

**KELINGS IN ACEH: MOBILITY, CRISIS, AND  
SURVIVAL IN THE 18TH-19TH CENTURIES**

**BY**

**NIA DELIANA**

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Sciences  
(History and Civilization)**

**Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human  
Sciences  
International Islamic University Malaysia**

**JUNE 2021**

## ABSTRACT

There is a dearth of scholarly studies on independent trans-oceanic mercantile groups active in Aceh. The Keling merchants were one of numerous influential chains of traders that connected the maritime mercantile network in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Colonialism and transformations that arrived through European imperial rule, fueled by nationalist narratives in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dispelled the historical presence and memory of the Kelings from their embedded position in the story of Southeast Asian development. Contributions and legacies of diverse ethnic groups that lived within the social and political fabric of the region have often been contested, distorted, ignored, or extirpated from nationalist and racist historical narratives on development and education. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the longstanding Keling trading activities in Aceh reached a peak, and then sharply declined and disappeared. Kelings were one of many ethnic groups known to the Acehnese as traders, including Hindus and Muslims from Southern Indian key ports such as the Coromandel Coast. Keling Muslims were favourites of both local autonomous leaders and the Sultans, skillfully meeting the needs not only of commercial requirements and maintenance but also advising in financial matters and political policies. Increasing European hegemony from the late 18th century onwards reduced the role and contribution of the Kelings, who were gradually eclipsed as the royal elites listed to the advice of the newcomers, who later became Shahbandars, commerce and political policymakers. The Sultans began to emulate British trade, and the associated maritime and security system and law, following numerous land and sea unrests that raised suspicions about foreigners – including both European and Keling merchants – interfering in domestic politics and fomenting rebellions. The influence of the Kelings further declined under Dutch colonialism, with a coastal blockade in 1873 severely restricting commercial access in almost every trading port. Through consulting numerous indigenous primary works, European reports, newspapers, and archival materials from Istanbul, Leiden, London, Aceh and Penang, this research raises four questions surrounding the indigenous knowledge on the Kelings establishment, display of influences, and responses towards internal and external turbulences in Aceh, and intellectual-cultural contributions to the Acehnese. Addressing these questions, the objectives of this study are to: (1) identify indigenous knowledge and portrayal of the Kelings based on local texts; (2) elaborate on the role of the Kelings in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; (3) highlight dynamic responses towards the survival of trade mobility and the decline during the rising internal turbulences, rivalry, and hegemony of the British, Dutch, and French in Aceh; and (4) describe the roles played by the Kelings in the intellectual and religious spheres. This study aims to fill the existing gap and provide additional contributions to the study of the South Indian trans-oceanic role in Indonesia and the general history of maritime Southeast Asia.

## خلاصة البحث

يندر وجود دراسات علمية محكمة حول مجموعات “التجار عابري المحيطات” في آتشييه. كان التجار الكيلنغيون “Kelings” مجموعة واحدة من العديد من مجموعات التجار عابري المحيطات المؤثرة والمسيطرة التي ربطت شبكات التجارة البحرية والملاحة في جنوب شرق آسيا في مرحلة ما قبل الاستعمار، وهم مجموعة ذات أصل هندي وفدت على جنوب شرق آسيا. كان من نتائج الاستعمار – والتحويلات التي حدثت إبان فترات الإمبريالية الأوروبية في القرن العشرين – أن نشأت الكيلنغيون رغم ارتباطهم الوثيق منذ أزمان بعيدة بالتجارة والإبحار عبر المحيطات. لقد تمخض عما يسمى بنمط التعليم العصري والتنمية الحديثة الذان جاء بهما المستعمر سك مفاهيم قومية وعنصرية وعرقية جديدة ومشوهة، أدت إلى القضاء على الإرث الثقافي والمفاهيمي الراسخ منذ القدم والذي حافظ على تماسك النسيج الاجتماعي والسياسي للسكان الأصليين في جنوب شرق آسيا، مما تسبب لاحقاً بحدوث الصراعات. إبان القرنين الثامن عشر والتاسع عشر، بلغ النشاط التجاري والبحري للكيلنغيين ذروته، لكنه سرعان ما تراجع بشدة واختفى. كان الكيلنغيون واحدة من العديد من المجموعات العرقية المعروفة في آتشييه بالتجارة، إضافة إلي مسلمي وهندوس موانئ جنوب الهند. وفي الحقيقة، فقد فضل كل من الحكام والأمراء المحليين وكذلك السلاطين التعامل مع المسلمين الكيلنغيين لمهارتهم وحسن أدائهم للمهام التي تسند إليهم، ليس في المجال التجاري والبحري وحسب، إنما أيضاً تقديم الاستشارات المالية والسياسية. مع مرور الوقت، أدت الهيمنة الأوروبية المتصاعدة أواخر القرن الثامن عشر إلى تقليص دور ومساهمة الكيلنغيين وأقول نجمهم تدريجياً – كمنخبة ملكية تقدم المشورات – لصالح الطبقة الجديدة التي أصبحت تعرف فيما بعد بالشهبندرات. مع مرور الوقت، بدأ السلاطين المحليون بمحاكاة النموذج البريطاني في التجارة، مع ما يلحقه من نظم بحرية وأمنية وقانونية، بعد العديد من الاضطرابات البرية والبحرية التي أثارَت الريبة حول التدخل الأجنبي – بما في ذلك التجار الأوروبيون والكيلنغيون على حد سواء – في السياسة المحلية وإثارة التمرد. لاحقاً، قلَّ تأثير الكيلنغيين بشكل أكبر في ظل الاستعمار الهولندي، خصوصاً بعد الحصار الساحلي في عام 1873 والذي قيّد حركة التجارة البحرية ومنع الوصول إلى كل الموانئ التجارية تقريباً. تقوم هذه الدراسة بطرح أربع أسئلة حول الذاكرة المحلية للسكان الأصليين بما يتعلق بالكيلنغيين ونشأتهم، ودورهم وتأثيراتهم في الاضطرابات الداخلية والخارجية في آتشييه، ومساهماتهم الفكرية والثقافية فيها، وذلك من خلال الاطلاع على العديد من المصادر المحلية الأصلية، والتقارير الأوروبية، والصحف، والمواد الأرشيفية من اسطنبول وليدين ولندن. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الإجابة على هذه الأسئلة للتوصل إلى أمور عدة، منها؛ أولاً، التعرف على الذاكرة المحلية للسكان الأصليين حول الكيلنغيين اعتماداً على المصادر الأولية والنصوص المحلية؛ ثانياً: بيان دور الكيلنغيين في القرنين الثامن عشر والتاسع عشر؛ ثالثاً:

