fullerton resolved to extend to Nanning the Malacca land system, the collection of the tenth, and the jurisdiction of the court of judicature. In March 1827 he sent Lewis to Nanning to investigate and report on the situation. Impressed by what he mistakenly saw as Nanning's rich economic potential and appalled at the penghulu's exactions, Lewis urged Fullerton to exercise what he regarded as the Company's full rights in Nanning.9

The arguments for intervention were, however, hotly disputed by members of the Penang Council. Samuel Garling, Resident Councillor of Malacca, and John Anderson, then Secretary to the Penang Government, both doubted whether Nanning was part of Malacca territory at all.10 Overruling their objections, Fullerton delegated Lewis to supervise arrangements to impose the tenth at Nanning and make Dol Syed and his chiefs salaried revenue and police officials of the Company.11

Dol Syed resisted the claim. Widely revered by his own people for possessing supernatural abilities, he resented the diminution of his judicial authority perhaps even more than the loss of revenue.12 In

9 SSR, A 33, 13 March 1827; SSR, O 3, 24 July 1828.
10 SSR, A 53, 7 March 1827; SSR, A 63: Resident Councillor minutes, 26 Feb. 1829.
11 SSR, A 57: Penang Council minutes, 3 Nov. 1828; SSR, I 32: Penang Council to Resident Councillor, Malacca, 1 Nov. 1828.
December 1828 he flouted Straits jurisdiction by passing sentence in a murder case instead of referring it to Malacca. On two occasions, he was summoned to Malacca to answer for his actions; he twice refused. When Fullerton, his patience apparently exhausted, gathered a force to march against Naning and then revoked his orders, Dol Syed responded by openly seizing produce from an orchard (dusun) located along the Malacca–Naning border. Many people in Malacca saw this as a deliberate trial of the Company’s strength.\(^{13}\)

With the abolition of the Penang presidency in 1830, the court was closed and the owner of the land could obtain no redress.

Meanwhile the Bengal Government approved Fullerton’s recommendation that Naning was to be regarded as a vassal of the Company and therefore liable to pay the tenth. They proposed, however, that war should be avoided. When the new Governor, Robert Ibbetson, indicated that this latest act of defiance would encourage the natives of Malacca not to pay the tithe, and when he assured them that Naning would offer no resistance, they left further action to his discretion.\(^{14}\) A ‘petit Peninsular Campaign’ was launched against the penghulu (5–28 August 1831), the raison d’être of which was not only to punish the Panghooloo of Naning for his resistance, but to intimidate the other petty chiefs subject to Malacca, who it is supposed being weak in themselves, secretly urge on and assist the Naning hero in his opposition.\(^{15}\)

Unfortunately, after the Malays repelled two battalions of Company troops, a larger force had to be deployed. The war was pursued more cautiously from late January to mid-June 1832. During this period, an expensive road had to be built to reach the Malay stronghold of Taboh Naning, Dol Syed’s capital, and the cost of the whole campaign sky-rocketed.

The war was protracted because Naning was the epicentre of a wider power struggle in the interior. In 1758, the Dutch had signed a treaty with Johor placing the inland states of Sungei Ujong, Rembau, Johol and Naning under Dutch protection. A Minangkabau prince from Sumatra was invited to come and preside as Yang di-pertuan Besar (‘He who is made lord’) over the penghulus of the four territories, though the rulers continued to actually administer and

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 161.
\(^{15}\) SCCR, 11 Aug. 1831.
dispense justice in their own domains. Originally the Yang di-pertuan Besar passed through Malacca to be endorsed by the Dutch before venturing inland to take up office, but this practice lapsed during the British wartime occupation of Malacca. In both 1813 and 1828, the Yang di-pertuan Besar-elect proceeded straight to the interior, and the inland states became independent of British influence. By 1831 the office of Yang di-pertuan Besar was contested. When the new candidate, Raja Labu, came from Sumatra with the usual credentials in 1828, he was backed by the Dato Kiana, chief of Sungei Ujong and most senior of the four undang-undang ('lawgivers'), but opposed by Raja Ali of Rembau, an ambitious half-Bugis nephew of Sultan Ibrahim, ruler of the predominantly Bugis state of Selangor. Ali had exploited family quarrels to seize power in Rembau and now felt threatened by the election of Labu, whose wife was Ali's aunt and one of his fiercest foes. Labu was driven to seek political asylum at Malacca, where he was living in 1831 under the title Yang di-pertuan Besar of Sri Menanti.

While the Company prepared for war, Dol Syed convinced Ali that the British intended, after subduing Naning, to install Labu as Yang di-pertuan Besar and to annex Rembau. Ali despatched men to aid Naning, under the command of his son-in-law Syed Sabban, a half-Arab adventurer with independent political aspirations. Ali's decision encouraged others to rally around Naning, notably some of the minor chiefs of Muar. The chiefs' distrust of the British was aggravated by the arrival in Malacca (June 1831) of the disgruntled ex-raja of Kedah, now forcibly transferred from Penang.

Finally, however, largely by negotiating secretly with Naning's key ally, Rembau, the British were able to undermine and defeat Dol Syed. Naning was thereafter formally incorporated into Malacca territory and redefined administratively. In October 1832 Ibbetson travelled to Naning, nominating fifteen penghulus to take charge of the newly-created parishes (mukims). The unique ancient offices of

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Penghulu Raja Merah of all Naning and the ampat suku were abolished, while the new understanding of the designation penghulu was deliberately reduced to 'district revenue and police officer'. After his surrender in 1834, Dol Syed was pensioned off. His heirs were tacitly permitted to use the venerable title Sri Raja Merah, even though it was not until long afterwards that the office received the adequate stipend and legal sanction of the British Government. For years, the cost of governing Naning exceeded the revenue which the Company derived from it. Despite this, the exactions of the penghulu and ampat suku were lifted and it was said that the peasants could make more profit even if little of this reached Malacca's coffers. J. R. Logan, visiting Naning fifteen years after the war, found the district fairly prosperous, its thriving villages lined with rows of Chinese shophouses in places that had been the centre of operations during the conflict. He found the inhabitants so friendly and deferential that it was almost inconceivable that the Company could have gone to war with such folk. The ebb and flow, however, of war and resistance triggered in this period continued unabated. Although Naning's Malay neighbours remained autonomous in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, as with Rembau, they submitted to British protection within the next sixty years out of both opportunity and necessity.

**Sovereignty and Siblingship**

So far, accounts of the war have depicted the Naning episode merely as a British bureaucratic blunder against Malay intransigence. This itself suggests that new questions must be asked about the nature of British imperialism and Malay society. Malay resistance must be placed within the framework of a general crisis of the Malay world. Guided by these new points of light, the Naning War emerges as a much more fundamental and far-reaching conflict between assertive new ideas of colonial sovereignty and notions of siblingship which lay at the heart of Malay politics in this period.

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In the Naning War, we hear echoes of current debates on the making of the second British Empire (c. 1780–1830). The Empire’s strong metropolitan core and ‘sinews of power’ at the periphery emerged from the maelstrom of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, driven by the engines of trade, industry and finance, legitimated by a more domineering ideology of transcendent law and sovereignty. Nowhere was this more clearly seen than in Asia, where empire was largely created by the ‘military despotism’ that was the English East India Company. The Company was a civilian authority consisting of a sophisticated administrative apparatus, pretentious agents-on-the-spot and assertive armies. Often, the plethora of problems which the Company’s state faced on the ground were compounded by dilemmas, distances and delays. The need to finance its career of aggrandisement induced a self-perpetuating ‘military-fiscalism’.22

It is, of course, imperative to determine the extent to which the self-confident imperialism of this era of ‘Meridian’—and its diminuendo after 1820—applied in the instance of Naning. The nature of state and colonial authority in the 1820s–40s is at present undergoing careful re-evaluation. Bayly points out that the received view of an Age of Reform was too simplistic:

Viewed in the longer term ... the 1830s and 1840s still seem to represent a watershed in the style of government both in the colonies and Britain, though it would be naive to see this simply as a watershed between the ancien regime and liberalism.

