

‘ISLANDING SINGAPURA’: RECLAIMING THE NATION’S MARITIME HERITAGES



Despite the moniker of Singapore as an ‘island’ nation, lesser known is how the nation used to consist of more than 60 offshore islands, in addition to the mainland itself. Over the years, many of these islands have undergone massive changes, both in form, content and practices, brought about by processes such as land reclamation and other developments done in the service of the mainland. Not only has this resulted in the number of offshore islands reduced (and only a few made publicly accessible), but also the complete disruption of the lives and livelihoods of former island inhabitants (most of whom resettled to the mainland since the early 1970s), as well as the loss of much of the tangible/intangible natural and cultural heritages associated with these islands. In addition, the drawing of national borders had also diminished the salience of networks between this nation of islands to each other and to the wider region, such as, among others, Riau in Indonesia and Johore in Malaysia, thus impacting those whose very identities may have or are still straddled across these artificial boundaries. Using the word ‘reclaim’ in the title as a double entendre, this workshop focuses on two key objectives: (1) to highlight the ways in which the many islands around Singapore – as well as their inhabitants – may have been affected over time (such as through the reclaiming of land), and (2) reclaiming the now muted maritime heritages of Singapore/Singapura and how there were rich connections between the offshore islands; the islands and the mainland; as well as beyond.

Date: 30 April 2024.

Venue: AS8-04-04.

Time 0900hrs.

Supported by:

Department of Southeast Asian Studies, NUS; National Heritage Board; My Community.

PROGRAMME

0830-0900 Registration.

0900-0915 Welcome note – Vathana Pholsena, Head, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, NUS.

0915-0930 Introduction to the workshop – by Hamzah Muzaini, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, NUS

0930-1015

The Watery World

Cynthia Chou (via Zoom)

1015-1030 Break

1030-1115

Diving into the Tebrau Strait: Connecting People, Fisheries and Memories
Serina Rahman

1115-1200

Once Upon A Time in Pulau Seking
Vivienne Wee and Geoffrey Benjamin

1200-1330 LUNCH

1330-1415

Tracing Memory and Documenting the Lost Landscapes of Jurong Island
Hadi Osni

1415-1500

How We Island: Artistic Labour as Territorial Reclamation
Wong Chen-Hsi

1500-1515 Break

1515-1600

Archipelagic Indigeneity, Interconnections, and Strategies of Control
Imran Tajudeen

1600-1615

Concluding Remarks - Hamzah Muzaini

SPEAKERS' ABSTRACTS

The Watery World

Cynthia Chou

(Via Zoom)

For centuries, the maritime waters now encompassing the nation-states of Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and Thailand have constituted the life and living spaces of mobile fishing communities such as that of the Orang Suku Laut (Tribal People of the Sea). Despite geographical and cultural barriers, these mariners gained mastery of the seas and integrated communities as well as regions via a complex network of kinship-infused cultural-economic units. From this network, crucial communication, international trading and exchange relationships were established. With a focus on Singapore's expansion of its landmass by way of land reclamation from its surrounding waters, the repurposing of its offshore islands and the strengthening of its borders, this paper explores the impact of these developments on the tangible/intangible natural and cultural heritage of the people of the sea. Singapore's spatial imaginings are often premised upon the island state's understanding of land-based people's appropriation of space. This paper takes on a conceptual shift to explore the impact of these changes. First, it moves beyond a land-based perspective. Secondly, it explores sea-based nomadic people's spatial imaginings. Through a discussion of indigenous narratives, histories and geographies, this paper aims to widen the inquiry into Singapore's maritime heritage.