تسليط الضوء على جهودهم في فترات حيوية التجارة البحرية وحركتها، وفتران الانحدار أثناء الاضطرابات الداخلية المتصاعدة، والتنافس والهيمنة البريطانية والهولندية والفرنسية في آتشييه؛ رابعًا: بيان الدور الذي لعبه الكيلنغيون في المجالات الفكرية والدينية. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى ملئ الفراغ الأكاديمي المتعلق بهذا الجانب، وتقديم مساهمات إضافية لدراسة الدور البحري الذي لعبته جنوب الهند في إندونيسيا والتاريخ البحري والملاحي في جنوب شرق آسيا.



## APPROVAL PAGE

The thesis of Nia Deliana has been approved by the following:



---

Arshad Islam  
Supervisor



---

Ahmad Murad Mohd. Noor Merican  
Post-Viva Supervisor

---

Mohd Helmi Mohd Sabri  
Co-Supervisor

---

Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli  
External Examiner

---

Husain. K.  
External Examiner

---

Mohamad Fauzan Noordin  
Chairman

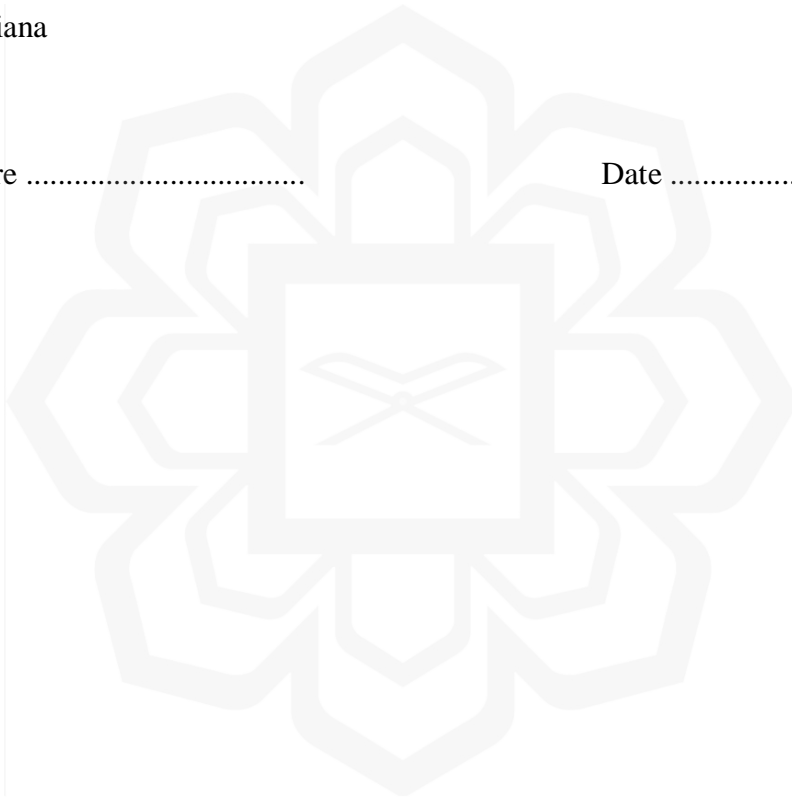
## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Nia Deliana

Signature .....

Date .....



**INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA**

**DECLARATION OF COPYRIGHT AND AFFIRMATION OF  
FAIR USE OF UNPUBLISHED RESEARCH**

**KELINGS IN ACEH: MOBILITY, CRISIS, AND SURVIVAL IN  
THE 18TH-19TH CENTURIES**

I declare that the copyright holders of this thesis are jointly owned by the student and IIUM.

Copyright © 2021 Nia Deliana and International Islamic University Malaysia. All rights reserved.

No part of this unpublished research may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without prior written permission of the copyright holder except as provided below

1. Any material contained in or derived from this unpublished research may be used by others in their writing with due acknowledgement.
2. IIUM or its library will have the right to make and transmit copies (print or electronic) for institutional and academic purposes.
3. The IIUM library will have the right to make, store in a retrieved system and supply copies of this unpublished research if requested by other universities and research libraries.

By signing this form, I acknowledged that I have read and understand the IIUM Intellectual Property Right and Commercialization policy.

Affirmed by Nia Deliana

.....  
Signature

.....  
Date

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, the highest acknowledgment is delivered to the Almighty Allah, subhānahu wa-ta'ālā, and His Messenger, Muhammadﷺ, who guided me in seeking and discovering perspectives of knowledge. I pray that He would always direct me in finding the right path in whatever I read and think.

I am mostly grateful for being able to share the preliminary ideas related to this topic with Prof. Abdullah al-Ahsan, who encouraged my official dissertational purpose. I am also highly indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Arshad Islam, and Prof. Ahmad Murad Noor Merican, who have been very motivating not only with suggestions and critiques, and also with supportive attitudes and visions on the future of this thesis. My thanks go to my co-supervisor, Dr. Mohd Helmi Mohd Sabri, who has been very gracious in sparing time and providing insights for the betterment of the study. Without them, this thesis would have been impossible to complete.

My regards are due to various figures who have lent a hand to discuss and help in shaping the ideas of the research. I will never forget the times and thoughts of Prof. Hasbi Amiruddin, Misri A Muchsin, T.A. Sakti, Masykur of Pedier Museum, Nurdin A.R. and Keling descendants in Aceh, who were available for comments, and precious oral memories from their elders on the role and contribution of the Kelings in Aceh in recent history.

I pronounce my gratitude to Mehmet Özay who has been very encouraging and supportive in exchanging perspectives on various aspects of the study and analyzing crucial Turkish sources to be proportionately established in this study.

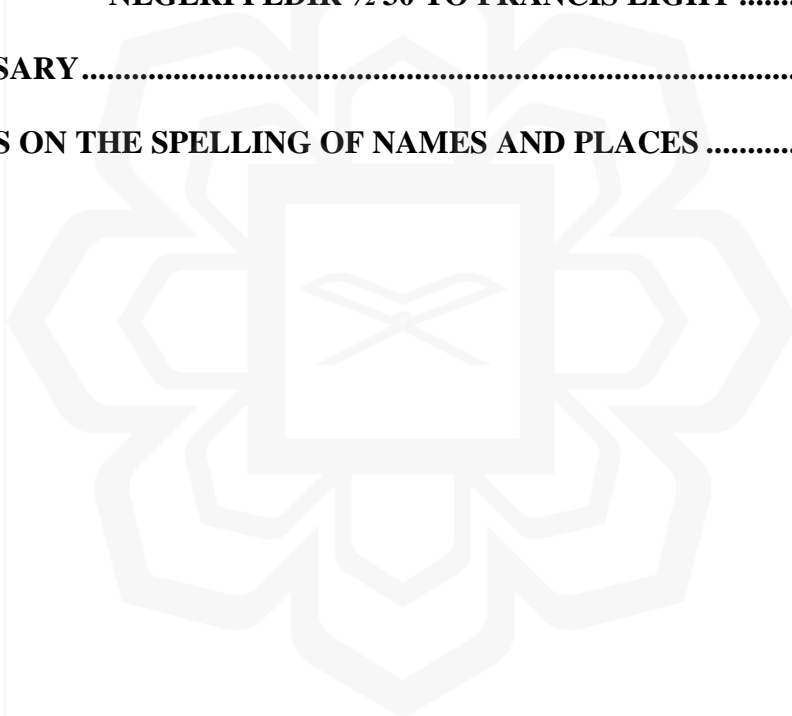
I sincerely express my gratefulness to every staff member in the libraries of DÉR al-Hikmah of the International Islamic University of Malaysia, the National Library of Singapore, Centre of Policy Research and International Studies (CenPRIS-USM), the private library of Ali Hasjmy and the Masykur Pedier Collection of Aceh, and Aceh Provincial Museum Collections, who have been very helpful in providing related essential sources of this study. May Allah grant the best rewards to all of them.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Abstract in Arabic .....	iii
Approval Page .....	v
Declaration .....	vi
Copyright Page .....	vii
Acknowledgements .....	viii
List of Abbreviations .....	xii
Transliteration Table .....	xiii
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background of the Study .....	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem .....	5
1.3 Research Questions .....	8
1.4 Objectives of the Study .....	8
1.5 Significance of the Study .....	9
1.6 Literature Review .....	10
1.7 Theoretical Framework .....	13
1.7.1 Longue Durée and the Dispersing Subalterns .....	14
1.7.2 Micro-history and Euro-centric Attachment .....	17
1.8 Research Methodology .....	23
1.8.1 Primary Sources .....	23
1.8.1.1 Non-Indigenous Sources .....	24
1.8.1.2 Indigenous Sources .....	26
1.8.2 Secondary Sources .....	27
<b>CHAPTER TWO: IMAGES OF THE KELINGS IN LOCAL JAWI TEXTS .....</b>	<b>28</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	28
2.2 Mapping Benua Keling Through Classical local Texts .....	29
2.3 Dimension of Identity .....	39
2.4 Trans-Oceanic Tales .....	47
2.5 Localizing Indian Texts .....	50
2.6 Transformation of Images .....	54
<b>CHAPTER THREE: TRANS-OCEANIC NATURE AND ESTABLISHMENT BEFORE THE 18TH CENTURY .....</b>	<b>57</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	57
3.2 Classical Trails Before and After Islamization .....	57
3.2.1 Tamil-Hindu Reminiscence .....	58
3.2.2 Independent Mercantilism and Islamization .....	60
3.3 Indigenous Address of South Indian Muslims .....	71
3.3.1 Existing Scholarly Identification .....	71
3.3.2 Identification in Acehese Texts .....	73
3.4 Mobility and Forgotten Identities .....	79
3.4.1 The Chuliah Mobility .....	80

