

Bencoolen Lives:  
the long aftermath of the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty

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15 July 2016

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## List of Abbreviations

BPC	Bengal Public Consultations
Coll.	Collection
EIC	East India Company
IOR	India Office Records
IJC	India Judicial Consultations
IPC	India Public Consultations
IPFC	India Political & Foreign Consultations
NAS	National Archives of Singapore
SFP	<i>The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser</i>
SSR	Straits Settlements Records
ST	<i>The Straits Times</i>
VOC	<i>Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie</i> (Dutch East India Company)

## Introduction

“The transfer of this settlement to the Dutch (in exchange for Malacca) in 1825, was a severe blow and great disappointment to all the natives, both high and low. At a meeting of chiefs held at the Government house, at which the English and Dutch authorities were both present, for the purpose of completing the transfer, the senior Rajah rose to address the assembly, and spoke to the following effect:

‘Against this transfer of my country I protest. Who is there possessed of authority to hand me and my countrymen, like so many cattle, over to the Dutch or to any other power? If the English are tired of us, let them go away; but I deny their right to hand us over to the Dutch...’<sup>1</sup>

The early nineteenth century saw a number of transfers of colonial power in the Indian Ocean world. The Napoleonic Wars alone saw the transfer of the Ceylon from the Dutch government to the British (1802), the Cape Colony between the same regimes (1814), and the invasion of French Mauritius (1810) and its subsequent British dominance. At the same time, Britain also occupied the Dutch East Indies between 1811 to 1816, returning it to the Netherlands after the wars. In 1824, the British and Dutch governments concluded a treaty providing for the transfer of colonial territories between the two: a line of influence was drawn, and what is today Southeast Asia was divided into British and Dutch spheres. The British East India Company factory at Bencoolen, on the west coast of the island of Sumatra, now falling into the Dutch sphere, would be traded for the Dutch possession of Malacca, on the Malay peninsula and now in the British sphere. On the surface, then, the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty provided for a transfer of power between two colonial regimes heedless of the wishes of their indigenous population, as the Bencoolen Raja alleged.

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<sup>1</sup> G. F. Davidson, *Trade and Travel in the Far East: Or Recollections of Twenty-One Years Passed in Java, Singapore, Australia and China*. (London: Madden and Malcolm, 1846), 81–82.

The 1824 treaty was the culmination of years of Anglo-Dutch rivalry in the region.<sup>2</sup> This rivalry had long roots; the British arrival at Bencoolen in 1685 had been precipitated by their expulsion from Banten in Dutch-dominated Java.<sup>3</sup> More recently, the decision by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen, Sir Stamford Raffles, to establish a trading post on the island of Singapore in 1819 had upset the Dutch, who saw the island as part of their sphere of influence. After several years of negotiations by the Dutch and British governments, an agreement was reached in the 1824 Treaty of London. Among other terms, the British would surrender Bencoolen to the Dutch. In turn, the Dutch would abandon their claims on Singapore, and transfer their holdings in Malacca to the British. More than anything, this Anglo-Dutch treaty is remarkable for how it has shaped the nation-states of South-east Asia; the modern scholar of nationalism, Benedict Anderson, observed the concordance between modern Indonesia and the Dutch East Indies.<sup>4</sup>

For a process that was common during the colonial period, however, little has been written about the impact of colonial transfers of power, even as the impact of the transfer lasted long beyond the handover date. In Ceylon, Alicia Schrikker has shown how the new British Governors had to accommodate Dutch residents' demands, along with pre-existing relationships with indigenous powers. Indeed, Dutch ideas on Ceylonese society continued to shape British approaches

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Nicholas Tarling, *Anglo-Dutch Rivalry in the Malay World, 1780-1824* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Y. Andaya, 'Interactions with the Outside World and Adaptation in Southeast Asian Society', in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 358, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521355056.008>; John Bastin, *The British in West Sumatra (1685-1825): A Selection of Documents, Mainly from the East India Company Records Preserved in the India Office Library, Commonwealth Relations Office, London* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965), xi–xxii.

<sup>4</sup> And, by extension, Malaysia with (more or less) the former British possessions in Malaya and Borneo. See Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed., 2nd ed (London ; New York: Verso, 1991), 120–121; 176. As he observes:

“Some of the peoples on the eastern coast of Sumatra are not only physically close, across the narrow Straits of Malacca; to the populations of the western littoral of the Malay Peninsula, but they are ethnically related, understand each other's speech, have a common religion, and so forth. These same Sumatrans share neither mother-tongue, ethnicity, nor religion with the Ambonese, located on islands thousands of miles away to the east. Yet during this century they have come to understand the Ambonese as fellow-Indonesians, the Malays as foreigners.”

to their new territories.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, commenting on scholarship on decolonisation (a 20<sup>th</sup> century transfer of power), Farina Mir observes that historiographical understandings have shifted from seeing decolonisation as “event” or “moment”—manifested in a “transfer of power” between two metropolises (colonial to national)—to viewing it as a longer process.<sup>6</sup> Much the same could be said about transfers of power between colonial regimes. Surprisingly, this is a aspect of transition that appears to have been elided in histories of Malacca or Mauritius.

The case of Bencoolen’s transition has been particularly overlooked. While the international politics of the transfer have been addressed by historians like Nicholas Tarling, no study similar to Schrikker’s has been done. When Raffles, newly appointed as Lieutenant-Governor, arrived at his post in 1818, he held its station in a position of withering contempt. Understandably so, perhaps, for compared to Java—the island the British held for five years during the Napoleonic wars, and site of Raffles’ last Governorship—Bencoolen was indeed ‘the most wretched place.’<sup>7</sup> Raffles’ characterisation (unfair or otherwise), continues to persist. In the (English-language) historiography of the region, meanwhile, Bencoolen has been cast in a marginal light, particularly in relation to the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore.

The object of this thesis, then, is to follow the long aftermath of the transfer of power from British Bencoolen to the Netherlands Government. It extends understandings of regime change or “transfers of power” temporally—bringing histories of Bencoolen’s exchange past 1825—but also spatially, placing Bencoolen as one of many Indian Ocean port nodes. Rather than focus on the

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<sup>5</sup> Alicia Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815: Expansion and Reform*, TANAP Monographs on the History of Asian-European Interaction ; Vol. 7. 288424344 (Leiden etc: Brill, 2007); Alicia Schrikker, ‘Caught Between Empires. VOC Families in Sri Lanka after the British Take-Over, 1806-1808’, *Annales de Démographie Historique* n° 122, no. 2 (1 July 2012): 127–47.

<sup>6</sup> F. Mir, ‘AHR Roundtable on The Archives of Decolonization: Introduction’, *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (1 June 2015): 844–51, doi:10.1093/ahr/120.3.844.

<sup>7</sup> Raffles to William Marsden, 7 Apr 1818 in Sophia Raffles and Thomas Stamford Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, F.R.S. &c. Particularly in the Government of Java, 1811-1816, and of Bencoolen and Its Dependencies, 1817-1824: With Details of the Commerce and Resources of the Eastern Archipelago, and Selections from His Correspondence* (John Murray, 1830), 293.

colonial administrators, or military officers that have been the subject of historical writing so far, it looks at the individuals who were affected by the transfer in order to understand colonial transition more generally. These include convicts transported from India, plantation owners (and, by extension, those who worked for them), as well as the Caffrees, who had been emancipated from slavery during Raffles' governorship.

### *Time and Space*

The thesis was born out of a hunch. Working in the British colonial archives for another project, I was struck by how far into the future the legacies of the 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty stretched. Well into the 1850s, there were records of Dutch pensioners in Malacca maintained by the British government, petitions from convicts once despatched to Sumatra, and Bencoolen spice planters turned merchants taking up residence in Singapore. On probing further, it became clear that concerns about Bencoolen did not end with the transfer. Indeed, why were British authorities so preoccupied with matters in a settlement they had divested, or with reminders of previous imperial regimes?

By and large, however, the prevailing historiography of Bencoolen fails to capture this sweep. While there have been several histories of Bencoolen written, all of the English-language accounts take 1825 as their end point, a fact that is apparent from their title: John Bastin's *The British in West Sumatra: 1685—1825*, based on the Sumatra Factory Records (SFR) in the India Office Records collection at the British Library, ends with the transfer of power (just as the SFR does). So too does John Ball's *Indonesian Legal History: British West Sumatra 1685—1825* and Alan Harfield's

*Bencoolen*.<sup>8</sup> Yet the British archives—both in London and at the Straits Settlements Records—give lie to this neat division, as concerns relating to Bencoolen continue to appear well past the handover date.

Because the Treaty of London offered a five-year transition period for the transfer of power, some of the administrative issues related to Bencoolen remained open at the handover date. One of these questions was the situation of emancipated slaves (Caffrees) and convicts and “Bengalees” who had been recipients of a British government pension before 1825, but who remained at Bencoolen after the transfer of power. In 1828, the EIC government at Calcutta despatched a mission under Robert Ibbetson to Bencoolen and Batavia to settle the status of these people; in the wake of the Ibbetson mission, some of the Caffrees were offered passage to Penang, one of the EIC’s Straits Settlements along the Straits of Malacca.

If anything, a sense of Bencoolen’s continuity comes forth from historians writing for the modern Indonesian nation state. Both Firdaus Burhan and Abdullah Sidik—although relying on much the same English sources as Bastin, Ball and Harfield, situate the British period within a much longer span of time, leading up to a period of Dutch colonialism and eventual independence.<sup>9</sup> Still, however, such an approach constrains the impact of Bencoolen unnecessarily geographically, eliding its role within the networks of trade and empire that stretched between the east coast of Africa—where the Caffrees were enslaved from—to India and beyond.

Thus this thesis moves beyond themes of imperial (Anglo/Dutch) rivalries or nationalist understandings that place Bencoolen in relation to the history of Sumatra leading up to Indonesian independence, to situate Bencoolen within a broader Indian Ocean story—one that reaches across

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<sup>8</sup> Bastin, *The British in West Sumatra (1685-1825)*; John fl Ball, *Indonesian Legal History: British West Sumatra 1685-1825* (Sydney: Oughtershaw Press, 1984); Alan Harfield, *Bencoolen : A History of the Honourable East India Company’s Garrison on the West Coast of Sumatra (1685-1825)* (Barton-on-Sea: Aand JPartnership, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Firdaus Burhan, *Bengkulu dalam sejarah*, Cet. 1.. (Jakarta: Yayasan Pengembangan Seni Budaya Nasional Indonesia, 1988), 125–161; Abdullah Siddik, *Sejarah Bengkulu, 1500-1990*, Cet. 1.., Balai Pustaka 851369952 (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1996).

to Madagascar and India to the west, and Penang and Singapore to the east. It challenges the notion that histories of Bencoolen are peripheral to histories of trade and empire in the region. While located on the periphery of British colonial possessions, Bencoolen was by no means *peripheral*, as the following chapters will illustrate. Indeed, Bencoolen—and the people who lived, worked, or were enslaved there—was very much a part of the British Empire.

### *Fragments*

The thesis draws on material within the “colonial archive”: both that of the state and the knowledge production associated with it. Because the colonial archive is concerned with matters of state, the focus of these accounts is often on matters of high politics; colonial administrators and the policies they promulgated, rather than the lived experience of people under their rule.<sup>10</sup> The vast majority of sources relating to Bencoolen in the 1820s—indeed, from what I can tell, the entirety of it—was produced as part of the colonial enterprise: government documents, narratives by travellers, and reports produced by scholars. In other words, they were imbued with what Edward Said has referred to as “Orientalist discourse.”<sup>11</sup> This, incidentally, also points to one of the limitations of this study; this is a thesis written primarily with the aid of English-language sources (or Dutch sources in translation). It cannot, therefore, claim to offer anything close to a comprehensive picture of the

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<sup>10</sup> The work on colonial archives and their implications for historiography is vast. Some examples of the genre include Nicholas B. Dirks, ‘Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive’, in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, South Asia Seminar Series 14671945X (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 279–313; Nicholas B. Dirks, ‘Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History’, in *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures*, ed. Brian Keith Axel (Durham, NC, etc: Duke University Press, 2002), 47–65; Ranajit Guha, ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’, in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha, vol. 2, 12 vols. (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1–42; Ranajit Guha, ‘On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India’, in *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (Ranikhet: Bangalore: Permanent Black; Distributed by Orient Blackswan, 2009), 187–93; Gyanendra Pandey, ‘The Colonial Construction of the Indian Past’, in *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Oxford India Paperbacks 097872067 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 23–65; Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Repr. with a new pref., Penguin Classics (London etc: Penguin, 2003).

transition in Bencoolen without reference to the complete extent of Dutch writings about the transfer.

Even so, a multitude of studies in recent years have shown the rich possibilities of working with the archive to understand the colonial subaltern.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Bencoolen, these include works on labour and migration across the Bay of Bengal and on the origins and legacies of slavery at the English factory.<sup>13</sup> What this thesis will do is to build upon their work with archival “fragments” that open the possibility of accessing—however incomplete—the lived experience of those involved in the transfer. Here, Clare Anderson’s work on “subaltern prosopography” to illustrate the impact of colonialism in the Indian Ocean offers a blueprint; while nowhere as ambitious or as detailed, by sketching the life histories—however brief—of four individuals, and a group of people across the transfer of power, this thesis aims to illustrate the impact of transition within the broader world of colonialism in the early nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

## Organisation

The first three chapters move from high politics, to the lives of individuals affected by the transfer. Thus, the second chapter of this thesis looks at two lives from Bencoolen’s plantation industry: William Day—an Eurasian plantation owner at the time of Raffles’ governorship, who stayed on at Bencoolen after the arrival of the Dutch, until his death in 1832—and Cursetjee

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<sup>12</sup> Bearing in mind the critique that “the subaltern cannot speak”, per Spivak, the process of recovery can still be productive. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

<sup>13</sup> Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013); Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya, ‘East India Company in Sumatra: Cross-Cultural Interactions’, *African and Asian Studies* 8, no. 3 (1 June 2009): 204–21, doi:10.1163/156921009X458082; Richard B. Allen, ‘Satisfying the “Want for Labouring People”: European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850’, *Journal of World History* 21, no. 1 (2010): 45–73, doi:10.1353/jwh.0.0100.

