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Feature

Saving Tanjung Tokong

by Penang Monthly



Tanjung Tokong has the historical honour of being the only urban village left on the Northeast Coast district, closest to George Town. Early Malay and Chinese maritime communities are under siege with the recent development of luxury residential and commercial properties.



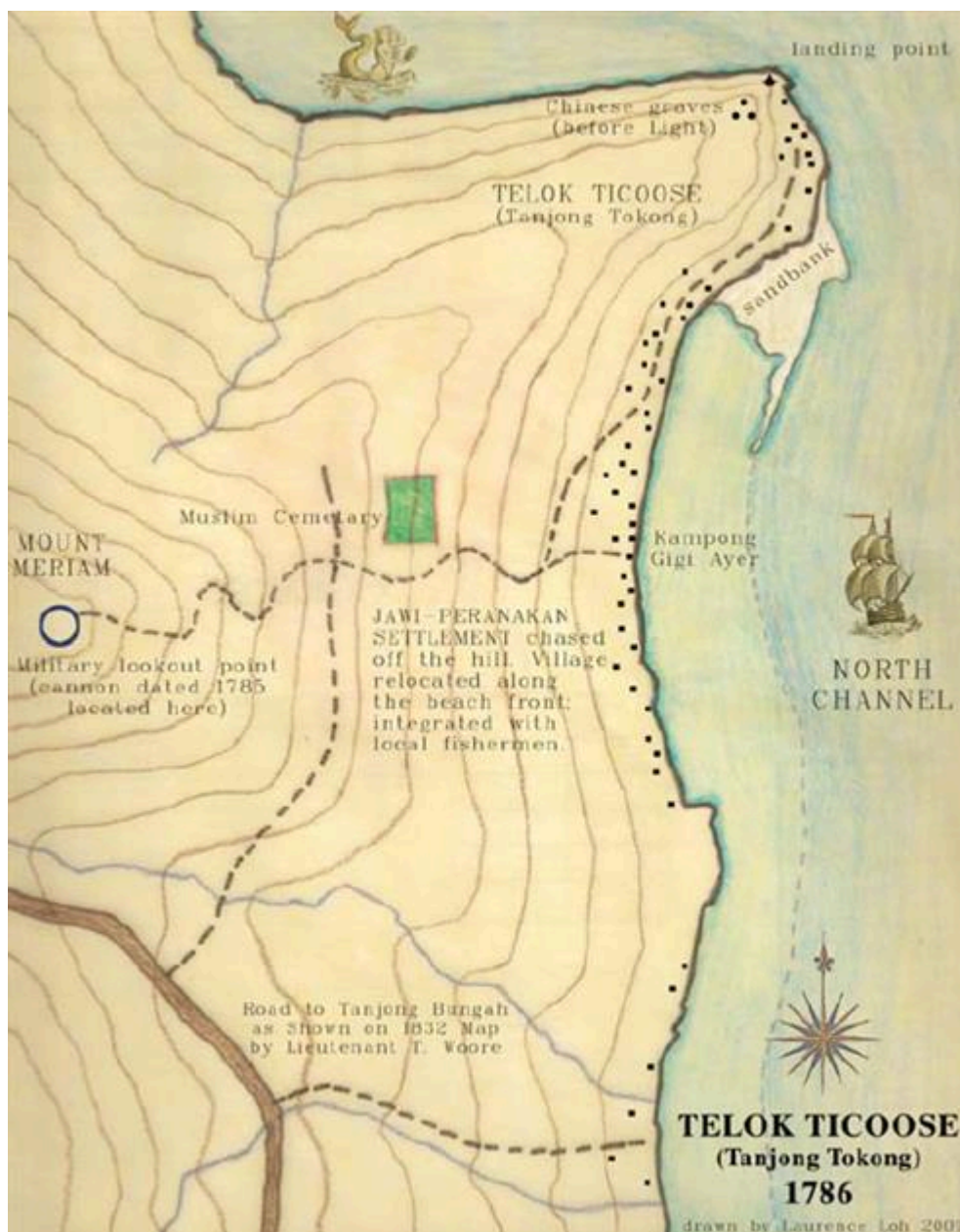


The malay community of Kampung Tanjong Tokong needs to showcase its long history in the area, its peaceful co-existence with the Chinese community and its living heritage. Family histories here go back over 300 years and some families have actually drawn up their complex genealogies from the time of Captain Francis Light and before. This is unique to Penang's urban history when you consider that Tanjong Tokong is even older than George Town.

My proposal here to conserve and restore Kampung Tanjong Tokong into a national heritage village (*Kampung Warisan*) is part of a larger attempt to restore the heritage of coastal Malays (and Chinese). Malay waterfront villages (*kampung gigi air*) are fast being demolished and replaced by upmarket seafront homes for the rich.