3.4.2 Prolific Mastery of the Labbai.....	83
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: THE KELINGS UNDER COLONIALISM.....</b>	<b>92</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	92
4.2 Implications for Internal Affairs .....	93
4.3 Favoritism and Selective Justice.....	96
4.4 Colonial-Civilization: Progress and Dehumanization of Nature.....	98
4.5 The Making of Racist Remarks on the Kelings.....	101
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FEATURES.....</b>	<b>111</b>
5.1 Introduction .....	111
5.2 Territorial and Sovereignty Dimensions .....	112
5.3 Social and Administrative Structure .....	114
5.4 Political Structure, Turbulences and Autonomous Leadership .....	118
<b>CHAPTER SIX: KELING MERCHANTS AND MEDIATORS: THE RISE AND BELONGING .....</b>	<b>126</b>
6.1 Introduction .....	126
6.2 Trans-Oceanic Trade Preserverance .....	128
6.2.1 From Commodities to Native Industry .....	131
6.2.2 The Sultanate and Keling Nakhodas.....	139
6.2.3 Migration and Fortunes.....	146
6.3 From Commercialism to Royal Elite .....	158
6.4 Keling Mediators .....	166
6.4.1 The Marikan and Istanbul .....	168
6.4.2 South Indian Link of Muhammad Ghauth .....	174
6.4.3 Sidi Muhammad .....	177
6.4.4 Panglima Tibang.....	179
6.4.5 Translators and Letter Bearers .....	181
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: KELINGS IN CRISIS AND SURVIVAL .....</b>	<b>185</b>
7.1 Introduction .....	185
7.2 Aceh in the Shifting Bahr Al-Hind.....	186
7.3 Sultanate Systemic Changes.....	188
7.4 Sepoys, Arms, and Debts .....	196
7.5 Sea Unrest: Pirates, Convicts, and Refugees.....	209
7.5.1 Piracy: Keling Victims and Players.....	211
7.5.2 Indian ‘Mutiny’ Impacts .....	223
7.5.3 Kelings in Arms Smuggling.....	224
7.6 Role of Kelings in the Aceh Sultanate and Independence Prior to 1873 .....	228
7.7 Colonialism and Keling Responses .....	230
7.8 Religio-Intellectual Reliquiae.....	235
7.8.1 Language and Letters.....	235
7.8.2 Tuan Meurasab and Sufi Links .....	242
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>246</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>254</b>

<b>APPENDIX A: KELING HIKAYAT RAJA-RAJA BANJAR DAN KOTA WARINGIN .....</b>	<b>278</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: DAFTAR SEJARAH CEREBON .....</b>	<b>283</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: LETTER OF LEUBE PRANG.....</b>	<b>286</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: TUN MARIKAN AS LETTER BEARER TO ISTANBUL, 1253/1837.....</b>	<b>289</b>
<b>APPENDIX E: LETTER OF SULTAN JAUHAR AL-ALAM SYAH WRITTEN BY LEUBE ABDUL KARIM TO TEUKU CHIK PEUSANGAN.....</b>	<b>298</b>
<b>APPENDIX F: COLOPHON OF KITAB TAJWID POSSESSED BY TEUKU LEUBE KLENG.....</b>	<b>303</b>
<b>APPENDIX G: LETTER OF A KELING-CHULIAH SHAHBANDAR, PO SALLEH TO FRANCIS LIGHT REGARDING A STOLEN SHIP AND WAR IN ACEH (N.D.).....</b>	<b>306</b>
<b>APPENDIX H: KELING VESSEL IN LETTER OF PO LEM MUDA PERKASA NEGERI 22 AND RAJA SETIA INDERA NEGERI PEDIR ½ 30 TO FRANCIS LIGHT .....</b>	<b>309</b>
<b>GLOSSARY.....</b>	<b>316</b>
<b>NOTES ON THE SPELLING OF NAMES AND PLACES .....</b>	<b>318</b>