Diving into the Tebrau Strait:

Connecting People, Fisheries and Memories

Serina Rahman

The Tebrau Strait was once merely a broad waterway that separated mainland Malaya with Singapore, then a single inclusive entity. Immediately post-separation, residents along the strait continued to cross its waters unaffected by the new imaginary divisions that resulted from politics and nationhood. It was only in the early 1980s that more solid boundaries appeared; electric fencing on the Singapore side and passport controls. Gone were the days when people could paddle across to shop, sell goods and produce, or meet with family. But before the borders tightened, some from Singapore's southern islands had moved to Mukim Tanjung Kupang, on the western end of the Malaysian side of the Tebrau Strait. These were fishermen who could not bear the thought of being confined in tiny HDB flats far from their open sea. Today some of these folk still fish in the familiar waters between Singapore and Malaysia, sailing a near invisible path between neighbouring entities, yet belonging to both sides. More oblivious to and unconcerned about the boundaries, are their prey - myriad fish and other marine species that live in these narrow coastal habitats. These men and marine creatures are the last flailing legacy of what used to be a thriving artisanal fishery. This paper traces the evolution of that heritage, its human, habitat and species links between the northern and southern coasts of the Tebrau Strait and contemplates its narrowing future.

Once Upon A Time in Pulau Seking *Vivienne Wee and Geoffrey Benjamin*

Once upon a time, Pulau Seking was an island. Now, it is a road in the Semakau Landfill that requires official permission to visit. Based on ethnographic field research conducted from 1980 to 1994, our paper and the accompanying photographs describe Pulau Seking as it was when it was the last of the Southern Islands to be inhabited by Singapore's indigenes, the *Orang Selat* (People of the Straits). The paper will be presented by Vivienne Wee and illustrated by appropriate photographs taken by Geoffrey Benjamin. The questions to be addressed are: (1) Who are Singapore's indigenes? (2) How did they live? (3) What patterns of social relations previously existed on Pulau Seking? (4) Where are the people of Pulau Seking and other indigenous communities now? Since it is no longer possible to visit Pulau Seking as an island, our paper and photographs are offered as a historical record of what once existed but no longer exists.

Tracing Memories of the Nine Islands of Selat Sembilan *Hadi Osni (and Hamzah Muzaini)*

Jurong Island has evolved over the past five decades through the amalgamation of various small offshore islands. Once home to diverse communities, including Malay and indigenous groups, these islands witnessed drastic transformations that displaced them and reshaped their visible landscapes. Our research generally documents individual offshore islands now comprising Jurong Island to shed light on the lives and livelihoods of former inhabitants and how these were impacted by industrialisation and resettlement, primarily using traditional archival research methods (e.g., oral interviews, photo elicitations, etc.) and supplemented by GIS technology to reconstruct the histories (and visualities) of these vanished landscapes.

The presentation provides an overview of the cartographical documentation of the Jurong Islands' islands, natural features, and settlements, including Pulau Samulun, Pulau Merlimau, Pulau Seraya, and Pulau Ayer Merbau. It explores the etymology of island names, settlements, natural features, practices and traditions associated with growing up on the islands and notable personalities. We then map the timeline of industrialisation on the islands and the islanders' resettlement to the mainland.

However, this research has not been without its challenges. In this presentation, we also explore some of the complexities of utilising memory as a source to reconstruct the lost landscapes of Jurong Island. We also explore the intertwined nature of personal, cognitive, and habitual memory in the recollections of former inhabitants to offer insights into individual identities, socio-spatial practices, and collective knowledge of the island's layout and activities.

How We Island: Artistic Labour as Territorial Reclamation

Wong Chen-Hsi

Singaporeans tend to think of themselves as urban dwellers and participants in a far-reaching economic network; most have little interaction with the islets and pelagic spaces which immediately constitute the nation-state. Decades of environmental intervention and cycles of erasure and terra-forming, as well as large-scale resettlement of native communities, have deeply transformed social and living spaces and produced a feeling of mutability and impermanence. The impact on the individual and on communities is often one of alienation and rupture from the native land. This research presents a brief audit of a little mapped territory - of the artistic labours and cultural artefacts which strive to order and make sense of the psychic discontinuity resulting from the country's ever-changing spatial landscapes. Many of these works – films, novels, songs, plays, video art, photographs - engage with themes of psychic amputation, erasure, memory loss and re-formation, dislocation and disruption, as well as a desire for collective healing. This paper approaches these artistic consequences of human labour as resources, evidentiary records and markers of otherwise marginalised territories – of emotional and experiential ecologies as legitimate sites of information.