<sup>14</sup> Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Muncherjee, a Parsee spice planter who arrived in the 1820s. The third chapter of this thesis deals with the fate of the convicts at Bencoolen—one of the East India Company's first penal settlements. Perhaps the most complete is the life story of one Kunnuck Mistree, a convict at Bencoolen who finally found release aged seventy in 1857. The fourth chapter takes as its subject the final life story of this thesis, that of the Caffrees, descendants of slaves transported in the eighteenth century from Madagascar. Their fate formed the subject—among others—of the Ibbetson Mission to Bencoolen between 1828-1830. The final chapter offers epilogues of a fragmentary nature to illustrate the long aftermath of transition after the Dutch had arrived.

## Chapter Two: William Day

At the eve of the transfer, Bencoolen's economy remained tied to its plantations of pepper, clove and nutmeg. This chapter examines the impact of the transition through the lives of two individuals involved in the plantations, each of which had lives affected differently by the transfer. One of these was William Grant Day, whom we know through a series of letters later deposited in the Southampton Archives, and then published by a descendant of Charles Day, James Trelawney Day, as *Letters from Bencoolen*.<sup>15</sup> While many of the British associated with the plantations left the settlement after the transition, William Day chose to remain at Bencoolen. By contrast, our other individual, a Parsee merchant called Cursetjee Muncherjee, would leave Bencoolen for the new British settlement at Singapore, and is known to us only through the briefest of fragments. We begin this chapter with William Day.

William Day was the son of Charles Day, a career East India Company (EIC) servant, and a Malay woman named Incie Jannin.<sup>16</sup> The younger Day was born in 1804 at "Allas", an out-station of the Bencoolen residency, where Charles served as an EIC writer.<sup>17</sup> Thereafter the Days moved to the Madras Presidency, and thence to England, where William obtained some schooling. While at Bencoolen, the elder Day had purchased two plantations (named Botany Bay and Combong) of his own, and in 1821, both William and his brother were sent back to Bencoolen to manage them. While Thomas died shortly thereafter, William Day continued to manage the plantations until his death in 1831.

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<sup>15</sup> Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*.

<sup>16</sup> Letter 8, William Day to Charles Day, 23 Mar 1825, enclosing "A true copy of the last Will and Testament of William Grant Day at Bencoolen", 8 Mar 1825, in James Trelawney Day, ed., *Letters from Bencoolen, 1823 - 1828*, Cambridge Asia Series ; 4 (Kilkerran: Hardinge Simpole Pub, 2008), 57.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

In addition to his plantation interests, William Day also worked for both the British and Dutch administrations at Bencoolen. During their time in Bencoolen, both Days corresponded regularly with their father in Southampton, apprising the latter of financial matters relating to his holdings, and including details about daily life at Bencoolen. As a source for the impact of the transfer on plantation owners—as well as those associated with the plantation industry—these letters are valuable. Unlike the British, who saw Bencoolen as a counter to the Dutch trade in spices from the east, the Netherlands government saw no need to place such importance once they took over. This chapter draws on their correspondence to illustrate the changes in Bencoolen’s society and economy after 1825. It shows that the move from British to Dutch control was not a clean rupture, as the historiography might suggest, but one that was considerably more drawn-out.

*Political and Economic Uncertainty*

While the Treaty of London was being hammered out between the British and Dutch governments, those on the ground in Bencoolen were often unaware of their fates. The first “accounts [of the transfer] reached us three months back via Batavia” in September 1824, but many of the British settlers had questioned its veracity, “not having received any official accounts.”<sup>18</sup> That it should take so long for news to reach Bencoolen is not surprising—the treaty was signed in March 1824, and news from London or The Hague would often take months to reach India or Batavia. By the time official news arrived in December, the British at Bencoolen felt betrayed, upset at the “clandestine...manner” of the Treaty negotiations, and the “truly distressing” nature of the news.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Letter 5, William Day to Charles Day, 24 Dec 1824, in *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Indeed, a month before the handover date in 1825, Day still complained of the absence of “further intelligence respecting the transfer.”<sup>20</sup>

Compounding the uncertainty was the general British antipathy to Dutch administration in Java and Sumatra. Describing the Dutch as “a more arbitrary nation there cannot be”, Day wrote that, “the Dutch character is too well known at Bencoolen, the acts of their Government at Batavia and Padang speak for themselves.” Perhaps the plantation owners were concerned about their land being requisitioned, for Day notes that he would be “tak[ing] the necessary precaution” of registering the title deeds of his plantations with the “local authorities.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed Day registered a general sense of resignation to the upcoming changes, writing, “*apo bouli boit? [apa boleh buat]*” (what can one do?).<sup>22</sup> The only glimmer of hope for Day, it seemed, was the possibility of meeting some “Dutch frows”, for which he asked his father to send “gloves or watch ribbons.”<sup>23</sup>

For civil servants like Day, an additional complication was the loss of a company job and the privileges associated with it. At the end of February 1825, he and the other writers in the EIC establishment were dismissed, in preparation for the handover.<sup>24</sup> Under the Dutch, meanwhile, he could not “expect to get employment” unless he were “proficient in the Dutch language.”<sup>25</sup> This caused him considerable worry. Like those “similarly situated”, including Robert Bogle, Day wrote: “I do not know what I shall do when they discharge me. I cannot get it out of my mind.”<sup>26</sup> Compounding these worries was the Supreme (Calcutta) Government not providing a pension to those laid off, except to those who had worked for at least fifteen years.<sup>27</sup> A later appeal against the

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<sup>20</sup> Letter 6, William Day to Charles Day, 18 Feb 1825, in *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Letter 5, William Day to Charles Day, 24 Dec 1824, in *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Letter 6, William Day to Charles Day, 18 Feb 1825, in *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Letter 6, William Day to Charles Day, 18 Feb 1825, in *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Letter 6, William Day to Charles Day, 18 Feb 1825, in *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Letter 5, William Day to Charles Day, 24 Dec 1824, in *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Letter 7, William Day to Charles Day, Feb 1825, in *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>27</sup> Letter 9, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Nov 1825, in *Ibid.*, 59, 62–63.

decision also failed.<sup>28</sup> Nor could they hold out the prospect of following the British to their new possessions; while the late Acting Resident, John Prince, “gave [Day] the option of following the establishment to Singapore”, the offer came without the guarantee of a job. Instead, “it would be a lottery whether the Resident would have been pleased to employ [him].”<sup>29</sup> Given the greater uncertainty at Singapore, Day elected to stay in Bencoolen and see out the transfer.

### *Transition to Dutch Rule*

Events elsewhere in the Dutch East Indies conspired to hamper the Dutch transfer of Bencoolen. In February 1825, Day noted that he heard “a report of the Dutchmen not being able to take possession for four or five months, as they are engaged in a very serious war at Macasser [*Makassar*]—and are also at Palembang.”<sup>30</sup> This was a point he repeated shortly thereafter, believing that the “Dutch cannot [original emphasis] take possession for 5 months to come.”<sup>31</sup> When they finally arrived, there were other wars. In September 1826, Day wrote that “the Dutch have lately met with a serious defeat in battle with the insurgents” and expected them to “recall all their forces from Sumatra and concentrate all their strength” in order to “crush them.”<sup>32</sup> While Day does not name the insurgents, it is pretty likely that he was referring to either the Padri War in Palembang, or the Java war, led by Prince Diponegoro.<sup>33</sup>

In order to fund these campaigns, Bencoolen was often squeezed. As Day wrote, “they [the Dutch at Bencoolen] are so miserably poor”, while “at Java the Government is equally as short of

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<sup>28</sup> Letter 12, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Sep 1826, in *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>29</sup> Letter 8, William Day to Charles Day, 23 Mar 1825, in *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Letter 6, William Day to Charles Day, 18 Feb 1825, in *Ibid.*, 37–38.

<sup>31</sup> Letter 7, William Day to Charles Day, Feb 1825, in *Ibid.*, 42–43.

<sup>32</sup> Letter 12, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Sep 1826, in *Ibid.*, 79–80.

<sup>33</sup> Dutch intervention in the Padri war began in the 1820s, while Diponegoro’s rebellion took place between 1825–1830.

cash.”<sup>34</sup> His later letters contain many complaints about the various taxes and duties the Dutch imposed on the settlement: in September 1826 he wrote that “the Dutch are doing everything to drive the people away, taxes and duties are exacted on everything.” Among other taxes, the “charges of boat hire and wharfage” were some fifty percent higher than under the EIC. Other taxes levied included estate duty by the “orphan chamber”, and a “transfer duty...which extracts from the seller of 6 per C[ent].”<sup>35</sup> These taxes combined with the news that by the middle of 1826, the Dutch began to draw down their establishment at Bencoolen. Day noted “the general opinion” that the Dutch reduction of the garrison’s numbers (already less than fifty soldiers) was “precussory [*sic*] to the abandonment of the place together.”<sup>36</sup>

In the interim period, the Dutch still had to administer Bencoolen, and turned to many of the former EIC civil servants to fill government posts. Tom William Griffiths, who had been Magistrate under the British, continued to hold the post in the Dutch administration until his death. In turn, he was succeeded by another British planter, Robert Bogle in January 1826.<sup>37</sup> Bogle was also elevated to the title of Assistant Resident, a post he held until his death in 1848.<sup>38</sup> At a lower level, William Day turned to the “Dutch Service” in late 1825, in response to losing his British pension. There, it appears, he first received “50 Rs a month, much less than what a common soldier in the English Service gets.”<sup>39</sup> Soon after, however, he received a raise to 100Rs, as a “quill driver” (in other words, a clerk). According to Day, the Dutch government service was far more demanding:

I have no sinecure in the Dutch employ, they pay you for your time and they will have it; hours of attendance from 9 to 4 whereas during the English reign it was 10 to 3 o’clock. Having no other monthly income than the produce of Botany Bay and Rice at 6 Dollars a

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<sup>34</sup> Letter 12, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Sep 1826, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 79.

<sup>35</sup> Letter 12, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Sep 1826, in *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>36</sup> Letter 12, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Sep 1826, in *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Letter 10, William Day to Charles Day, 16 Jan 1826, in *Ibid.*, 66–67.

<sup>38</sup> G. F. Davidson, ‘Bencoolen in 1828–30, by G.F. Davidson (extract from Trade & Travel in the Far East, London, 1846)’, in *The Journal of Thomas Otho Travers, 1813-1820*, by Thomas Otho Travers, ed. John Bastin, *Memoirs of the Raffles Museum*; No. 4 (Singapore: Raffles Museum, 1960), 212n19.

<sup>39</sup> Letter 9, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Nov 1825, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 62.

month obliged me tho' very very much against my inclinations to enter the most despicable service in India.<sup>40</sup>

William Day's frustrations in the Dutch service must have been shared by others who had been in the EIC's service, and were now obliged to work for the new government for a salary. After all, he knew no Dutch—though he had been “studying Dutch” and “hope[d] to be able to understand something of it shortly” by January 1826.<sup>41</sup> Alongside him was the “Raddin Canim's son”, who had “been to Calcutta for his education and knows just enough of English to make himself understood.”<sup>42</sup> The language barrier meant that some of the business of governance continued to take place in English. Two copies of the “Proceedings of the Native Court in the Bencoolen Residency”, survive in the archives of Leiden University; dating to 1827, and both written in English, one is signed by Bogle, while the other is copied out in a neat hand, perhaps by Day or another clerk.<sup>43</sup>

As we saw earlier, with the escalation of tensions elsewhere in the Dutch East Indies, and the draw-down of the Bencoolen garrison, Day (and, probably, the others working for the Dutch) began to worry that his “dismissal is not far distant.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, scarcely a month after Day expressed his fears, news from Batavia confirmed his fate. As he wrote, “this Residency is reduced to a Post holdenship — and I am in common with one and all ‘Honourably discharged from his Netherlands Majesty's Service.’”<sup>45</sup> William Day thus had the honour of being discharged from the service of two governments; first, the India government with the transfer of Bencoolen in 1825, and, the following year, the Dutch government.

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<sup>40</sup> Letter 10, William Day to Charles Day, 16 Jan 1826, in *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>41</sup> Letter 10, William Day to Charles Day, 16 Jan 1826, in *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Letter 11, William Day to Charles Day, 14 Apr 1826, in *Ibid.*, 71. We don't know why the Radin's son went to Calcutta—Day never mentions him again—but it is likely that he was sent there to learn enough to join the EIC's civil service. Now that the British had left, he had joined the Dutch instead, perhaps for a salary, or perhaps for the Radin to have someone he knew in the colonial administration.

<sup>43</sup> “Proceedings of the Native Court in the Bencoolen Residency”, 1827-28 in ‘H813: Stukken over Het Rechtswezen in de Residentie Benkoelen’ (Bencoolen, n.d.), KITLV Special Collections, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Universiteit Leiden.

<sup>44</sup> Letter 12, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Sep 1826, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 77.

<sup>45</sup> Except, it seems, for Bogle. Letter 13, William Day to Charles Day, 23 Oct 1826, in *Ibid.*, 82.

While all this was going on, for many the transfer to Dutch rule was a reason to leave Bencoolen. William Day's letters provided a frequent running tally of the "Englishmen" who remained behind. In November 1825, he wrote of how "there are only 7 of us who have been obliged to stay behind."<sup>46</sup> By January the next year "of Old Bencoolenites, there only remain five of us," who kept to themselves because "the Dutchmen are so great a set of blackguards that they are not fit company for a gentleman."<sup>47</sup> By April, William Day noted just "four in number": "[William] Baskett, [Robert] Bogle, James Grant and myself."<sup>48</sup> This is how it remained until May 1828, when Baskett decided to leave.<sup>49</sup> Why did so many leave? In April 1826, Day and Grant had a simple explanation:

...we equally feel the unfortunate change in the whole settlement of Englishmen who were here this time 12 month, the whole of them have left some with fear, others from necessity, and some from disgust at the new administration<sup>50 51</sup>

It seems that Day's frequent complaints about the tax rate at Bencoolen, as well as the administration of justice at the settlement, were shared by the emigrants. But there were also pressing financial concerns. In 1829, a number of "Proprietors of Spice Plantations and other Property at Bencoolen", who claimed their "private interests have been so cruelly sacrificed to the attainment of a political object" (the Treaty of London) submitted a memorial to the Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India. Pointing to the "general ruin to property at Bencoolen", they urged the British Government to increase the sum of restitution offered from £40,000, which they claimed would barely cover Baskett's losses alone.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Letter 9, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Nov 1825, in *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>47</sup> Letter 10, William Day to Charles Day, 16 Jan 1825, in *Letters*, 68. *Ibid.*, 68; Contrast that with the previous letter: "The Dutch completely keep to themselves, they have not done us yet the complement of asking us to dinner," Letter 9, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Nov 1825, in *ibid.*, 63.

