

FROM LIGHT TO YOU
BY LIFE & TIMES

PLUSH heritage

THE CHULIAS OF PENANG

They were instrumental in shaping our cultural, economic and political landscape, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

IN the 1970s and '80s, from inside the Butterworth-Penang ferry, the Clock Tower on the island was still visible. Instead of the usual excitement associated with a visit to the island, it was often a reminder of the somewhat boring routine of the quick day trip ahead for many children from the north.

The first stop would be one of the foreign banks on Beach Street as there were none on the mainland's northern states. Then, it might be a visit to the money-changer or pharmacy down the road. A biryani lunch at Dawood restaurant or nasi kandar on Queen Street would be followed by an afternoon of sari shopping on Market Street.

When there was cash in hand, a visit to the jewellers on Pitt Street was a must. A refreshing teh tarik from one of the coffee shops was next before a quick visit to the sundry shop on Chulia Street that sold QBB ghee, dhal, red onions, shallots, pepper and others spices imported from India.

Although the streets have different names now, many of these places of business still exist. In fact, save for the foreign banks, they had one thing in common: Many of the proprietors were Tamil Muslims, who are also known as Chulia. Some of them have been living in and around Chulia Street for generations.

But who were these Chulias? Where did they come from? How did they contribute to that unique heritage of George Town? These were the kind of issues that piqued the curiosity of Khoo Salma Nasution.

MONSOON TRADE

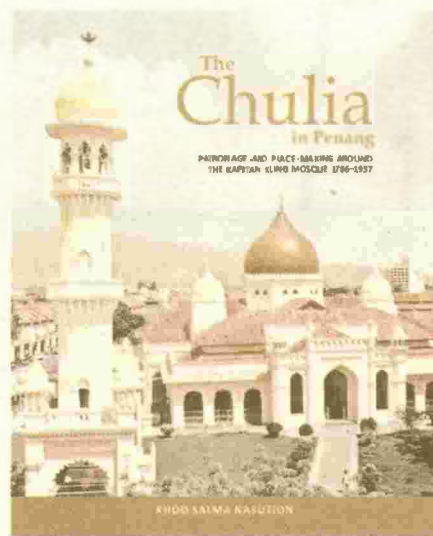
"We are looking at the same people, yet they had different names. From Tamil Muslims and Keling to Chulias. How did this happen? Where was the continuity?" asks this passionate 53-year-old advocate of heritage conservation.

In 1989, she started to explore Penang as a historic port city. At the time, she was still living in Armenian Street, which isn't far from Chulia Street. Curious about the Muslim sacred sites and Indian bungalows hidden behind the Chinese shophouses, she was particularly determined to discover Penang's role in the Indian Ocean monsoon trade.

All these issues, together with a commission to write a book about the Kapitan Keling Mosque, were the starting point of Salma's journey of discovery. Her research would cover two vast and complex subjects: Islam and India. All that work has been chronicled and published in an award-winning book called *The Chulia In Penang: Patronage And Place-Making Around The Kapitan Kling Mosque 1786-1957*.

It looks at how the Tamil Muslims, living under the East India Company, then in the Straits Settlements and British Malaya, evolved in response to the changing terms of colonial patronage.

The Islamic Arts Museum of Malaysia has used Salma's book as the basis of a photo exhibition called *The Chulia In Penang* to highlight the spread of the Tamil Muslim diaspora in Penang and Malaysia at large.