Looking further afield, territorial expansion continued apace even when official pronouncements most sharply contradicted it, as after Wellesley’s recall and during Bentinck’s reforming administration in India (1828–35). When liberalism and caution were supposed to have been the order of the day, the conditions for the annexation of Sindh and the Punjab were in gestation. The first Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26) commenced even when fighting against the Marathas and the Gurkhas was hardly over. So also British ambitions in Malaya were renewed in 1826.23


23 Bayly, Imperial Meridian, pp. 235–47.
Rather than being an indeterminate 'gap', however, between the empire-building of 1780-1830 and the high watermark of Victorian imperialism, several clear themes do emerge in the 1820s-30s. It makes good sense to read the late 1820s as the continuation of a peculiar brand of Tory imperialism, albeit strongly infused with economic utilitarianism and liberal-evangelical humanitarianism, which in turn appeared to foreshadow the imperial effulgence of the later nineteenth century. Empire-building occurred in the context of financial crisis and the stabilizing of external and internal frontiers. The experience of global imperialism coupled with the changing temper of indigenous resistance made even more explicit the absolutist concept of sovereignty that had always been implicit in British ideas and institutions.

By the 1830s new, liberal, expansive ideas were definitely crystallizing, informing a blueprint for reshaping much of the world. The foremost expression of this was Palmerstonian policy and 'gunboat diplomacy', part of a larger 'cosmoplastic' grand design. Even if this concept of a grand design appears controversial, it is undeniable that Palmerston acquired a consuming interest in foreign affairs from 1827-28, when he first held cabinet rank, and served as Foreign Secretary in Earl Grey's administration at a time of Whig ascendancy. A series of dramatic events, including the outbreak of the Turco-Egyptian war in 1831 in which Russia realigned herself with the Ottoman Empire, jolted Palmerston into rethinking the status of Asia in the international system. Around this time, too, many Britons held that their Empire would be imperilled without vigorous assertion of British power and influence in Asia. With the politicians in London and agents in Asia tending to interpret events within the same broad speculative framework, it was only to be expected that the more dynamic would tackle problems confronting them in appropriately aggressive style.

The roots of such aggressive reformism were apparent in Raffles' administration in Java and the founding of Singapore. In the 1830s and beyond, the problem of protection and paramountcy moved into higher gear as the British flexed their muscles elsewhere—the judicious strategical annexations of the Riau-Johor Kingdom, the cul-

26 Raffles was one of the first empire-builders to promote a regenerative programme using Benthamite ideas; see J. Bastin, The Native Policies of Sir Stamford Raffles in Sumatra and Java (Oxford, 1957).
tural centre of the Malay world (1820s-30s), the Falklands (1833), Aden (1839), Hong Kong (1842), then the constant expansion of British settlers and merchants (and slightly later advent of British authority) into New Zealand, British Columbia, Lagos, Queensland, Labuan and large parts of India between the 1840s and 1860s. The British who took over in Java in 1811 were infected with arrogance and anger against 'native tyranny', in the same vein as Lord Welles-ley in India after 1798. Crawfurd, for example, often appeared to snub Javanese rulers.\(^{27}\) Subsequently, although British rule in Indonesia was brief, the ideas of Raffles remained influential in Ceylon, India and, later on, Sarawak under Brooke rule.\(^{28}\) So, too, in Naning, in what probably was a resurrection of Rafflesian attitudes in the late 1820s, charges of oppression were levelled against the penghulu, while the British cast themselves yet again in the role of 'liberators', a free and conquering island race.

Central to this nexus of Rafflesian concerns, which brought protection, paramountcy and prestige to the fore, was a creative tension between formal and informal empire-building. For the East India Company, the official line was often that 'when men on the spot found that they could not maintain trading stations without a peaceful hinterland . . . the Directors grudgingly agreed to intervention.'\(^{29}\) Closer to Naning, the fact that events hardly ever happened as the Directors wished is borne out by the various treaties with the Malay states in boundary and commercial matters. In 1825, a British arbiter was called in to settle the boundary dispute between Perak and Selangor. In 1826, the British despatched soldiers to persuade the Siamese to withdraw from the Perak River in compliance with the Burney Treaty, to advise the sultan against sending the bunga mas, and to give him general assurance of British backing.\(^{30}\) Governor Fullerton was, in fact, sharply reprimanded by Calcutta over his vigorous policy in Perak. It was with the memory of this still fresh in

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\(^{28}\) A case-in-point was Ceylon, already being seen as a model colony, where a careful commission of enquiry (1829-31) was undertaken by William Colebrooke and C. H. Cameron. The Colebrooke–Cameron proposals, elaborated in five reports (1831–32), stressed the importance of economic freedoms and education; cf. G. C. Mendis (ed.), *The Colebrooke-Cameron Papers*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1956).


\(^{30}\) Cowan, *Nineteenth-Century Malaya*, pp. 11-12. *Bunga mas* 'Flowers of Gold', but actually a tree adorned with gold and other precious ornaments sent regularly as a tribute from vassal states to the Thai court.
his mind that Fullerton decided, in October 1829, to submit the question of using force in Naning first to the Supreme Government in India. They in turn referred matters to the Court of Directors in London. Inevitably, the notorious problems of long-distance communication and decision-making meant that the Straits authorities did not receive general endorsement of Fullerton’s proposals until June 1831. This was no new phenomenon, as Raffles himself bemoaned some years earlier: ‘The Directors are a large heavy body and move slowly, therefore I must not complain of their delay . . . I shall not be the first public servant who has been neglected by the higher powers’. Meanwhile, during the two-year interval, policy-making was rapidly overtaken by events on the ground.

A reassessment of the Naning War makes clear that it was not just a question of blunder and blame. Its early histories tended to pin the blame on either of the parties involved in the conflict, thereby glossing over its many complexities. On the one side stood Fullerton and Lewis (the ‘well-intentioned evil genius of the Naning War’, and married to a Dutch wife who may have deliberately tried to embarrass the British administration); Ibbetson also determined to follow through when all had gone too far, too late. Hence the notion of ‘official stupidity’. On the other side, there was Dol Syed, the ‘villain of the piece’, traditionally stereotyped as a Malay hooligan flanked by ‘designing counsellors’, including Dutch merchants at Malacca who hoped to profit from the conflagration. Such views are extremely reductionistic; it is now possible, indeed necessary, to point to larger forces at work—above all, a debate on the nature of colonial authority.

Despite the policy of non-intervention, a strong reluctance to wage war was overcome by a stronger motivation to enforce the British
version of civilized order: law, sovereign authority, stable revenues. Naning could yield 'nothing but an inconsiderable tribute', the Directors judged possession of the district to be 'altogether unnecessary to our security', and yet

the great mass of evidence, documentary and traditional, appears to us to be decidedly in favor of the supposition that the British Government possesses sovereign authority in Nanning ... [The jurisdiction of the Court of Judicature extends to Nanning and the inhabitants, therefore, are subject to the Law of England instead of Malayan Laws, which have been administered to them hitherto by a Native authority.]

Of especial concern were the pre-eminence of civil jurisdiction and the double-barrelled *casus belli* of humanitarian outrage against slavery and offended British prestige.

First, great incomprehension clouded the terms and definitions that would either make or break the case for intervention. Little consensus could be reached about the meanings of treaty clauses and designations like penghulu or *Kapitan*, matters pertaining to command and control, ownership rights and criminal justice. Coming from a culture which knew far more about a dignified territorial aristocracy than other more volatile traditions of kingship, Lewis and Fullerton held that Dol Syed was a servant of the Company, a petty district revenue-cum-police officer no different from the rest of Malacca's penghulus, whereas Garling and Anderson (a noted Malay specialist) felt he was to be accorded the status of an independent but protected chief.

Ultimately, high-handed sub-imperialism at the crumbling frontier triumphed as the persuasions of Company agents at the centre of formulating an 'official' attitude towards Naning prevailed. It was well known that the Court of Directors, in the multiplicity of their affairs, are too apt to depend much on the statements of their servants at a distance, without ever taking the trouble, or wishing to hear the other side of the question. Their total ignorance on such contemptible matters as Malacca politics, would lead them, without further enquiry, to approve of whatever suggestions Mr. Fullerton and his party might have made on the subject, and to order the adoption of warlike measures to compel the petty Naning Chief to submit to the terms proposed.