Although Kampung Tanjong Tokong currently appears to be in shambles, there is a vibrant living community waiting to be rediscovered. The day market (*pasar pagi*), night market (*pasar malam*) and *Pasar Ramadhan* are among the more famous traditional pasar on the island. The mosque is

very active in the afternoon and night and the Kampung is famous for its Malay food which includes *mee kuah udang* and *tom yam*. There is also plenty of historical evidence to demonstrate that the village dates back more than 200 years; years before Captain Francis Light established a permanent British settlement on the island.



Map of Tanjung Tokong from 1786, showing the movement of the Jawi-Peranakan settlement down to the east coast.

Marginalisation without land ownership

While the early migrants to Penang – the Chinese, Europeans and Indians – understood the processes of colonisation better and rapidly submitted claims on land and titles, the Malays thought that the lands they had inhabited for hundreds of years were theirs, hence very few applied and paid for land titles. So all the Tanjung Tokong villagers lived on the lands and coastal areas of Teluk

Tikus without titles (with the exception of Bapu Hussein Meera Lebai, an Indian Muslim who had trailed Captain Francis Light from Junk Ceylon (Phuket) and Alor Setar.

Indigenous poorer communities in Malaysia and Penang in particular were unable to afford titles to their lands unlike the migrant business communities which were more successful and which began to move into this area at the turn of the 20th century. Penang had and continues to have no provisions for Malay land reserves.

In the 1930s before the Second World War, the shores of Tanjung Tokong were reclaimed by funds from the Hindu and Muslim Endowment Board. Shifting currents left the shores muddy and open to disease. Land reclamation was stopped during the war, however. In 1941, the Japanese bombed George Town, Tanjung Tokong and other coastal areas on the island. Japanese occupation and surrender in 1945 created a surge in Chinese from George Town moving into the area. In 1954, Tanjung Tokong residents were offered houses funded by the Endowment Board (EB) and given temporary occupation licenses (TOLs). After Independence in 1957, the land was placed under the Penang state government.

In 1972, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdul Razak, visited the village to inform the people that the federal government had assigned the Urban Development Authority (UDA) to develop the area for the benefit of the villagers. Because there was a disagreement about the development plans to transfer residents to high-rise low cost flats, a village residents' association, *Persatuan Penduduk Kampung Tanjong Tokong* (PKTT) was formed in 1981 to monitor the development of the village. This remains the only registered association representing the residents of Tanjung Tokong.

Who owns the land?

There was considerable debate over the condition of transfer of Kampung Tanjong Tokong to UDA Holdings. At the time of Tun Abdul Razak's visit in 1972, UDA was tasked with assisting the Malay community to obtain affordable low cost housing. Its objectives have since changed and its subsidiary company, UDA Holdings, is now privatised as a commercial venture.

On January 13, 1984, a letter from the Director of the Land Office of Penang [44 dlm. Ptg/pm/dtl/76] was written to inform the Chief Minister that 54 acres comprising Kampung Tanjong Tokong had been handed over to UDA (then a national government body) with the special provision that "the land hereby alienated shall be used solely for the rehabilitation, reconstruction and renewal of Tanjong Tokong village". The Land Office also stated that they had stopped issuing

TOLs after that event. Although the wording of the provision is not entirely clear, it is possible to conceive a scenario where sections of the 250-year old village along Jalan Lama Tanjung Tokong are conserved and restored into a heritage village, while areas destroyed by the 2004 Tsunami and the 2007 fire are rebuilt as modern housing.



A row of terrace houses in Seri Tanjung Pinang, Tanjung Tokong.

The debate also extends to the position of tenants and those who have constructed illegal houses on the land. From 800 original households, this has snowballed to more than a thousand. They want UDA to build flats for them and do not have any sentimental feelings about heritage or history (it could be argued that they have little history in the area to begin with). As the Malay saying goes, “*Kerana se-titik nila, rosak susu sebelanga*” (Because of a single drop of blue dye, the entire pot of milk is spoilt).

Kampung Tanjung Tokong – more than just land

Over the last 36 years since the visit of Tun Abdul Razak in 1972, Kampung Tanjung Tokong’s inhabitants have dreamt about their TOLs being converted to grants, so that they could own their land. This would at least have given them the assurance of fair treatment in a political economy where Malays are a poorer minority.