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APM	Aceh Museum Province
APM	Aceh Provincial Museum
BEFEO	Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient
BOA	Basbakanlik Osmanli Arsivi
BRILL	Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië
EAP	Endangered Archive Program of British Library
IOR	Indian Office Records
ISEAS	Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
JAMBRAS Society	Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society
JIEA	Journal of the Indian Archipelago and East Asia
JSBRAS	Journal of the Strait Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society
JSEAS	Journal of Southeast Asian Studies
KYAH	Koleksi Yayasan Ali Hasjmy
LBL	Leidse Bibliotheek Leiden
PMMSC	Pedir Museum Masykur Syafruddin Collection
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies

## TRANSLITERATION TABLE

According to IIUM Thesis Manual, Arabic Transliteration Scheme as followed:

### *Consonant*

Arabic term	Transliteration	Arabic Term	Transliteration	Arabic term	Transliteration
ء	‘	ز	Z	ق	q
ب	b	س	S	ك	K
ت	t	ش	Sh	ل	l
ث	th	ص	Ş	م	m
ج	j	ض	Ï	ن	n
ح	h	ط	İ	ه	h
خ	kh	ظ	Z	و	w
د	d	ع	Ñ	ي	y
ذ	dh	غ	Gh		
ر	r	ف	F		

### *Vowel*

Arabic term	Transliteration	Arabic term	Transliteration
َ	A	ا +	É
ِ	I	ى +	Ê
ُ	U	و +	Ë
اِي	Ay	او	aw

The transliteration above is not applied when the context attached to localized Arabic or Indian names of persons and places.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In one of the hundreds of eerie evenings of 2001, precisely a day after a school near our home was burnt to ashes by the unidentified mob, I sat unusually relaxed with my late father. We talked about the old days, where peace and harmony illuminated our daily activities. He was born and raised in Northern Aceh at Meureudu, where he recalled witnessing a group of Keling descendants or “Ureung Kleng”, commonly known to the local inhabitants as “Ureung Dagang” or merchants, who had intermingled and inter-married with the locals, who were not considered a different ethnic group for the people of the North, rather they were from “our own people”.

A contrasting experience in Malaysia drove my initial interest in this research. Around six years after I first arrived in Kuala Lumpur, I was told not to use the word “Keling” to denote the “Indians”, as it is considered offensive and deemed derogatory, which led to the idea of erasing the word from the national dictionary proposed by an Indian Muslim organization in Malaysia, due to misconceptions about its use.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the root of the argument originated from a single example of a colonial portrayal of Kelings.

This appoints to the reality of unequal perceptions and longstanding efforts of decolonialism relating to the Kelings that tend to dichotomize narratives on trans-oceanic traders in Southeast Asia. The Acehnese would be amazed to compare the presence of records saying that the founder of Bandar Aceh Darussalam Sultanate (c.

---

<sup>1</sup> Florence A Samy, “APIM to Continue Fight to Remove ‘Keling’ from Kamus”, *The Star*, May 18, 2009, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2009/05/18/apim-to-continue-fight-to-remove-keeling-from-kamus>.

1205 CE) was Sultan Johan Syah, a Keling,<sup>2</sup> which exposes the inconsistency of the idea that “Keling” is a derogatory term, almost banned in usage.

In the last 20 years, increasing attention has been paid to the study of trans-oceanic mobility surrounding the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and Malacca Straits, contributing to empowering the conviction of the coastal fluidity and inclusiveness of a maritime civilization that was desolated by the incursion of European colonialism, and which was obliterated by modern capitalism during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

“Keling” is derived from “Kalinga”, an ancient South Indian kingdom based in Orissa or the Coromandel Coastal area. It came to be identified with Indian Muslim traders in Southeast Asia who hailed from South Asia, including from the Coromandel Coast, Malabar, and Sri Lanka, which in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries included merchant groups such as the Marakkayar, Labbais, Chuliahs, Rawthers, and others unidentified by clan names.

Nasution informs us with regard to the initial identification of South Indians in Aceh that aside from Chuliahs, sub-ethnic groups such as Labbai and Fakir existed, often associated with ethnically hybrid Sufi societies. Asiff Hussein stated that name of Po, beside Labbai, existed among Sri Lankan Muslims, being a nickname among them. Numerous records on Aceh support these arguments.

In particular, Tamil Muslims of Sri Lanka, often called “Moors” in early European accounts as Po<sup>3</sup>, Fakir, and Sahib.<sup>4</sup> Identification through professions in the

---

<sup>2</sup> “News of the Fortnight”, *Straits Times Overland Journal*, July 13, 1873, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Po as a surname was also commonly attached to Muslim from Champa of Vietnam.