Archipelagic Indigeneity, Interconnections, and Strategies of Control - *Imran Tajudeen*

This paper presents an overview of themes that emerged from research and interviews involving the islands of Seking, Sudong, Brani, and Ubin, and of Singapore's eastern coastal kampungs at Bedok, Ayer Gemuroh, Kuchai Lorong 3, and Kallang. Focusing on their interlinked threads, the presentation looks at clues and stories from houses, familial links, migration and settlement shifts, activities organised and other initiatives, the development of facilities, and alliances and hierarchical relations of headmen and governance. The discussion adopts a dialectical perspective to ground-up connections and top-down plans concerning archipelagic indigeneity and its dynamic historical interconnection on one hand, and its relationship to successive governance regimes and strategies of formalisation of control by Malay kingdoms, the colonial government and post-independence nation-state on the other hand. The first theme examines the diverse nature of the islanders' origins and self-ascribed identity differentiation, both internal and comparative. To this end, the memories and stories of origins, movements, and an analysis of place naming conventions across Singapore's coasts and islands will be discussed in relation to customary practices of Orang Selat/Laut and Melayu, and the significance of the names in our interpretation of degrees of indigenisation or localisation of regional archipelagic groups, particularly Javanese and Bugis, to the maritime-oriented settlement contexts of Singapore. In the second theme, the significance of the stories of individual islands and coasts are contextualised against a comparative look at the development of infrastructures of control. Taking a *longue durée* view, the overall shifts in the attitudes and strategies of those with power over maritime settlements is read in terms of changing notions of their instrumentalization and subjugation to what traditional/ customary, colonial and post-independence governments perceived to be their priorities. The discussion concludes with a look at the challenge facing the last remaining sites of living offshore islander heritage: Pulau Ubin's social and cultural survivals and the questions surrounding their continuity and viability.

BIOGRAPHIES OF SPEAKERS

Cynthia Chou is the Director of the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, C. Maxwell and Elizabeth M. Stanley Family Chair of Asian Studies and Professor of Anthropology at the University of Iowa. Her primary research has centred on a longitudinal ethnographic study of the orang suku laut in Indonesia. Her research has focused on their social life and their understanding of territories and borders. She received her M. Soc. Sc. from the National University of Singapore and her Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the University of Cambridge. In 2011, she was awarded the degree of DPhil by the University of Copenhagen for her contributions to the study of the orang suku laut.

Serina Rahman is a Southeast Asian Studies Department (NUS) lecturer, teaching environmental politics; religion, magic, and anything about Southeast Asia by sea. Trained as a conservation scientist specialising in seagrass human-habitat interactions, her practice is in community empowerment through citizen science, community research and ecotourism. She also studies artisanal fisheries resource management; all of which is done at Kelab Alami, a community organisation in Johor, Malaysia that she co-founded in 2008. Her work to support this community and its efforts to participate in and benefit from encroaching urbanisation has earned both the organization and herself myriad awards and media recognition. Her research also includes (un)sustainable development (especially Forest City), Malaysian rural politics and political ecology. Serina is an Iskandar Malaysia Social Hero Award Winner for Environmental Protection (2014), is Malaysia's Ambassador for Citizen Science Asia, a UN-affiliated organization, and was highlighted as a Channel News Asia Climate Warrior in 2021.

Vivienne Wee obtained her PhD in Anthropology from the Australian National University, MSocSc from the University of Singapore, and Bachelor's degrees in Music and Anthropology from the University of Minnesota. She was Associate Professor at The Chinese University of Hong Kong and the City University of Hong Kong after lecturing at the National University of Singapore. Her decades-long field research has been conducted with the indigenes of the Riau-Lingga Islands of Indonesia. In Singapore, she was fortunate to have done field research in Pulau Seking, the last of the inhabited Southern Islands.

