

Iberians and Southeast Asians at War: the Violent First Encounter at Melaka in 1511 and After

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The present paper examines the violent encounters between Iberians (Spanish and Portuguese) and the indigenous populations of maritime Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century, focusing primarily on the example of Melaka (Malacca) in 1511 and fighting that continued on from that conquest for the remainder of the sixteenth century.¹ First encounters between peoples, civilizations, and so on are not necessarily violent. The Iberians in Southeast Asia, like those in the Americas, for example, came to obtain wealth through conquest of land in the latter case and through the control of maritime trade routes in the former.² As Jeremy Black points out, in South and Southeast Asia, contact (violent or otherwise) was a contingent consequence of the European arrival in region, not a necessary result, because the early Europeans came to dominate the coastal vector of trading networks not to conquer territory. The meeting of Iberians with Asians in Southeast Asia was thus not quite so easily bifurcated into two opposing sides. Indeed, throughout the early decades of the Iberian presence in Southeast Asia, much warfare in the region was actually fought out between Asian rulers and not simply between the Portuguese and the Asians.³ Nevertheless, it was the meetings of Europeans with Southeast Asians that afforded the starkest contrasts in war culture and technology and thus isolating these two belligerents and how they attempted to learn from each other affords a strong opportunity for understanding the processes of transcultural learning.

I **Melaka in 1511**

¹ The concept of “Southeast Asia” here is loosely defined. “Southeast Asia” would have had little meaning to indigenous societies. The Portuguese, as early sixteenth century mapping made clear, viewed the “region” as a confusing mixture of islands and coasts with no clear delineation between a mainland and an island world.

² Jeremy Black, “War and the World, 1450-2000,” *Journal of Military History* 63.3 (July 1999): 675.

³ Fernão Mendes Pinto, *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*, edited and translated by Rebecca D. Catz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989): 21.

The Portuguese under Afonso D'Albuquerque arrived at Melaka in 1511 to demand a "reckoning" for the poor treatment of Portuguese crews who had visited the port in 1509. The Melakans, however, proved defiant, putting on great displays of force on sea and on land. The Melakan goal, advised by Indian and Turkish traders, was to delay the Portuguese until they would be forced to leave with the arrival of the monsoon.⁴ D'Albuquerque attacked and took the city before that occurred.

From the available sources we can break down the forces arrayed against each side and some elements of their respective cultures of warfare. According to the Portuguese accounts, D'Albuquerque's force consisted of fifteen to sixteen small and large boats, an armada carrying seven to eight hundred Portuguese and several hundred Indian mercenaries.⁵ Additionally, after his arrival, D'Albuquerque quickly made alliances with other disgruntled traders in the port, particularly with the Chinese, who lent to him a number of boats to help him land Portuguese on land to assault the town. Between the two assaults he made on the city, D'Albuquerque also arranged secret peace pacts with certain contingents of fighting men overtly on the side of Melaka, in particular a Javanese commander and his people in Upe (the settlement across the river from Melaka proper) and traders from Pegu and their retainers who happened to be in the city.⁶

Under the Sultan of Melaka there were said to be 100,000 fighting men in all of his lands, but to defend the city itself in 1511 there were only twenty thousand in total, including large contingents of foreign soldiers. At sea before the Portuguese, there were many junks; while on the river there were numerous *praos* (a type of Malay boat) and *lancharas* (launches). Aside from firearms, they used poisoned darts, bows and arrows, and, according to one Portuguese observer, "excellent" lances. Amongst the booty taken after the fall of the town were armor-plated dresses, but no indication is made if these were actually used for battle purposes or part of elite, ceremonial adornment. Moreover, the Melakans made use in the fighting of twenty war elephants, all carrying wooden castles on their backs, filled with armed men.⁷

⁴ Afonso de Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque, Second Viceroy of India*, translated by Walter de Gray Birch (London: Hakluyt society, 1875-84): III, 67, 68, 70.