<sup>48</sup> Letter 11, William Day to Charles Day, 14 Apr 1826, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 72; *ibid.*, 74.

<sup>49</sup> Letter 17, William Day to Charles Day, 31 May 1828, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 110.

<sup>50</sup> Letter 11, William Day to Charles Day, 14 Apr 1826, in *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>51</sup> Letter 11, William Day to Charles Day, 14 Apr 1826, *Letters*, 74

<sup>52</sup> "The Memorial of the Proprietors of Spice Plantations and other Property at Bencoolen, in Sumatra", 9 Feb 1829, in 'Proprietors of Bencoolen, for Losses Sustained on the Surrender of That Settlement to the King of the

Yet, William Day remained put. Early on, responding to his father's suggestion to go to Singapore in 1825, he wrote that "Bencoolen has more natural inducements to me than any other place in India."<sup>53</sup> By contrast, following the British to Singapore had its own uncertainties; he would have to compete with "the other country born young men sent round at the same time under the same circumstances as himself" for a position.<sup>54</sup> After his lay-off from the Dutch government however, Day considered the possibilities of heading to Singapore or Penang, and perhaps obtaining patronage from Charles Days' friend Sir John Clardige to re-enter the EIC's civil service.<sup>55</sup> Day planned to work for a few months before returning to Bencoolen. Yet there was a palpable sense of having missed the boat: at Singapore, John Prince (the late Acting Resident at Bencoolen) could only offer him a job with salary of 100Rs.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, by May 1828, Sir John had fallen out with the Straits Governor Robert Fullerton, and his powers of patronage were much reduced.<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, the exodus of Englishmen from Bencoolen had been an opportunity for those who remained behind. With the departure of the other Englishmen, Day had taken on the role of agent for their plantations and other property. By the middle of 1827, he was managing 13 plantations with "3 to 400 people" working under him, while "no other Englishman [had] more extensive agencies." This, he estimated, amounted to a third of Bencoolen's total plantations. And it was a lucrative opportunity: "in this business of agencies there are many pickings, commission etc."<sup>58</sup> The following year, Basket's impending departure, and the opportunity for agency, would have put Day (and James Grant, his partner) in an even better position; in May 1828 he was earning some "300 to 350 rupees per month", enabling him to pay off his debts "and save a little money in the

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Netherlands', Estimates &c. Miscellaneous Services: For the Year 1829 (London: Whitehall, Treasury Chambers, House of Commons, 2 April 1829), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Letter 7, William Day to Charles Day, Feb 1825, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 42.

<sup>54</sup> Letter 7, William Day to Charles Day, Feb 1825, in *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Letter 15, William Day to Charles Day, 28 Jul 1827, in *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>56</sup> Of which 40-50Rs would be spent on rent. Letter 16, William Day to Charles Day, 20 Nov 1827, in *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>57</sup> Letter 17, William Day to Charles Day, 31 May 1828 in *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>58</sup> Letter 15, William Day to Charles Day, 28 Jul 1827, in *Ibid.*, 97-98.

bargain” (original emphasis).<sup>59</sup> No wonder then, that Day wrote, “I have all my comforts about me, such as I shall not get elsewhere for the next ten years to come.”<sup>60</sup>

After May 1828, William Day no longer wrote to Charles Day. The younger Day had noted that his father had not written as often, and he perhaps, likewise, stopped writing. He died in January 1831, and his estate is believed to have been appropriated by the Dutch government, perhaps by the orphan department.<sup>61</sup> But if his was the tale of one spice planter who threw his lot in with the British, then the story of Cursetjee Muncherjee offers a different sort of story about the impact of the Treaty of London, and the long period of transition. We begin Muncherjee’s story twenty-five years in the future, when his past at Bencoolen became an important detail in events at Singapore.

### **Cursetjee Muncherjee, erstwhile spice planter**

In August 1857, an old Bencoolen spice planter found himself involved in an incendiary incident on the island of Singapore. Khurruck Singh, an erstwhile Sikh State Prisoner, was alleged to have met with three other convicts to plot an attack on the island’s Europeans; while the latter attended Church, he and his men would kill them. In the context of attacks on Europeans in India taking place during the Indian Rebellion, the rumours demanded serious attention from the Straits government.<sup>62</sup> In the authorities’ investigation, they discovered that this treasonous meeting was alleged to have taken place at the house of a man named Cursetjee Muncherjee Moosh, erstwhile of Bencoolen.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Letter 17, William Day to Charles Day, 31 May 1828 in *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>60</sup> Letter 15, William Day to Charles Day, 28 Jul 1827, in *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, xlv.

<sup>62</sup> This episode is dealt with in much greater detail in Arjun Naidu, ‘The “Second” Sikh: Exile and Memory in the Straits Settlements’ (BA Senior Thesis, Princeton University, 2015).

<sup>63</sup> IOR/P/202/35, IPFC 2 October 1857, “Convict and Executive Office, Singapore”, 7th August 1857.

By coincidence, the alleged mastermind had also submitted a petition to the Governor of the Straits Settlements, requesting permission to return to India to support British efforts at taming the rebellion and describing his relationship to Cursetjee:

Petitioner in conclusion begs to add that he is at present residing with an Old Parsee friend of his named Carsetjee Muncherjee, [*sic*] formerly a Merchant and Spice Planter, at Bencoolen, who administered under the rate of the late Sir Stamford Raffles...<sup>64</sup>

Cursetjee's relationship to Khurruck Singh provides the strongest (and only) impression of him in the colonial archive, brought to the fore by concerns over the Sikh's alleged murderous intentions. Stepping back from 1857, however, it is possible to piece together a glimpse of Cursetjee's life in its appearances across various snippets in the colonial archive, beginning with the spice plantations in Bencoolen.<sup>65</sup>

Cursetjee arrived in Bencoolen from Bombay some time in 1821, in the midst of Raffles' (and the EIC's) struggles with the spice market. While at Bencoolen that year, he reportedly "lived for some months" at the home of William Baskett, while Baskett was away.<sup>66</sup> Like many of the other Europeans at the settlement, the newly-arrived Cursetjee was soon struck with a fever. Having eventually recovered, it seems that Cursetjee decided to stay on or visit again, for in July 1823, Thomas Day's accounts for his Botany Bay planation show "Cursedjie Munsedjie (*sic*)" having purchased "2 Peculs & 4 Catties" of nutmeg, and "87 lbs" of mace for some £215.<sup>67</sup> But although Cursetjee's transaction was one of the larger ones that year, his name never appears again in either of the Days' accounts.

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<sup>64</sup> IOR/P/202/35, IPFC 2 October 1857, to E.A. Blundell, "The Humble Petition of Kurruck Sing", 6th August 1857.

<sup>65</sup> As has been noted elsewhere, Cursetjee may well have been related to the 18th century VOC broker Mancherji Khursedji, whose descendants later worked for the EIC. Their names are identically pronounced. Ghulam Ahmad Nadri, 'Commercial World of Mancherji Khurshedji and the Dutch East India Company: A Study of Mutual Relationships', *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no. 02 (2007): 315–42.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Little, 'On Coral Reefs as the Cause of Blakan Mati Fever and of the Fevers in Various Parts of the East', ed. James Richardson Logan, *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, New Series, IV (December 1850): 715.

<sup>67</sup> Letter 3, Thomas Day to Charles Day, 26 October 1823, enclosing "Mr. William Grant Day in Account Current with Charles Day, Esquire, 1823" dated 31 December 1823, Appendix B4 in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 124. Note that the letter was not sent until 1824, at the earliest.

Nonetheless, Cursetjee continued to build his holdings in Bencoolen, purchasing land for an estate at the settlement. According to the visiting Dutch administrator Nahuijs, cultivation was encouraged by the Bencoolen government, for “anyone willing to open an estate [could] get the land for a very small sum and...a number of workers free of charge.”<sup>68</sup> Perhaps Cursetjee took advantage of this. Or, perhaps he was the “Parsee Merchant” who Baskett “let...have” a “very desirable plantation”, on the condition that the merchant mortgage the property to repay his debts to Baskett.<sup>69</sup> A record of Cursetjee’s holdings no longer survives, but there is evidence that when the political and economic winds shifted, Cursetjee mortgaged the estate to the Bombay merchant firm Jejeebhoy Dadabhoy, Sons & Co in 1844.<sup>70</sup> By that time, however, Cursetjee had moved to Singapore, where he became acquainted with the Parsi merchant Frommurze Sorabjee, and was perhaps also involved in business with him.<sup>71</sup> His trade, meanwhile, had moved on from spices. In 1852, he placed an advertisement in the *Straits Times* announcing his purchase of the shipwreck *Scotia* in the South China Sea, and offering a share of the salvage if returned to himself or his agents in Labuan and Brunei.<sup>72</sup>

By all accounts, unlike Frommurze or some of the other Parsis in Singapore, Cursetjee remained fairly anonymous, and his name does not appear in any account of Parsi history in Singapore. Still, he must have been fairly successful, for by 1857 he had managed to live in a two-

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<sup>68</sup> These workers would have included convicts, Caffrees and indentured servants. See Hubert Gerard Nahuijs van Burgst, *Translated Extracts from Letters about Bencoolen, Padang, Menangkabau, Rhioum, Singapore and Poelo-Penang*, Second Enlarged Edition (Breda: F.B. Hollingerus Pijpers, 1827), 13.

<sup>69</sup> Letter 5, William Day to Charles Day, 24 Dec 1824, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 30.

<sup>70</sup> *SFP*, 21 March 1851, 1. This same estate was involved in a legal battle between Cursetjee and Jejeebhoy & Co, which was resolved in 1851.

<sup>71</sup> *ST*, 26 April 1848, 1. The *Straits Times* was reporting on Cursetjee’s and Frommurze’s departure to Penang. Frommurze’s son, Cursetjee Frommurze, was also a merchant, founding the firm Little, Cursetjee & Co., “Auctioneers and Commercial Agents”. See also John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8n11.

<sup>72</sup> *ST*, 3 February 1852, 2.

story house or bungalow, where he had taken Khurruck Singh as a lodger.<sup>73</sup> By then, advanced in age and probably long having retired from any trade, his most important attribute appears to have been his past at Bencoolen, even as Bencoolen had long since left the British Empire.

Cursetjee appeared adept in navigating the social stratifications of colonial Singapore. But aside from his involvement in the European world of trade, Cursetjee had cultivated the acquaintance of Dinishim Jumsetjee, a Parsi convict of the third-class, who as one of the three convicts involved in the alleged massacre plot. When interviewed by the Resident Councillor for his part in the affair, Dinishim noted that he would “frequently visit my Country man the old Bencoolen Parsee Cursetjee Moss.”<sup>74</sup> Through his contact with Dinishim, Cursetjee had become acquainted with Khurruck Singh, taking in the latter as lodger after his release from detention. Perhaps he might have known the old Bencoolen convict Kunnuck Mistree (from Chapter Three) too. Regardless, Cursetjee’s brief fame illustrates that social boundaries—particularly for non-Europeans—were nowhere near as solid as categorisations of “convicts” and “merchants” might imply.

As another reminder of the legacies of the 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty, the house where Cursetjee was living was in a neighbourhood called Kampong Bencoolen. Located along Bencoolen Street and Middle Road, to the north of the Singapore convict jail, the neighbourhood was so named because it was settled by “natives of Bencoolen”, principally Malays.<sup>75</sup> Alongside them lived Indian dhobies, who built a Benggali Mosque in the neighbourhood (later rebuilt as the Bencoolen

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<sup>73</sup> Two of the convicts whose testimony the Resident Councillor obtained describe the house as having rooms “upstairs” and “downstairs.” IOR/P/202/35, IPFC 2 October 1857, “Convict and Executive Office, Singapore”, 7th August 1857.

<sup>74</sup> IOR/P/202/35, IPFC 2 October 1857, “Convict and Executive Office, Singapore”, 7th August 1857.

<sup>75</sup> Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E Brooke, and Roland St. John Braddell, eds., *One Hundred Years of Singapore, Being Some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from Its Foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on the 6th February 1819 to the 6th February 1919*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1921), 488; Victor R. Savage and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Toponymics: A Study of Singapore Street Names*, Geography & Environment Research (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), 52; C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005* (NUS Press, 2009), 33.

Mosque).<sup>76</sup> By 1857, when Cursetjee was living there, some of the residents in Kampong Bencoolen were Christian Anglo-Indians; in fact, the panic surrounding Cursetjee's lodger so enveloped them, that thirty of them had written to the Governor of the Straits Settlements expressing their unease at the prospect of a convict uprising.<sup>77</sup> In its ethnic and religious complexity, however, Kampong Bencoolen was no different from the settlement of Singapore as a whole, or indeed from its namesake, Bencoolen.

The life stories we have managed to piece together of William Day and Cursetjee Muncherjee should help illustrate that transition was not a matter of a clean break. More importantly, they show the complexity of the transition process as it took place, as well as how the networks of colonial trade and power in the Indian Ocean (particularly around the Straits of Malacca) were reshaped. Day and Cursetjee may have been fairly moneyed individuals, but the transition was not felt just at the level of rich Eurasians or Parsees (to say nothing of the European elite). The next two chapters delve into the impact of transition on what might be called the "subaltern".

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<sup>76</sup> Rajesh Rai, *Indians in Singapore, 1819-1945 : Diaspora in the Colonial Port-City* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46.

<sup>77</sup> IOR/P/188/47, IPC 2 October 1857, "The respectful Memorial of the Christian Inhabitants of Campong Bencoolen, and the adjoining Campongs", 21 August 1857.

