The Representation of George Town Heritage: A Two-Space Analysis of Local Alienation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of George Town Heritage within the context of George Town Heritage sites, and the annual George Town Festival (GTF). It explores the heritage sites of the various communities in Penang, Malaysia. It argues beyond the Eurocentric hegemony and representations of Penang history anchored on the British occupation of the island in 1786. There also exist other levels of hegemony and various forms of representations of the heritage in Penang. This is expressed by the narratives/historical representations of various settler communities such as the Chinese, Chinese Peranakans, Indian Muslims and the Eurasians. To showcase the manifestations of these various levels of representations of heritage, the paper adopts the method of combining historiography, participant observation and document study. The article applies Hall’s (1997) notion of representation as its theoretical framework. Halls’s theory articulates the asymmetry between the dominant discourse and the local discourse of Penang heritage. This asymmetry reveals absence, and alienation of certain local narratives of historical relevance. The paper interrogates the following: What sort of historical consciousness do the two-spaces of analysis espouse regarding the history of Penang? What are the historical imbalances and omissions in the representation of George Town Heritage? How can the local/oral history serve as a prognosis to the historical imbalance in the narration and depiction of the history/heritage of Penang?

The paper recommends the need for the GTF, and George Town Heritage Sites to commemorate the historical journey that emerged in Penang before 1786.

Keywords: George Town heritage, George Town festival, historiography, local history, Malay, Penang
INTRODUCTION
This article examines representation of George Town Heritage within the context of George Town Heritage sites, and the annual George Town Festival (GTF). It explores the articulation of Penang history/heritage within these two spaces. It argues that beyond the Eurocentric hegemony and representation of Penang history anchored on the British occupation of the Island in 1786, there exist other levels of hegemony and various forms of representations of heritage in Penang. These representations have often been expressed by the narratives/historical representations of various settler communities in Penang, such as the Chinese, Chinese Peranakans, Indian Muslims and the Eurasians.

The focus of the article is a study of the history of Penang and its heritage. It applies Stuart Hall’s (1997) notion of representation, as its theoretical framework. The theory of representation demonstrates the asymmetry between the dominant discourse and the local discourse of Penang heritage sites. This asymmetry reveals absence, and alienation of certain local narratives of historical relevance. What is being showcased in both spaces depicts little recourse to local history, especially of the early Malay communities. Their narrative is neither celebrated nor fairly represented. The articulation of Penang heritage within the context of George Town heritage sites and the GTF constitute an imbalance in representing the history of Penang.

A two-space analysis is used to empirically demonstrate the representational gap of Penang history/heritage. The first space of representation focuses on the George Town cultural heritage sites, as defined by the George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI). Meanwhile, the second space of analysis was predicated on GTF, an annual event that celebrates the cultural heritage of George Town, which began since 2010. The paper interrogates the following: What sort of historical consciousness do the two spaces of analysis espouse regarding the history of Penang? What are the historical imbalances and omissions in the representation of George Town Heritage? How can local/oral history serve as a prognosis to the historical imbalance in the narration and depiction of the history/heritage of Penang?

Subsequent to the introduction, this paper provides a literature review and theoretical framework, followed by the influence of colonial knowledge in the representation of history in the postcolonial states. It also incorporates the historiography of Penang within the context of colonial knowledge and its representation. The methodological framework is followed by discussions, findings and conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
The paper adopts Hall’s (1997) notion of representation as an analytical framework in analysing the representation of heritage in Penang. Hall sees representation “as an act of reconstruction rather than reflection” (Hall, 1997, p. 10). This has the implication of giving an image of something other than
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its true image, and such a reconstruction makes no recourse to the root, and origin of such an imagery it seeks to represent.

The power of representation is underpinned by the historical imbalance between the colonial and the local narrative in the historiography of Penang. This paper is inclined towards analysing this representational gap. Hall (2007) contends that “representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs, and images, which stand for or represent things” (Hall, 1997, p. 15.). The following representation circuit by Du Gay (1997) shows the power of the representation discourse on culture and society.