⁵ For variance in the figures supplied in the Portuguese accounts see Cortesão's note at Tome Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, edited and translated by Armando Cortesão (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944): II, 279. The *Sejarah Melayu* puts the figure at at least 1,000 musketeers and the Portuguese armada at forty-five vessels, consisting of seven carracks, eight galleasses, ten long galleys, fifteen sloops, and five foists. C. C. Brown (tr.). "Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25.2-3 (1952): 167; R. O. Winstedt (ed.), "The Malay Annals or Sejarah Melayu," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 16.3 (December 1938): 15.

⁶ Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 99, 109-110.

⁷ Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, II, 279; Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*. 2 vols.,

Melaka also had significant aid from foreign allies. Joining the Melakan boats in the harbor were Gujarati ships prepared for war by a Gujarati captain who wanted war with the Portuguese, and a promise that the Gujaratis would contribute six hundred “well armed” fighting men and twenty bombards to Melaka’s defense. Moreover, the work of building up the fortifications of Melaka was being handled entirely by the Gujaratis. Amongst other foreign defenders of Melaka were also many Javanese and Iranians, as the latter were important traders in the Indian Ocean commercial world. It was the alliance of so many foreign soldiers, it was alleged, that made the sultan “so puffed up with pride” as to expect that he would capture the entire Portuguese fleet before his city.⁸

According to most sources, there were three thousand cannon at Melaka in 1511 and, of these, two thousand were bronze and one thousand of iron, although many of these may have been small arms or light artillery and not the heavy cannon carried by the Portuguese.⁹ Most if not all of these firearms were brought from other Asian sources, primarily the Javanese and the Gujaratis after 1509, supplying not only the guns but also the men who would handle them. In the early sixteenth century, prior to the Portuguese arrival, the Malays were indeed a people without the gun. Perhaps most revealing is the reference in the *Sejarah Melayu* to the Malays during the 1509 episode not understanding “why bullets killed,” indicating a clear lack of familiarity with the application of firearms in battle, if not in ceremony. This admission lends some weight to the comment by João de Barros of Sumatra that before the Portuguese arrived the indigenous population used only blow pipes and poisoned darts (and thus did not make use yet of firearms). Moreover, as the Melakans had only now introduced to firearms, they had not previously adopted the practice of Europe and Indian cities, of fortifying their port, relying upon the Gujaratis to help them build up such defenses from 1509.¹⁰

translated by Mansel Longworth Dames (London: Hakluyt Society, 1918): II, 179; Alboquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 99, 127.

⁸ Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 179; Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, II, 279; Alboquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 66, 69, 70, 92, 93, 99.

⁹ For the 8,000 and 3,000 figures respectively, see Alboquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 128 and 127; D. K. Bassett, “European Influence in South-East Asia, c. 1500-1630,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 4.2 (September, 1963): 146.

¹⁰ Winstedt (ed.), “The Malay Annals or Sejarah Melayu,” 14; João de Barros, *Da Asia* (Lisboa, Regia Officine Typografica, 1777): Decada 3, Parte 1, 510. Given the combined assertions in the available sources that Javanese were skilled in making guns of their own and “are everywhere sought as gunners” and that the Sultan of Melaka had been increasing his stock of guns since the 1509 episode it may be possible that the Javanese came to supply and handle the guns. Barbosa says of the Javanese that they make “firelocks and arquebusses, and all other kinds of firearms; they are everywhere much sought after as

For both the Iberians and the Southeast Asians warfare was not simply combat on the terrestrial plane between mortal opponents. Instead, the divine or supernatural and the mundane were inseparable. The Iberians had one foot still firmly placed in medieval Europe and were thus not so different in their interpretations of the grand framework of warfare than indigenous populations in Southeast Asia were. The superstitions of pre-Enlightenment Europe thus provided interpretive frameworks to conceptualize the encounter with non-Europeans. Like Southeast Asians, the Iberians also relied heavily upon astrologers for information on the otherwise unknowable. When Magellan wanted to know the whereabouts and plans of a ship that had departed he consulted his onboard astrologer who informed the captain that the lost ship had deserted and was on its way back to Spain. Magellan, satisfied, gave the lost vessel no further thought.¹¹ The Iberians took omens seriously and winds that carried a ship to the wrong port were directed to do so by Providence for reasons that were revealed in the form of omens. Divine intervention also played a crucial role in determining the outcomes of battles. The Iberian soldier carried the war God of the crusaders along with him into battle against Muslims and infidels. God intervened in battles on the side of the morally good. Holy warriors made of lightning saved the righteous when all seemed lost. The Iberians interpreted success as the will of God, especially after victories against much higher odds.¹² Take, for example, the 1570 victory over a Moro army on Luzon, which was said to have been due to “the will of God, who had ordained it so – a self evident fact, since for every Spaniard there were a hundred Moros.”¹³ Similarly, D’Albuquerque relied upon St. James the Apostle, D’Albuquerque even delayed his preparations for battle so that he would necessarily attack on the Day of St. James, so that the saint would give him another