## Chapter Three: Kunnuck Mistree

In August 1856, a convict at Singapore named Kunnuck Mistree (sometimes referred to as Kunnuck Mittre, Konnuck Ram Mittre, or Kanak Mithay) submitted a petition to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, requesting a pardon and permission to return to India. Mistree had been tried in January 1818 at Fort William in Calcutta, and sentenced to “transportation for life” to Bencoolen on a charge of larceny. After the transfer of Bencoolen to the Dutch, Mistree was transferred to Singapore in 1825, where he had remained since. While some convicts had been offered a pardon, Mistree “finding himself comfortable and happy in his then position neglected to avail himself” of the same offer.<sup>78</sup> Mistree’s petition for release arrived with multiple enclosures collected over his twenty-eight years in incarceration. These included character references, his employment history, and evidence that other convicts were offered release in 1825.

As far as archival collections go, Mistree’s petition presents a rich cache of detail; picking through the supporting documents, a picture of the life of Kunnuck Mistree emerges. But the petition reveals much not just about his incarceration as a British penal transportee, but also about the impact on the transfer of Bencoolen on convict lives. Hitherto, however, Mistree has remained anonymous, unstudied by the historian, and only recently attracting the attention of archivists.<sup>79</sup> Given this detail, and the rarity of a convict being referred to by name, this chapter will delve into Mistree’s life history as a jumping-off point, as it considers the impact of the transfer of Bencoolen

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<sup>78</sup> SSR/S026, To Frederick James Halliday, “The humble Petition of Kunnuck Mistree a convict now undergoing his sentence of transportation in the Settlement of Singapore”, 14 Aug 1856.

<sup>79</sup> In fact, his first mention appears to be in an article detailing the efforts of volunteer archivists in digitally transcribing the Straits Settlements Records in Singapore. See Vandana Aggarwal, ‘Reliving History’, *Tabla!*, 8 April 2016; Vandana Aggarwal, ‘The Mystery of Kunnuck Mistree’, *Off The Record: Articles by Archivists — National Archives of Singapore*, 28 June 2016, <http://www.nas.gov.sg/blogs/offtherecord/the-mystery-of-kunnuck-mistree/>. I thank Kar Min Lim for drawing my attention to these articles.

to the Dutch on Bencoolen's convict population, and its long aftermath. We begin with a history of the convict establishment at Bencoolen.

### *Convicts at Bencoolen*

In 1787, Bencoolen was selected as the first destination for transported convicts from India.<sup>80</sup> Over the course of the next 38 years (until the handover), some 2000 convicts would be transported to Bencoolen.<sup>81</sup> Convict transportation in India fulfilled several objectives. First, punishment: sending convicts across the *kala pani* ("black water"), which was believed to cause a loss of caste, was seen as a sufficiently degrading and suitable punishment for crimes committed by South Asians in the Indian Presidencies, particularly high-caste Hindus. The disciplinary function coexisted with an economic role. For example, the EIC had been at Bencoolen for over a hundred years by 1787, but the need for labour—in terms of public works, and cultivation—remained acute. One source of labour were slaves imported from Africa, known at Bencoolen as the Caffrees, who arrived in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We will return to them in the next chapter. The other were transported convicts, who would later perform the same function elsewhere in the British Empire. Finally, convict transportation was seen as a means of relieving the burden on jails in India: both financially, and in terms of space for housing convicts.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Coincidentally, the British began transporting British convicts to Australia the same year, after the failure of convict transportation to Africa, and the American revolution removed other alternative destinations. Clare Anderson, 'Sepoys, Servants and Settlers: Convict Transportation in the Indian Ocean, 1787-1945', in *Cultures of Confinement: A History of the Prison in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, ed. Frank Dikötter and Ian Brown (London: Hurst and Company, 2007), 186.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 188; Anand A. Yang, 'Indian Convict Workers in Southeast Asia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of World History* 14, no. 2 (2003): 179–208. Anand Yang estimates the number to be two to three times larger (4000 to 6000 convicts transported).

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, 'Sepoys, Servants and Settlers: Convict Transportation in the Indian Ocean, 1787-1945', 186–188; Anderson, *Subaltern Lives*, 25–26; Yang, 'Indian Convict Workers in Southeast Asia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', 185–192.

In Bencoolen, British hopes were initially high that the convicts could provide the labour necessary to grow spices and compete with the Dutch. On arriving in 1800, the newly appointed Commissioner of Bencoolen Walter Ewer wrote to Henry Dundas, of the Board of Control in London:

This is a very proper place for the Bengal convicts. I am instructed to use my endeavours to relive Government from the expenses of maintaining them... They will be of great use in such an uncultivated country as this is & so thinly inhabited. I hope, Sir, when you get my accounts you will keep them separate form those of Penang, that we may see which place is most valuable.<sup>83</sup>

These hopes, however, as with so much of the EIC's designs for Bencoolen, would not come to fruition. Within a year, Ewer was remarking upon the need for Sepoys to "keep [the convicts] in order."<sup>84</sup> A later superintendent of convicts at Singapore, J.F.A. McNair, noted how the EIC's plans for pepper and camphor cultivation were "greatly disappointed", as their commercial importance waned.<sup>85</sup> Instead, convicts were used to clear roads and estates, as well as being "let out to planters" (private plantations, not owned by the EIC).<sup>86</sup>

Kunnuck Mistree's arrival in Bencoolen in February 1818 coincided with the arrival of Stamford Raffles as Bencoolen's new Lieutenant-Governor. At this point, there were some five hundred convicts at Bencoolen, which was now one of the EICs three penal destinations (the others being Prince of Wales' Island in Penang, and Mauritius).<sup>87</sup> Raffles' arrival coincided with the imposition of some of the first formalised rules for convict management, later called the "Bencoolen Rules."<sup>88</sup> Raffles's arguments for implementing these rules were framed in terms of incentivising the convicts. He wrote, "the prospect... of employing their industry for their own advantage" would in

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<sup>83</sup> Ewer to Dundas, 6 Aug 1800, in Bastin, *The British in West Sumatra (1685-1825)*, 108.

<sup>84</sup> Ewer to Dundas, 20 Jan 1801, in *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> John Frederick Adolphus McNair, *Prisoners Their Own Warders: A Record of the Convict Prison at Singapore in the Straits Settlements, Established 1825, Discontinued 1873, Together with a Cursory History of the Convict Establishments at Bencoolen, Penang and Malacca from the Year 1797* (Westmister: Archibal Constable and Co, 1899), 2.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>87</sup> Anderson, 'Sepoys, Servants and Settlers: Convict Transportation in the Indian Ocean, 1787-1945', 188.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in McNair, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*, 4-7.

due course “supply a stimulus to exertion and good conduct.” The rules would thus have the twin advantages of improving the corrective aspect of transportation and improve its use as a tool of labour.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the financial and coercive burden of the EIC (in terms of maintaining and disciplining the convicts) would be mitigated. These reforms paralleled the ones he put in place for the Caffrees (to be discussed in the next chapter).

Raffles’s proposed solution would echo the Butterworth Rules implemented later in the century at the Straits Settlements. For the first time, convicts were to be classified for their management:

While a convict remains unmarried and kept to daily labour very little confidence can be placed in him, and his services are rendered with so much tardiness and dissatisfaction that they are of little or no value; but he no sooner marries and forms a small settlement than he becomes a kind of colonist, and if allowed to follow his inclinations he seldom feels inclined to return to his native country.

I propose to divide them into three classes. The first class to be allowed to give evidence in court, and permitted to settle on land secured to them and their children; but no one to be admitted to this class until he has been resident in Bencoolen three years. The second class to be employed in ordinary labour. The third class, or men of abandoned and profligate character, to be kept to the harder kinds of labour, and confined at night.<sup>90</sup>

Mistree himself would eventually be admitted to the first class. By December 1823, when there were about 800-900 convicts, according to Raffles, the “system [was] complete,” as he commented on the “general improvement of this class of people” after the implementation of the principles.<sup>91</sup>

Likewise, the Dutch colonial administrator and traveller, H.G. Baron Nahuijs van Burgst, was particularly enamoured of the convict management system at Bencoolen. Nahuijs wrote admiringly of the convicts’ prosperity, and perhaps also because of its apparent success in ensuring the colonial state’s control over the convicts. According to him, those of the first class had

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<sup>89</sup> Raffles and Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, 298.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>91</sup> Raffles to Wallich, 20 Dec 1823, in *Ibid.*, 564–565.

apparently “the same rights as free native inhabitants”, “freed from all work” and even “granted a piece of land free.”<sup>92</sup> This, he writes, led to “a certain amount of prosperity” and “orderliness and thrift” among the convicts. Nahuijs also noted that convicts engaged in moneylending to other inhabitants at Bencoolen (“at the usurious rate of 25% per month”), and that “most of [them] have one, two, or three cows, some even eleven or twelve.”<sup>93</sup> This, he noted, enabled the convicts to sell milk and butter to the Europeans at the settlement.

Without any accounts from the transported convicts in the archive, it is difficult to ascertain how close to reality Nahuijs’s praise was. Indeed, another contemporary account prepared by the Agricultural Society of Sumatra on “The Population of Marlborough”, dating to September 1820, paints a similar picture. According to the report, the convicts were “well lodged and clothed”, in addition to receiving a steady supply of rations which they sold for additional profit. Together with the dairy operations that Nahuijs described, the authors commented that the convicts “frequently return to their native country...much richer than they came”, while in other cases the convicts preferred to remain in Bencoolen after their terms of ended.<sup>94</sup> A census attached to the report, however, suggests some of the estimates may have been overblown. Out of the 1966 buffaloes and 1956 cows, the convict population was listed as owning just 4 buffaloes and 184 cows, which amounted to less than ten per cent of the total livestock in the settlement. By contrast, the vast majority of cattle belonged to the Europeans, and Buffaloes to the “Malays”.<sup>95</sup>

Another observation was that some of the “gourdans” (convicts receiving a salary of a dollar per month, probably in the second or first class) “frequently intermarry with the natives of the place,

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<sup>92</sup> Nahuijs van Burgst, *Translated Extracts from Letters about Bencoolen, Padang, Menangkabau, Rhioum, Singapore and Poelo-Penang*, 8.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>94</sup> W. R. Jennings, Edward Presgrave, and James Lumsdaine, ‘Appendix A: Report on the Population, &c. of the Town and Suburbs of Fort Marlborough’, in *Proceedings of the Agricultural Society, Established in Sumatra 1820*, vol. 1 (Bencoolen: Baptist Mission Press, 1821), 11–12.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–31.

or with coffree [Caffree] women.”<sup>96</sup> This was the result of the close association between the two groups. Seen as sources of labour by the colonial establishment, both the convicts and the Caffrees at Bencoolen were jointly supervised by a “Superintendent of Convicts and Caffrees.” As Anand Yang has shown, these labour ties facilitated the sexual and marriage liaisons the report described, particularly between convict men and Caffree women.<sup>97</sup> These relationships would complicate future plans for resettlement of both groups after the transfer of power, as we shall soon see.

### *Transfer and Transition*

The Treaty of London did not make any specific provisions for the relocation of the convict establishment. Meanwhile, the British Parliament passed an Act permitting the transfer of all convicts sentenced to transportation at Bencoolen to “any other place to which he or she might originally have been transported.”<sup>98</sup> Management of the actual matter fell onto the India Government at Calcutta, under whose authority the convicts had been transported in the first place. By the end of 1823, there were 704 convicts sentenced to transportation at Bencoolen, comprising 153 from the Madras Presidency and 631 from the Bengal Presidency. Of these 610 were transported for life and 94 for sentences of seven or fourteen years.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 12; It appears that William Day retained a “gourdan” long after the departure of the British. See Letter 17, William Day to Charles Day, 31 May 1828, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 110.

<sup>97</sup> Yang, ‘Indian Convict Workers in Southeast Asia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries’, 184.

<sup>98</sup> “An Act for transferring to the East India Company certain Possessions newly acquired in the East Indies, and for authorizing the Removal of Convicts from Sumatra”, *The Statutes of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland: 5 George IV. 1824* (London: His Majesty’s Statute and Law Printers, 1824), 620.

<sup>99</sup> SSR/NL60/M3, Bengal to Resident, Singapore, “Memorandum regarding Convicts at Bencoolen”, 1 Nov 1824. According to the memorandum, some of the convicts had been at Bencoolen for more than 30 years, which would have been very near the start of the convict establishment at Bencoolen.

In a memorandum addressed to the Resident at Singapore, the Supreme Government at Calcutta outlined its thinking about the future of the convicts at Bencoolen.<sup>100</sup> The possibility of leaving the convicts at Bencoolen, to be maintained under the Dutch Government, was quickly rejected on grounds of undesirability. Instead, the Supreme Government viewed it “desirable that the great majority of the Prisoners” should be transported again to Penang and Singapore. The fear of “escape and return to India of the many desperate robbers who are now in confinement at Bencoolen” necessitated a quick “removal” of those convicts. Labour considerations, one of the driving forces for the transportation of convicts also played a part. The Resident at Singapore was invited to request a number of convicts to work on “public works” at the new settlement.

The Supreme Government did, however, make an exception: for “individuals... almost the first class of the convicts”, who had obtained that status by way of “their service and good conduct” (recall Raffles’s Bencoolen Rules). These convicts, who numbered about 45 as of October that year, had been permitted to settle at Bencoolen, and so might be offered “the option of remaining at liberty at Bencoolen” on condition that they not return to India. To this number the Supreme Government permitted an additional fifteen individuals, who while “not officially included in the first class”, still “might have conducted themselves well and might be married or have families at Bencoolen.” The remainder, along with any convicts sentenced to Bencoolen and not yet arrived there, would be “removed” as soon as possible.<sup>101</sup>

The policy outlined by the Supreme Government deviates considerably from the way it was applied, at least according to Mistree in his petition, where he wrote that “the greater part of the convicts” were offered pardons at the transfer, contingent on “their not returning again to India.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> SSR/NL60/M3, Bengal to Resident, Singapore, “Memorandum regarding Convicts at Bencoolen”, 1 Nov 1824.

<sup>101</sup> SSR/NL60/M3, Bengal to Resident, Singapore, “Memorandum regarding Convicts at Bencoolen”, 1 Nov 1824.

<sup>102</sup> SSR/S026, To Frederick James Halliday, “The humble Petition of Kunnuck Mistree a convict now undergoing his sentence of transportation in the Settlement of Singapore”, 14 Aug 1856.