The Chulia In Penang: Patronage And Place-Making Around The Kapitan Kling Mosque, 1786-1957

BY Khoo Salma Nasution
PUBLISHER Areca Books (2014)

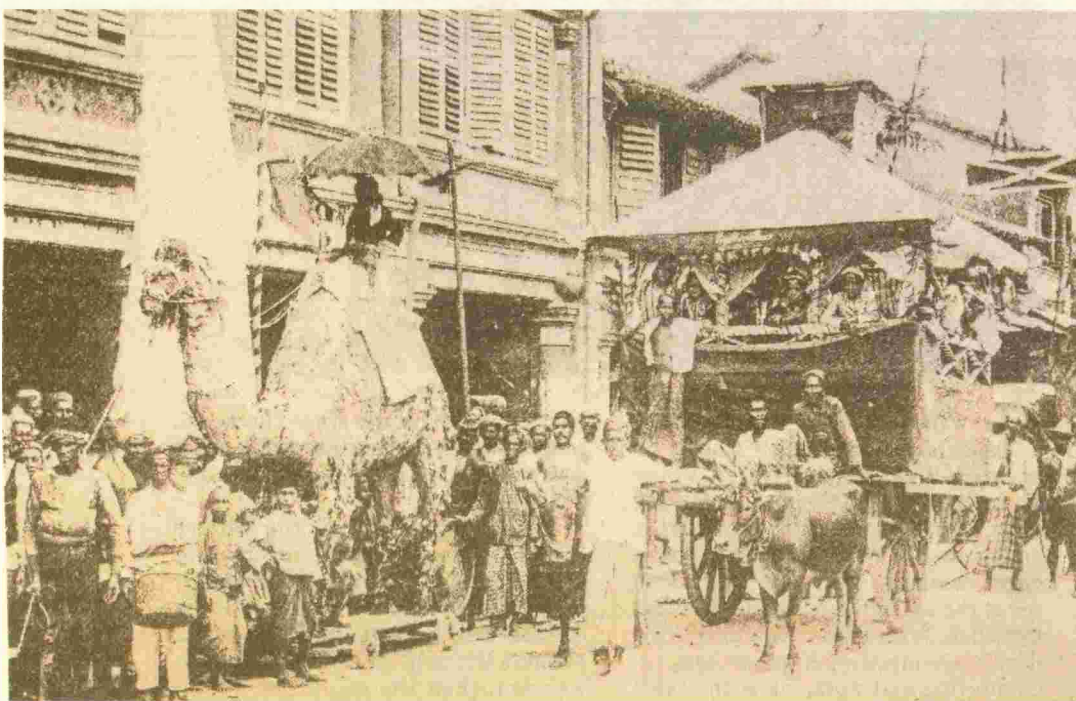
A TANGIBLE HERITAGE

As we walk past the exhibits, Salma describes the etymology of the word Chulia. There is a belief that for a very long time, people from the Chola Kingdom of India were referred to as Chulia. Their lands (Cholamandalam) were collectively called the Coromandel Coast by the Europeans.

Once the Chola dynasty was in decline, much of their trade in the Straits of Malacca was taken over by traders from Southern India. These traders tended to be Tamil Muslim and they were now referred to as the Chulias. They brought with them the Pelikat cloth, pepper and many other products. In time, they became highly successful and by the 19th century, they endowed mosques, Sufi shrines (dargah), burial grounds, a water tank, schools and amenities and an ashurkhanah or congregation hall to hold religious feasts and processions.

The Kelly Map of 1893 depicts the Kapitan Keling Mosque (which is marked as Musjid on the corner of Buckingham Street and Pitt Street) and the surrounding endowment (waqf) properties. In its heyday, says Salma, the area covered by this endowment covered some 18 acres (seven hectares) of land.

The discussion takes a fascinating turn when Salma says that she tried to imagine what the daily lives of all these people were



Boria contingent with a camel on wheels and a bullock-drawn float during the Queen Victoria Diamond Jubilee, 1897. Courtesy of the National Archives of Malaysia

like. "I read their wills and the court cases they got embroiled in. I mean, they may have migrated to Penang, but when it came to distribution of property, they followed what they always did in India. For example, some families left the property to the girl as the men were away all the time. That made me aware that some of them practiced a matrilineal system."

