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A RE-ENACTMENT OF HISTORICAL EVENT THROUGH DIGITAL PHOTO ARTS: KEDAH-SIAM WAR, 1821-1842

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Abstract:

Kedah-Siam War or also known locally as *Perang Musuh Bisik* took place in Kedah for twenty-one years from 1821 and lasted until 1842. It was one of the wars that changed the state of Kedah significantly in terms of demography, politics and political stability, and affected the Kedah sultanate greatly. During the war, there was no photograph recorded as the photograph technology is not yet available in the region. Documents discussing this event are scarce and yet much valuable to the history of Kedah that shape what it is now. Hence, this significant historical event is re-enacted through digital photo arts for the education of generations to come.

Keywords:

Re-Enactment, Historical Events, Photography, Digital Photo Arts, Kedah-Siam War

Framing History in Photographs

A picture is worth a thousand words. A single photograph can bring so many memories and emotions and thus convey a message stronger and more efficiently than words. History has

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been captured in photographs so we can learn from them. We can see many photos of ancient artefacts that tell stories not only of their history but also their rich culture. The book "History of the World in 1000 Objects" published in 2014, for example, captures and showcases ancient objects that speak volumes of the world they represent. The photographs of these valuable treasures tell incredible stories that allow us to understand more of our ancestors and the world they lived in. Works by Karen Shepherdson (2020), Brandon Tauszik's Pale Blue Dress (Bourton, 2020), and Warren Neidich's American History Reinvented (Neidich, 1989) have shown how photography captures the essence of history, of culture, and the people through photography. Tauszik, for example, through his Pale Blue Dress, pictured the re-enactment of the Civil War by putting more emphasis on the re-enactors, capturing their emotions while in character, and moments in between.

Historical re-enactment can be realised by carefully, at the utmost possible, protecting the historical accuracy of such events, encapsulating every detail of the event that historically have occurred. It is indeed an important activity for education and preservation of historical events, and some would argue for entertainment or hobby. Interested in the education and preservation of history for younger generations, we embark in this project to re-enact one of the most important events in the state of Kedah, Malaysia – the Kedah-Siam War or locally known as Perang Musuh Bisik among the elders. Not only it lasted for slightly more than two decades, this war presents various lessons to be learned, from politics and society, trusts and betrayal among allies and enemies, up to the discovery of new information on weaponry and technology.

Research Objective

Due to scarce reference in historical documents and visual forms, the rich history of Kedah cannot be visualised to its people efficiently, especially the younger generations. The Kedah-Siam war was almost an unknown event, yet very significant, to the majority of people in Malaysia (Wan Mansor, 2019). A more accurate reference to this war is as written by Sherard Osborn (1857) in his book entitled "The Blockade of Quedah 1938: A Midshipman's Exploits in Malayan Waters". In his book, Osborn recorded many events that took place during the war including the refugees and how the people of Kedah were tortured by the Siamese. Since this war shaped what the Kedah state is now, it is of utmost importance to capture the history in visuals for a more efficient communication and education to the public. This is therefore the key objective of this study. It is also educative to the people especially those of Kedah youngsters.

Photography is one potential way to portray the war taking into consideration its historical accuracy. Since the photography technology was not yet available in the region at times of the war, digital arts photography can be a potential way to educate the public on such important events. Digital photographic art is a relevant part of the digital humanities paradigm because it is an example of the digital technology and the fields of social sciences and humanities merging (Asundi et al., 2023). In the context of this research, digital photographic art is an art form based on the visual reference source, which is predetermined by the eventualization of the real historical events. Osborn (1857) did include some drawings or illustrations in his book during his tenure as naval nominee and midshipmen in the Malayan waters during those painful years for Kedah, but not much on the actual war that took place in Kuala Kedah. Hence, we are encouraged and motivated to capture the war, narratively and visually, as an effort to further portray, as accurately as possible, the important events that happened during the war, through

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digital photo arts. As such it serves the purpose of knowing the local history that is beneficial to every Malaysian.

The Kedah-Siam War, 1821-1842

The events of the Kedah-Siam War or also popularly known among the older locals as Perang Musuh Bisik (which literally means the war of enemy's whisper) is the war between the state of Kedah and the Siamese army based in Ligor (Osborn, 1857). As the war lasted for twenty-one years from 1821 to 1842, the war phase selected in this study is the third wave, which seen the counter-attacks led by Tunku Muhammad Saad, nephew of the sultan of Kedah in reign, Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin. This phase of the war took place in 1838 until 1840. According to historical sources, Tunku Muhammad Saad managed to drive the Siamese army all the way to the Singgora border. Pattani, currently a city in southern Thailand, was freed for the first time. This success was a great achievement and Tunku Muhammad Saad was considered a Kedah war hero. However, the success did not last long. Kedah fell back into Siamese power on March 23rd, 1839 (Abdul Mua'ti, 2018; Mahadhir, 2019).

This phase of the war is considered significant in the history of Kedah as it shaped the state's demography and politics to present day (see Figure 1 for the change of the political landscape and demography of the Kedah sultanate before and after the war), where Pulau Pinang and Setul are now no longer a part of the once great state. Instead, Pulau Pinang, also known as Penang, now stands as one of the states in Malaysia. Setul is now known as Satun, a province in southern Thailand.

Figure 1: The Old Kedah, Spelled as Queda (Left), And the Present-Day Kedah (Right)
(Source: National Archive Singapore and Google Maps)

As we can see from Figure 1, on the left is the old great Queda and on the right is modern day Kedah, one of the states in northern Malaysia. The significant political and geographical landscape changed so much that Kedah has lost its land to British (Penang) and Southern

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Thailand up to Trang province to Siam (Mahadhir, 2023; Wan Shamsudin, 2014). Nonetheless, the war has imparted its effects to shape the history of Malaysia and Thailand (Mohd Herman, & Akmal Anas, 2023; Mohd Herman, 2020; Mohd Herman, 2018). To commemorate such historical event, the re-enactment of the war is one of our efforts to educate our target audience – young ones on the local history.