gunners.” Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 193; Bassett, however, asserts that the Javanese had no artillery, as demonstrated in the defeat of their fleet by the Portuguese in 1513. Bassett, “European Influence in South-East Asia,” 148. All this would suggest, it would seem, that the Javanese were unable as of yet to apply cannon to their ship structure. According to Chinese merchants who may have been commercial competitors with Indian traders and thus borne a special hostility to them, the Gujeratis had brought Melaka its artillery from Cambaya as well as “arms of every kind.” The largest gun had also been sent by the King of Calicut to the sultan. Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 99, 127. On the other hand, the Portuguese who came to Melaka in 1511 believed that Melaka had gunfounders (who they were is not revealed) who “were as good as those of Germany.” Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 128.

¹¹ Antonio Pigafetta, *The First Voyage Around the World by Magellan* Lord Stanley of Aldeley (tr.), (London: Hakluyt Society, 1874): 250.

¹² Manuel de Faria y Sousa, *The Portugues Asia: Or, The History of the Discovery and Conquest of India by the Portugues*, 3 vols. translated by John Stevens (London: C. Brome, 1695): I, 251, 302; “Relation of the Conquest of the Island of Luzon [April 20, 1572],” In Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson (eds.), *The Philippine Islands 1493-1898* (Cleveland: The A. H. Clark Company, 1903): 150.

¹³ “Relation of the Voyage to Luzon [June 1570].” In Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson (eds.), *The Philippine Islands 1493-1898* (Cleveland: The A. H. Clark Company, 1903): III, 100.

victory as St. James had earlier given him at Goa, and “Santiago” (Saint James) was D’Albuquerque’s war-cry during the fighting.¹⁴ Generally, it was divine intervention more than the quality of the guns per se that determined Iberian success.¹⁵

Two features that were inseparable from warfare for both the Iberians and the Southeast Asians were bloodshed and spectacle. No one would be surprised by a European commander of this period giving the order, as D’Albuquerque did, that, after the battle, any Malay encountered, as “natives of the country,” should be put to death “wheresoever they were found,” having the result that “of the Moors, women and children, there died by the sword an infinite number, for no quarter was given to any of them.”¹⁶ Although Southeast Asians tended to keep their captives as property or convert them to vassalage, bloodshed was just as much a part of the actual fighting as it was for the Europeans. Certainly, warfare between kingdoms on Java and Sumatra before the arrival of the Iberians involved large-scale slaughter and the scorching of settlements.¹⁷ Similarly, both sides attributed to each other’s manner of fighting much spectacle, the Portuguese stressing the blowing of horns, the blaring of trumpets, and a great deal of noise among the defenders and the Malay sources would stress the noise and fire of the Portuguese guns:¹⁸

they fired their cannon from their ships so that the cannon balls came like rain. And the noise of the cannon was as the noise of thunder in the heavens and the flashes of the fire of their guns were like flashes of lightning in the sky: and the noise of their matchlocks was like that of ground-nuts popping in the frying-pan.¹⁹

During his initial negotiations with the Melakans, D’Albuquerque was irritated by frequent displays of naval strength by the Melakan Sultan and on one occasion even sent small boats forward to burn vessels in the harbor and houses along the shore, to teach the Melakans a lesson. As negotiations drew on and it appeared the Melakans were preparing defenses for battle, D’Albuquerque struck with full force, planning to capture and hold the bridge that divided the town of Melaka from Upe, thus splitting Melaka’s forces in-

¹⁴ Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 101-102, 120.