Geoffrey Benjamin studied biology, social anthropology, and linguistics at the University of Cambridge, where he also obtained his PhD in Social Anthropology (1967) for a thesis on Temiar Religion. He has taught anthropology, sociology and linguistics at the former University of Singapore, the Australian National University, the National University of Singapore and (currently in Linguistics) at Nanyang Technological University. His ethnographic and linguistic research has focused on the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia and on the region's Malays. He has also been researching in Singapore and Indonesia's Riau Islands. His publications cover the languages, societies, cultures and music of the Malay World, as well as areas of general sociocultural theory. They include the 20-chapter collection (co-edited with Cynthia Chou) *Tribal Communities in the Malay Word: Historical, Social and Cultural Perspectives* (IIAS/ISEAS, 2002) and the monograph *Temiar Religion, 1964–2012: Enchantment, Disenchantment and Re-enchantment in Malaysia's Uplands* (NUS Press, 2014). A further monograph, *Between Isthmus and Islands: An Anthropological History of the Malay World*, is near completion for publication by ISEAS.

Hadi Osni is a Senior Community Researcher at My Community Limited, facilitating community partnerships and leading heritage research projects. In 2023, Hadi Osni earned his Ph.D. from the National University of Singapore (NUS). His thesis centres on digitally reconstructing lost architecture by utilising the memory of former residents. He was awarded the second prize in the 2017 Berkeley Essay Prize Competition for ‘The Baweanese Ponthuk: Ponthuk Tampilung’. In 2018, he made contributions from his research to Ponthuk Bawean di Singapura, a publication by the Baweanese Association of Singapore supported by the National Heritage Board.

Chen-Hsi Wong is a filmmaker and educator who has practised in both independent and commercial cinema. Her practice-based research has explored ideas about social dislocation, urbanity, citizen narratives, marginalised bodies, and statehood. Her current research interests focus on climate change and its impact on intangible heritage, cultural labour, constructions of islandhood, and environmental mapping. Her films have won awards and screened in many leading international festivals. Chen-Hsi is an Associate Professor and Acting Chair of the School of Art Design Media at NTU. She received her MFA from USC School of Cinematic Arts in Los Angeles.

Imran bin Tajudeen is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Malay Studies and the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, where he teaches topics on identity and representation through the arts, built heritage, and urban history in Singapore and maritime Southeast Asia. He researches the material and discursive outcomes of the colonial encounter on the heritage construction of vernacular architecture and indigenous urbanism, traditional settlements, and their associated tropes. He also examines Southeast Asia’s historical mosque forms and ornaments in the context of transregional interactions and translations across the region’s vernacular and Indic architectural legacies and under colonial rule. His doctoral dissertation on these topics (NUS, 2009) won the ICAS Book Prize in 2011. He is co-editor of Southeast Asia’s Modern Architecture (2018). He was postdoctoral fellow at MIT’s Aga Khan Program (2009–10) and the IAS in Leiden (2010–11), and Mutawa Visiting Fellow at OXCIS (Oxford, 2019-2020; 2022). He is currently working on a monograph on maritime Southeast Asia’s mosques, royal gardens and palaces of the 15th to early 20th centuries.

Hamzah Muzaini is a cultural geographer with the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, NUS. His research interests pertain to the geographies and politics of heritage, memory and remembrance. He is the co-author of *Contested Memoryscapes: The Politics of Second World War Commemoration in Singapore* (with Brenda Yeoh, 2016, Routledge) and co-editor of *After Heritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage from Below* (with Claudio Minca, 2018, Edward Elgar). He has also published extensively in peer reviewed journals on topics which includes, among others, war remembrance in Singapore and Malaysia, cultural theme parks in Southeast Asia and the heritage politics of the Moluccan community in the Netherlands. His latest project relates to the history and heritage of the Southern Islands in Singapore, focusing specifically on bringing back lost (hi)stories of St John’s Island (Pulau Sekijang Bendera), Lazarus Island (Pulau Sekijang Pelepah), Seringat Island, and the many islands that make up Jurong Island today.