Challenged by rapid urban development, land reclamation and high-rises, this settlement has been pushed inland and dwarfed by large-scale, upmarket commercial and residential developments, the most ambitious being E&O Properties’ land reclamation project at Seri Tanjung Pinang – a 100-ha site with a gross development value of RM2.6bil. Nearby, a smaller parcel of 54 acres is being

developed by UDA Holdings. These new residential developments are far beyond the reach of the average Malay resident of the area.



A flat in Tanjung Tokong, behind the Island Plaza shopping complex.

Local Malay houses, now dilapidated and derelict, stare at travellers driving along the coast towards affluent Tanjung Bungah and Batu Ferringhi. Owners of partially burned houses have been moved to transit quarters on reclaimed land. Other residents are worried their next move will be into cheap high-rises behind Island Plaza. Residents represented by the PKTT are adamant about remaining on the original site of the Kampung (now apparently reduced to 20 acres) and being issued permanent titles.

The choice to live in low cost, high-rise apartments was mooted by UDA Holdings but the majority are resisting this since they feel that they have been typecast as “squatters” on land which they have occupied for more than a century. At the same time, the president of the PKTT stressed that they were not against “development”, they were simply against the type of development that only assured developers’ profits. The villagers were against “development” which discounted the social interests and needs of the people.

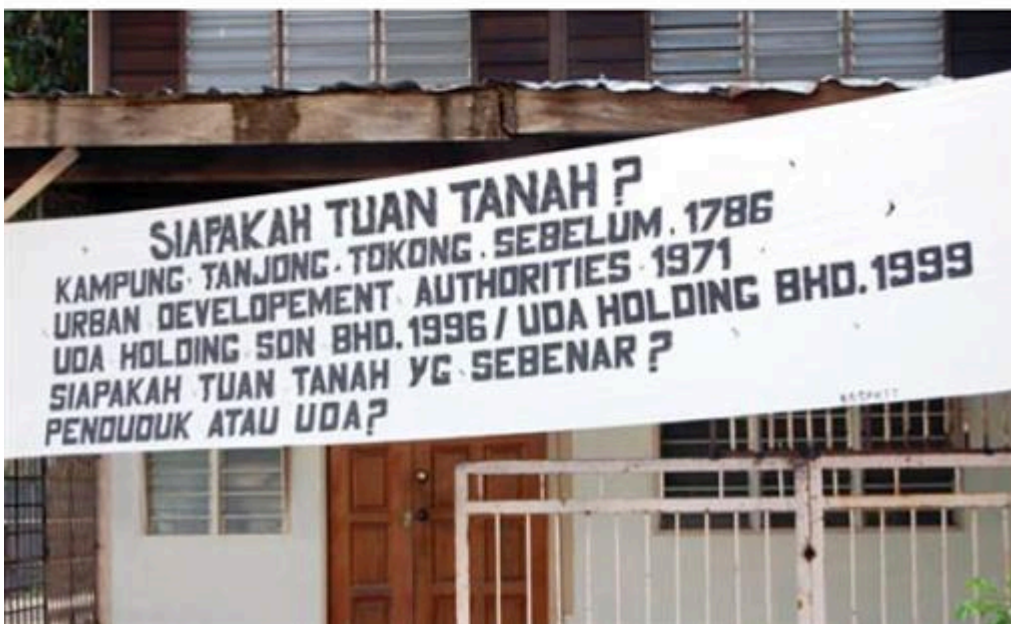
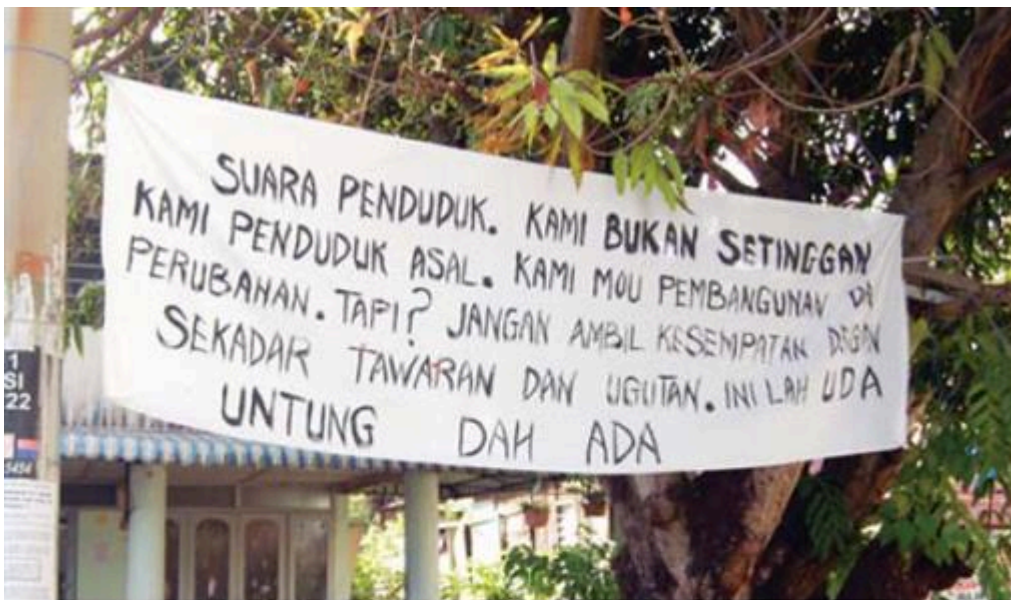