Hence, representation as a cultural production is produced by the dominant discourse, and often consumed by the larger society. The pertinent question to our analysis is how cultural production, such as heritage, and historiography of Penang is produced, and consumed by the public. This process of the production of history is impelled by knowledge and power of discourse. There is imminent power at the level of representation and regulation of the history/heritage through the regulatory agencies such as the GTWHI, and the mechanism representing cultural production in the GTF.

Likewise, the level of consumption involves communities, civil society organisations, and academia. There seems to be little attempt at challenging the hegemonic history at the consumption level. The society consumes what is produced by the world of images, symbolised by

(Du Gay, 1997). The circuit of culture (London: The Open University)

*Figure 1. Hall’s representation circuit*
archives, and photographs orchestrated by the state and popular platforms. Thus, Penang heritage sites, and the GTF typify these practices. Colonial knowledge is one of the important avenues of this cultural production in the postcolonial states. It has become the embodiment of the history of the new nation states (Shamsul, 2012), and the major platform under which representation of histories of postcolonial societies is articulated. The history of Penang is implicated by this. What follows is how colonial knowledge shapes the representation of history in Penang.

Colonial Knowledge and Representation of History

The intellectual tradition of colonial knowledge is discernibly part of the epistemological orientations of the social sciences in the 19th century (Wallerstein, 1999). The 19th century witnessed the two culture debates implying a separation between science and philosophy. The former connotes rational knowledge based on sensory accumulation whereas the latter is a knowledge accumulation based on the speculative, cultural and aesthetic premises. Thus, conventional social science and their epistemic practices has leaned towards the natural sciences and its empiricist epistemology (Wallerstein, 1999).

The triumph of science over philosophy or the humanities has become the fulcrum of colonial knowledge and its accumulation of knowledge about the other, and the concept of others. This intellectual commitment of the social sciences prompted Said’s (1978) work on knowledge production and culture, entitled Orientalism. Said contends that the Western intellectual tradition hardly made reference to the philosophy and history of the oriental societies. Rather, the societies were merely reduced to trends and statistics (Said, 1978). Therefore, local histories such as histories of the nation states, identity formations, and cosmo-politanism were misconstrued by the colonialist knowledge paradigm, termed here as local alienation.

The power of representation in discourse is imminent in the historiography of postcolonial states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It promoted a revisionist form of history that produced knowledge of societies based on the power of the colonial knowledge (Cohn & Dirks, 1996). Colonial knowledge refers to the ontological power of the British to codify and reconstitute certain forms of knowledge and practices in the colonies based on what suits the European eye (Shamsul, 2012). One of the vestiges of the colonial form of knowledge in the colonies is the formation of nations-states along ethnic identities as colonial tactics of divide and rule (Shamsul, 2012).

Furthermore, the alienation of local histories in the construction of knowledge of postcolonial states is an inherent feature of colonial knowledge and its power to define (Mamdani, 2012). It is noteworthy that colonial knowledge rejects and seldom recognises oral history, which appears to be the dominant historical account of the pre-colonial societies. Colonial knowledge and
its projection of colonial subjects has been a subject of discussion among scholars in Malaysia (Ibrahim, 1998; Shamsul, 2012).

The major impediment of the colonial knowledge lies in its empiricist epistemology, anchored on premises, such as expedition, observations, and statistics (Huigen, 2009). This form of knowledge production unravels the colonial sentiments, and the colonial mindset about the societies they study. According to Cohn in his book *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, the key modalities that inform the formation of colonial knowledge in India include the historiographic modality, the observational travel modality, the survey modality, the enumerative modality, the musiological modality, and the surveillance modality (Cohn, 1996).

