ACCOUNTS BY MERCHANTS, TRAVELLERS AND MISSIONARIES AS HISTORICAL SOURCE FOR THE STUDY OF THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY

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OBJECTIVE
To prove that the accounts of the Malay Archipelago particularly Malay Peninsula by the Merchants, Travellers and Missionaries are historical source for the study of this part of the world in the 18th and 19th century.
MERCHANTS/TRADERS
• Merchants/Traders were in the Malay Archipelago before the presence of western powers.

• European merchants became actively involved during the age of exploration with the formation of European trading companies like EIC, VOC and etc.
• In the Malay Peninsula, country traders/private traders went against the orders of EIC not to trade here in 1657 and their activities provided a historical clue for the study of the Malay Archipelago.

• Country traders (CT) played a vital role in the Malay states when the official policy of the British was not to intervene. Prominent CT were Francis Light, James Scott and Thomas Forrest.
ACCOUNTS OF COUNTRY TRADERS AS A SOURCE FOR THE STUDY OF THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO
Prosperity of the Malay States

• Highlighted the richness of the Malay states in the 18 century. This came to light from the report provided by the CT who visited Malay states like Kuala Terengganu and other states.

• Gave detailed information on the economic activities of the Malay states and its product.
• Malay rulers had cordial relations with country traders and foreign traders and were willing to fulfill their needs.

• This proofs that Malay rulers in the 18th century had a policy of accommodation towards foreign traders.

• Without the information provided by the country traders, less information would have been available about 18 century Malay states.
Accommodative Policy of the Malay Rulers

• The cordial relations established by the country traders created the opportunity for the Malay rulers to implement a policy of accommodation towards the foreigners.

• Malay rulers could now sell their products to traders who were willing to offer a higher price.
• The policy of open and free trading enabled local rulers to sign different treaties with country traders, even when they have already signed treaties with the Dutch.

• The accommodative nature of the Malay rulers and their craftiness comes to light through written sources attributed to country traders and their activities.
Laissez-Faire Policy in the Malay Archipelago

- Through the writings of country traders and traders operating in this part of the world the British officials came to be aware that laissez faire policy had been practiced here long before foreign commercial presence.

- If such a policy had not existed, foreigners would have employed gunboat diplomacy to achieve their ambitions.

- The fact that free trade and free ports existed in the Malay Archipelago was brought to the fore by Francis Light, the founder of Penang and Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore.
TRAVELLERS
• Normally refers to those travelling to new places for recreation or pleasure and not for economic activities.

• Their writings contributed information which could be considered as a historical source for the study of the Malay Archipelago, particularly the Malay states in the 18 and 19 century.

• Travellers too make judgments on contemporary affairs which appeal to the modern historian.

- Isabella is a traveller and writer who travelled to Malaya in 1879 at the age of 47, five years after official intervention by the British in Malaya.

- Her book *The Golden Chersonese* which was published in 1883 comprised a series of letters she wrote while travelling in the Malay States (for five weeks from January-February 1879) to her sister Henrietta in Edinburgh.
• Her description and evaluation of certain historical events remains as a source to study history of Malaya in the 19 century.

• She recorded her impressions of every place she visited so vividly. Isabella has a superbly trained gift of observation, description and thirst of information.
• She views the Malays as an enlightened race compared to what was perceived by the British administrators.

• Her view contradicts with the accepted perceptions of the British officials that Malays are not civilised. Frank Swettenham expresses his views in his book, *The Real Malay*: “There was a strong belief that Malays were treacherous by nature and pirates by trade, and that there were no special inducements for a white man to trust himself in such a barbarous country”.
Isabella explained vividly the character of the Chinese and why they were dominant in Malaya. To quote her, “*The Chinese promise to be in some sort the commercial rulers of the Straits. It is by their capital, industry and enterprise that the resources of the Peninsula are being developed*”. It explains why they were relied upon by British administrators and capitalists developing agriculture and mining in the Malay states.
• Isabella also highlighted the role of Yap Ah Loy, a prominent Chinese businessman who developed Kuala Lumpur in the 1880s but was not recognised.

• She therefore considered it proper for him to be accorded due recognition for his services awarding him with either St. Michael or St. George.
• Ah Loy’s place in history has been totally sidelined in modern Malaysian history. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) made proposal on 26 April to honor KL founder.

• The only reminder of this great hero is a small road in the city centre that has been named after him.

• The grousse pointed out by Isabella 100 years ago are being repeated by the Chinese community in the 21 century.
Views of the Indians

• Isabella’s view with regard to the Indian race does explain why Indians fail in modern day Malaysia. She compares them to other races and her conclusion is that Indians lack fibre and not quick-sighted.

• The situation is the same in the present day Malaysia.
• In a news report, the *New Straits Times*, 27 April 2009, the Government exhorted the Indian community to emulate the Chinese in grabbing investment and business opportunities.