<sup>4</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, *The Chulia in Penang, Patronage and Place Making 1786-1957* (Penang: Areca Books, 2014), 51; Asiff Hussein, “Cultural & identities: Ten Interesting Facts About Sri Lankan Names”, *Roarmedia*, last modified February 20, 2017. Retrieved January 15, 2019 from <https://roar.media/english/life/culture-identities/ten-interesting-facts-about-sri-lankan-names/>.

Tamil language is also indicative of this phenomenon, such as sarang, kerani, and tandil.

Returning back to what remembered through records, the word “Kelings” was not unfamiliar to the local texts from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but images on their identity evolved and were heavily perturbed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While these images were contested significantly in British colonies such as Malaya, the images of the Kelings in Aceh remained dependent on protectorate status and the anti-colonial struggle. Existing scholarly literature emphasizes the intensification of commercial activities led by Kelings from the Coromandel Coast throughout the key ports of Southeast Asia. They were infamous for being skillful in handling long-distance voyages and goods maintenance, trading with extremely cheap prices, and running their business operations through large numbers of peddlers, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

Chuliahs merchants usually owned larger vessels with 100-300 tons of chargeable cargo which arrived in August and September to depart on February, April, and May, bound the trust to paternal related agencies that connect the networks sustainability<sup>6</sup> which stretched from the Coromandel Coast, such as Porto Novo, Nagapattinam, and Nagore, reaching to Aceh, Pidie, Penang, Malaka, Mergui, and Thailand. Most of the Chulias traded in textiles, arms, and opium, with notable exchanges of gold dust, pepper, betel nut, and other forest raw products.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Barbara W. Andaya and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Early Modern Southeast Asia 1400-1830* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 189.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Forrest, *A Voyage from Calcutta to the Merqui Archipelago, Lying on the East Side of the Bay of Bengal* (London: New Bound Street, 1792), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Nordin Hussein, *Trade and Society in Straits of Melaka: Dutch Melaka and English Penang 1780-1830* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006), 16; David Washbrook, “The Textile Industry and the Economy of South India”, in *How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles 1500-1850*, eds. Giorgio Riello and Thirthankar Roy (London: Brill, 2009), 182.

Their prolific skills and knowledge of oceanic routes led to the strengthening of their position and influence. In Aceh they played increasingly diverse and significant positions from the royal household to the mastery of agricultural livelihoods. They were given settlements and privilege to cultivate new pepper plantations that accommodated waves of migratory labour from the Coromandel Coast.<sup>8</sup>

Crucial developments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century challenged their positions in Aceh and elsewhere in the Southeast Asian maritime trading network. During this period, the economic gravitation of the Aceh Sultanate evolved around the production of pepper, and by the 1820s it was supplying half of the world's pepper demand.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Muslim merchants from India and the Arabian Peninsula targeted the control of numerous major pepper ports across the Malacca Strait and the Indian Ocean, but British, Dutch, French, and American individual traders and companies were increasingly active.

Internal conflict between the Sultan and the uleebalang gave opportunities to the British (and later the Dutch) to expand their influences in commercial activities, and subsequently in political affairs. Contacts with French and American ships in Southern and Western areas of Aceh, followed by the revival of historical relations between Aceh and the Ottoman Sultanate in the 1840s, added to the looming power contest between various colonial and indigenous interest groups.<sup>10</sup>

The Anglo-Dutch Treaties (1814, 1824) had essentially apportioned hegemony over areas corresponding to modern Malaysia and Indonesia to the British and Dutch,

---

<sup>8</sup> Lee Kam Hing, "Aceh at the Time of the 1824 Treaty" in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 83-89; Lee Kam Hing, *The Sultanate of Aceh: Relations with the British 1760-1824* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62, 65 & 91.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Reid, *Asal Mula Konflik Aceh: Dari Perebutan Pantai Timur Sumatra hingga Akhir Kerajaan Aceh abad ke-19* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2005), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Reid, "Aceh and the Turkish Connection" in *Aceh: History, Politics, and Culture*, eds. Arndt Graf, Susanne Schroter & Edwin Wieringa (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 31.

respectively, resolving complexities associated with the long and disparate development of trading posts throughout Asia from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as well as ironing out the Dutch objections to the Raffles Treaty (1819) between Britain and the Sultan of Johor. The machinations of the Anglo-Dutch Treaties were a purely European affair, with no involvement of local representatives, despite increasing land and sea disputes. A later treaty in 1871 further consolidated encroaching colonialism over Anglo-Dutch colonies in India, Malaya, and the East Indies, and was extremely disadvantageous for Aceh and the Kelings, as the British indirectly handed over its protectorate of Aceh to the Dutch.<sup>11</sup>

During this shifting period, the position of the Kelings as long-standing partners of Aceh in terms of trade and politics were contested. Numerous key markets fell into the control of British and Dutch interests. Responding to the latest situation, Aceh sent Keling mediators to Istanbul and Paris in 1848-1872. These missions were conducted for the purpose of gaining military aid and political alliance against the Dutch. When the war between Aceh and the Dutch broke out in 1873, their contribution was not absent, and numerous kinds of aid were delivered for war effort.