¹⁵ Michael W. Charney, *Southeast Asian Warfare, 1300-1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2004): xiv.

¹⁶ Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 127.

¹⁷ Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, II, 231.

¹⁸ Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 103.

¹⁹ Brown (tr.). “Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals,” 167.

two. After Portuguese cannon and muskets forced the Melakans away from the shore, D'Albuquerque's men landed in two brigades, one on the mosque side and the other on the city-side at the break of dawn, each racing to the bridge. In response the defenders in Melakan stockades on the bridge fired matchlock muskets and cannon at them, but as the Portuguese got closer, the Melakans relied upon long lances, shields, poisoned darts blown from tubes, and bows and arrows to fend them off. Ultimately, the Portuguese attack was successful, the mosque being taken as well as the stockades on the bridge. Many of the defenders were killed and the others sent fleeing.²⁰

Elephants played a role in the defense even at this stage of the contest. As the Melakans began to flee the stockades, the sultan arrived on his elephant named Jituji accompanied by other castled elephants, and many additional fighting men. The sultan brought with him his Muslim teacher on his elephant. According to the Malay side, the sultan had stood his ground with his elephant in the face of a "hail of bullets," only deciding to return to the palace when his religious teacher felt that it was not the right place to study the Unity of God. They turned around to charge the Portuguese again, however, when they realized that the latter were pursuing them. The Portuguese waited as the elephants charged and met the elephants with lances, mortally wounding them. The elephants, wounded in this way, turned around and charged through the Melakans on the ground forcing them all into a rout as well as forcing the sultan to the ground where he fled on foot.²¹

Unsure of what the sultan would do next and in need of resupply, D'Albuquerque withdrew his men under cover of night, bringing with them fifty large bombards they had captured in the stockades. The sultan reoccupied the stockades on the bridge and strengthened them more securely than before, filling them again with artillery and did the same with barricades in the major streets on both sides leading up the bridge, laying down poisoned thorn-bushes along the shore as well. The sultan also lent to the young nobles among his warriors copies of the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*, which provided examples of bravery in battle.²²

After several days and no response was made by the sultan to a call for terms, D'Albuquerque determined to land a second time in order to fortify the town for

²⁰ Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 68-69, 95-97, 102, 103; Brown (tr.). "Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals," 167.

²¹ Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 104-106; Brown (tr.). "Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals," 167-168; Winstedt (ed.), "The Malay Annals or Sejarah Melayu," 15.

²² Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 104, 106, 108-109; Winstedt (ed.), "The Malay Annals or Sejarah Melayu," 15; Brown (tr.). "Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals," 167-168; Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, II, 279.

permanent occupation. Interestingly, D’Albuquerque now made use of a large junk he had captured whose loftiness would allow it to be taken up to the bridge and tower over it and filled it with men and artillery. The junk would provide shelter to the Portuguese from attacks while allowing them an ideal position to fire into the stockades on the bridge, avoiding the shore and the streets leading up the bridge altogether. The junk, however, became stuck on a sandbar before the bridge as the sultan sent barges full of oil and wood set afire against the Portuguese in it for nine successive nights, each one diverted using bowsprits, harpoons, and heavy chains. During this period of waiting for the spring tide, D’Albuquerque set his iron-smiths to work to forge building tools to make their own stockades when the chance arose, to provide bolts for crossbows, and to construct mantlets (portable shelters) that would help to protect the Portuguese from the bombards.²³