Superintendent Lewis and Governors Fullerton and Ibbetson were each convinced that Naning was an integral part of Malacca's

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37 Board of Control—Board's Collections, part 4 (BoC—BC): F/4/1310 (52134/5): Public Letter to Bengal, 2 June 1830.
38 SCCR, 11 Nov. 1831.
domain—de jure Company territory. Relevant Dutch records were uncovered proving otherwise, but by then it was too late to avert conflict. Fullerton's order of 1828 to reimpose the tenth was seen by many Malays as a breach of faith. Moreover many were fearful that after Naning had been annexed, the same tax would be levied on the adjacent territories. Such fears cast a shadow over Anglo-Malay relations and compelled Rembau to join Naning in the anti-British camp.39

Those who pushed for war were overconfident, perhaps na"ive in their expectations of an early and easy victory, anticipating little resistance and cheerful local collaboration. Any pretext for war, such as the ‘duku incident’ of October 1830, was seized upon as a test case of the Company's specific influence over Naning and general standing among the Malays. The arbitrary attitude of the Company's officials is illustrated by the way they handled this last dispute. Enche Surin, a former tithe impropriator in Malacca territory, complained to the Resident Councillor that Dol Syed's men had trespassed on his estate and taken fruit from his duku trees.40 Surin produced documents showing that the dusun lay outside Naning territory and had been in his ancestors' possession for over a century, whereupon Garling required the penghulu to ascertain the facts and, if they were as stated, make restitution. What was made explicit, too, was the primacy of British civil authority over Naning:

As for the piece of land, even if it belongs to Naning, it is under the jurisdiction of the British Government, and you are only acting under the orders of this Government, as you are well aware.

Concerning Enche Surin's dusun, it is for us to decide the ownership.41

Subsequently, while Malacca Government records revealed that Surin did indeed own an ancient holding, a fact which Dol Syed himself never denied, they did not indicate whether the disputed trees were on that particular plot of land. Proprietorial rights, land ownership and boundary matters were never easy to determine. Lewis had confessed as much in 1828: 'It is not, however, settled how far British jurisdiction extends.'42 British insistence on the universal application

40 A local fruit (Lanceium domesticum) containing small, sweet pips.
of their law and sovereignty, shaping their opinion of the penghulu's recalcitrance, moved both parties inexorably towards armed confrontation.

In the light of emancipation, the emotive issue of slavery was also invoked as classic evidence of native misrule. In 1829, the question of jurisdiction was complicated by the matter of domestic slavery, raised by Garling after a man of Sungei Baru (in Naning) turned pirate (a common sideline of Malay chieftainship), kidnapped some Malacca residents, and sold them as slaves to Raja Ali of Rembau. The Secretary to Government had replied thus:

The Government is decidedly of the opinion that Slavery has not, in any shape, a legal existence [in] Malacca; no proviso whatever is made for its continuance by the Treaty of Transfer, and it is not, as in the West Indies, recognized by Act of Parliament or any local law ... Justices of the Peace are responsible for their Acts to the Supreme Court and must act under the liability in respect to an application for the punishment and re-delivery of slaves but in the opinion of Government no form of restraint can be legally exerted.43

This happened at a time when parliamentary debates at Westminster were raging over the abolition of slavery in Britain's colonies and the productivity of slave labour.44 Lying at the periphery, however, Naning was directly affected because of its obligation under the 1801 Treaty to return slaves, including those taken in Rembau.45 This sparked off controversy at Malacca. The editor of The Malacca Observer was quick to condemn slavery:

Considering ... its baneful influence on morality, as well as on the social and charitable intercourse of life, ... it is a subject of paramount importance, and ... the duty of every man to employ whatever power or capacity he may have for its removal, as that of a foul blot on humanity.46

This time round, it was Garling who championed intervention in the form of 'emancipation'. While he had noted that 'It has not been proved that the people of Nanning have fallen under greater thralldom since 1795 than that to which their Chiefs subjected them prior to that period ...',47 writing on 17 November 1829, Garling declared:

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43 SSR, 169, p. 77.
45 Blagden, 'Malay Documents', no. 2: Article 9 of the Treaty, 16 July 1801.
46 The Malacca Observer, 21 April 1829.
Nearly 50 applications during the last six months have been made to me by persons held in Slavery. The wretchedness and humiliation of mind and body with which I became thus acquainted will ever be a practical refutation of the assumption that 'they are treated more as children than as slaves'.

Fullerton and Lewis disclaimed the authority to curtail debt-bondage, while dismissing the 'overweening zeal and mistaken notions of humanity' that guided opposition to it. On 26 November, Fullerton went so far as to minute: 'The Collision was absolutely and utterly unavoidable from the course pursued by Mr. Garling.' Like Garling, Ibbetson and others may have raised the banner of civilizing mission when they employed Malays to perform certain manual tasks, in a grand endeavour to convert indigenous traditions of corvee labour to the western practice of a paid work-force. Census-taking, land reforms and the construction of roads and markets were part and parcel of this liberal reform package. It was the opinion of the official mind no less than the rhetoric of imperialism that '[the Malays] will in future be relieved from all vassalage and feudal services and the free employment of their own [labour] will be theirs'. Meanwhile corrective measures were prescribed for the perfidious 'Tyrant' Dol Syed, who had no legitimate advantage beyond the respect which his station entitles him to. Left of late years entirely to himself, he has no doubt appropriated in the manner of all Malay chiefs whatever he could conveniently exact from the inhabitants, either of produce or personal labor, and it is the fear of losing these illegitimate advantages, hitherto uninterruptedly enjoyed, that makes him hostile to our rule.

Chauvinistic western notions of Malay backwardness and oriental despotism called for amelioration under the British rule of law, especially where 'liberty' might secure more cheaply and efficiently the means to exploit local resources—for the British, a singularly pleasing paradox.

In due course, the war became a matter of honour prompted by the need to retrieve lost reputation. In November 1831, three months after the first Naning campaign ended disastrously for the

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51 B.Sec.Pol. 363: 25 Nov. 1831: Ibbetson to George Swinton, Chief Secretary to the Bengal Government, 24 Sept. 1831.
Company, Calcutta endorsed the proposed annexation of Naning, but the Vice-President Sir Charles Metcalfe was furious: '[W]e are now committed—worthless as the object is, we cannot recede without loss of character, and are now bound to subjugate the rebel at Naning whatever the cost'.

Ibbetson was authorized to detach Rembau from Naning by treaty arrangements, and to open a Malacca–Naning highway with the jungle at its sides cut back. Requests for reinforcements were all approved, except for the European troops held in reserve at Tenasserim. Naval support in the form of a steamer was thrown in for good measure. British prestige was at stake:

The erroneous information received from the authorities to the Eastward . . . misled the British Government into this protracted and worse than useless war for a worthless object. From this contest . . . we cannot now in policy recede without establishing our Superiority over the Malay Insurgents . . .

though the Bengal Government took equal pains to emphasize that the ultimate goal of this was to 'secure tranquillity and prevent future collision'. Any territorial extension that might lead to further contests was 'greatly to be deprecated'. Intervention was, after all, meant to vindicate the Pax Britannica. What resulted was a secondary imperialism: British expansion, sanctioned, after the fact, by the metropolis.

'Informal' empire and 'excentric' imperialism were both at work in Naning, a set of reflex actions between British and Malay components. True to the notion of sovereign paramountcy, it was hoped that regenerating and remoulding this territory in the image of Britannia would not necessarily or permanently require territorial possession. The political and economic drive from the Straits Settlements, however, resulted in expansion when it operated at cross-purposes with the Malay component of indigenous collaboration and resistance. The dynamics of the ensuing confrontation were shaped more by the subjects and institutions of British governance at the periphery—governors and councillors, tax-collectors and law enforcement agencies—than the 'policy-makers' in the metropolis, which they mirrored. Through the catastrophe and crisis of war, Naning, like many other parts of the world, came to be 'enlightened' by Britain's expanding presence, 'warts and all': law and sovereignty, revenue-collection and commerce, suffused with humanitarian and utilitarian sentiments.

52 Ibid.: Metcalfe's minute, 5 Nov. 1831.
54 B.Sec.Pol. 366: 4 June 1832: Swinton to Ibbetson, 31 May 1832.
The causes and character of the war cannot, however, be so conveniently subsumed under the monolithic heading: 'British imperialism'. There was no high road to war in the Malacca-Naning area, only war-paths running through the tangled realities of the Malay world across the span of centuries. 'Anti-colonial' resistance also mirrored the form and social interventions of the colonial state. With the fall of the Malacca Sultanate and collapse of the Malay imperium, the Portuguese, then later the Dutch, grappled with native aristocracy and their adherents at former imperial centres. Long before the arrival of the British, there already was a tradition of indigenous resistance: Portuguese and Dutch 'Naning Wars' were fought in 1511 and 1644-46, respectively, vivid reflections of indigenous practices of opposition, evasion and bargaining with a superior power and disruptive forces from the outside world.