From the elaboration above, it can be understood that a further study on Kelings before 20<sup>th</sup> century in Aceh is essential to shed light on this particularly important and neglected area of Southeast Asian history.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Throughout the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Indo-Malay Archipelago, independent private merchant groups such as the Kelings were gradually driven out of the maritime trading zone and their rights to belong in the lands where they dwelled in

---

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Reid, *The Contest for North Sumatra: Atjeh, Netherlands, and Britain 1858-1898* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1969), 291-293.

enclaves in Southeast Asia were increasingly challenged. These developments were triggered by number of reasons, which relate to preliminary problems on the problematic historiography of Kelings studies. The images of Kelings during the colonial era in the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the changing social and political systems of the local elites, which in one aspect allowed manipulated migratory labour from South India to Malaya and Sumatra. Secondly, the establishment of nation-state encouraged the use of birthplace and race as a system to acknowledge rights and “local” privilege, and to “other” non-conforming ethnic groups such as Kelings (and others). Thirdly, topographical developments and the United Nations Resolution on Validating Names of the Sea and Region in South Asia and Southeast Asia in 1975 diverted the scholarly trend in educational institutions, where the study of regions was internalized through looking inwards rather than outwards, de-prioritizing the traditional celebratory view of the trans-mobility of people as a major factor in the socio-economic development and cultural richness of communities.<sup>12</sup>

The further core problem that this study addresses is the limited literature exploring these events, largely due to an inadequate amount of Acehnese and Keling sources that speak on their own behalf. Daniel Perret, author of *From Slave to King: The Role of South Asians in Maritime Southeast Asia* (2011) recognized the lack of indigenous sources, and that this formed a barrier to establishing narratives on mobility and integration into indigenization.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, South Indian narratives in Indonesian sources are scattered in numerous primary and secondary publications. South Indian societies were inherently complex

---

<sup>12</sup> Syed Muhd Khairuddin al-Junied, “A Theory of Colonialism in the Malay World”, *Post-colonial Studies*, vol 14, no. 1 (2011): 14-17; Sunil S. Amrith. “The Bay of Bengal and the Malay World: Diaspora and Cultural Circulation, c. 1780-1980”, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 41, no. 120 (2013): 187-190.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Perret, “From Slave to King: The Role of South Asians in Maritime Southeast Asia from the Late 13<sup>th</sup> to the Late 17<sup>th</sup> century”, *Archipel*, no. 82 (2011): 160.

and diverse, and specific sources on certain ethnic groups are sparse. Unlike sources from Kedah, Perak and Johor that well-preserved, sources from Indonesia mostly are scattered and gleaned from mass data including shipping logs, voyage reports, ship arrivals and departures, civil cases, indigenous correspondence loops, trade commodities reports, news, and events in newspapers, and even epitaphs and manuscript colophons.

Another point to highlight is local identification of Kelings and Keling descent as the result of assimilation and 20<sup>th</sup> century development. This process of indigenization chased away detailed information on Keling origins. The assimilation process included the Acehnese dialect that changed the character of original Keling names, abridging them, or using nicknames; and changes in names, mostly into Arabic names, as the result of conversion to Islam or certain professions dealing with religious activities. To be able to mark identification, secondary narratives on indigenous identification on South Indian groups urgently need re-establishment. As a response to that, a chapter of this study investigates Kelings' mercantile connections in Aceh before and after the coming of Islam to the region. It examines local society's identification of South Indian traders.

In addition, modernized education led to abolishment of Arabic scripts as the communicative standard that had been shaping major voices of identities during the pre-nation state era, replaced with Roman standardization, whereby local generational label identification of certain groups of merchants was dissolved under general name of country to which they belonged. In the post-nation-state establishment, scholars tended to replace "Keling" written in original texts with "Indian", which was deemed a more appropriate modern usage, which can be seen in the transliteration work on

*Bujangga Manik* and *Hikayat Carang Kulina*.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Ian Proudfoot noted that the 1963 edition of *Cerita Jenaka*, presumably edited by Mohammad Taib Othman, had “in some instances adjusted the text to modern tastes, for example, by changing orang Keling to orang India” from the original work of Raja Haji Yahya’s edition of 1908.<sup>15</sup>

### **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study focuses on answering the following questions:

1. What were the Kelings portrayals in the Jawi classical texts?
2. Why did the Kelings gain influence in Aceh?
3. How did the Kelings respond to internally and externally triggered turbulence in Aceh?
4. What are the intellectual and religious contributions of the Kelings in Aceh?

### **1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the knowledge and portrayal of the Kelings in the Jawi sources.
2. To elaborate the Kelings role in Acehnese trade and politics.
3. To highlight dynamic responses towards the survival of trade mobility and sense of attachment to Aceh during Aceh’s internal conflicts, in the face of the increasing hegemony and colonialism of European powers.