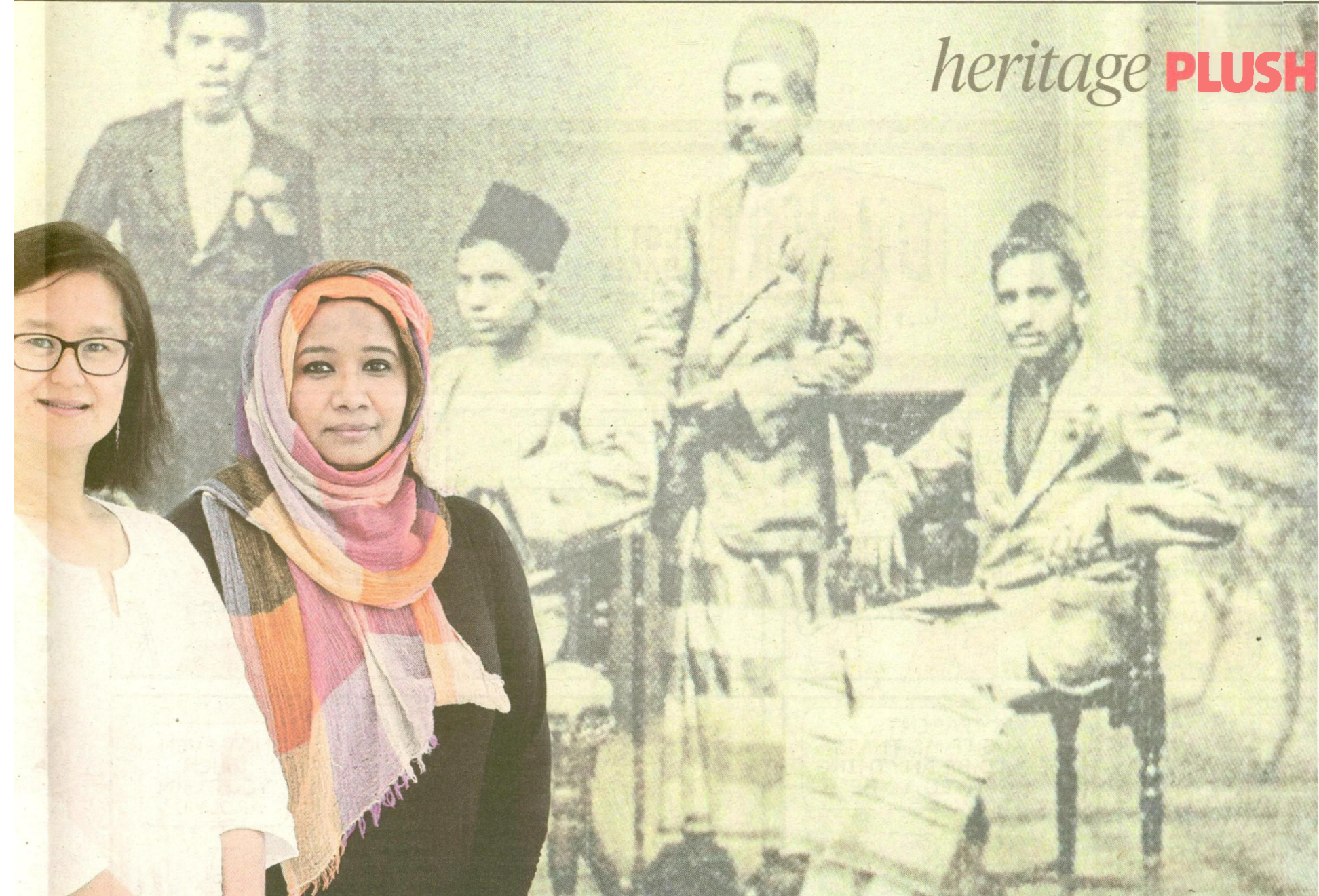
Then there is the story of a furious son-in-law who decided to sue his in-laws. Upon his marriage, as part of what appeared to be

a dowry for a house. U his in-law well.