The Re-enactment of Kedah-Siam War

The photos (Figure 2 to Figure 7) are some of the photos that illustrate the re-enactment of the Kedah-Siam War based on the historical sources. They were created by using Photoshop which is an industry standard image editing software. It was developed by Adobe company for creating and manipulating digital photos (Adobe, 2025). Each photo is a combination of composite images that were shot from various events. Subject clothing, for example, the clothing of ancient soldiers and civilians in Kedah, were discovered from old photographs based on the study of Aziz, Husni, Mat Yakim, & Ahmad (2023).

Figure 2 depicts the Kedah Malay warriors operating the cannon. Figure 3 portrays a group of Siamese soldiers entering Kedah on foot. Figure 4 represents a battle that took place in front of Kuala Kedah fort, where the Siamese soldiers ambushed the fort during a wedding feast. Figure 5 depicts how the Siamese soldiers tortured local villagers when they captured the Kuala Kedah fort. Among the tortures include burning people alive in an empty tree trunk hole (a), and tying people up between a 'nibong' tree in which its thorns pierced the victims' body and they would bleed to death (b).

After the attack in which Kuala Kedah fort was captured by the Siamese, the Kedah warriors initiated a counterattack and reclaimed the fort. Figure 6 portrays the Kedah warriors guarding Kuala Kedah fort with one of the famous cannons – Meriam Katak Puru. Lastly, Figure 7 represents a special type of small cannon called Meriam Ekor Lutong, made by local cannon experts, which was suitable to be operated on a 'perahu', a type of small rowing boat. The cannon was portable and easy to relocate during the war.

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Figure 2: Kedah Malay Warrior (Dramatized)

Figure 3: The Siam Soldiers (Dramatized)

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Figure 4: The Battle That Took Place in Front of the Kuala Kedah Fort's Main Door

(a)

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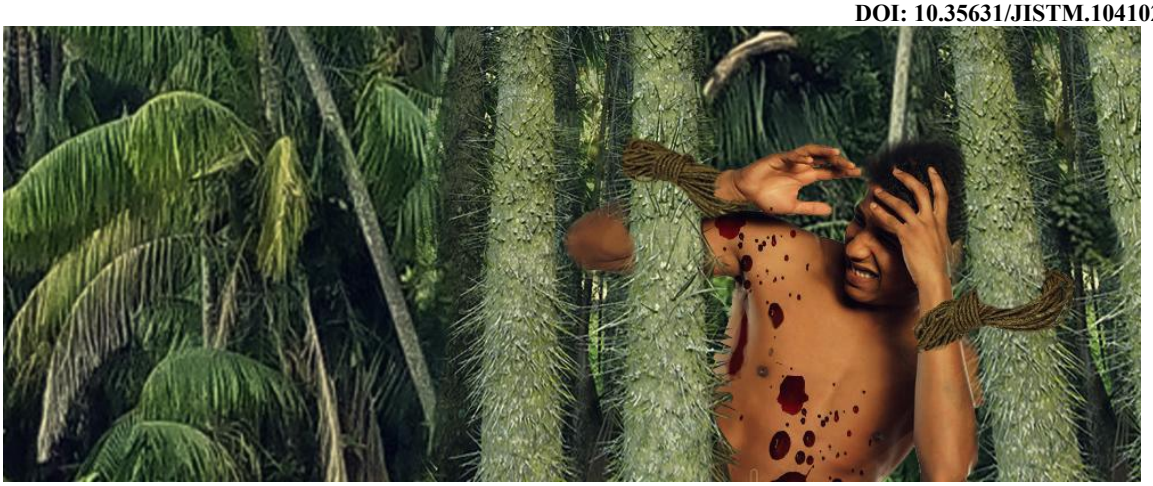

(b)

Figure 5: Among Siam's Tortures Include (A) Burning People Alive in An Empty Tree Trunk Hole, Then Eating the Meat, and (B) Tying Up People Between 'Nibong' Tree in Which Its Thorns Pierced the Victims' Body and They Would Bleed to Death

Figure 6: Kedah Warriors With One of the Famous Kuala Kedah Fort's Cannons

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Figure 7: A Special Type of Mobile Cannon Called *Meriam Ekor Lutong*

Conclusion

Historical event such as the Kedah-Siam War that took place from 1821 to 1842 is one of the significant events that have occurred and impacted its effects to the modern-day Kedah and Malaysia as well as Thailand (southern provinces). It is of the utmost importance that we commemorate such event in a digital form, i.e., digital arts, as accurate as possible, to capture history as an effort to educate and celebrate the rich history and culture that historical event has imparted in our lives. The photos shall contribute to the State of Kedah government's historical collection.

The issue of authenticity is one in which the aspect of photographic manipulation should be subjected to strict scrutiny in a bid to avoid spreading false accounts of historical facts. Photo manipulation is not aimed at replacing the truths of history; it is an interpretative tool that can be used to revisit an event, an atmosphere, or even a feeling that are impossible to capture in a photographic process.

Therefore, the intrinsic constraints of historical interpretation should be clearly expressed by putting information into context, additional narratives, or comments of artists, which will guarantee the audience knows that it is the depiction of an image but not the factual evidence. This is the only such position that will allow academic integrity and visual ethics to be maintained, and at the same time to allow photo-manipulation art to serve the purpose of creative, critical, and informed historical reflection.

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