---

<sup>14</sup> Annabel Teh Gallop, “John Crawford and Malay Studies”, *Asian and African Blog*, last modified May 27, 2014, <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2014/05/john-crawford-and-malay-studies.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Ian proudfoot, “MCP. Cerita Jenaka. Bibliography”, *Malay Concordance Project*, last modified July 2007, [http://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/CJen\\_bib.html](http://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/CJen_bib.html).

4. To describe the roles played by the Kelings in the intellectual and religious spheres.

### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study is significant firstly in filling a research gap in the scholarly literature on Aceh and its Keling merchants in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and presenting additional narratives on independent commercial groups in the Indian Ocean at the dawn of European hegemony, as perceived through Aceh experience.

Secondly, it contributes to the additional perspectives on the characteristics of Islam through the progress of commercial and political relations, and religious influences as manifest in the Keling mercantile network in Southeast Asia.

Thirdly, this study provides additional contribution on indigenous Southeast Asian encounters with South India in the context of immigrant communities, particularly concerning intermingling and assimilation processes, mobilities, and the sense of belonging.

Fourthly, as Anthony Reid mentioned in an email exchanged with the writer in 2017, the study of Aceh in general for the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century is largely ignored, thus this work offers a serious contribution to address this important research gap.

Fifthly, there is the urgency of decoloniality of knowledge on Kelings among the dominant culture in Southeast Asia that conditioned the negative usage of the word merely into a derogatory meaning. Derogatory usage handicapped justice on South Indian trans-boundary cycle histories that their legacy before colonialism tarnished by ignorance on colonial psyche establishment.

## 1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

Historians in this field acknowledge that literature on Aceh's relations with the Kelings, and South India in general, is inadequate, not only for the 19<sup>th</sup> century. General studies on connections between South Indians with the Indo-Malay Archipelago have been insufficient, especially in exploring particular dimensions such as religion, politics, and trades. Xavier S. Thani Nayagam in 1955 wrote that study of South Indian relations with Southeast Asia is "unjustified", "has not received the notice it deserves", is "not sufficiently studied", and "available materials have not been satisfactorily interpreted".<sup>16</sup> In 1981, A. Mani realized that the study of South Indians in particularly with Indonesia has been very scanty. In 1993, he claims that the gap in the study is still unsettled.<sup>17</sup> Earlier this year, Anthony Reid mentioned that the study on Aceh's relation with its Muslim merchants, particularly the Chulias of the Coromandel ports, has been egregiously ignored.<sup>18</sup> These statements confirm the inadequacy of existing literature. While this is the fundamental rationale for undertaking the current research, it also poses existential problems for this historical inquiry. Despite facing some challenges regarding the limited availability of pertinent secondary sources, this study undertook a review of numerous books and journal articles relevant to the objectives of this research.

When topics of South India's intermingling with Southeast Asian Muslims are discussed, Barbara Watson Andaya's work titled *The Indian 'Saudagar Raja' (the King's Merchant) in Traditional Malay Court*<sup>19</sup> serves as the primary reference. In

---

<sup>16</sup> Xavier S Thani Nayagam, "Tamil Cultural Influences in Southeast Asia", *Tamil Culture*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1955): 1-8.

<sup>17</sup> A Mani, "Indian in North Sumatra" in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, eds. K. S. Sandhu and A. Mani (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 46.

<sup>18</sup> Personal email with Anthony Reid exchanged on 23 December 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya, "The Indian Saudagar Raja (The King's Merchant) in Traditional Malay Courts", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 51, no. 1(233) (June 1978): 12-35.

this 24-page journal article, Andaya discusses the origin of Kelings who in the later period were identified as “Chulia” in the Malay Peninsula (particularly Kedah and Perak), Minangkabau, and Aceh. She examines their roles and privileges in the courts of the local sultanates as political merchants and the challenges they faced. With extensive utilization of rich natives and foreign primary sources, Andaya succeeded to establish the nature of the position of Indian Muslims in the Malay Peninsula in general and to crystallize the description of ‘saudagar’ position in the Malay courts. Although important remarks have been connected by the author to the role of the Acehese court, the narratives were confined to the period of the 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Another compelling work on this subject is *Islamic Merchant Communities of the Indian Subcontinent in Southeast Asia* by Sinappah Arasaratnam.<sup>20</sup> This work is a 19-page published lecture delivered at the University of Malaya in 1989. Arasaratnam’s speech delivers further background on contacts between Muslim merchants from the Indian Subcontinent, including the Coromandel Coast, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Cuddalor, and Nagapattinam, with the Muslims in the Malay World, especially in Malacca, Aceh, Kedah, Phuket, Macassar, and Banten. He particularly pointed out the roles of the Chulias in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries in trade, politics, and religious aspects among the Malay Muslim communities. Since this is a printed speech, it has scarce methodological details, although a few primary references are footnoted. As the period ends with the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this speech provides further evidence on the gap for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century narratives.

---

<sup>20</sup> Sinappah Arasaratnam, *Islamic Merchant Communities of the Indian Sub Continent in Southeast Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1989).