During the second assault, when the spring tide was able to carry the junk up to the bridge, D’Albuquerque did not divide his men, attacking as a single force on the junk and in the boats protecting it, since the Melakan defenses were better this time around. As the junk pushed up the river, the Melakans again fired their bombards and matchlocks, blew poisoned darts, and fired arrows, while the Portuguese threw their own darts, fired matchlocks, and tossed canisters of gunpowder, forcing the defenders of the bridge into their stockades. The Portuguese then attacked the bridge, forced the defenders from the stockades, and then turned to the task of taking control of Melakan defenses on the roads and the mosque. The mosque was taken with difficulty. The sultan, this time on his elephant named Juru Demang, defended it with his remaining elephants and several thousand men. When the Melakan line broke, the king was temporarily isolated, fighting, so we are told only in the Malay account, with the Portuguese “pike to pike.” Only when the sultan was wounded in the hand and showed his blood to his subjects did his war-chiefs rally to his aid. Twenty of the leading war-chiefs were killed in the melee. As the Portuguese advanced on the royal audience hall, the Melakan warriors fled. It was at this point that the sultan and the survivors withdrew, cursing the cowardice of the young, marking the end of the defense of Melaka.²⁴

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²³ Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, II, 279; Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 112, 113.

²⁴ Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 121-122; Brown (tr.). “Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals,” 169.

Learning and Synthesis

Was this battle a case of asymmetrical warfare in Southeast Asia as in contact-era Americas, Africa, or Siberia? It is doubtful. One major difference between the initial violent encounters of Europeans and Southeast Asians and those between Europeans and indigenous populations elsewhere, for example, is that some South and Southeast Asians already had the gun even if Melaka and the Malays did not. Although the route(s) by which they acquired firearms is debated, when Europeans do first arrive in the region, the major states of India and some areas of Southeast Asia, such as Java, possessed arsenals of firearms (although of questionable value) and even the technology to found their own cannon.²⁵ Since this pre-existing firearms weaponry failed so poorly in battle an important question that needs to be answered is who carried knowledge of the European gun to the Malays and other Southeast Asians?

As we have already seen in the brief survey of the Portuguese and Southeast Asian forces above, there were many potential intermediaries for the transfer of military culture and technology. D’Albuquerque, for example, came to Melaka in response to the captivity by the Melakans of Portuguese visitors to the port in 1509. Aside from numerous episodes in which Portuguese and Spanish were taken in battle elsewhere, shipwrecked Iberians (such as those who introduced the gun to Japan), traders, and those who sought employment as mercenaries were common. The *Estado da India* may not have taken seriously Portuguese such as those who in the early 1520s, entered local service, armed themselves as archers, and adopted clothing “in the style of the country.”²⁶ However, this was a very serious matter, for such Portuguese also carried to Southeast Asian armies the gun and skill in using it, not to mention Iberian tactology and nautical prowess. Fully aware of their value, indigenous rulers eagerly sought their employment in their forces as musketeers and as seamen.

²⁵ Crawford suggested that firearms technology circulated to the Philippines from Muslim Malay sultanates along with Islam, while Gibson-Hill suggests that firearms had reached western India in the late fifteenth century and passed from thence to maritime Southeast Asia perhaps thirty years before the first Portuguese visit to Melaka in 1509. C. A. Gibson-Hill, “Notes on the Old Cannon Found in Malaya, and known to be of Dutch Origin,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26.1 (July 1953): 146; “Relation of the Voyage to Luzon [June 1570],” 78.

²⁶ Genevieve Bouchon & Luis Filipe Thomaz (eds.), *Voyage dans les Deltas du Gange et de L’Irraouaddy: Relation Portugaise Anonyme (1521)* (Paris: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, 1988): 337.

Moreover, it was not only Iberians who found their way into indigenous service, for, as we have seen in the case of Melaka in 1511, the Portuguese not only brought substantial numbers of Indians with them to fight, but made local alliances with the Javanese and others. Such local alliances would multiply over the course of the sixteenth century.²⁷ “Spanish” or “Portuguese” forces would soon include quite a few indigenous people, who fought alongside the Europeans, sometimes using local weaponry, but often integrated into the Iberian fighting system.²⁸ Southeast Asians may have helped to bridge the gap between the cultures and technologies of the European and Asian worlds as informants on local tactics and weaponry, as well as the indigenous cultural beliefs and practices which would have helped Europeans understand when and how indigenous opponents would make their attacks or abandon their defenses..

