

LIFE &  
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# PLUSH

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## The living mosque

PENANG'S KAPITAN KELING MOSQUE REFLECTS THE  
HEART AND SOUL OF THE CHULIA COMMUNITY

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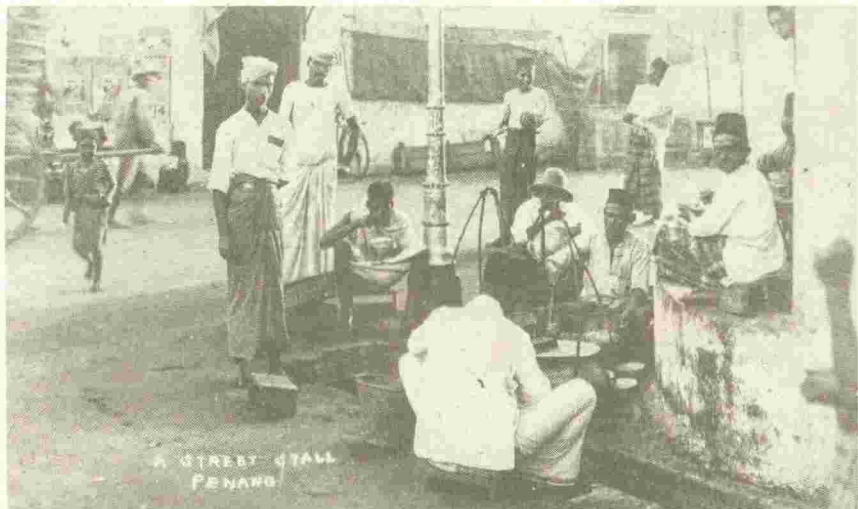


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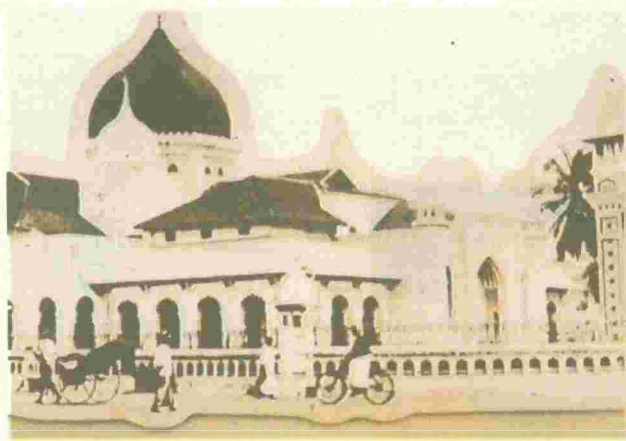
# PLUSH heritage



Earliest known photo of the Kapitan Keling Mosque showing a covered walkway to the ablution area next to the wall. (Picture from the Collection of Serge Kakou)



Customers enjoying mamak food at a street junction. (Picture from the Wade Collection)



Mosque in the 1800s. (Picture from Penang State Museum)



Aerial view of the Kapitan Keling Mosque.

PICTURES BY DANIEL LEE

# REG LANDMAI

Penang's Kapitan Keling Mosque and belonging, writes **Aneeta**

**I**N the early 1990s, a little girl and her parents lived in Air Itam, Penang. Although the State Mosque was just down the road, 6-year-old Siti Marina Mohd Maidin and her father preferred to go to George Town to visit the Kapitan Keling Mosque situated off Chulia Street.

Sheltered from the hustle and bustle of George Town, she spent her time waiting for her father by reading a book in the leafy grounds.

All grown up now, Marina, 32, says: "I felt close to my community in that mosque."

With her exotic facial features that are distinctly Tamil, Marina points to some of the exhibits in a photo exhibition at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia called *The Chulia In Penang* and adds: "It's the story of my people."

The exhibition is based on the works of an award-winning tome by Khoo Salma Nasution called *The Chulia In Penang*:

*Patronage And Place-Making Around The KapitanKling Mosque 1786-1957*. Originally, the proposal was for Salma to present a lecture based on her book. However, the museum decided to present a full photo exhibition which highlights the spread of the Tamil Muslim diaspora in Penang and Malaysia at large.

The exhibition focuses on four distinct areas, namely, the origin of the Tamil Muslims (at one time known as Chulias) in Penang, the wafq (an endowment), the Kapitan Keling Mosque and the contribution of the Chulias to the heritage of Penang.

What is at the forefront of the discussion with Marina, however, is the mosque.