Thus, the British appropriate its knowledge in the colonies through these modalities. These are exclusionary and top down in approach. They alienate orality and subjectivities of the colonised. Pertinent to this paper is the historiographic modality which entails the various representations that valorises the British presence in the colonies through erection of memorials and sacred places (Shamsul, 2012). This in a way indoctrinates the psyche of citizens around the relevance of the British in the history of the colonies. For example Fort Cornwallis, a star fort built by the British East India Company in the late 18th century is currently a major heritage site in Penang. Francis Light built the fort following the British occupation of Penang in 1786. Fort Cornwallis represents an imagery and particular historical consciousness constructed on the image of the British occupation of Penang. Similarly, the Light statue at Fort Cornwallis as a historical memory in Penang reveals the quintessence of historiographic modality in representing the history of colonised societies.

**Postcolonial Response**

The revisionist history represented by colonial knowledge is challenged on account of lack of reflexivity as a counterpoise to colonial knowledge. Postcolonial theory challenges the knowledge hierarchies and asymmetries between the European worldviews (defined as eurocentric) and local world (defined as indigenous) regarding the historiography and knowledge representation of the nonoccidental world anchored within the enlightenment philosophy (Arowosegbe, 2014). Thus, enlightenment as a grand universal project was prompted by western intellectual thought in the 17th century for those who wanted to make their society, rational, secular, scientific and therefore, modern (Arowosegbe, 2014, p. 310).

Postcolonial theory challenges the grand narrative of the European enlightenment. Some of the postcolonial writings that challenges the enlightenment include Decolonising Methodologies (Smith, 1999), Provincialising the West (Chakrabarty, 1997), Resisting the Colonialist Discourse (Yahya, 2003), and The Myth of the Lazy Native (Syed Hussein Alatas, 1977). These were concerned with the need to restore agency to the colonised people in
terms of their history, epistemology, and discourse against the backdrop of colonialist representational discourse.

Postcolonial studies challenge the colonial hegemony in the representation and hegemony of colonial enclaves (Abdalhadi, 2016). It assumes knowledge production based on an ideographic approach which sees the local communities as the authentic interlocutors of their history and their destiny (Nyoka, 2012). It is an effort of decolonising knowledge by restoring agency to the colonised (Smith, 1999). It unravels the significance of original and autonomous societal narrative emerging from sociologies at the periphery (Keim, 2011).

The epistemic premise of the postcolonial studies is tailored on challenging the colonial epistemological, ontological and methodological modes of inquiry illustrated by Cohn’s on the forms of colonial knowledge. They have stressed on the need to transcend colonial assumptions about non-western societies by integrating other perspectives of history. A discerning example of decolonised social science is the role of local history in the construction of knowledge of the colonised (Smith, 1999). The need to pay due diligence to the context of the natives, their language, culture, philosophy and tradition as a corpus of knowledge (Said, 1978).

These alternative epistemologies constitute what Alatas refers to alternative discourse in the social sciences (Alatas, 2000). Alternative history is defined as a process of knowledge production where the researched becomes the researcher (Smith, 1999), where the local communities become the authentic interlocutors of their history through oral narratives (Nyoka, 2012).

The Historiography of Penang and the Geopolitics of Space

The power of the representation highlighted above is underpinned by its strength of redefining the idea of place and space. One of the legacies of the colonial revisionist history of Penang is the deconstruction of the idea of space in the colonised territories. The dominant discourse and its power of representation more often than not describes Penang as terra nullius, a place without occupants (Murad Merican, 2014). This discourse presupposes that before the British occupation of the Island in 1786, Penang was a virgin, uninhabited land. It denies that the island was already inhabited by groups of people from the Malay Archipelago and the mainland peninsula.