In support of his claim, Mistree had enclosed with the petition were two certificates of release, for convicts named “Shaick Aumnoo Unwar” and “Cafseenauth Chowdary”. It is possible, however, that both Shaick Aumnoo and Cafseenauth were both part of the first class of convicts, and so offered a pardon.

Of the two, Shaick Aumnoo was the closer parallel to Mistree. He had been sentenced to transportation for life in 1809 on charges of dacoity at Nuddea (Nadia), at which point he was adjudged to already have been 60 years old. In March 1825, Shaick Aumnoo was “released from custody as a convict” by the Superintendent of Convicts at Bencoolen, “in consideration of [his] uniform good conduct and through reform.”<sup>103</sup> In turn, he was presented with a certificate of release in June of that year.<sup>104</sup> Signed in Bengali and copied in English, Shaick Aumnoo committed himself not to return to India and instead serve out his sentence elsewhere, possibly at Port Arthur in Australia.<sup>105</sup> No record survives of Shaick Aumnoo’s journey to Australia, if he ever undertook it. It would be curious, for it appears that most of the convict establishment was transferred instead to Penang or Singapore; indeed, cases of Indian convict transportation to Australia were very rare.<sup>106</sup>

The other prisoner was Cafseenauth Chowdary. Unlike Shaick Aumnoo or Mistree, he was sentenced to just seven years of transportation in 1819 and had almost already spent his conviction by the time of his release in March 1825.<sup>107</sup> Like Shaick Aumnoo, Cafseenauth signed a certificate—

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<sup>103</sup> SSR/S026, Certificate (Shaick Aumnoo), 1 Mar 1825.

<sup>104</sup> SSR/S026, Certificate (Shaick Aumnoo), 1 Jun 1825.

<sup>105</sup> I thank Durga Chatterji and Pratyusha Mukherjee for their assistance with the Bengali version of the certificate. The citizen archivist at the National Archives of Singapore who transcribed the record suggests that he committed himself to Port Arthur in Australia, but the text of the original is not legible enough for me to confirm this.

<sup>106</sup> Anderson, ‘Sepoys, Servants and Settlers: Convict Transportation in the Indian Ocean, 1787-1945’, 188–189; Clare Anderson, ‘The Politics of Punishment in Colonial Mauritius, 1766–1887’, *Cultural and Social History* 5, no. 4 (1 December 2008): 417–418, doi:10.2752/147800408X341622; Clare Anderson, ‘Unfree Labour and Its Discontents: Transportation from Mauritius to Australia, 1825-1845’, *Australian Studies* 13, no. 1 (1999): 116–33. Clare Anderson writes that around a hundred people—convicts sentenced to retransportation, as well as indentured workers—were sentenced to transportation from Mauritius to Australia between 1825 and 1845. Shaick Aumnoo’s punishment would have been contemporary to that. That said, she dates transportation to Van Diemen’s Land as beginning in 1834 (previously transportation was to Robben Island, or New South Wales).

<sup>107</sup> SSR/S026, Certificate (Cafseenauth Chowdary), 1 Jun 1825. Unfortunately, Chowdary’s crime is illegible on the archival copy deposited in the National Archives of Singapore.

in both English and Bengali—attesting to his release and committing to not returning to India until the end of his sentence.

According to the documentation supplied by Mistree, he was a “convict of 1<sup>st</sup> class”, and thus would have been eligible for the pardons offered to Shaik Aumnoo and Cafseenauth, per the general policy memorandum.<sup>108</sup> Further testament to his character was provided by the Assistant Secretary, who observed that Mistree had “been employed in the General Hospital at this Residency for the last several years”, where he had “always behaved himself with sobriety, honesty, and attention to duties.”<sup>109</sup> And yet, Mistree did not take the pardon. As he noted, he had been happy in his position, and did not see the need to take the offer up, perhaps because he could not envision life outside the convict establishment, being far from home and with Bencoolen’s prospects after the British departure looking unclear. Indeed, we do not know if all of the forty-five to sixty eligible convicts took up the offer of a pardon; indeed, many may not have, like Mistree. As we shall see in the next chapter, the Caffrees were the recipients of an offer to travel with the British to Penang, and not all of them took it up.

The effects of the departure of the convicts to Singapore, meanwhile, were felt at Bencoolen too. There would, on one hand, been the loss felt in terms of labour. In 1823, William Day had described the convicts as “being the cheapest labour procurable here.” At “5 Rs a head”, they were apparently less costly to him than the rations he was providing the slaves at his plantation.<sup>110</sup> Perhaps more unexpectedly, however, their impending departure in 1825 pushed the prices of cattle down—from 20P a head to 10P a head, attesting to how intertwined they were with the settlement’s economy.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> SSR/S026, J Mall, Superintendent of Convicts, 24 Mar 1823.

<sup>109</sup> SSR/S026, Assistant Secretary in Charge, Fort Marlboro, 23 Mar 1825.

<sup>110</sup> Letter 4, William Day to Charles Day, 6 Dec 1823, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 20.

<sup>111</sup> Letter 9, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Nov 1825, in *Ibid.*, 60.

*Life at Singapore*

Having failed to obtain a pardon, Mistree was sent to Singapore. Arriving in April 1825, he continued his work as a dresser at the pauper's hospital on the island shortly thereafter.<sup>112</sup> At the pauper's hospital, Mistree was eligible for a pay of 12 Rupees a month in 1828, a figure comparable to Hollodar, a "compounder" who was also paid 12 Rs. a month, and six times that of Mohun, a barber.<sup>113</sup> During his first three years at the settlement, Mistree obtained a number of "certificates" testifying to his good conduct. The Head Surgeon of the Straits Settlements noted in August 1827 that Mistree "served as a Native Doctor in the General Hospital" at Bencoolen, and he "always found [Mistree] very diligent and attentive."<sup>114</sup> That same year, another recommendation noted that Mistree "always behaved himself well during that time", while in 1828, Alex Warrant, the Assistant Surgeon, commended Mistree's "sober and steady" conduct.<sup>115</sup>

The presence of such certificates within the archive is unusual; aside from Mistree's case I have not seen any similar documents, or seen mention of them in other accounts of convicts. Nor is it clear why these certificates were issued. Were they issued to all convicts who worked at establishments like the hospital? Or had Mistree requested for them? It is unlikely that Mistree was assembling them in the 1820s with a view to obtaining his release some three decades later. Perhaps, a more likely explanation is that Mistree had petitioned for his release around that time; recalling the release of other Bencoolen convicts like Shaik Aumnoo and Chowdary, Mistree had perhaps wanted to make evident his good conduct and eligibility for parole.

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<sup>112</sup> SSR/S026, Executive Officer and Superintendent of Convicts, 5 Aug 1856.

<sup>113</sup> SSR/Q2, Civil Order by the Hon'ble the Resident Councillor, 21 Feb 1828. Compare this to the wages of second class convicts in the 1859, who were paid anywhere between Rs 2 and Rs 11. See IOR/P/206/64 IJC, "Report on the Jails and Jail Hospitals in the Straits Settlements for the year 1858-59" 18 Jul 1861.

<sup>114</sup> SSR/S026, Certificate (signed P.J., Head Surgeon), Aug 1827.

<sup>115</sup> SSR/S026, Certificate (signed W. Montgomerie) 16 Jun 1827; SSR/S026, Certificate (signed Alex Warrant), 1 Jul 1828

Although no parole was forthcoming, in 1846, Kunnuck Mistree applied for and received a “ticket of leave”, permitting him to live outside the convict lines.<sup>116</sup> After the approval of his request, Mistree ended his stint as dresser at the pauper’s hospital.<sup>117</sup> Mistree’s application was facilitated by Straits Settlements government formalising a new set of regulations for the management of convicts, known as the “Butterworth Rules” (after the governor of the same name). These rules were an extension of previous systems, including the Bencoolen Rules instituted by Raffles in the 1820s.<sup>118</sup> Under the Butterworth Rules, convicts were divided into six classes, through which they would progress based on performance.<sup>119</sup> Among these, convicts of the first class were issued tickets-of-leave, permitting them to live outside convict lines and find their own employment. Second class convicts, such as Mistree, were employed by the state in a variety of functions, including in hospitals, as well as convict overseers and peons. Under the Butterworth rules, convicts who had been transported for life, and had served for sixteen years were permitted to obtain tickets of leave.<sup>120</sup> Here one might wonder how Mistree had been reclassified from a “first-class” convict to a “second-class” one. Was that a consequence of not taking up the pardon? Or did the Butterworth rules change the status of a first-class convict?

As a convict of the first class, a ticket of leave permitted Mistree the privilege of living away from the Convict lines, on the condition that he report to the superintendent of convicts regularly. In addition, any offence committed would have resulted in the revocation of the ticket, and a demotion to one of the lower classes.<sup>121</sup> But obtaining the ticket also meant that per the convict

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<sup>116</sup> SSR/S026, Ticket of Leave, 25 March 1846.

<sup>117</sup> SSR/S026, Executive Officer and Superintendent of Convicts, 5 Aug 1856.

<sup>118</sup> These regulations were in turn based on and superseding other regulations known as the “Bencoolen Rules” and the “Penang Rules”. See McNair, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*, 19–21; Anderson, ‘Sepoys, Servants and Settlers: Convict Transportation in the Indian Ocean, 1787-1945’, 195–196; Anderson, *Subaltern Lives*, 30–32.

<sup>119</sup> See McNair, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*, 84–90; IOR/P/206/64 IJC, “Report on the Jails and Jail Hospitals in the Straits Settlements for the year 1858-59” 18 Jul 1861.

<sup>120</sup> This was the case in the 1850s, and presumably so for Mistree as well. See *Ibid.*, 85. Also see IOR/P/188/49, India Public Consultations Jan 1858, Blundell to Beadon, 26 Nov 1857

<sup>121</sup> McNair, *Prisoners Their Own Warders*, 85.

regulations, he would no longer receive a wage from the government. In Mistree's case, he found work as "a native holistic doctor", drawing on his experience at the pauper's hospital. Here, Mistree claims, he had "gained esteem of his countrymen and others...with whom he [had] come in contact."<sup>122</sup>

During Mistree's ticket-of-leave period, it appears that he began to put together a case for his release. This was a long process. In 1851, he obtained two character references—a "J Burrows", who had apparently known him for twenty-six years, and the apothecary at the Convict Hospital, who had known him for fifteen—who "certified" that they had heard "nothing unfavourable" about him.<sup>123</sup> Mistree apparently first attempted petitioning the British government at Whitehall. The Home Secretary, George Gray, declined the petition, on account that the correct authority for a pardon lay in the Governor General of India.<sup>124</sup>

Thus denied in London, Mistree engaged a solicitor to file a petition to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal—the presidency from which he had been exiled—hoping for a pardon. Noting that Act XVIII of 1855 permitted the granting of a pardon, Mistree took care to note the burden that banishment had imposed on him, and the good faith in which he had borne his punishment:

That your Petitioner is now in his Seventieth year of age and has [ ] upwards of thirty eight years Banishment for his offence and according to ordinary calculation has but a few years to live he is now conscious that those few years should be spent in his native country. That your Petitioner has during a long banishment uniformly conducted himself well and to the satisfaction of under whose immediate Superintendance he has been placed as will appear from copies of the certificates of good conduct accompanying this petition. That to a Hindoo the punishment of transportation is more terrible than death itself and the only consolation left to a Hindoo under such circumstances is the hope of returning if it be but to die on the Banks of his beloved Ganges.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> SSR/S026, To Frederick James Halliday, "The humble Petition of Kunnuck Mistree a convict now undergoing his sentence of transportation in the Settlement of Singapore", 14 Aug 1856.

<sup>123</sup> SSR/S026, May 1851.

<sup>124</sup> SSR/S026, C.W. Cowper to John Neumarch, 7 Aug 1855.

<sup>125</sup> SSR/S026, To Frederick James Halliday, "The humble Petition of Kunnuck Mistree a convict now undergoing his sentence of transportation in the Settlement of Singapore", 14 Aug 1856.

As the numerous certificates of behaviour attest to—there were twelve attached to his petition—this was a carefully planned petition, gathered together with all the resources that Mistree appeared to have available to him. It is also notable for its awareness of his legal standing as a convict; in addition to Act XVIII, he also makes reference to the treaty between the Netherlands and Britain and British legislation providing for the transfer (titled “An Act for transferring the East India Company certain possessions newly acquired in the East Indies and authorizing the removal of convicts from Sumatra”), which resulted in his move to Singapore. This was a considered petition, one that took years to build up

As a bureaucratic procedure however, even Mistree’s twelve certificates of character were insufficient. After his petition was submitted, a further six references were appended to it, as the Straits government had to verify his good conduct. Among these were both Superintendents of Convicts—Macpherson and his replacement McNair—testifying to “no complaint of any kind” being made against Mistree, a former apothecary who noted that he had known Mistry since 1831, and not “seen or heard any thing unfavourable touching his character”, and the head overseer of convicts.<sup>126</sup> Most of these testimonies spoke of having known Mistree for a long period of time; indeed the Resident Councillor wrote that he “knew” Mistree at Bencoolen and for 19 years Singapore.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, it is remarkable that the entire hierarchy of the government at Singapore was supportive of Mistree’s attempt. The last testimony also points to another legacy of Bencoolen—even the civil servants dispersed across the Empire were the same people, a fact that has often been ignored.

### *Pardon*

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<sup>126</sup> SSR/S026, R. Macpherson, 20 Sep 1856; SSR/S026, J.F. McNair, 22 Dec 1857; SSR/S026, Head Overseer, May 1857.

<sup>127</sup> SSR/S026, R. Macpherson, 20 Sep 1856; SSR/S026, T. Church, 20 Sep 1856.

In 1858, Mistree's petition reached the Government of Bengal. "In consideration of the very long period of transportation" that he had already endured, "during that period, and his present advanced age", the Lieutenant Governor acquiesced to Mistree's pardon.<sup>128</sup> In turn, Mistree would be permitted to return to India. Some forty years after his initial sentence—in January 1818—Kunnuck Mistree's long banishment would finally come to a close. Neither him, nor the Supreme Court that sentenced him that year, might have expected the contours of Mistree's fate to follow so closely that of the British Empire in Southeast Asia. The news reached Singapore in February of that year.<sup>129</sup> It appears, however, that Mistree remained in Singapore for some time after that; in August he requested permission to be exempted from quit rent (a land tax) "on a lot of Ground transferred over by him for religious purposes."<sup>130</sup> No further trace of Mistree survives.