If such Iberians or Asians who fell between the cracks of the European empires and indigenous states introduced the gun in many (but certainly not all) places in Southeast Asia, what did the introduction of the gun actually mean? Boxer argues that due to papal ban on selling weapons to non-Christians as well as a “natural reluctance” among the Portuguese to supply cannon or gunners to Asian rulers, over the century and more following the fall of Melaka, continuous sieges by Malays, Achinese, and Javanese failed to demonstrate “the besiegers ma[king] effective use of any guns which they might have had...”²⁹ Similarly, D. K. Bassett has challenged M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs’s assertion that the Portuguese fared worse in the last half of the sixteenth century because Asians assimilated Portuguese strategic practice and military and nautical technology. Certainly, Bassett asserts, the Malays did not learn accuracy in firing artillery from the Portuguese, for, given the poor showing of Malay gunners in numerous conflicts in the several centuries after the fall Melaka they fared no better than the poor performance of the cannon at Melaka against the Portuguese in 1511. Furthermore, Bassett takes “the arrival of Turkish guns and gunners in Aceh before each new wave of Achinese expansion” as possible evidence of the dependence of Achinese and Malays upon foreign

²⁷ The case of the Portuguese alliance with Ternate against Tidore in the early 1520s is a good example. Faria y Sousa, *The Portuguese Asia*, I, 278.

²⁸ “Relation of the Voyage to Luzon [June 1570],” 91; “Relation of the Conquest of the Island of Luzon [April 20, 1572],” 143; Faria y Sousa, *The Portuguese Asia*, I, 273, 302.

²⁹ Charles R. Boxer, “Asian Potentates and European Artillery in the 16th-18th Centuries: A Footnote to Gibson-Hill.” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38.2 (1965): 162-163.

skills for handling their firearms.³⁰

From the Iberian perspective, guns were effective in terms of their propelling musket or cannon balls at their enemy and killing or wounding them with predictable accuracy. While Southeast Asians would indeed adopt Portuguese firearms and abandon those from China and elsewhere, their effectiveness improved little. The main reason was that while they adopted the form of Portuguese weaponry, they did not copy the systematic way in which the Portuguese handled their weaponry, what Black refers to as “the means of delivering, and sustaining force,” which was just as important as the weaponry itself.³¹ For some Southeast Asians, however, the efficacy of guns was sacral. As Boxer points out, instead of making effective use of guns, “Indonesian and Malay rulers valued cannon rather for prestige and sacro-religious reasons than with any serious idea of using them offensively.”³²

At least at first, Malays more broadly reacted to firearms by relying upon night attacks on Portuguese positions, including Melaka, but also against Portuguese positions in nearby Sumatra. Presumably this hindered the aim and reduced the window of reaction of gunners on the walls.³³ As one source explained in 1523, “the night time is preferred by these people for making their attacks, as being then most secure from the effect of fire-arms.”³⁴ Southeast Asians also adopted new tactics that took advantage of rain and the generally wet tropical environment and there are examples from Sumatra to the Philippines of indigenous forces waiting until the next rain to the attack either the Spanish or the Portuguese, “when it would be impossible for them to make use of the arquebuses,”³⁵ since the dampened powder would not ignite. The unreliability of firearms in watery terrain or during the rains, meant that when an Iberian soldier went ashore and needed to respond to danger quickly, he would sometimes prefer the trustworthy bow and arrow compared to the unreliable firearm.³⁶

Nevertheless, accounts of fighting between the Malays and the Portuguese from

³⁰ Bassett, “European Influence in South-East Asia,” 146-148.

³¹ Black, “War and the World, 1450-2000,” 678.

³² Boxer, “Asian Potentates and European Artillery in the 16th-18th Centuries,” 171.

³³ Bouchon & Thomaz (eds.), *Voyage dans les Deltas du Gange et de L'Irraouaddy*, 343; Bassett, “European Influence in South-East Asia,” 149; Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, 421.

³⁴ Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, 421.

³⁵ “Relation of the Voyage to Luzon [June 1570],” 98.