The existence of Malay communities prior to the 1786 occupation/possession/cessation has been subverted by the dominant discourse. For instance, Merican (2014) traced the history of pioneer Malay communities in Penang that has not been accorded with an agency in the historiography of the island. He contends thus:

What rarely comes to public knowledge is the existence of Batu Uban as a town and port, not only of the Straits of Melaka, but of the Indian Ocean. Batu Uban was the centre of Malay-Muslim
commercial and cultural life, bonded with Batu Bara, and other areas in Sumatera and the rest of the Malay Archipelago. Both are noted as cultural and identity transition points. Thus far, whatever the sketchy history of Batu Uban and its regions tells us of links with Kedah and Minangkabau society, as well as traders and missionaries from the Indian Subcontinent and the Middle East. Batu Uban has evolved, but its legacy denied. Batu Uban is an example of the deconsecration of history and heritage. The early pioneers to the island are certainly legends. They existed but are hardly recognized in mainstream history. They had in fact, after traversing across and along the Straits of Melaka for years, finally settled in Kedah (later the island off its coast, Penang, was temporarily ceded [pajak] to Francis Light), and produced thousands of descendants. (p. 5)

Batu Uban is located close to Universiti Sains Malaysia campus. However, it is currently facing the politics of exclusion as an erstwhile historical place in Penang. Justifying the geographical sketch of Batu Uban in Penang, Merican contends that it was a trade hub that linked the Straits of Malacca and the Indian Ocean in the 18th century. This predates the arrival of the British East India Company. In fact, Batu Uban was marked as ‘town here’ in a 1763 British sketch map. The place was inhabited by the Malays in the early 1730s. It was a port then. The earliest mosque on the island is also in Batu Uban, built in 1734 (Merican, 2014, p. 5).

**Approach and Framework**

This study is framed within the context of the social constructivist perspective. The perspective assumes that the research phenomenon is socially constructed. This is against the backdrop of positivist epistemology that sees reality as a product of established regularised process of enquiry that privileges detachment of the researcher from the object of his research. Hence, this study places the imagination of the researcher at the heart of the research inquiry. Mills (2000), the proponent of the idea of sociological imagination contends that the critical role of social science research lies in the ability of the researcher to use the quality of his mind in understanding the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with the realities in the larger society. The study adopts a method that incorporates two or more sources (Yeasmin, 2012), to enhance the potential of enhancing the validity of the research. It therefore incorporates historiography, participant observation, and document analysis.

Historiography as a method which challenges the universality of history which has been a major legacy of positivist epistemology (Smith, 1999). It looks at the narratives from the margin, the excluded, and the marginalised. The method serves our purpose of understanding the heritage
articulation of Penang from the pre-colonial narratives of the island. The Penang heritage as exhibited in the George Town heritage sites and the annual GTF revealed absences, and an unarticulated version of history and heritage of the colonised. Historiography stresses the valorisation of ideographic inquiry in the study of local communities where emphasis is led on oral accounts and subjectivities of the colonised (Firat, 1987).

On the other hand, an observation of Penang heritage sites was undertaken by the authors. Participant observation was rooted in ethnography where the researcher established contact with the respondents and information from the respondents was elicited over a period of time. This included field observation and note taking (Valenzuela & Shrivastava, 2002). A two-day trip to the George Town Heritage site was embarked on by the authors from 17th to 8th February, 2016.

The streets which were surveyed were Lebuh Acheh, Lebuh Armenian, Lebuh Chulia, and Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling. These streets were selected for their historical relevance in the ethnic formation of Penang. They harbour major Malay-Muslim heritage, Hokkien artefacts, and Indian temples. Similarly, observations also covered areas designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites. The researchers observed a prevailing influence of straits eclectic, colonial and Asian civilisations, in the various streets and cultural artefacts in George Town. These include Indian, Chinese, and Islamic civilisations.

RESULTS

George Town Heritage Sites

George Town was designated as Penang world heritage site by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in July 2008 (Musa & Kuah, 2016). This recognition was a turning point in the mapping of various heritage sites of Penang such as the reinvigoration of George Town heritage sites. The George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) has cooperated with several non-governmental organisations (NGOS), government agencies, and conservation experts in achieving its mandate of preserving and rediscovering Penang heritage. One of the key initiatives currently embarked on by the GTWHI is the project of documenting the oral history of Penang communities (Musa & Kuah, 2016).