Within the first year of the Portuguese occupation of Malacca, Afonso d'Albuquerque sent an expedition into Naning which penetrated as far as Padang Cacar and encountered opposition.\(^{55}\) Bearing testimony to this clash is the grave of a Portuguese soldier killed in action; it became a local landmark known as Kubor Ferringhi ('Grave of the European').\(^{56}\) The Portuguese expedition probably set out as a mopping-up operation to clear the higher reaches of the Malacca River and its environs of remaining local resistance. More importantly, it seemed to reconfirm Malacca's immediate sphere of control, perhaps the 'home territory' of the fallen Sultanate. For the Malays, while they were at once made aware of the presence of a new overlord, Naning and other parts of the interior remained essentially unchanged.\(^{57}\) This sense of continuity suggests something of the symbolic significance of the old Malacca heartland for Malays; the later Malay States inherited from Malacca both a tradition in which some of their major values found expression, and a paradigm of political organization which it was their pride to preserve.\(^{58}\)

Following the capture of Malacca by the Dutch in 1641, a treaty was concluded 'to persuade the Menangkabows of Naning to adopt an agricultural and peaceful life'.\(^{59}\) However, the people of Naning

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\(^{55}\) Begbie, *Malayan Peninsula*, p. 50.

\(^{56}\) Logan, 'Five Days in Naning', p. 34.


\(^{59}\) Braddell, 'Notes on Naning', p. 195.
chafed under Dutch subjection, refusing to pay the tribute demanded, let alone hand over Christian slaves. The Dutch 'Naning War' remarkably paralleled the experience of the English two hundred years later. A small punitive expedition was massacred in 1644, so that a larger force had to be sent to bring the then penghulu to justice at Malacca; he was only reinstated as ruler of Naning after guaranteeing the good behaviour of his people.\(^6^0\) Naning's later treaty with Britain (1801) had resonances, too, with the earlier Dutch agreement, and the chain of subsequent events to enforce the clauses of this treaty bore an uncanny resemblance to the course and conduct of the Dutch incursion into Naning. Among the most significant flash-points was the dispute over land revenue and its ownership. Here again, as before, a failure to pay the tenth in Naning was bound up with the broader issue of sovereignty and jurisdiction.

The Europeans had established a foothold on Malay soil, but were by no means masters of their fates. They were occasional participants in the general crisis of the Malay world dating to the collapse of the Malacca Sultanate in 1511. With the decline of centralized political authority in the Malay peninsula, a new tradition of decentralized government evolved in which the great offices of state, for socio-economic reasons, came to be filled by aristocrats who were chiefs of districts. These small autonomous rulers were to be more than an anomalous and short-lived intrusion on the field of Malay political culture. Interposed between their overlords (raja) and the mass of subjects (ra'ayat) in the outlying villages, these paramount chiefs resembled invisible 'dark stars' in their ability to alter the pattern of the firmament, the very kerajaan (government by a raja).\(^6^1\) Admittedly, kerajaan—the Malay political system—still reflected a cultural unity despite the absence of political unity. Separate communities owing allegiance to various paramount chiefs shared a common language, way of life, agricultural economy and political culture.\(^6^2\)

But also dating back to the sixteenth century were group migrations around parts of the archipelago, resulting in merantau...


\(^6^1\) Gullick, *Indigenous Political Systems*, p. xl.

\(^6^2\) A. C. Milner, *Kerajaan* (Tucson, 1982), pp. 113–14. Similar features have been observed elsewhere, leading one historian recently to describe pre-colonial Malay society as 'semi-feudal'; see B. K. Cheah, 'Feudalism in Pre-Colonial Malaya', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 25, 2 (1994), p. 269. The debate is far from over, but this article attempts to understand Malay society on its own terms rather than those borrowed from the history of medieval Europe.
(residence abroad). One example of this was the transplantation and growth of a permanent Minangkabau 'colony' on the west coast of the Malay peninsula. The Malacca hinterland came to be populated largely by Minangkabau Malay immigrants from Sumatra, and they were divided politically into several small independent states, loosely grouped into a confederacy later known as Negri Sembilan (the 'Nine States')—Naning, Rembau, Sungai Ujong, Johol, Jelebu, Jelai, Klang, Ulu Pahang, and Segamat. Encircled by the Dutch in Malacca (where a state of armed truce existed with perennial quarrels), the Malay sultans of Johor (nominal overlords but distant and on the wane in the eighteenth century), the Bugis (waxing strong until their defeat by a Dutch naval squadron in 1784), and the Raja Kechil of Siak (who captured Johor in 1718), the confederate states found the loophole and means of ensuring their survival—the potent device of the 'dynastic myth'. In the mid-eighteenth century these states started the practice of importing an independent Minangkabau prince to preside over them as Yang di-pertuan Besar. This utilized the legitimacy principle in vindicating a widespread Indonesian tradition of kingship: a royal title and role confined to symbolic paramountcy, yet neither derived from Malacca nor under the sway of any superior power.63

By the early nineteenth century, the delicate balance of the kerajaan had been upset. With the influx of Minangkabau settlers and the impact of other centrifugal forces (the Dutch and Bugis included), Malay society in the interior became so unstable that there was no central authority capable of ruling the land. In and about Naning, a 'turbulent frontier' opened up due to factional in-fighting over the position of Yang di-pertuan Besar. As one writer put it, these 'attempts to win power in Negri Sembilan and the attempts of adat chiefs to arrogate to themselves the prerogatives of a raja can explain much of the history of the state'.64 Already in 1825 there was no generally acknowledged primus inter pares, so that the confederacy existed but in name amid fierce civil strife. News circulating around Malacca at the time linked the Naning dispute to that wider disequilibrium. Munshi Abdullah, the foremost Malay writer of the period and a key eyewitness, reported on the disturbances caused by rumours of wars:

64 Swift, Malay Peasant Society, p. 146.
Some said 'In two days' time the people in the interior intend to come in and put Malacca to the sword.' Others cried 'Look, there they are! thousands of their men have arrived.' Then they rushed out and brandished their weapons, making their children cry and falling over and jumping up again in their stampede. The noise of doors and windows slamming was like a storm raging. Innumerable weapons made their appearance. Men shouted 'Look over here!' and others said 'No, over there!', to the accompaniment of such din and confusion that even the Company's guns were taken from inside the fort and sent chasing about here, there and everywhere. In the end nothing happened. It was only a false alarm, like people fighting in their sleep.65

But this turmoil was no mere shadow-boxing. Naning was at the frontline of a real crisis—the loose string that, when tugged, threatened to unravel the fabric of the larger geopolitical system Naning was attached to. Due to its close proximity to Malacca Naning had, time and again, fallen under the influence of the Europeans so that it was excluded from consultations with the other eight states in matters of war and peace.66 Now, as before, Naning was caught in the cross-fire and poised to draw others in.

On the Malay front, there was a contest for power, and for this, the control of armed men (kaki, literally 'feet', the mobile basis of political power) was an absolute prerequisite to success. This was the other side of the vexed corvee issue, which the British had frowned upon for humanitarian reasons but which had become the quintessence of Malay political and social life. A chief held his district by virtue of his own strength rather than the direct patronage of a suzerain. Both the quantity and quality of a chief's 'following' and aristocratic 'friends' (kawan, panakawan) mattered a great deal as indices of power and status. Conversely, these followers were dependent on their chief for maintenance, their prospects connected with his largesse and political clout. When they became indebted to him, they contracted themselves to the chief's service until he was repaid. In this way, too, the chief acquired and retained debt-bondsmen as a means of engrossing power and prestige.67

In a socio-political system where the strength of states was reckoned in terms of manpower, we must determine the precise nature of the penghulu of Naning's authority in terms of its reach and bases, the web of alliances both 'external' and 'internal' that he

depended on. Much to their detriment, this was something the Brit-

ish themselves had failed to do in the run-up to war; even the Mal-

acca Police Department was oblivious to the interweaving of support

networks among the Malays. Malay alliances were something of a

‘family affair’—obligatory yet volitional, sometimes secured at great

personal cost. Particularly among the Minangkabaus, allegiances

were governed, first and foremost, by ‘siblingship’. Using idioms of

siblingship, Peletz observes that politico-military pacts forged on the

basis of kinship ties in Negri Sembilan, led to an intensification of

strife and warfare throughout the area:

Many of these conflagrations thus involved a variant of fratricide . . . Com-

petition, petty rivalries and overt antagonisms, among titled males and

political aspirants defined as brothers is a pervasive theme throughout

Negri Sembilan’s precolonial history.68

During the war, a type of ‘hostage system’ was operative; families

of certain chiefs were kept at Taboh by Dol Syed to stand surety for

the chiefs’ loyal conduct. Dol Syed also appeared to deceive Rembau

into joining forces with Naning. These exercises in power politics

and intrigue were certainly symptomatic of the sibling rivalries, ant-

agonisms and competition within the interior—the appointment of

the new Yang di-pertuan Besar, complicated by alleged British sup-

port for the rival candidate, plus the rewards and risks of profit and

plunder. Ibbetson noted that

Every petty Rajah or Panghooloo is an independent Chief capable of assem-

bling 200 vagabonds or more, ready to act in any way that suits his fancy

or that offers a prospect of a little plunder. There are piratical Chiefs also

residing upon the banks of Rivers ever ready to answer any summons of

the kind and in this manner a rabble of some thousands is soon collected,

formidable only from the natural protection and means of offence which it

affords them. . . . As the Malay States become more and more disjointed

and misgoverned petty independent Chiefs living by plunder proportion-

ately increase and nothing but the power to punish them with effect will

even deter such characters from insulting our Authority, whenever oppor-

portunity, and the prospect of plunder invite the attempt.

By gaining if possible the neutrality of the petty Chiefs around us—only to

be effected by bribery or fear—Nanning would succumb most probably with-

68 M. G. Peletz, A Share of the Harvest (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988), pp. 29,

39-40. Also cf. B. W. Andaya, To Live as Brothers (Honolulu, Hawaii, 1993), a recent,

related study of kingship and kinship in Jambi and Palembang from the seventeenth
to early nineteenth century, revealing the spectrum of reciprocity and rivalry in the

‘forced fraternity’ of Malay, Minangkabau, aboriginal (batin), and Javanese cultures

of southeastern Sumatra.
out a struggle. The obstacle to this lies in the union of these people by marriage and community of interests—links more difficult to be severed than any other.

Therefore, the underlying fear that politically mobile but culturally unified alliances among the Malay chiefs would escalate the war provoked resolute Company action. The British blockaded the Linggi River in May 1832. It was imperative that this initiative did not create a new and more united opposition: ‘[I]t is not deemed expedient to extend by acts of severity a spirit of hostility amongst the Malays against the British Government or to incur the risk of involving ourselves in new disputes and hostilities.’

Nevertheless, considering Dol Syed’s ‘gross offence’ (ankara) and the aid that reached him later in the form of men from Rembau, Sungei Ujong, Johol and Muar, the Company was pressured ‘to take firm action immediately... so that no arms and provisions would be brought in for our enemy’.

Other evidence also points to the conflicting systems of loyalty among the Malays. An examination of the correspondence of August 1831 between the wily Syed Sabban of Rembau and J.B. Westerhout, a Dutch resident of Malacca at ease in British official circles, is instructive. These letters reveal not only the effective betrayal of Naning by Rembau during the war, but also something of the clashes of loyalty and kinship among the Malays in periods of crisis. From one letter, we know that ‘assistance came to the Panghooloo of Naning from all the Malays in great numbers including ‘so many men from Rumbow’. But Syed Sabban was sure that an amicable settlement could be reached, with Rembau functioning as an intermediary between the British and the other Malay chiefs:

[For] Spanish Dollars 500 we will get the Malays to return back to their own countries. For what have we got to say to the business? It is the Company’s people warring with the Company, and all the Panghoooolos will be guided by us, and if we return all the other Panghoooolos will also go away.

The law of the jungle was also in operation: aid would be supplied as long as the British did not ‘take the country as far as Rumbow’. Several days later, Syed Sabban informed Westerhout that ‘all the

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70 B.Sec.Pol. 366: 4 June 1832, no. 22.
71 Blagden, ‘Malay Documents’, no. 32: Letter from Garling to the chiefs of Rembau, Sungei Ujong, Johol, and Muar, 29 May 1832.
Panghooloos and ryots' agreed to stand down for the time being but would return to Naning if not paid '... and then we cannot prevent them'. Some form of Malay solidarity was expressed: '[Westerhout's] wish to take the same Panghooloo of Nanning we cannot comply with, but if our friend's life and ours are spared we shall see what can be done.' Yet accepting the pay-off by the British, the turncoat Syed Sabban was as good as his word:

Now we have to inform our friends as a secret that the Panghooloo of Nanning wants to attack Malacca and he has requested assistance from Rumbow and Mooar, but the people of those places cannot any more assist as we and the Iang de Pertuan of Rumbow cannot assist Nanning, as we have sworn fealty with our friend and we will never break our engagements.\(^2\)

Syed Sabban appreciated the long-term advantages of siding with the British, even as his father-in-law Ali sought official recognition as ruler of Rembau. Amid the shifting sands of Malay politics, Rembau went for the hope of a more secure future within the confederacy while Naning was marginalized. In January 1832 Rembau made peace with the Company, its independence acknowledged, but leaving Naning in the lurch.\(^3\)

To grasp more fully how alliances within the Malay world worked, we must explain how the religio-cultural dimension of Malay politics energized anti-colonial resistance. Here, traditional ceremonial life and custom (\textit{adat}) and, more specifically, Minangkabau matrilineal custom (\textit{adat perpatih}) were bound up with Islamic revivalism. Within this culture, the complex relationship between custom and religious revivalism sheds further light on the tensions in Malay politics.

\textit{Adat perpatih} shaped Naning's destiny. This customary law, what Begbie in his day called an 'extraordinary deviation from acknowledged principles of succession',\(^4\) often ran counter to Islamic law and actually weakened strong patrilineal ties of kinship and mutual help which tribal law had created in these small communities. Wilkins noted that inheritance laws in Naning remained much as they had been in the Padang Highlands of Sumatra several centuries before. Newbold mentions that Do\(l\) Syed succeeded his mother's brother Anjak in 1801, an appointment confirmed by the British


\(^{73}\) Turnbull, \textit{Straits Settlements}, p. 269.

\(^{74}\) Begbie, \textit{Malayan Peninsula}, p. 134.
Adherence to adat perpatih inadvertently and progressively undermined the political stability of the interior. Curiously, it may help to explain why Ali was prepared to abandon Dol Syed. Apart from purely pragmatic considerations, Ali could find in Islamic law the powerful rationale for a political system founded more on might than right, a stand which polarized his territory against Naning and other states sharing the traditional matrilineal basis. Garling recognized it when he wrote:

"There is a strong bond of union between the Panghooloos of Rambow, Johol, Soongye Ujong and Nanning; their ancestors were fellow countrymen and are believed to have been invested with authority in our interior about the same period. Raja Ally is not a member of this union, being descended from foreigners and his very office is a novelty."

The scion of aristocratic Bugis stock on his father's side, Ali had in fact supplanted his maternal (Minangkabau) grandfather in Rembau, Raja Assil, who then retired to Naning. This suggests a more complex portrait of indigenous resistance, combining shades of Islamic protest with pre-Islamic (Hindu-Buddhist and pre-Indic) customary inspirations, especially in the fine nuances of contract, sale, slave-right, land tenure, succession to real estate and titles.

Within this cultural framework, it is difficult to place Dol Syed himself—whether as a renegade malcontent (Hang Jebat) or patriotic resistance hero (Hang Tuah) stemming from Malay folklore roots, or perhaps even a type of messianic *ratu adil* (Just King). Even his British opponents had dubbed him 'the Naning hero'. It has been said that the relative lack of millenarian movements in the Malay peninsula (compared to Java or Sumatra) points to a basic

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77 B.Sec.Pol. 366: 4 June 1832: Garling's letter to Colonel Herbert, 14 April 1832.