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<sup>128</sup> SSR/Z35, Junior Secretary to Government of Bengal to Governor of Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca, No. 149, 8 Jan 1858.

<sup>129</sup> SSR/Z35, No. 69 of 1858, Governor to Resident Councillor at Singapore, 4 Feb 1858; Copy to Superintendent of Convicts, 11 Feb 1858.

<sup>130</sup> SSR/Z36, No. 69 of 1858, Ag Secretary to Governor of Straits Settlements to Resident Councillor at Singapore, 30 Aug 1858.

## Chapter Four: Caffrees

While the transportation of convicts from India was one source of labour, it complemented an earlier movement of people from the Western Indian Ocean to Bencoolen: slaves from Madagascar, known as Caffrees (sometimes referred to as “Coffrees”).<sup>131</sup> The first slaves arrived in 1695, tied to the EIC, and continued to arrive well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although their descendants were emancipated in 1818, they continued to labour in the same ways that existed before emancipation. This chapter begins with an overview of the history of Caffree slavery at Bencoolen, and their economic importance to the settlement. It then demonstrates that the economic importance hindered attempts to resettle the Caffrees after the Treaty of London. In the process, Caffree family ties were subject instead to the whims of two rival colonial powers. When passage was finally offered to Penang, however, the Caffrees faced more problems. The economic opportunities that the Caffrees had at Bencoolen no longer presented themselves, and a group of them petitioned to be allowed back to Bencoolen.

### *Context*

According to John Bastin, the first Caffree slaves arrived right at the start of Bencoolen’s establishment, in 1695. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya has shown, meanwhile, that some were recruited as far away as Saint Helena, enslaved on account of the climate at Bencoolen proving difficult for

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<sup>131</sup> The term derives from the word *kaffir*, which was applied to black Africans in British India and Bencoolen. For a discussion of the early years of the slave trade in Bencoolen, see Allen, ‘Satisfying the “Want for Labouring People”’; de Silva Jayasuriya, ‘East India Company in Sumatra’ discusses the later period.

Englishmen.<sup>132</sup> During a period of French occupation in Sumatra in 1760, many Caffrees took the opportunity to escape. Consequently, from 1763 onwards, more slaves were taken to Bencoolen. Some of the slaves were purchased via traders in Muscat and India, while others were taken from Madagascar and the East African coast.<sup>133</sup> Richard Allen estimates that some 10,000 to 12,500 slaves might have been shipped to Bencoolen from the latter two regions, the vast majority of which arrived between 1762 and 1781.<sup>134</sup> For whatever reason, the trade appears to have stopped after that date.<sup>135</sup> Indeed, the Court of Directors at London had hoped to emancipate the Caffrees in 1787, but did not do so after opposition from Bencoolen.<sup>136</sup>

The Caffrees were directly enslaved by the EIC, and given a variety of tasks, including soldiering, construction and plantation labour. The situation of Caffrees at Penang in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century—about which we know more than Bencoolen—gives some idea of their role in the EIC’s settlements. In 1787, soon after the establishment of an EIC trading post at Penang, 126 Caffrees were sent there from Bencoolen. Francis Light, the founder of Penang, observed their poor health, commenting that “many of them so old they are unfit for service.” Perhaps this reflected the fact that no new shipments of Caffree slaves arrived in Bencoolen after 1781.<sup>137</sup> As at Bencoolen, the Caffrees were “maintained” by the EIC, being supplied “drams [whiskey]... rice, buffalo meat, and money.”<sup>138</sup> A 1794 slave register puts the population in Penang at 89, which dropped to 81 by 1796.<sup>139</sup> Work at Penang appears to have been tough: the Caffrees were assigned to road repair,

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<sup>132</sup> de Silva Jayasuriya, ‘East India Company in Sumatra’, 210.

<sup>133</sup> Bastin, *The British in West Sumatra (1685-1825)*, 88n280; Allen, ‘Satisfying the “Want for Labouring People”’, 55.

<sup>134</sup> Allen, ‘Satisfying the “Want for Labouring People”’, 63.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>136</sup> Court of Directors to Fort Marlborough, SFR 43, 19 May 1790, in Bastin, *The British in West Sumatra (1685-1825)*, 88–89.

<sup>137</sup> See note above.

<sup>138</sup> Captain Light, Superintendent of Prince of Wales’ Island to Governor-General in Council, 18 Jun 1787 in Great Britain. Parliament and East India Company, *Correspondence on State of Slavery in Territories under Rule of East India Company, and Slave Trade*, vol. 24, House of Commons Papers 125 (London: House of Commons, 1828), 422.

<sup>139</sup> The 1794 register includes 5 Tindals, 33 Men, 38 Women, 3 boys and 10 girls, the children being of unclear status. Review Roll of The Honourable Company’s Caffree Slaves, Prince of Wales’ Island, 29 Nov 1794 in *Ibid.*, 24:427.

firewood cutting, sweeping and hospital attendance. Many became infirm, or died. By 1809, the “survivors” were emancipated, and only six (two men and four women) remained by 1818.<sup>140</sup>

By the time of Raffles’ arrival in 1818, Bencoolen still hosted a significant population of Caffrees enslaved to the EIC. They were, according to him, “considered indispensable for the duties of the place... employed in loading and unloading the Company’s ships, and other hard work”, an opinion in which he did not apparently share, believing instead that “free labourers ought to be engaged”.<sup>141</sup> According to the governor’s wife, Lady Sophia Raffles, they were almost immediately emancipated and issued with certificates of freedom shortly after their arrival.<sup>142</sup>

Emancipation was framed in terms of both British moral obligation, as well as in terms of the uplift of the Caffrees. As noted in the previous chapter, many of the Caffrees had begun living with convicts—emancipated and otherwise—a state of affairs that drew Raffles’s disapprobation. He explained that:

No care having been taken of their morals, many of them are dissolute and depraved—the women being in promiscuous intercourse with the public convicts for the purpose (as I was informed by the superintendent [of convicts and Caffrees]) ‘of keeping up the breed’—and the children left to a state of nature, vice and wretchedness.<sup>143</sup>

Apparently the colonial authorities at Bencoolen had encouraged this situation, perhaps out of a desire to augment the labour pool consisting of convicts and Caffrees (as evident by the suggestion of ‘breeding’). Indeed, by the time Raffles had arrived, the vast majority of the Caffrees were descendants of the people enslaved in Africa. An 1820 census counted 252 Caffrees at

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<sup>140</sup> Rich Caunter, Superintendent of Police to W. A. Clubley, Secretary to Government, Prince of Wales’ Island, 7 Dec 1818 in *Ibid.*, 24:450.

<sup>141</sup> Raffles to Court of Directors, SFR 47, 10 April 1818, Document 130 in Bastin, *The British in West Sumatra (1685-1825)*, 157.

<sup>142</sup> Raffles and Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, 300.

<sup>143</sup> Raffles to Court of Directors, SFR 47, 10 April 1818, Document 130 in Bastin, *The British in West Sumatra (1685-1825)*, 157.

Bencoolen, of whom about forty-five had been brought over from Madagascar, with the remainder having been born at Sumatra, presumably out of such liaisons.<sup>144</sup>

Emancipation did not, however, unbind the Caffrees from the EIC. They, and their descendants, apparently “prefer[red] working for the Company on the same terms as during their slavery to the precarious employment of private individuals,” according to the Agricultural Society’s report of 1820.<sup>145</sup> Others, according to Nahuijs, offered their services to the other plantations, receiving “Sp. Piaster 2 and five bamboos of rice per month.”<sup>146</sup> In any case, emancipation did not change the view of Caffree’s as sources of hard labour, particularly among the colonial establishment. For instance, the same Agricultural Society report commented—with language hardly unchanged from the tone of “keeping up the breed” that Raffles observed (and one might use for horses and their capacity for work, rather than human beings)—that:

The race has degenerated much from inter-mixture with the natives, but the descendants of the original importation are tall and very athletic, and retain all the muscularity and strength of their sires.<sup>147</sup>

The Caffrees were not the only enslaved people at Bencoolen. In particular, after their emancipation, slavery remained central to the plantation economy at Bencoolen. The 1820 Agricultural Society report noted that without slavery, “Sumatra would not now have to boast of one fourth of the present extent of cultivation.”<sup>148</sup> Slave-owners included European plantation owners, “their descendants” and other “free peoples”, while the enslaved people included inhabitants of Pulau Nias (an island to the north-west of Bencoolen), Bali, and some Chinese.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Jennings, Presgrave, and Lumsdaine, ‘Report on the Population, &c. of the Town and Suburbs of Fort Marlborough’, 30–31; Raffles and Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, 300.

<sup>145</sup> Jennings, Presgrave, and Lumsdaine, ‘Report on the Population, &c. of the Town and Suburbs of Fort Marlborough’, 13.

<sup>146</sup> Nahuijs van Burgst, *Translated Extracts from Letters about Bencoolen, Padang, Menangkabau, Rhioum, Singapore and Poelo-Penang*, 12.

<sup>147</sup> Jennings, Presgrave, and Lumsdaine, ‘Report on the Population, &c. of the Town and Suburbs of Fort Marlborough’, 13.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

Supplementing this group were those under debt-bondage, or *mengiring* (literally translated: to follow), primarily associated with “native” Sumatrans.<sup>150</sup> An 1820 census places the total number of slaves at 1465, and *mengiring* debtors at 735.<sup>151</sup> A breakdown of the ethnicities of slaves was never taken, as they were considered under the category of those they “followed” (i.e. their owners/debtors)—whether “European”, “Free Bengali” or even “Caffree.” As these people were not enslaved by the EIC, and were considered as “native” to Bencoolen, however, they were not covered by the discussions around the 1824 Treaty of London.

### *Transfer*

The fourteenth article of the Treaty of London included provisions for the free movement of peoples after the transfer date of 1<sup>st</sup> March 1825:

All the inhabitants of the territories hereby ceded, shall enjoy, for a period of six years from the date of the ratification of the present Treaty, the liberty of disposing, as they please, of their property, and of transporting themselves, without let or hindrance, to any country to which they may wish to remove.<sup>152</sup>

While the convicts undergoing transportation were not included within this clause (as we saw in the previous chapter), in 1826 the EIC reiterated that the Caffrees, “emancipated convicts” (namely, convicts whose term of transportation had come to an end) and “Free Bengalis” as being covered by the treaty’s provisions.<sup>153</sup>

In order to fulfil the terms of the treaty, the EIC initially offered to provide for a “transfer” of the Caffrees who wished to leave Bencoolen after the handover date. The former Acting

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 24–25.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 30–31.

<sup>152</sup> ‘Treaty Between His Britannic Majesty And The King of The Netherlands, Respecting Territory And Commerce In The East Indies’, in *Edinburgh Annual Register for 1824*, vol. 17 (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co, 1825), 28.

<sup>153</sup> de Silva Jayasuriya, ‘East India Company in Sumatra’, 216, 218.

Resident, John Prince, who had remained at Bencoolen after the transfer, was instructed to offer the Caffrees (who had been “emancipated...in the year 1818”) a choice of heading to Prince of Wales’ Island or Singapore, “upon a moderate pension, not exceeding six rupees.” Were the offer to be accepted, Prince was to facilitate their departure, while any Caffree who declined the offer could remain at Sumatra without a government pension.<sup>154</sup> For this purpose, William Lewis (another planter at Bencoolen and sometime EIC official) was tasked with managing their departure.<sup>155</sup>

Because of the importance of labour to the settlement at Bencoolen, however, the EIC’s plans were stymied by the Dutch government.<sup>156</sup> According to Prince, the Dutch authorities imposed a number of conditions on the Caffrees before they could obtain passage. Not only did they have to obtain a police pass to leave the settlement, the Dutch would only permit Caffrees who had been in the employ of the British government and had no debts to leave. When Prince offered to discharge their debts, his suggestion met with ‘disapproval’ from the Dutch resident.<sup>157</sup> As William Day described it, “the Netherlands Govt. Have interfered...a great fuss has been made and it is supposed that our Govt./ The English / will be obliged to take notice of it.”<sup>158</sup>

Consequently, few Caffrees were able to take advantage of the British offer. The Dutch conditions meant that of 114 Caffrees who had applied to leave Bencoolen, only twenty-eight were able to. Further, families were not allowed to travel together: as Prince observed, “grown-up sons and daughters [were] not permitted to follow their parents.” Nor were the emancipated convicts

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<sup>154</sup> Bengal Public Consultations [BPC], 8 Sep 1829. Prince to Lewis & Boyle, 8 Sep 1825 in East India Company, *Slave Trade (East India) Slavery in Ceylon: Copies or Abstracts of All Correspondence between the Directors of the East India Company and the Company’s Government in India, since the Lst Day of June 1827, on the Subject of Slavery in the Territories under the Company’s Rule ; Also Communications Relating to the Subject of Slavery in the Island of Ceylon*, vol. 16, Session 15 November 1837 - 16 August 1838, Vol. LI (London: House of Commons, 1838), 208.

<sup>155</sup> There are conflicting accounts on this. William Day writes that there was one ship, the *Mary*, while de Silva Jayasuriya writes that it was called the *Louisa*. Letter 11, William Day to Charles Day, 14 Apr 1826 in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 72; de Silva Jayasuriya, ‘East India Company in Sumatra’, 217–218.

<sup>156</sup> de Silva Jayasuriya, ‘East India Company in Sumatra’, 216.

<sup>157</sup> BPC, 8 Sep 1829. Prince to Lushington, 14 Sep 1826 in *Slave Trade (East India) Slavery in Ceylon*, 16:209.