The George Town heritage sites illustrate the ethnic identities of the various communities that have lived on the island. This is equally reflected in the street naming of George Town, as well as the religious artefacts of various communities such as mosques, and various temples. It was observed that the heritage sites were purely old houses that once harboured prominent personalities that settled in Penang. This can be seen from the following cultural enclave defined by the GTWHI:
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sn</th>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>St. George Church</td>
<td>Lebuh Farquhar, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Goddess of Mercy Temple</td>
<td>Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Sri Maha Mariamman Temple</td>
<td>Jalan Tanjung Bungah, Tanjung Tokong</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Noordin Family Mausoleum</td>
<td>Lebuh Chulia</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Kapitan Keling Mosque</td>
<td>4, Jalan Buckingham, George Town</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Kapitan Keling Family</td>
<td>14, Jalan Buckingham, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Han Jiang Ancestral Temple</td>
<td>127, Lebuh Chulia, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Lim Kongsi</td>
<td>28, Beach St, George Town</td>
</tr>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Cheah Kongsi</td>
<td>8, Lebuh Armenian, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Central Fire station</td>
<td>Gat Lebuh Chulia, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple</td>
<td>57, Lebuh Armenian, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi</td>
<td>8, Cannon Square, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Yap Temple &amp; Ciji Temple</td>
<td>Lebuh Armenian, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Dr Sun Yat Sen’s Penang base</td>
<td>Lebuh Armenian, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>George Town World Heritage Incorporated</td>
<td>118, Lebuh Acheh, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Syed Al-atas Mansion</td>
<td>Lebuh Armenian, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Acheen Street Malay Mosque</td>
<td>Jalan Lebuh Acheh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Eng Chuan Tong Tan Kongsi</td>
<td>28, Beach St, George Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Boon San Tong Khoo Kongsi</td>
<td>No. 117-A, Victoria Street, George Town</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* George Town World Heritage Incorporated

*Figure 2.* Cultural enclaves of George Town

The above table showcases the various heritage sites of Penang. What is interesting about these cultural enclaves is that they reveal the nature of settlements, identity formation and the geopolitics of space. Going by this, one can view Penang as a settler island populated by diverse ethnic communities from Asia, the Malay Archipelago and of mainland South East Asia. These include the various Malay ethnicities especially the Minangkabaus, and the Achehnese, and from mainland Kedah, the Chinese Peranakans, the Indian Muslims and the Jawi Pekans. The pertinent question is what was the cultural symbol of the Penang communities before the British occupation in 1786?
The above map shows the major heritage sites of Penang. The data shows the Penang heritage sites, and the major streets that harbour them. Prominent streets that harbour Penang history as shown above, comprises Lebuh Acheh, (Masjid Melayu) Lebuh Armenia (hosts, Syed Alatas mansion, and the Sun Yat Sen cultural museum). If heritage is about historical places, then the Penang heritage presents a multi-cultural history of the island.

**George Town Festival**

GTF was conceived as a celebration of George Town Heritage site listing as UNESCO heritage site in 2008. Its major mission is “to become the platform for culture and the arts in South-East Asia, with a focus on George Town’s unique perspective” (GTF Handbook, 2014). However, the roadmap towards the transformation of the celebration into an annual festival did not come to fruition at early inception. None of the proposed local groups (Art Alliance, Heritage Groups & Chinese Clans) wished to hold the responsibility of carrying out the festival. A mandate was given to Joe Sidek to design a road map for the implementation of the Festival (Sidek, 2013).