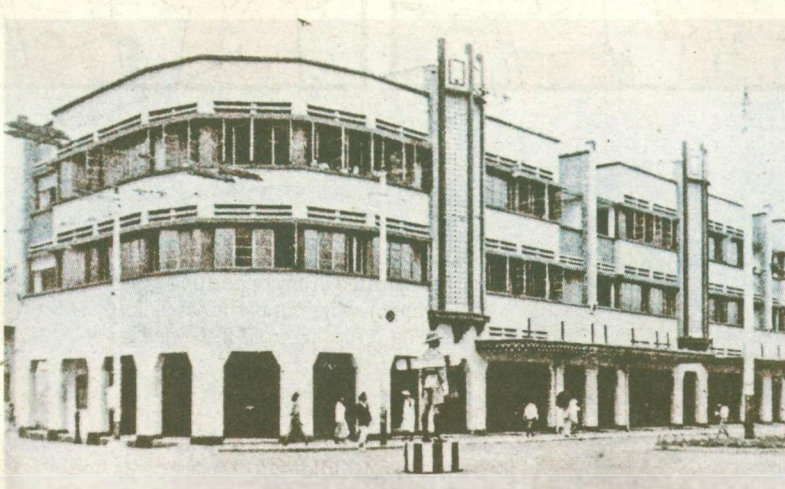
In time, Malays as well as Jawi. This assimilation of cultural factors as boria a promulga

heritage PLUSH

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Khoosalma Nasution (left) and Jasmin AbdulWahab
PICTURES BY MOHD KHAIRULHELMI MOHD DIN



(Above) Janopakari, a Tamil daily newspaper published in Penang in 1914 by the Mercantile Press under the editorship of A. Mohamed Abdul Cader.

(Left) Endowments for Social Housing Pitt Street Tenements at the junction on Pitt Street and Chulia Street. COURTESY OF THE MALAYAN ARCHITECT

The Kelly Map (1893) depicting the Kapitan Keling Mosque and the surrounding endowment (waqf) properties. Courtesy of Jabatan Ukur dan Pemetaan Pulau Pinang.

Muslim Leave Movement.

Salma explains that other than strengthening the Tamil identity, the Chulias also started Tamil schools and made a concerted effort to play an important role in the political progression of Malaya. The document in question, an article published in a journal called *The Islamic Voice Of Malaya*, was written by K. Sultan Merican. His intention was to form a pan-Malayan Muslim association to help the government of day. Here is an excerpt of what he wrote:

"Unity is strength, and let us all, whether we be Malays, South Indian Muslims, Malabari Muslims, Punjabi Muslims or Bengali Muslims, pool our resources at this critical stage of world situation, and stand shoulder to shoulder by the Islamic association of Perak and help the Government by our united Muslim effort in return for the blessings and contentment the Government has given us."

Published in 1946, this document, says Salma, is an example of how the Chulias were instrumental in helping to unify the people to compete in "Penang's city and settlement elections in the 1950s."

Today, many descendants of these Chulias have become part of the "cosmopolitan elite in Malaysia" and shaped some of the events of our country. To conclude, Salma is satisfied that, for now, she's achieved her aim in writing this book. She concludes: "I was looking for that human agency. Things don't just happen. There must be someone who champions these people and their causes."

On the Cover: Portrait of a Tamil Muslim drawn from a photograph and reproduced in a newsletter of The Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris. Courtesy of Yeoh Seng Guan.

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a dowry he was to receive, he was promised a house. Unfortunately, he found out that his in-laws decided to stay in the house as well.

In time, the Chulias married local Malays and their progeny were known as Jawi Pekan or Jawi Peranakan. This assimilation with the local Malay community resulted in the progression of cultural forms and performance arts such as boria and Bangsawan, which are still promulgated today.

They also published Malay and Tamil diaspora literature and newspapers which flourished until the first world war. An example of this is *Janopakari*, a Tamil daily newspaper published in Penang in 1914 by the Mercantile Press, under the editorship of A. Mohamed Abdul Cader.

POLITICAL INFLUENCE

"You must take a look at this," says Salma and points to an image of a document called *The History Of The All Malaya*