<sup>158</sup> Letter 11, William Day to Charles Day, 14 Apr 1826, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 72. By this stage Day was working for the Dutch government in Bencoolen; note his emphasis on “The English” as “our Govt.”

either.<sup>159</sup> As we have seen, Caffree and convict society had become increasingly intertwined by the 1820s. The restrictions placed by the Dutch cut into these family ties; Prince observed how “many of the women who are permitted to go are married to Caffree men who are restricted.”<sup>160</sup> The difficulties were further complicated by the ties between the Caffrees and others at Bencoolen (as we have seen before). Referring to themselves as “Free Bengalis” (released convicts and descendants of the Caffrees), they petitioned Prince, writing that they had “emigrated . . . to this place in different situations” and were now “inter-married with Natives of this place, and we are now fathers and Husbands of families.”<sup>161</sup>

The Dutch conditions, which Prince called an “unfeeling and unprecedented exercise of authority”, placed many of the Caffrees in limbo. Hoping that the “wisdom of the supreme government shall devise more effectual means for their ultimate removal”, many of the eligible Caffrees remained with “their husbands and children” at the settlement. They were, at least, able to draw on a small pension from the British government, “two-thirds” of what they would have been entitled to at Penang.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, it is unclear how many Caffrees actually managed to leave under these conditions. A tiny minority of Caffrees did make their way to Singapore, as an 1827 return of population at that settlement noted the presence of two men and three women.<sup>163</sup> In Penang, meanwhile, it appears that there were 114 “Coffrees” at Prince of Wales’ Island in 1828, an increase from the six counted ten years earlier.<sup>164</sup>

The role of the other British agent appointed to handle the Caffrees, Robert Bogle, appears to have exacerbated matters. Bogle held the responsibility of handling the accounts for the EIC’s

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<sup>159</sup> BPC, 8 Sep 1829. Prince to Lushington, 14 Sep 1826 in *Slave Trade (East India) Slavery in Ceylon*, 16:209.

<sup>160</sup> BPC, 8 Sep 1829. Prince to Lushington, 14 Sep 1826 in *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 77.

<sup>162</sup> BPC, 8 Sep 1829. Prince to Lushington, 14 Sep 1826 in *Slave Trade (East India) Slavery in Ceylon*, 16:209.

<sup>163</sup> SSR/N1/01050, “Abstract Return of the Population at Singapore”, 1 Jan 1827.

<sup>164</sup> “Census of the Population of Penang, or Prince of Wales’ Island, Province Wellesley, and adjacent Isles, up to the 31st December 1828”, in Robert Montgomery Martin, *History of the British Possessions in the Indian & Atlantic Oceans: Comprising Ceylon, Penang, Malacca, Sincapore, the Falkland Islands, St. Helena, Ascension, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Cape Coast Castle, &c., &c.*, British Colonial Library. London, 1844. v. 10 (London: Whittaker & Co., Ave Maria Lane, 1837), 130.

various pensioners—including Caffrees—after the handover.<sup>165</sup> By January 1826, however, he had assumed the title of magistrate (after a Caffree “running a muck” had killed the previous magistrate) and Assistant Resident.<sup>166</sup> This, as de Silva Jayasuriya points out, could well have created a conflict of interest, given the Dutch desire to retain Caffree labour.<sup>167</sup> In any case, Prince appeared to have been unhappy with Bogle’s handling of the matter. William Day observed how the two had “come to a paper war respecting the Coffrees,” and he was confident that after “the whole of the business...come[s] before Parliament... Bogle’s name will be often mentioned not much to his credit.”<sup>168</sup>

Two years later, however, the status of the Caffrees remained in doubt. In October 1828, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Robert Fullerton, observed that “three years have already passed in fruitless negotiation” with the Dutch Governor-General at Java. Indeed, a despatch from Calcutta sent to Batavia in August had not even merited a reply from the Dutch official. Warning of the dangers of further “procrastination”, given that the provisions of the treaty were set to expire (in March 1830), Fullerton advocated more direct action based on three principles. First, that the Dutch at Bencoolen were not to object to the British transferring any Caffree, Bengali or emancipated convict, or their families, away from Bencoolen. Second, that any outstanding debts would have to be settled before Caffrees could move (recalling the Dutch conditions), but that a British agent could have the discretion to offer restitution. And third, that any laws implemented after the transfer would not prevent these people from moving. In order to implement these principles, and with

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<sup>165</sup> de Silva Jayasuriya, ‘East India Company in Sumatra’, 217.

<sup>166</sup> Letter 10, William Day to Charles Day, 16 Jan 1826, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 66–67.

<sup>167</sup> de Silva Jayasuriya, ‘East India Company in Sumatra’, 217.

<sup>168</sup> Letter 12, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Sep 1826, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 79. By this stage, however, Day had expressed much unhappiness with Bogle (over unrelated matters), and it is quite unlikely that he would have had anything positive to add.

Calcutta's approval, Fullerton despatched Robert Ibbetson, the Resident Councillor at Penang, to Bencoolen, along with the EIC ship, *Hastings*.<sup>169</sup>

This time, it appears that negotiations with the Dutch were concluded satisfactorily, permitting Ibbetson to return to Penang with the Caffrees. Their departure brought to a close an ordeal that lasted more than three years. The interim period of uncertainty over their domicile and pensions appeared to take a toll on the Caffrees. Ibbetson noted that on arriving at Penang, the Caffrees initially “engaged themselves in private employ”, but when informed that they could not do so without losing their pensions, “resigned, preferring apparently a bare subsistence with sloth and idleness to higher wages and personal exertion.” With “this circumstance [of uncertainty] and the habits of idleness [the Caffrees] contracted for the last four years at Bencoolen”, he believed that at Penang “their services will never be made available with advantage.”<sup>170</sup>

### *Penang*

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1829, 97 of these “Caffree Pensioners” arrived at Penang on board the EIC frigate *Hastings*. The group included 23 men, 52 women and 22 children.<sup>171</sup> At the last moment, Ibbetson reported that 8 Caffrees, who had initially elected to join the *Hastings* opted instead to remain behind.<sup>172</sup> We can only speculate at their reasons—Ibbetson gives none—but perhaps they had to do with the fact that their family or children were not offered passage, not being “Caffrees”, “Free Bengali” or “emancipated convicts.” Indeed, the 97 was notably fewer in number than the initial number of 114 that Prince had reported as being interested in leaving Bencoolen.

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<sup>169</sup> SSR/NL55/K18. Minute by the President, R Fullerton, Prince of Wales' Island, 20 October 1828; BPC, 21 November 1828, H.T. Prinsep, Secretary to Government, Bengal to J. Anderson, Secretary to Government, Prince of Wales' Island, 21 Nov 1828 in *Slave Trade (East India) Slavery in Ceylon*, 16:205.

<sup>170</sup> BPC, 8 Sep 1829. R. Ibbetson, Minute, 1 Jun 1829 in *Ibid.*, 16:209.

<sup>171</sup> SSR/NL55/K18, No 1., “List of Coffree Pensioners arrived at Prince of Wales' Island from Bencoolen on board the Honble Company's Frigate *Hastings*”, R. Ibbetson, 28 May 1829.

<sup>172</sup> SSR/NL55/K18, No 2. “List of Coffree Pensioners”, R. Ibbetson, 28 May 1829

For those who did arrive at Penang, however, their stay proved to be an unhappy one. Shortly after their arrival, Ibbetson recommended to the Straits government that aside from seven individuals, all pension payments were to be ceased. As he wrote, the Caffrees “are not disposed to labour for their present Pensions and the great proportion of women among them is indeed an obstacle to this.” Although Ibbetson does not make evident what he believed the women would be able to do for labour, the policy was justified in terms of the fact that “the more industrious of their number had years since voluntarily accepted emancipation upon less favourable terms”, referring perhaps to the 1818 emancipation under Raffles.<sup>173</sup> As was often the case, economic considerations dictated Caffree policy. While the recommendation was framed in terms of personal industry, it is apparent that it was made with a view to maximising the economic utility of the Caffrees to the Straits government.

The end of government pensions hit the Caffrees at Penang hard, as a petition written by them in 1830 attests to. This petition, which exists in the holdings of the National Archives of Singapore, was written by “poor and miserable petitioners”, with the aim of being given permission to travel back to Bencoolen.<sup>174</sup> The copy of the petition I consulted is very badly damaged; nonetheless it is possible to glean some details about their situation. Describing themselves as “poor and miserable petitioners”, the petitioners noted that they were “suffering at the moment” in Penang, despite having been in “long service to the Honorable Company.”

Referring to the original plans around the time of the transfer, they observed that the British government (through the Acting Resident, John Prince) had offered them a pension of four to seven rupees per month (the reasons for the discrepancy is unclear), if they were willing to move to either Penang or Singapore. When that did not happen, a second offer was made “requesting” the “poor

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<sup>173</sup> SSR/NL55/K18, R. Ibbetson, Memorandum, 3 Oct 1829.

<sup>174</sup> SSR/NL15/A70, Military Secretary to Governor-General, “Petition of poor and miserable Caffrees”, 8 May 1830.

and miserable petitioners” to head to Penang, requiring them to “dispose” their property at Bencoolen, in return being “repaired” for their losses. It was under this offer—made by the Ibbetson mission—that the group of 97 had accepted travel to Penang.

At Penang, however, the situation was no better. They noted that they found difficulty in “obtaining employment”, compounded by the EIC stopping their pensions, causing them much “hardship to be maintained here.” The rest of the petition is not readable by any means, nor is the Governor-General’s response clear. A note in the archival margins observes that the petitioners were “soliciting a pension and passage to Bencoolen”, while the accompanying letter suggests that the Governor-General indicated that the “local authorities” (in Penang) would be best placed to deal with it.<sup>175</sup> No further traces remain of the Caffrees, or if they got their passage back to Bencoolen; While “Caffres” continue to appear in censuses in Singapore in the 1830s, no reference is made to a past at Bencoolen.<sup>176</sup> Sunil Amrith suggests that they “melded, unnoticed” into the population at Penang, while de Silva Jayasuriya writes that tracing their descendants remains an open project.<sup>177</sup> Given the Caffrees past and close links and intermarriage with the convict community at Bencoolen, that would be unsurprising.

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<sup>175</sup> SSR/NL15/A70, Military Secretary to Governor-General, 8 May 1830.

<sup>176</sup> There were 37 “Caffres or African Negroes” according to the 1833 census, 62 in 1834 and 41 in 1836. Martin, *History of the British Possessions in the Indian & Atlantic Oceans*, 152; Thomas John Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca, Viz. Pinang, Malacca, and Singapore: With a History of the Malayan States on the Peninsula of Malacca* (J. Murray, 1839), 9, 55; Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, vol. 5 (Philadelphia, PA: C. Sherman, 1844), 418. Newbold describes the “Caffres” at Singapore as descendants of Arab (rather than British) slave-trading, although he was writing in a post-abolition context.

<sup>177</sup> Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 77; de Silva Jayasuriya, ‘East India Company in Sumatra’, 221.

## Chapter Five: Fragmentary Epilogues

### *Economic Decline*

The departure of the British, and the overall marginal importance of the settlement to the Netherlands government saw Bencoolen's population decrease significantly. By 1833, the population had declined to 5392 people by one Dutch count, including 632 "Bengalis" and 94 "Kaffers" (presumably, Caffrees, since there is no record of other people of African origin at Bencoolen), who had probably opted not to follow Ibbetson to Penang.<sup>178</sup> By the time G.F. Davidson arrived between 1828 and 1830, he noted that Bencoolen had "declined very seriously from its former prosperity," a lamentation reminiscent of William Day's. With many of the planters and merchants having left, and the Dutch draw-down of its establishment, he described it as "very little more than a station for the Dutch Assistant-Resident and a small garrison."<sup>179</sup>

Speaking with the *Radins* of Bencoolen (whom he claimed "possessed gentleman-like feelings and taste"), Davidson claimed that the handover of Bencoolen was "a severe blow and great disappointment to all the natives, both high and low."<sup>180</sup> Part of that, he attributed to the loss of British pensions for the "petty Rajahs and other nobles", but it is likely too that the declining economic importance of Bencoolen, as well as the trade associated with the British settlement, had also affected the Malay rulers in the region.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Emanuel Francis, *Herinneringen uit den levensloop van een' Indisch' ambtenaar van 1815 tot 1851*, Eerste Deel (Batavia: Van Dorp, 1856), 83; Burhan, *Bengkulu dalam sejarah*, 156.

<sup>179</sup> Davidson, *Trade and Travel in the Far East*, 74.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

Bencoolen's economic decline had become readily apparent to all who visited. In August 1832, an American naval embassy called on Bencoolen, en-route to Siam and Cochinchina. The surgeon, Benajah Ticknor described meeting two "Englishmen", Hay and Grant, who informed him that "the commerce of Bencoolen [had] been declining for some years." They noted two causes: "high duties imposed...upon imports and exports", which William Day had also complained of, and the fall in prices of pepper, nutmegs, cloves and mace, which had been the main exports from the region.<sup>182</sup> Consequently, "for some years previous to [the American visit], it was rare for a vessel to enter the harbour oftener than once in six months."<sup>183</sup>

The marketplace or bazaar at Bencoolen reflected this stagnation. Ticknor was particularly taken aback, noting that he had "scarcely ever seen any place that exhibited a less inviting appearance than this", from the "narrow dirty streets" that "branched off...from a kind of central square", to the "miserable dwellings" nearby.<sup>184</sup> Most of the occupants were Chinese shopkeepers, but "nothing was to be seen in their shops, except a very few of the most ordinary articles of European and Chinese manufacture."<sup>185</sup> The overall picture was desolate. Even "provisions here were scarce and dear, there being so little demand for them."<sup>186</sup> If Ticknor's European interlocutors had complained about the impact of the Dutch arrival on their commerce, then the impact on the non-European population must have been even greater.