³⁶ Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, 421; Bouchon & Thomaz (eds.), *Voyage dans les Deltas du Gange et de L'Irraouaddy*, 346.

the period suggest that the former, however unfamiliar or unskilled before 1511, or even whether or not a sacral purpose was more important than practical application, learned how to use the weapons in battle to some effect over the course of the following decade, perhaps because with the arrival of the Portuguese, the usage of firearms had by necessity moved from the ceremonial to the tactical, and with the loss of Melaka the Malays no longer could afford the expense of employing others to do something they could quickly learn to do themselves. As Barros explains, only after fighting with the Portuguese did the population of Sumatra develop new tactics in battle and begin to make (and use) cannon of iron and bronze, although they still relied heavily upon those taken from Portuguese ships. As mentioned, another source was the Ottoman Empire, from which states such as Aceh began to acquire new and better guns from the 1530s. In response, from the mid-1520s, the Iberians took special steps to extract cannon from indigenous owners, especially among hostile states such as at Tidore and Lobu on Sumatra, both in 1525. In any event, by the time that the Dutch entered Southeast Asia at the beginning of the next century, they encountered indigenous armies that already had and knew how to use with reasonable skill cannon and muskets.³⁷ Longterm success (that is, until the early seventeenth century at least) for the indigenous states was that they were able to combine practical with sacral roles for the firearms they adopted from the Europeans.

Although war elephants are generally associated with the larger mainland Southeast Asian armies,³⁸ the Iberians encountered them throughout many parts of maritime Southeast Asia. The Portuguese, however, were not surprised by the role of elephants in battle, for they had experience against war elephants in the Indian subcontinent. As we have seen, they were not slowed down by any sort of surprise by the elephants during the attack on the bridge in Melaka. The lack of any centralized political organization, such as the *Estado da India*, or intellectual framework that could accommodate a new actor so dramatically different from Asian actors and thus meaningfully communicate the limitations of the elephant to battle, meant a very slow

³⁷ William Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, introduced by John Bastin (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1966): 422; Barros, *Da Asia*, Decada 3, Parte 1, 510; Pinto, *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*, 21; Faria y Sousa, *The Portuguese Asia*, I, 275, 306-307; David Henley, "Conflict, Justice, and the Stranger-King: Indigenous Roots of Colonial Rule in Indonesia and Elsewhere," *Modern Asian Studies* 38.1 (2004): 95.

³⁸ See, for example, Jon Fernquest, "Min-gyi-nyo, the Shan Invasions of Ava (1524-27), and the Beginnings of Expansionary Warfare in Toungoo Burma: 1486-1539," *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 3.2 (Autumn 2005): 305.

pace of adaptation. Although the elephant fared poorly at Melaka in 1511, we thus find the sultan of Bintan including “many” elephants among his forces in his assault upon Portuguese Melaka in 1518. The slow pace of adaptation, however, was also due to the fact that longterm reliance on the elephant and certain geographical realities meant that for some tasks, the Southeast Asians had nothing else. The Achinese, for example, needed elephants alongside manpower to tear down the Portuguese stockade at Pasai in 1523 rather than cannon.³⁹

Iberian adaptation to elephants, however, through transcultural learning also helped to assure the diminishing of the elephant’s battlefield role. The Portuguese had clearly learned how to deal with them at Melaka as well as in Sumatra in 1523, by lancing them to inflict wounds that would send the elephant bolting or burning gunpowder under their trunk, which they found would have the same effect.⁴⁰ The Portuguese may have gained at least the knowledge of burning gunpowder to frighten elephants from Indians or on their own from their experience in India, but it can be asserted that they already had this knowledge by the time that they reached Southeast Asia. Generally, however, the application of ever more accurate and powerful firearms to battle meant that the elephant was gradually relegated to transport and construction duty.

The Iberians interpreted the most feared Southeast Asian weapon, the poisoned arrow or dart dispensed from a hidden position, as a weapon common throughout the tropical world. Indeed, the Portuguese commonly applied one or another variant of the same term, *zervatana*, *zerbatana*, or *gravatana*, from Brazil to Southeast Asia, to the tube-blown poison dart. But while the form of the weapon and tactics per se seemed transregional, poisons and local variants in warfare required acquiring local understandings and remedies that were unique to the region. As we have seen, poisoned thorns were laid on the shores for the invaders to prick themselves not just in Melaka, but in the Philippines as well, where they were placed on roads to prevent passage by Iberian soldiers. The Portuguese learned by experience that they had to deal with poison by cauterizing the wound quickly. The Iberians would eventually resort to the less painful

³⁹ Faria y Sousa, *The Portugues Asia*, I, 179, 225, 228, 244; Bassett, “European Influence in South-East Asia,” 148; Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, 422.