Protest banners erected by the villagers decrying what they claim are the “broken promises” of Uda Holdings.

They were positive about the development of a heritage enclave – a collection of traditional Malay homes for some 161 pioneer families living on the original site along the inner road and another 150 on a later site.

Village life has always shaped a Malay community; provided a safe enclave for children, walkways for residents, bicycles and carts as well as easy communication hubs; and is conducive to Malay rites de passage...

It is easy to understand why residents want houses which are essentially “Malay”, which give them a sense of cultural belonging and history. Village life has always shaped a Malay community; provided a safe enclave for children, walkways for residents, bicycles and carts as well as easy communication hubs; and is conducive to Malay *rites de passage* – weddings, births and deaths which are still community-managed and not farmed out to caterers in rented premises in George Town. They want outlets for eateries and for the famous Tanjung Tokong *pasar malam* and *pasar pagi*. They want access to the sea and most importantly, not to be displaced by expensive housing on their seafront.



Protest banners erected by the villagers decrying what they claim are the “broken promises” of uda Holdings.

Moving forward

From March 2008 to March this year, I was involved in resolving the dispute between the people of Tanjung Tokong and UDA Holdings. With the assistance of several NGOs such as the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT), the Academy of Socio-economic Research and Analysis (ASERA), Badan Warisan Malaysia and my own outfit, Intersocietal and Scientific (INAS), we organised meetings with the people of Tanjung Tokong and the state government (primarily with representatives from the Chief Minister’s office) but always worked closely with the PKTT , then under the leadership of Cik Gu Yahya Salleh.



Before



After

Restored seafront houses in Tanjung Tokong Village.

I prepared the dossier on the “Conservation of Tanjung Tokong” with the help of Laurence Loh and this was presented to Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng at a final presentation on February 26 this year. The dossier was also personally handed over to Datuk Seri Utama Dr Rais Yatim, the Minister of Information, Communication and Culture on March 6.

On April 22, I received a call from the Urban Planning Unit of the state government, responsible for the drafting of the Penang Local Plan (Island) 2020, inviting me to present once again our conservation plans for Tanjung Tokong. This was a lengthy meeting and we worked out details relating to site, landscaping, architectural design, height and size of new flats and so on. The problem was that there were several opinions and views as to how this could be achieved. The early residents with long genealogies and living histories wanted the entire village to be conserved, while the more recent residents, tenants and the younger generation did not care about the village’s

history and just wanted a house to live in. Eventually, the site proposed in the dossier was accepted by the Urban Planning Unit.

The greatest worry of the Tanjung Tokong villagers is that they will not be issued titles and will be squatters for life, like those in Batu Feringghi (Kampung Mutiara), resettled to make way for the Rasa Sayang Resort decades ago. Even villagers from Tanjung Bungah who were resettled when their village was damaged by the 2004 Tsunami are unsure if their new flats are legally theirs. The majority of the Tanjung Tokong residents living in the UDA Phase Two flats completed decades ago still do not have titles. NGOs can work with state governments and local people but eventually it is the real threat of homelessness that drives the poor to sacrifice their heritage for a roof over their heads.

It has taken a long time to get to where we are, as there have been many Tanjung Tokong groups with conflicting interests that have caused resolutions that were previously made to be broken up. The good news now is, over the Hari Raya season recently, Lim Guan Eng cheered me up at the State Raya party with the message that the state government has agreed to transform Tanjung Tokong into a Kampung Warisan, as a community trust.

This was heartening indeed, a worthy effort of community conservation. I feel it will be time and money well spent. However, the Tanjung Tokong folks must get their act together and realise that this is the best deal they will get; they should unite, cut their losses and bask in their amazing history for the benefit of future generations of Penangites. I certainly hope that the people of Tanjung Tokong will appreciate the conservation of an important historical area and focus on their legal entitlements as the descendants of Penang's first inhabitants.



Before



After

Restored seafront houses in Tanjung Tokong Village.



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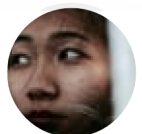
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