If the economy was one grievance, another reason for the *Radins'* displeasure, however, may well have been with the system of governance under the Dutch Residents. William Day had described Knoerle's predecessor as a "much disliked, most arbitrary fellow, [who] does just as he

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<sup>182</sup> Benajah Ticknor, *The Voyage of the Peacock: A Journal*, ed. Nan Powell Hodges (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 102.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 98–99.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

pleases and makes a mockery of justice.”<sup>187</sup> While charges of Dutch ‘arbitrariness’ were a common refrain in Day’s letters—even before their arrival—a later letter made some serious allegations:

A system of torture has been introduced for the purpose of extorting evidence in cases of murder... Mr. Robert Bogle who enforces and superintends these tortures has had the audacity to deny it, I have myself been an eye witness. The “Inquisition room” adjoins my office, and the shrieks of the poor unfortunate creatures are heard far around.<sup>188</sup>

This situation did not appear to change with the arrival of Knoerle, even as Ticknor claimed the new Resident had described Dutch policy in Java as one of “great cruelty.”<sup>189</sup> Edmund Roberts, another of the Americans in the embassy, observed that:

It is degrading to humanity to see the subject air with which the resident is addressed by the lower order of Sumatrans. They stand, when they enter his presence, with an aspect of humble submission: their bodies are bent—the palms of their hands are seen resting on their knees, and fear is strangely marked on their countenances.<sup>190</sup>

Ticknor too had noted how Knoerle had “to adopt severe measures with the natives, and to enforce them with utmost strictness.” While Ticknor praised the methods, observing that Knoerle had instituted a trial by jury for murder cases, the execution of five men convicted by such, and the outcomes—a decline in the murder rate—it was “evident that he was very much feared.”<sup>191</sup>

Knoerle was later murdered, apparently “at the instigation of some of the principal rajahs of Bencoolen... his body was literally cut in pieces and then burnt with great exultation.”<sup>192</sup> Ticknor believed the cause to be Knoerle “taking liberties with ... wives and daughters” of the natives.<sup>193</sup>

### *“Abandoned Children”*

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<sup>187</sup> Letter 11, William Day to Charles Day, 14 Apr 1826, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 72.

<sup>188</sup> Letter 12, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Sep 1826, in *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>189</sup> Ticknor, *The Voyage of the Peacock*, 98.

<sup>190</sup> Edmund Roberts, *Embassy to the Eastern Courts of Cochin-China, Siam, and Muscat: In the U. S. Sloop-of-War Peacock* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1837), 36, <http://archive.org/details/embassytoeaster00robegoog>.

<sup>191</sup> Ticknor, *The Voyage of the Peacock*, 97–98.

<sup>192</sup> Roberts, *Embassy to the Eastern Courts of Cochin-China, Siam, and Muscat*, 38.

<sup>193</sup> Ticknor, *The Voyage of the Peacock*, 336n13.

One group of individuals who found themselves caught between Empires were children of the Englishmen who served with the Company. Ticknor had noted that a number of “children of Englishmen by native women” had “been left unprovided for when the place was transferred to the Dutch.”<sup>194</sup> According to Ticknor, Knoerle, had established the school on the model of Joseph Lancaster, with some “twenty to thirty destitute and unprotected children” were taught reading and writing in Malay.<sup>195</sup> These children—all boys—were being trained as clerks and writers for the Dutch administration.<sup>196</sup> His fellow emissary, Edmund Roberts, also noted the existence of a second school where arithmetic was taught.<sup>197</sup> The Dutch authorities also took particular care in financing these programs. William Day complained that:

Another most grievous subject of complaint is the interference of the orphan chamber in all Estates intestate or not, they will have something to say, and give the executors so much annoyance as to oblige them to throw it up, and then they take the whole of it to themselves and nothing more is heard of the estate.<sup>198</sup>

As Ann Stoler has observed in a number of colonial contexts, the children of unions between Europeans and colonised populations often attracted a great deal of state attention and consternation.<sup>199</sup> A particular area of concern was the notion of “abandonment” by European fathers, one that carried “specific race, cultural and gender coordinates.”<sup>200</sup> Later on in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *inlandsche kinderen* would be the object of numerous programmes of colonial socialisation in the Netherlands Indies.<sup>201</sup> Even at this early part of the century, Ticknor’s use of “unprotected children” is instructive; as is the schooling of these children to support the Netherlands government’s colonial project. Indeed, the traineeship they were subject to may not have been not

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>197</sup> Roberts, *Embassy to the Eastern Courts of Cochinchina, Siam, and Muscat*, 36.

<sup>198</sup> Letter 12, William Day to Charles Day, 10 Sep 1826 in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 80.

<sup>199</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia’, in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 1997), 198–227.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 205–209.

<sup>201</sup> Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 105–130.

all too different from the one that William Day had experienced. He too had been born to an English father and a Malay mother, and would later be schooled to become an EIC writer himself.

What is unclear, however, is what happened to girls born of such unions at Bencoolen, with gender providing an additional complication to the colonial state's projects. It is not that there were no girls born out of unions between native mothers and English fathers. Indeed our planter William Day had a daughter, Ellen Grant Day, who would have been eight years old in 1832.<sup>202</sup> William Day's attitude towards his daughter is particularly telling, given his heritage. In contrast to his upbringing, Day had wished for her that "the poor child will be much happier brought up as a native than as a European."<sup>203</sup> He even made an explicit provision in his 1825 will for her to inherit one-third of his estate, on condition that she were not "sent home to my friends in Europe", to ensure "her future welfare and happiness thro' life."<sup>204</sup> Why Day would do so is unknown. Indeed, he had at the same moment taken pride that his daughter "promises to be good looking, and as fair as [he] could justly expect."<sup>205</sup> It is unclear if Day ever did follow-up on his instructions; little more is known of Ellen Day except that she was buried in Batavia in 1901.<sup>206</sup> Nor may Ellen have been William's only child; Richard Davies' "Sumatra's Westkust" website notes the presence of a Thomas Grant Day, married in 1852, who served as a clerk at Bencoolen. The latter appears to have taken the name Daij, as he recorded in the *Almanak en Naamregister van Nederlandsch-Indië*.<sup>207</sup>

It was not unusual for men such as Day to father children with local women. When informing his father about the existence of his daughter, Day writes of meeting a Mr. Winter in the

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<sup>202</sup> Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, xlv–xlvi.

<sup>203</sup> Letter 7, William Day to Charles Day, Feb 1825, in *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>204</sup> Letter 8, "A true copy of the last Will and Testament of William Grant Day of Bencoolen", 8 Mar 1825, in *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>205</sup> Letter 7, William Day to Charles Day, Feb 1825, in *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, xlv–xlvi.

<sup>207</sup> Richard (W.E.R.) Davies, 'Overheid 1854 - Sumatra's Westkust', *Sumatra's Westkust*, 15 December 2002, <https://sites.google.com/site/sumatraswestkust/gouvernement-1854>; Richard (W.E.R.) Davies, 'Padang: Burgelijke Stand (BS) / Naamlijst (NL), Surnames C (Cabri) - F (Furrer)', *Sumatra's Westkust*, 23 December 2000, <https://sites.google.com/site/sumatraswestkust/burgerlijke-stand/bs-en-naamljsten-swk>; *Almanak en Naamregister van Nederlandsch-Indië voor het jaar 1848*, vol. 21 (Batavia: Ter Lands Drukkery, 1848), 306–307. Per the *Almanak*, Day, or Daij, had two children who took his last name.

out-station of Bantering, “who kept a woman” that was “the mother of his two children.”<sup>208</sup> Day framed the decision to take “a woman into keeping” (as he described it) as one of loneliness. Afraid of be seduced by Winter’s partner, who “had not the greatest command over her passions” (original emphasis), he said he was:

By this induced to keep a girl – further the want of society banished as it were in the jungles of Sumatra, without a soul to converse with or any one to attach my self to, being left at times for nearly a month together by myself—and no one to look after my clothes etc., prepare a comfortable return after a boiling hot days work...<sup>209</sup>

But there was also an undercurrent of sexual desire. “Young men will be young men”, he wrote, and while “women of the town” might give one “severe venereal [*sic*]” (as “four Gentlemen” had recently discovered), by “keep[ing] a woman”, he could avoid having to “fear...getting deceased” by sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>210</sup> No doubt the other men would have given similar rationalisations.

The discussion about “abandoned children” by the visitors also brought to the fore questions of racial identity. While Day had considered himself to be an Englishman, and perhaps the others at Bencoolen did too, this was not a label that the visitors applied to him. For instance, in his stay at Bencoolen, Davidson resided with Robert Bogle, whom he claimed was the “one Englishman” at the settlement—a term that William Day would have taken umbrage with, given his antipathy to Bogle.<sup>211</sup> Bogle, as we recall, had found employment in with the Dutch administration, and continued to remain there until his death in 1848.<sup>212</sup> Perhaps Davidson’s classification was a result of the feud Day and Bogle were having; or perhaps Davidson did not view Day—whose mother was from Bencoolen—as a proper Englishman.

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<sup>208</sup> Letter 7, William Day to Charles Day, Feb 1825, in Day, *Letters from Bencoolen*, 41.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> Davidson, *Trade and Travel in the Far East*, 84.

<sup>212</sup> Davidson, ‘Bencoolen in 1828–30, by G.F. Davidson (extract from *Trade & Travel in the Far East*, London, 1846)’, 212n19.

*Other legacies*

The Americans' accounts, however, cast doubt on an enduring colonial orthodoxy in one aspect. For a long time, British accounts had referred to the climate an environment of Bencoolen in uncomplimentary terms. On arriving at Bencoolen in 1818, for example, Raffles wrote that "this is, without exception, the most wretched place I ever beheld", and that even "the natives say that Bencoolen is now a *tana mati* (dead land)."<sup>213</sup> Bencoolen's reputation for disease and ill-health continued past Raffles' time, with Davidson writing that, "the climate of Bencoolen is the worst" he had encountered yet.<sup>214</sup> Ticknor noted that the few "foreign residents at Bencoolen" (presumably, European) that he met "gave a favourable account of the climate."<sup>215</sup> That gave him the confidence to "suppos[e] that a residence at Bencoolen would admit of as great a deal of happiness...as could be realised anywhere."<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Raffles to William Marsden, 7 Apr 1818 in Raffles and Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, 293.

<sup>214</sup> Davidson, *Trade and Travel in the Far East*, 79.

<sup>215</sup> Ticknor, *The Voyage of the Peacock*, 100.

<sup>216</sup> Although Roberts warned of the prevalence of "jungle fever". Ibid.; Roberts, *Embassy to the Eastern Courts of Cochin-China, Siam, and Muscat*, 36.

## Conclusion

Fort Marlborough stands today in the heart of present-day Bengkulu, a reminder of nearly a century and a half of British colonialism in the town. The fort is preserved as a historical monument, lent additional significance by the detention of the Indonesian nationalist leader Sukarno there during the last days of the Dutch East Indies.<sup>217</sup> Like Cape Town, Ceylon, Malacca and Mauritius among others, Bencoolen was one of a number of Indian Ocean territories that were exchanged between colonial powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These transitions were often not neat breaks but long affairs, in which the old order continued to exert influence long after the handover date. This thesis has shown, with the examples of the planters William Day and Cursetjee Muncherjee, the convict Kunnuck Mistree and the Caffrees, that colonial transition is never straightforward, putting lie to the clean breaks historical chronologies suggest. Even today, legacies of these transitions continue to persist.

One of the most notable festivals in modern Bengkulu is the Tabot festival, commemorating the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Muharram. The Indonesian Ministry of Tourism's official web site describes the "Bengkulu Tabot Festival" as "an annual cultural celebration that is not to be missed."<sup>218</sup> Tabot, the term used to describe the festival at Bengkulu (sometimes also called *tabuik*), derives from *tabut*, or ritual casket. On the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Muharram, Shia Muslims commemorate the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson at Karbala. Adherents would carry the *tabut* in a procession through the town, grieving and mourning

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<sup>217</sup> The Jakarta Post, 'Traces of British Colonization in Bengkulu', *The Jakarta Post*, 4 July 2014, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/07/04/traces-british-colonization-bengkulu.html>.

<sup>218</sup> Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Indonesia, 'Bengkulu Tabot Festival: A Colorful Celebration of Religion & Culture', *Wonderful Indonesia*, 2014, [http://indonesia.travel/attraction/attraction\\_details/131/bengkulu-tabot-festival-a-colorful-celebration-of-religion-culture](http://indonesia.travel/attraction/attraction_details/131/bengkulu-tabot-festival-a-colorful-celebration-of-religion-culture).

for his death, and it is from there that the festival takes its name. At Bengkulu today, this festival takes place from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Muharram, culminating in a final parade of the *tabut*.

The presence of parade more commonly associated with Shia Muslims, in a predominantly Sunni Islamic area is unusual, but not unsurprising. The movement of Shia Indian-Muslims had brought the festival to the region. For example, elsewhere in the British Empire, such as at Penang, Malacca and Singapore, the Muharram procession was often carried out by convicts; indeed the convict procession would in later years be a source of much anxiety for colonial administrators, eager to maintain order without provoking rebellion by restricting religious expression.<sup>219</sup> One explanation for Tabot's persistence is that perhaps the convicts who were stationed at Bencoolen—some of whom did not leave after the departure of the British—continued the tradition, which over time melded with the rest of society in the region. Or perhaps, as the Tourism Board notes, it was brought by Sepoy soldiers or Indian builders during an earlier era of Empire.<sup>220</sup>

As we have seen Bencoolen was but one of the many territories exchanged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the midst of the expansion of the British Empire. These legacies are not unnoticed in the modern day, often by their modern nation-state's Tourism boards (whether the celebration Tabot in Bencoolen, the red Dutch *Stadhuis* (“Town Hall”) of modern Malacca, or Mauritius’ “contrast of colours, cultures and tastes”).<sup>221</sup> Yet, behind these marketing messages is a historical process—colonial regime transition—that has seldom been addressed head-on. It is hoped that this analysis of Bencoolen has demonstrated the rich possibilities of such research.

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<sup>219</sup> Sunil S. Amrith, ‘Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal’, *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 555; Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 97–98; Anoma Pieris, *Hidden Hands and Divided Landscapes: A Penal History of Singapore's Plural Society*, *Writing Past Colonialism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 156–187; Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement (1786-1957)* (London: Cambridge U.P, 1969), 139; Constance M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements, 1826-67: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony*, University of London. Historical Studies 32 (London: Athlone Press, 1972), 105.

<sup>220</sup> An Imam or preacher known as Sheikh Burhanuddin, or Imam Senggolo, is also credited as the source of the Tabot festival. His origins are, however, unknown. See Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Indonesia, ‘Bengkulu Tabot Festival’.

<sup>221</sup> ‘Discover Mauritius’, *Discover Mauritius*, accessed 15 July 2016, <http://www.tourism-mauritius.mu/en/discover-mauritius.html>.

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