The GTF, as a popular space of narrating the Penang history has featured various performances by local and international artists since its inception in 2010. Pertinent
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to this article is the Eurasian Heritage Fest 2015 featured in the 2015 GTF programme. The GTF programme handbook in 2015 provides that “Eurasians heritage Fest 2015 is a two-day event showcasing the best of Eurasian culture in one place. Events include talks on and by prominent Eurasian families and personalities in Penang and Malaysia, a food and music extravaganza featuring Eurasian food stalls and bands, a Eurasian tea party and more” (GTF Booklet 2015, p. 19).

It is argued here that the featuring of Eurasian Fest alongside the GTF reinforces a particular consciousness regarding the place and space of the Eurasian community in Penang. This representation is further portrayed by the article “Mapping a Colourful History” by Augustin (2015). This article was written in conjunction with the George Town Festival, ending on 31st August, 2015. The article argues that Eurasians are a founding community of Penang and “were invited to help the British administration work with the various local communities to build this new settlement.” Hence the article suggests that the representation of Eurasians has become important given their founding status in Penang. The representation of Eurasians as the founding community lends a marginal place to the earlier founding community, that is, the Malays. Since the beginning of the GTF in 2010, there has been representations of several communities, including ethnic minorities, mainly categorically representing the Chinese, Indians, Indian Muslims and Eurasians. By this, their narrative and historical relevance in Penang heritage have continued to be celebrated. Nevertheless, that historical space continues to be misrepresented and therefore distorted.

Source: George Town Festival Office
DISCUSSION

As noted in the introduction, this paper seeks to examine the kinds of historical consciousness espoused through the Penang heritage and programmes focusing on the George Town Heritage sites and the GTF. The analysis suggests the following: (1) The Penang heritage sites depicts a settler version of Penang history. This is signified by the presence of historical, cultural and religious artefacts of various settler communities - the street naming of Penang further illuminates this version of history; (2) both George Town heritage sites and GTF suggest the importance of British occupation of Penang in 1786, via the arrival of Light. The listing of Fort Cornwallis as a historical site of Penang suggests a Eurocentric representation of history commencing in 1786.

Therefore, it is contended that little attention has been paid to oral history in the articulation of Penang heritage (Musa & Kuah, 2016). This requires the need to pay attention to the history that antedates Francis Light in 1786. Subsequently, it is also argued here that the power of representation has portrayed the history of Penang after the image of the British occupation.

It is noteworthy that the GTF aims at “preserving Penang and Malaysian unique traditions and cultures for the future generation” (Sidek, 2014). Since the inauguration of the GTF in 2010 up to the present time, it has featured cultural exhibitions, and representations by the various ethnic communities. The GTF has been successful in narrating the colourful presence of the settler communities in Penang. However, the organisers tend to ignore the narratives and history of earliest founding communities that developed Penang and its proximities prior to 1786. Mindful that GTF is dominantly an arts festival, it has to be emphasised that the history of Penang antedates the 1786 moment, as the most prominent historical reference to Penang history.

Meanwhile, the memories of the Malay communities and other oral traditions suggest that Penang had a developed community before the British occupation of the island. Light’s arrival should not be seen as the beginning of the Penang historical journey. In fact, the pioneer Malays on the island had already formed and settled in places such as Batu Uban. The organisers of the GTF need to revisit this part of history, and resonate that spirit in GTF aesthetics and performances. No account of Penang history will be complete without due reference to the pre-colonial history of the island. The important personalities worth reckoning include Dato’ Keramat, Nakhoda Nan Intan (Haji Muhammad Salleh), Dato’ Jenaton, Nakhoda Kechil (Ismail) and Dato’ Setia.

Despite the fact that Francis Light’s status was also a nakhoda, that of a merchant ship belonging to the Madras-based firm Jourdain, Sullivan and de Souza, he was never an employee of the English East India Company although he had a brief stint with the Royal Navy as a midshipman. While the Seranis have appropriated Francis Light Farsi word adopted in Bahasa Melayu which means captain Malay name for Eurasians
as one who invited the community to the island, GTF seems to alienate the original founding community that had mapped out the geography of Penang. This amnesia for the original founding community – the community that gave the various names of places on the island long even before Light expressed his interest from Ujung Salang (Phuket) in 1771. If at all the GTF aims at preserving Penang and Malaysia’s unique traditions and cultures for future generations as stated in the GTF programme booklet, then the island’s historical identities and heritage should not be subdued. It must be represented and narrated.