78 Braddell, 'Notes on Naning', pp. 230-1.


81 SCCR, 11 Aug. 1831.
problem in dealing with the interconnection of religion and unrest: the subject is known only when it becomes embodied in a movement or disturbance that becomes visible and threatens the state. Rumoured prophecies, visits by itinerant preachers and curers, unprescribed rituals, irreverent language—such manifestations of 'resistance' tend to evade documentation.\(^\text{82}\)

Nonetheless Malay spiritual and secular leadership intertwined in Naning. Certainly the penghulu of Naning associated himself with the kind of Islamic kingship that attained its fullest expression in the Malacca Sultanate; the use of the imperial title *Sultan Sri Maharaja di Raja* on Dol Syed’s personal seal belonged to the residuum of a bygone Malay imperial system. The seal had been presented to Dol Syed’s ancestor Juara Megat by the then sultan of Johor (as direct descendant of the last sultan of Malacca). Now, the penghulu used the seal in correspondence with his fellow Minangkabau chiefs as a badge of his legitimate (*berkhalifah*) and sacrosanct (*berdaulat*) authority.\(^\text{83}\) But like the societies of India and Java, where the Mughal Empire and Kingdom of Mataram had declined, here, too, the European Company benefited from the weakness of the Johor Sultanate in the Malay peninsula to further its aims.\(^\text{84}\) Naning was left clutching at straws—what remained of the sinews of Malay power in the peninsula.

Mystical powers were also attributed to Dol Syed, even as a ‘shroud of superstition’ was said to have veiled the minds of his followers. Paraphrasing the Malacca deputy Resident’s 1829 report, Braddell wrote that ‘it would be extremely difficult to divest the Punghulu of his Judicial authority; as, from the great respect and veneration entertained towards him as a saint, the people would, to a man, arm in his favour.’\(^\text{85}\) At the penghulu’s court, Minangkabau motifs prior to the Muslim conquest contributed to the complex mythology protecting the authority of the ruler. Malay royal themes from the days of Malacca’s Golden Age were recalled. In the manner that court chroniclers described the aura surrounding Sultan Mansur Shah of Malacca, contemporary writers alluded to Dol Syed’s ‘odour of sanctity’:

The superstitious Malayans [attributed] more than human powers to the Panghooloo, before whom the British lion appeared to have crouched. His

\(^{82}\) Ilteo, ‘Religion and Anti-Colonial Movements’ in *CHSEA*, 2, p. 230.


\(^{85}\) Braddell, ‘Notes on Naning’, p. 203.
character for sanctity, which had been growing for years, was vastly strengthened by this circumstance, and he was exalted into a demigod, and the sick, the maimed, and the blind crowded from all quarters to drink the waters in which the holy foot had been dipped, fully persuaded that they would be healed of their diseases.86

Considerable mystique also surrounded the penghulu’s regalia (kebesaran or ‘symbols of greatness’): the seal, a ‘magical’ Malay dagger (kris) named Ularkenyang (‘The Satiated Serpent’), a silk vestment (baju), and a genealogical book (salasilah) generally preserved in the Malay princely and noble houses. Fleeing Taboh after his defeat at the hands of the British, Dol Syed evidently considered the kebesaran important enough to bring with him. Personal charisma and public image did not fail Dol Syed to the end; after surrendering himself to the British, his ‘miraculous power in the cure of diseases’ assured him of a flourishing practice as a physician at Malacca until his demise in 1849.87 Such a religio-cultural system provided an idiom for resistance to colonial authority, in which the penghulu himself was a key point of focus.

Against this background, the forward moves of Lewis and Fullerton stirred much fear and resentment in the penghulu’s court. The Company was perceived as nothing more than a glorified revenue-collector, so the relational shift from clientage to control proved humiliating. The loss of traditional honour and status was more potent than any mere material deprivation. Even as Dipanagara, the resistance hero of the Java War, steadfastly refused to attend court as a symbolic act of resistance in traditional Southeast Asian politics, so Dol Syed also defied British summons to Malacca to account for his conduct. The eventual unmasking of indigenous impotence in the face of the British forward movement generated what amounted to a cultural crisis. The slaying at Kelemak of the Panglima Dato, a military leader (ulubalang) serving as the penghulu’s emissary at the start of hostilities, by grapeshot fired from a British six-pounder, profoundly shocked the Malays. When seven convicts escaped afterwards from Malacca and were caught in Naning, Dol Syed retaliated by ordering the execution of six of them over the grave of the Panglima Dato, keeping one behind to read a portion of the Koran before he, too, was ritually sacrificed. If prestige was so important to the Brit-

86 SCCR, 1 Dec. 1831.
ish, then pride in their own cultural identity was the hallmark of indigenous resistance:

[Although his life was guaranteed to him, Dool Syed is reported to have exclaimed that his death, banishment or perpetual imprisonment was decreed by Government and rather than perish so ignominiously, he would fall fighting and leave a name example to his posterity.\textsuperscript{88}]

The socio-psychological underpinnings of resistance were religious in character, as Ibbetson perceived:

\ldots a religious feeling more or less prevalent throughout all ranks of Mahometans in the interior of Malacca which operates decidedly to our disadvantage, particularly with the lower classes, where aid might otherwise be obtained to a much greater extent than at present.\textsuperscript{89}

Malay resistance to the interventions of the colonial state was strongly influenced by political fragmentation within Malay society, and the root and ground of shifts in Malay politics was a culture sensitized all the more by religion and custom.

\textit{Interlopers}

Into the local dynamic of political and religio-cultural ferment stepped European and Chinese interlopers. For a start, the Malay political economy was already highly fluid. In order to maintain his adherents, the Malay chief taxed his district heavily, and revenues were mostly spent in maintaining or extending his political power. Whatever human resources could be removed from the land were mobilized into fighting men rather than labourers for productive enterprises. In the resource-rich states, labour, capital and entrepreneurial ability became scarce. Between districts, there was also heightened competition for resources. With the limited pool of indigenous labour, it became inevitable that when the chiefs wanted to improve their revenues by exploiting their natural resources, they relied on 'alien' labour, capital and entrepreneurship from the adjoining Straits Settlements.\textsuperscript{90} New levels of competition arose, intensified and exacerbated by the arrival of outsiders, in a crescendo of conflicting interests.

\textsuperscript{88} Begbie, \textit{Malayan Peninsula}, pp. 193, 202–3.
\textsuperscript{89} B.Sec.Pol. 366: 4 June 1832, no. 1.
The broader economic factors in the causation of the war are illuminated by examples of intelligence, surveys and local knowledge vis-a-vis Naning's latent agricultural potential and natural resources, as well as evidence of the balance of commercial interests. The volatility of the Malay political economy was aggravated by the ambitious designs of the British and Dutch mercantile community at Malacca, and Chinese entrepreneurs moving into the interior. In particular, the growing importance of tin in the nineteenth century contributed to the state of flux, increasing both the stakes in struggles for power and office, and the resources available for these struggles. All this attracted outside attention, and the eventual extension of British control imposed order.

The capture of Malacca by the British (1795) and its formal cession by the Dutch (1824) precipitated the final collapse of Dutch political and commercial influence in the tin-producing states of the Malay peninsula. Financial backing for the tin mines thereby passed into the hands of the Chinese, and Chinese penetration into the peninsula (Malacca and its hinterland included) began in earnest, largely at the invitation of Malay chiefs. Chinese tin-miners were present in their hundreds and occasionally destabilized the indigenous socio-political system. Their commercial activities in Sungei Ujong, not far from Naning, provoked a massacre of Chinese miners by the Malays in 1828. In 1834, there was trouble in another nearby district, Lukut, but this time it was the Chinese miners who attacked their Malay employers and got ambushed while retreating to Malacca. Furthermore, although tin output in the early decades of the nineteenth century was small, the Malacca hinterland was already a principal source of tin in the Malay peninsula (see Table 1). The tin mines located near the Sungei Ujong branch of the Linggi River were not uncontested by the Malays themselves, hence the intermittent feuding between the chiefs of Sungei Ujong and Rembau—over control of the tin traffic—in the Linggi War of the later 1830s. Between 1844 and 1848 and again in 1873, the Malacca merchants complained to the colonial authorities about the excessive exactions of the Malay chiefs, increasing the pressure for political intervention.91

In Naning, the robbery in October 1830 of just one Chinese entrepreneur, Kwi Chang Ho, was also an occasion for misunderstanding. The British hoped that Dol Syed would investigate the case, adding that 'people who act like this towards our subject are like an enemy

Table 1
Tin Production in the Malay Peninsula, 1835*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pikuls</th>
<th>Tons</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>West Coast</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sungei Ujong</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ujong Salang</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selangor</td>
<td>9,600</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perak</td>
<td>7,500</td>
<td>446</td>
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<td>600</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pungah</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total for West Coast</strong></td>
<td>22,600</td>
<td>1,345</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>East Coast</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pahang</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kemanan and Trengganu</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>174</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patani</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total for East Coast</strong></td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total for Malay Peninsula</strong></td>
<td>34,600</td>
<td>2,052</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*These estimates were worked out by T. J. Newbold, who based his figures on information 'obtained from Natives under every possible check' (Newbold, British Settlements, 2, pp. 424-5).