**NEED TO CONNECT**

"How to say this?" asks Marina as she fidgets, making an effort to put into words

her sense of disconnect with others. "Both my parents are mixed blood. I have Indian blood, but I can't speak Tamil. I was brought up as a Malay. When you're mixed, you're not part of a group."

The junior curator with the museum gives a lopsided smile. "You know, I have relatives there," says Marina. "For example, there's a songkok-maker who's actually an uncle of mine, but I've never spoken with him. Each family has its own story. But I want to connect with them. That Indian part of me. Also,

George Town is so hectic, but when you go into the mosque grounds, it's very calm."

Glancing at a photograph of customers enjoying mamak food at a street junction from the Wade Collection, Marina shares: "My grandfather was a Tamil Muslim merchant from South India."

Determined now to visit the land of

her forefathers one day and trace her genealogy, Marina adds: "I remember how this mosque was the hub for Indian Muslims. Not just the Tamil Muslims, but other Indian Muslims as well."

**PAYING HOMAGE**

A highlight of the exhibition is a special screening of a documentary called *Masjid Kapitan Keling*. It's directed by Jasmin Abdul Wahab and funded by Finas. Award winning artiste A.R. Rahman contributed the music arrangement for this documentary. "I created this documentary as homage

heritage **PLUSH** BROUGHT TO YOU BY LIFE & TIMES



Various photos of the Kapitan Keling Mosque.

AL  
RK

ue evokes a sense of pride  
**Sundararaj**

to my late father, Abdul Wahab," says Jasmin, 50. Almost echoing what Marina had said earlier, she adds: "You know, there are times when my husband and I (we live in Kuala Lumpur) will get up in the morning, drive to Penang, perform the Zohor prayers at this mosque, eat at one of the nearby places and then drive back to KL."  
What is it about this mosque that inspires such acts of devotion? Her answer is simple: "This mosque has soul. It was built with so much love. The people who came here came with pretty much nothing. Yet, they built this place. It's a living mosque."

**REGAL ENDOWMENT**

The Tamil Muslims arrived in Penang well before the British brought indentured labourers from Madras to work in the rubber estates of Malaya. Believed to be originally from the Coromandel Coast of South India, they migrated to Penang and prospered as traders of Pelikat cloth, pepper and local products. In the 19th century, they enriched the port town of Penang with an endowment (waqf) for mosques, Sufi shrines, burial grounds, a water tank and for religious feasts and processions.

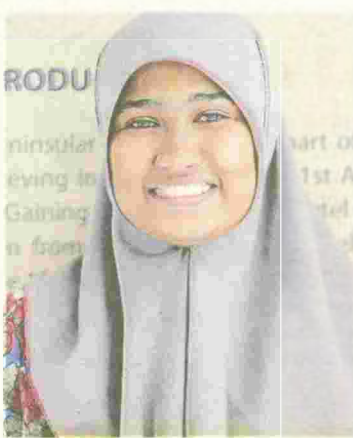
Indeed, the very name of the mosque both celebrates and preserves the history of the Tamil Muslims. One school of thought believes that the word *keling* has been used since the 15th Century within the Malay community to mean "Indian-Muslim from South India". As you would refer to a representative of the Chinese community as Kapitan Cina, you'd also refer to the leaders of the Tamil Muslims as Kapitan Keling. It follows that

towards the end of the 18th Century, when the idea of building a mosque was mooted, the Kapitan Keling of the time was Cauder Mohudden, a ship owner, merchant and progenitor of the Merican clan. In 1801, he built the Kapitan Keling Mosque.

A curious exhibit relating to this man is something called a Statement Of Humility. He added it to his will dated 1834 where he disposed of his substantial fortune of Sp\$50,000 (50,000 Spanish Dollars). It reads as follows:

*I do not leave this as a sufficient Estate to my wives and children but I have for them unperishable goods in the hands of God.*

Since its establishment, the mosque has undergone a few renovations and refurbishments. A significant one was in 1930 when the mosque was enlarged



**"I remember how this mosque was the hub for Indian Muslims. Not just the Tamil Muslims, but other Indian Muslims as well."**

*Siti Marina Mohd Maidin*

and its ventilation system was improved. More recently, there was a need to solve the problems of water seepage and poor drainage. Today, the architecture of this mosque, which started out as nothing more than a humble single-storey brick structure, is described as a "regal landmark" with its Moghul-inspired domes, turrets and a large minaret with some exquisite calligraphy and interior designs.

More than the aesthetic value, heritage and history of the mosque, what's endearing is the awareness in both these women of their glorious heritage. Jasmin puts it succinctly when she concludes: "I'd like people to know a little more about us, the ones called mamak. We're so much more than just teh tarik and roti canai."