• In other words Indians are asked to be like what was said by Frank Swettenham of the Chinese in his book the *Real Malay*: “They [Chinese] are the bees who suck the honey from every profitable undertaking.”
Views on Intervention in Perak & the Assassination of Birch, the first British Resident in the state of Perak

- Isabella made political comments relating to the reaction to the assassination of J.W. Birch, the first Resident of British in Perak.

- Isabella was of the opinion that the British failed to heed the views of the locals and always imposing their superiority over the locals without realising that the latter had a superior civilisation.
MISSIONARIES
• Missionaries were generally interested in the native population and helped to increase converts to Christianity.

• In the Malay states, Missionary society was formed with the objective of spreading Christianity, to publish and distribute scripture in the vernacular and to teach the youths to read and write. Missionaries were encouraged to produce Christian books, propaganda and text.
Origin of Missionary Activity in the Straits Settlements

- London Missionary Society (LMS) established a printing press in Malacca named *Mission Press* (1815) whose branches were formed in Penang (1819) and Singapore in (1822).

- *Mission Press* published Christian and non- religious works and it appeared in the various vernacular languages.

- The publication in Malay was mainly of the Bible, interpretation of the Bible, religious treatise and prayers. In 1819 about 54,000 printing materials were published in Chinese and 19,000 in Malay.
Reaction of Natives to the Spread of Christianity

• The natives reacted strongly to the missionaries efforts to Christianise the locals.

• The controversial publication of Beighton was *Comparison of the Religion of Jesus with the Religion of Muhammad, the Rise of Christianity* and a pamphlet with the title *Pengajaran. Comparison of the Religions* was an attempt to belittle Al Quran and praise the Bible. Malay leaders were of the opinion that these writings were crude, insulting and belittled Islam and its followers.
The Malays complained to the Governor of Penang and wanted Beighton to be restrained from distributing such materials. The latter was, however, able to convince the Governor that most of them were translation work intended to stimulate inquiry.

The explanation was contained in his “Letter to Mohammetans”, in which he stressed that Abdullah Munshi had helped in the publishing work.
• The reaction of the natives towards Christianity is something which is not studied in Malaysian history.

• It is only through the writings of the missionaries that one could acquire information with regard to how the natives reacted to the missionaries attempt to spread gospel or Christian teachings.
Early historical works of the time were published by Missionary societies. Without their efforts Malaysian history would have been incomplete.

A number of notable historical publications of the societies are listed below:


- **Notices of the Indian Archipelago, and Adjacent Countries; Being a Collection of Papers Relating to Borneo, Celebes, Java, Sumatra, Nias the Philippine Islands, Sulus, Siam, Cochin China, Malayan Peninsula & Etc**, Singapore, Mission Press, 1837.

- **Comparison of the Religion of Jesus with the Religion of Mohammed. Prophet of the Arabs in Mecca**, printed in Penang by Reverend Thomas Beighton in the year 1839. (Translation)


• Publication of the Journal of the Indian Archipelago need to be noted because the first two volumes was published by Mission Press and was subscribed for the use of the East India Company. This indicated the value of the information contained in this journal for the Company, which had economic and political interests in this part of the world.

• The local residents contributed many writings pertaining to the Archipelago which were believed to have helped the Englishmen to be better acquainted with the Archipelago and its resources.
Finally through the activities of the missionaries one is able to arrive at different interpretations of historical events, which may contradict official opinion.

One good example is the view of the Naning War by John Henry Moor in *Malacca Observer* from September 1826-October 1829.
• Moor appeared to disagree with the Government mission in Naning. This is indeed amazing or surprising as publications are expected to be in line with Government policies. He had to step down as the editor, as he had made remarks which were not favorable to the government.

• Recent findings do explain that Moor’s interpretation or view was right. East India Company was unfair in its dealing with the ruler of Naning.
CONCLUSION
• Merchants, Travellers and Missionaries contributed enormously to the historiography of Malaya and Malay Archipelago.

• It was only through the activities and writings of the merchants and traders that the British could gather vital information about economic activities and products in the Malay Archipelago.

• The travellers accounts provided an objective account of the events in Malaya for the modern day historian. The interpretations are valid for historical research.
Missionaries undertook to document writings of the locals, although their main objective was to christianise the locals. It was only through the work of the London Missionary Society that Mission Press was established in Singapore and many historical works in the form of books, translations and journals were published and circulated to East India Company officials, professionals and lay men.

The missionary views contradicted with the world view of the colonial times, and are surprisingly in consonance with the views which came to be popularly accepted in the post-colonial era.

Strongly enough post-colonial thoughts had existed even during the colonial period, in the thoughts expressed by foreign travellers and Christian missionaries.
THANK YOU

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