to us’. The penghulu complied with the Company’s wishes, but judgment could not be given as ‘the Chinaman did not wish to swear and there was no witness’ in accordance with Malay law. Amid rising tension, the penghulu advised Garling ‘not to allow any Chinaman to go up river alone except in the company of two or three people, so that if anything untoward happened it would be clear and there would be no dispute’ in future. This deepened official perceptions of Dol Syed as a ‘troublesome Chief’, a most ‘refractory Panghooloo’. Commercial interests and civilian influence also soured Anglo-Malay relations in other respects. While Dutch political power in the Malay peninsula had certainly been eclipsed after 1824, the malign influence of some Dutch merchants at Malacca remained. Resentful of the new British regime and ever seeking to sow discord, they probably rekindled Dol Syed’s suspicions of the British. This was in turn fuelled by inflammatory reports in The Malacca Observer that the Company intended to send up a sufficient force, with artillery, and a Civilian as Political Agent to obtain submission and compliance by intimidation if fairer means fail.

The object in contemplation was not merely to obtain the tythe... but to remonstrate... with the Punghooloo on the liberties he has taken with the Charter of the Court of Judicature, in trying and condemning offenders summarily, on his own fiat, and without a jury too! (what a sacrilegious fellow!) 94

When the destination of the proposed British military expedition had thus become public knowledge and the attack was subsequently countermanded pending approval from Calcutta, the very fact of delay from 1829 to 1831 was interpreted by the Malays as a sign of weakness:

The English power had not been directly exercised in these seas for ages. It had been taken on trust, as reflected from India and very recently from Burmah; and now on the first appearance of opposition the authorities hesitated. That this hesitation arose from any cause but fear, was not considered for an instant as possible, and in consequence, the Penghulu... became so elevated... that he threw off the air of reserve and respectful assistance which he had hitherto worn. 95

Information disseminated by interlopers, working on local suspicions, bred misconceptions—a catalyst that accelerated and intensified the collision of civilizations.

The stage was set for a decisive armed confrontation between the colonial regime and Naning. Here, above all, the cultural context of conflict would shape its outcome.

Military Cultures in Collision

The British Naning expeditions at times appeared to border on the farcical. Munshi Abdullah had this to say about the aftermath of the first expedition, albeit with the solemn conclusion that 'Allah knows best':

Mr Lewis came rushing back to Malacca looking as if he had escaped death by inches. All the officers and soldiers withdrew in haste to Malacca, having been surrounded by the upcountry people who took them so completely by surprise that they lost their guns, rifles, tents, ammunition and the Company's equipment. All of it had been left behind and every scrap taken by the upcountry people. 96

94 Malacca Observer, 30 June/14 July 1829; see BoC-BC: F/4/1271 (51004), for indication of the political turmoil caused by the leakage of information and its security implications.
95 Braddell, 'Notes on Naning', p. 204.
Begbie, the subaltern in the Madras Native Infantry who commanded the six-pounders and sappers in both campaigns, himself stated that ‘it was difficult to relate the facts without verging on ridicule and venturing on sarcasm’. He went on to narrate a truly paranoid situation in which ‘fear whispered that every bush concealed a Malay, and converted every stick into a musket barrel’.97 Judging from a more ‘native’ perspective, Logan believed that memories of the war would linger in Malay myth-history, if only for entertainment. Indeed they had made the Company’s civilian and military operations the theme of a satirical poem, alluding to the ‘disastrous chances, the moving accidents by flood and field’.98

Yet like many other colonial conflicts, the Naning War presents a more serious military aspect: the competition between two vastly different systems of war. From one angle, we witness the withering of Western modes of warfare in the setting of the Malayan jungles; from another, the winning ways of indigenous modes of warfare in the locality.

Among the colonial powers, the British were in the unique position of possessing, in their Indian army, a vast reservoir of troops. These could be deployed nearly anywhere in the world as necessary, albeit at the expense of the Indian budget.99 Paradoxically, what the Madras Army was not designed to do but was often required to do, with frequently disastrous results, was to serve imperial interests overseas. The Madras redcoats sent to Naning had seen action in the first Anglo-Burmese War and survived the swamps of the Irrawaddy, but barely—it had been a logistics disaster even then.100 Further south, the troops were unacclimatized to the Malay peninsula’s humid jungles. They were disciplined and trained for pitched battle, but unaccustomed to the entanglements of jungle warfare. The Naning conflict showcased ‘campaigns against nature’.101 Wind and weather, especially ‘Sumatras’,102 had a particularly ruinous effect on British firearms and ammunition; the heavy artillery pieces had

98 Logan, ‘Five Days in Naning’, p. 33. The poem, unfortunately, has not survived.
102 Winstedt (ed.), *Malaya*, p. 25: ‘Sumatras’ are violent squalls of wind and rain from the west, typical of the Straits of Malacca.
to be jettisoned in the sea of green in the wake of first campaign.\textsuperscript{103} Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert, commander of British forces in the second expedition, fretted about the health of his European officers being ‘destroyed by exposure to Sun and Rain’, if not ravaged by diseases endemic in the region, like malaria.\textsuperscript{104} By 20 April 1832, some 300 sick and wounded had been warded in a hospital at Malacca. The hostile, alien environment eroded the initial high morale and \textit{esprit de corps} of the troops. The breakdown of discipline and order was seen in a scuffle between members of the Malay Regiment and the Company’s Indian convict-carriers during the second campaign.\textsuperscript{105}

Clearly the enemy had been seriously underestimated in the first three-week expedition. This resulted in a hasty, ignominious retreat. Conversely, Malay resistance was overestimated in the second campaign, spaced out over three months via a slow ‘caterpillar advance’.\textsuperscript{106} Wesseling has reiterated that European supremacy was chiefly a question of ‘technical prowess’. However, depending on the indigenous military context, such superiority was not always usable, whether in the form of gunboats, artillery, cavalry, or firearms.\textsuperscript{107} British technical prowess was no exception: its strengths and limitations can only be understood in the broader context of military culture, inclusive of both natural obstacles and native opponents. In the case of Naning in the 1830s, here was where western technological dominance ended.

On the other hand, the striking success of Malay warfare operated both against and in favour of the British at different phases of the war. The consternation in Malacca shortly before the onset of the first campaign bears testimony to the effectiveness of Dol Syed’s tactics:

The Company ordered everyone to remain on guard in his compound, and at night to put lighted lamps at every entrance. Most of the people who


\textsuperscript{104} BoC—BC: F1/4/1334 (52858/9): Madras Mil. Dept., 1 Feb.–15 March 1832, nos 2, 4, 13. Newbold also noted that the climate of the interior was unfavourable to the long occupation of the country by Indian troops (\textit{British Settlements}, 1, p. 197). During the earlier Anglo-Burmese campaign, the Company lost three-quarters of their men largely from disease. Only after the 1850s did quinine prophylaxis become more widely available in British military circles for treating malaria; see D. R. Headrick, \textit{The Tools of Empire} (New York, 1981), pp. 20, 66–70.

\textsuperscript{105} Begbie, \textit{Malayan Peninsula}, p. 234.