It needs to be further stressed that prior to 1786 the Malay communities had settled in the island decades before. Hence, reference to Light and the 1786 moment is a memory of the colonial past. The years 1734 and 1749 are equally significant for they are connected to the personalities who, like Light, have a history, a genealogy and numerous descendants contributing to the history and development of the nation and the region. People appear to be oblivious of the two dates and may not see the significance of events prior to 1786.

Both the GTF and the George Town heritage sites seem to be a representation of the colonial past, without reference to the earlier past on the history of Penang island and George Town. The latter two are recorded in the memory and experiences of Malay stories. Then, oral histories should be an important repository of documenting the history of Penang.

The historical narratives seem to be one sided emphasising one aspect at the expense of the other. If Light had contacts with the two Sultans of Kedah, then it is conceivable to stress that the early Malays in the geographical proximities also made contact with the Sultan. It is pertinent to refer to Mencari Bako (1983) by Abdul Aziz Ishak,

The GTF needs to revisit the oral histories of Penang island and its proximities. Similarly, the George Town heritage sites need to encompass pre-colonial historical places such as Jelutong, Gelugor, and Batu Uban. These communities created the original founding community in Penang, whose descendants are now concentrated in such areas as various parts of Kedah and Perak, the Klang Valley, and throughout Malaysia and parts of Southeast Asia and beyond. Some are beacons and leaders of the nation’s political and intellectual life. They founded institutions that were to be integral to the nation’s history. The GTF platform must commemorate that journey that began from Penang. With no founding narrative, the GTF and Penang heritage sites would be an alienation of local history.

CONCLUSION
The two spaces of heritage discussed above indicate two major trajectories of Penang history. First, it shows the relevance of the colonial history in the representation of Penang dating back to the British occupation in 1786. Second, the major cultural spaces outlined by George Town World Heritage
sites indicate the relevance of the said settler communities. Most of them settled on the island in early part of the 19th century as can be seen in the historiography of various heritage sites. We extrapolate that the current Penang cultural heritage and history show little about the presence of Malay communities and their heritage on the island. Hence, Penang, as is portrayed historically, and contemporaneously, represents a colonial past, and a settler society of various communities.

It is the contention of this paper that what is presented as George Town heritage as articulated in both spaces represent a dominant revisionist discourse, with its power of defining and representing. Such a discourse says little about the history of earliest founding community of Penang (Malay communities), whose discourse was not narrated, nor fairly represented. It is evident that both the Penang heritage sites and the GTF portrayed a colonial vis-à-vis multicultural history of Penang. The former gives eminence to Francis Light as the founder in 1786, while the latter depicts the significance of George Town as a settler community.

However, these hegemonic history should not in any way preclude the presence of Malay communities prior to both Francis Light and the advent of subsequent settler communities, which suggest the overarching influence of the paradigm of representation in the discourse of culture and heritage. It exacerbates the assimilation of the dominant paradigm, through hegemony and the manufacturing of consent. We contend that this representation is bias, and ignorant of the earliest history of the Malay communities on the island such as Batu Uban, Tanjong Penaga and Jelutong. Narrating and representing history requires attention, in re-reading and decolonising the narrative through oral / local history, as a counter-hegemonic response to the dominant paradigm.

This requires the state, civil societies and the academia to review the rich resources in the humanities (local history, culture, civilisation, values) in charting a new vision for Penang historiography. This will contribute in unveiling the contributions, and presence of pre-colonial communities and their heritage. This study shows that Penang history, which is presented in the two spaces mentioned is an aberration to local history.

REFERENCES