\textsuperscript{107} de Moor and Wesseling (eds), \textit{Imperialism and War}, pp. 6, 65–6.
lived in districts outside the Settlement hurriedly moved into it. Property owners found somewhere to store their possessions. At that time everybody in Malacca... carried weapons, and in blacksmiths' shops crowds were busy repairing and sharpening them in odd corners. In particular, almost everywhere one went people were having sheaths made for their daggers.\textsuperscript{108}

Traditional Malay warfare did not normally entail great loss of life; it was an exercise in insult and skirmish rather than full-scale battle. Indeed, pitched battle was shunned, for its natural corollary of heavy casualties demoralized the followers of any leader who employed such tactics. Gullick called Malay warfare 'mostly a desultory affair of raids' in pursuit of loot or to oust political opponents, sometimes assembling coalitions of military parties from various localities. Exposed attacks on prepared positions were not favoured whereas ambush was, and raiding parties travelled light, equipped only with bare essentials—\textit{kris}, sword (\textit{pedang}), throwing spear (\textit{lembing}), and musket (\textit{senapang}). Adeptly weaving in and out of Naning's thick primeval forests, the Malays thus expressed a cultural preference for guerrilla warfare, whether sniping from hidden stockades or choosing the precise moment for each offensive.\textsuperscript{109} The Malays also resorted to the felling of trees to obstruct the British and cut their supply lines. As the results indicate and comparative studies demonstrate, an enemy which limited itself to such guerrilla activities was much more difficult to combat.\textsuperscript{110}

The Naning War might also be viewed as a colonial defeat in a 'people's war', where the British signally failed to win 'hearts and minds' when it mattered. Riding roughshod over Malay sensitivities, Lewis bulldozed his way into Naning as Civil Commissioner, together with Lieutenant Milnes as the district's provisional Resident. Rather offensively, a $1,000 reward was offered for Doli Syed's capture, while plans to elect new penghulus were publicized. A loftily-worded official announcement informed local inhabitants of the troops' objective to apprehend Doli Syed, urging them to remain calm and stay indoors.\textsuperscript{111}

Actually, the people of Naning remained unimpressed and, conversely, showed distinct antipathy towards their British 'liberators'.

\textsuperscript{108} Hikayar Abdullah, Hill (trans. and ed.), p. 259.
\textsuperscript{110} Cf. studies on indigenous warfare in Madagascar and Vietnam by Paillard and Fourniau in de Moor and Wesseling (eds), \textit{Imperialism and War}, pp. 4, 72ff and 167ff.
\textsuperscript{111} SSR, U1, pp. 74–9; Begbie, \textit{Malayan Peninsula}, pp. 162, 164.
On 10 August 1831, most of the Malay coolies suddenly deserted their British paymasters in the middle of the jungle, no doubt in collusion with their compatriots. They had even stuck white flowers in their hair to signal a secret friendly intention towards the folk of Naning. The notices offering hefty rewards for the capture of Dol Syed and Naning's ampat suku (dated 9 February and 24 July 1832) were likewise ignored.

It is true that the British did benefit from some degree of local collaboration along the way, but they were unable to make full use of potential collaborators until 1832 and their own manpower was inadequate for so daunting a problem. In late 1831, a hundred-odd Malays joined the 'Malay Contingent' to serve as auxiliaries alongside regular troops in the Naning War. But while this helped to expedite the second campaign, the loyalty of these men was questionable and they proved unreliable at times. In one incident, four Malays on sentry duty vanished—arms and all. It was difficult to incorporate western military technology and command structure into traditional Malay armies and defence groups.

What proved critical to the resolution of the conflict was the element of major betrayal behind enemy lines. Serious fragmentation within the Malay heartland finally led to a breach, enabling the British to employ a strategy of divide-and-rule to exploit internal disensions and tap the support of their Malay collaborators. As argued earlier, the Naning Malays were initially buttressed by the neighbouring state of Rembau and a host of satellite chiefs. To dissolve this hostile alliance the Company concluded treaties with Rembau, freeing her from obligations of vassalage inherited from the Dutch and recognizing her as a sovereign state. This achieved the defection of Naning's erstwhile allies—Raja Ali, Syed Sabban, plus other chiefs—to the side of the British. It marked the turning-point of the war. Indigenous expertise and knowledge of the terrain facilitated rapid, incisive advance with outflanking manoeuvres, culminating in the capture of Taboh Naning (15 June 1832). The Naning War was lost and won when the Company acknowledged their military and technological limitations, and, by cunning adaptation to the politically-divided Malay military context, swung the balance in their favour.

113 SSR, M6, Letter no. 152, para. 4.
The Naning War was a ‘collision of systems’ that sparked off wider repercussions than historians have hitherto recognized. However inept they had been, the future smiled upon the big battalions, represented in this instance by the 29th and 5th Madras Native Infantry with their magazine sergeants, golondauze, bullocks and tent lascars. Reverberations generated by the political and military operations of the early 1830s were immediately felt in the politics of the interior. Naning was prised open by the new judicial authority, revenue settlement and alliances established by the Company. The creation of numerous administrative divisions headed by more functional penghulus under a British umbrella heralded the advent of this new order. Westerhout was appointed district superintendent and authorized to collect the tenth on behalf of the Company.

Meanwhile Raja Ali, emboldened by British recognition, attempted to assert himself as Yang di-pertuan of Negri Sembilan. There began a series of wars between the jealous little states which kept the area in ferment for the next forty years, effectively preventing the Malacca entrepreneurs from exploiting their hinterland. War and resistance were thus a means of securing a new symbiosis between ruler and the ruled, merchants, men, money and markets, of which the method of aggrandisement and resistance was the raid. Civil disorder here continued intermittently well up to the point of formal British intervention in 1877, roughly contemporaneous with other forward movements into the peninsula.

The Naning War was one of a series of interlocking crises that gripped empire-builders and the wider Malay world in the early nineteenth century. Between 1760 and 1824, due to strained relations with indigenous rulers, Anglo-Dutch competition and ‘force of circumstance’, British commercial and strategic interests shifted from Aceh (in northern Sumatra) to Penang, and thereafter to Singapore and peninsular Malaya. The Anglo-Dutch Treaty (1824) that handed Malacca to Britain on a platter subsequently carved out two separate spheres of colonial influence, setting aside centuries of indigenous history and partitioning the Malay world through the Mal-
acca Straits. In the process, the Riau-Johor Kingdom was forever dismembered, while the cultural unity of east coast Sumatra and the peninsula was also arbitrarily severed. On the peninsula, the dismantling of Riau-Johor's central control paved the way for the emergence of modern Johor and Pahang as independent states. But all the while, there was no unified programme to advance the frontiers of the colonial state; throughout the region, the British found themselves responding to a more general crisis of the Malay world.

It is from this perspective that new insights can be brought to studies on colonial expansion in the Malay states. Broadly speaking, existing accounts have assumed that until late 1873, British policy sought to superficially 'tidy' the frontier—to promote trade in the Malay states, to prevent the outbreak of war between states, to abstain from anything more active than occasional missions of mediation in the Malayan peninsula. It has been suggested that after the loss of its China trade monopoly in 1833, the East India Company generally lost interest in the Straits. But as this article has shown, anxiety over what was perceived as the growing general anarchy of the Malay states (typified by conflicts such as the Naning War) and interest in the tin-mining potential of the interior, were already by the 1830s leading to an unprecedented assertion of colonial sovereignty in the peninsula. By the 1870s, fears that another power might stake its claim in the British sphere convinced Gladstone's Liberal Government of the need for a more ambitious policy to pacify the west coast Malay states. Hence the signing of the Pangkor Engagement in January 1874. This treaty introduced an advisory 'residential' system that would take root in Perak and other sultanates as the chief instrument of British power in Malaya for generations to come—exercising the 'rule of law', paramount sovereignty and regular revenue-collection. But again, debates on intervention had a much longer lineage.

Naning is a Malay word for a species of large yellow banded wasp, very venomous, bigger than a hornet. The Naning episode resembled, to say the least, the stirring up of the proverbial hornet's nest. Yet in so doing, the whole issue of colonial authority, local resistance and conflict in Naning moved in the mainstream of nine-
teenth-century British expansion. Whether or not the fighting was over a 'worthless object' is beside the point. What was at stake here was the prestige of one system (British 'sovereignty') and the survival of another (Malay 'siblingship'). The Naning War could be classed as a 'small war' only insofar as the native opponent appeared primitive to European eyes, but the embarrassing outcome of the first campaign for the British was a rebuff that simply could not be excused. The second expedition would attempt to redress their perceived loss of national honour and supremacy. For the Malays, the meddling of the white man could either extinguish long-cherished aspirations or serve local ambitions; different decisions to resist or collaborate suggest different indigenous perceptions of colonial authority—the white man as a burden or benefactor. In the sweeping panorama of Malayan history, the Naning War cast longer shadows than we might expect of a 'minor' conflict. The tenacious response of a hitherto obscure Malay district to the jingoistic swagger of British imperialism—the sting in this tale—helped to confirm a more cautious policy towards the Malay states up to the eve of full-blown British intervention in 1874. It also opened a window on more fundamental shifts in Malay politics and society that shaped the course of colonial expansion. But finally, if such a tiny episode was really rather significant, what other episodes in the early chapters of British expansion and wider traditions of indigenous resistance remain to be uncovered?