⁴⁰ Alboquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 104; Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, 422.

practice of using local herbs as antidotes to the poison, thus depending upon indigenous medical men to inform them of local pharmacopoeia. Prevention, however, was the best cure, and Iberian forces responded to indigenous archers hidden in jungle cover by using canvas guards which caught the projectiles before reaching a human target, using harquebusiers to disperse indigenous archers at a distance, advancing in a zigzag manner, and torching the houses being used by the enemy as cover.⁴¹

The Portuguese impact was minimal at sea. Southeast Asian fleets would not be swept from the sea until the arrival of the Dutch in 1600. Certainly until the arrival of the Dutch at least, no major technological transformation of Malay war fleets is discernible, the *lanchara* remaining the standard vessel of the Malay fleets throughout the sixteenth century. By contrast, one of the most important areas of European adaptation was on water. Iberian fleets discovered quickly that they needed to adapt to local tactics and technologies. While the Portuguese attacked Melaka, the Melakan fleet under the *laksamana* was away. Rather than contest the Portuguese at sea “in approved European fashion,” he instead lured them up rivers among stakes planted into the river bed or trapped Portuguese vessels in “confined waters,” in both cases limiting Portuguese movement, where he wreaked havoc upon them. The Portuguese soon resorted to delaying their progressions to pull up the stakes. While caravels and other craft would remain important at sea, on rivers they would adopt, from the Irrawaddy Delta to the Philippines, smaller, shallow draft prows or galley-like vessels.⁴²

Overall, Iberians seem to have adapted even more slowly to Southeast Asians than vice versa. The Iberian expansion into Southeast Asia came from both the west and the east as the furthest extensions of explorations proceeding around the Cape of Good Hope (the West) and the Spanish movement across the Americas (the East). Thus, the penetration of Southeast Asia by the Iberians represented a meeting of their collective experience in dealing with numerous other indigenous peoples along the way, including experience with certain technologies that were relatively common throughout tropical areas, such as poisoned darts. Fighting in Southeast Asia, then, was not a complete

⁴¹ Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, III, 104, 108; Barros, *Da Asia*, Decada 3, Parte 1, 510; Faria y Sousa, *The Portugues Asia*, I, 179, 180, 242; Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, II, 283; “Relation of the Voyage to Luzon [June 1570],” 83, 84; “Relation of the Conquest of the Island of Luzon [April 20, 1572],” 144, 147.

⁴² Bassett, “European Influence in South-East Asia,” 147-148; “Relation of the Voyage to Luzon [June 1570],” 75.

departure from what the Iberians had been involved with for decades and thus adaptation was already long underway.

The seeming similarity, however, to warfare elsewhere also seems to have disguised the crucial element of the supernatural in Southeast Asian warfare. In much of the archipelago, for example, animist spirits and the spirits of one's ancestors participated in the fighting and thus needed to be propitiated. It was this propitiation, through ritual practices, that worked, in a moral system governing spiritual forces that determined the effectiveness of combat and the weapons used, from bladed weaponry to firearms.⁴³ Unable to fully understand how Southeast Asians saw warfare prevented the Iberians from exploiting this knowledge for battlefield gain. This perhaps is one part of the explanation of why, as other scholars have asked, the Portuguese fell on the military defensive in the last half of the sixteenth century after spectacular victories in the first half.

III

Summary and Conclusion

The possible cultural consequences of first violent encounters between Iberians and indigenous populations were offset by a number of factors that minimized the impact. One factor was that the Iberians came to Southeast Asia from the west after having cut their way around Africa and across India and from the east after conquering large parts of the Americas. By the time they met around the world in Southeast Asia, they had hardened up to "first violent counters." Especially important was their reliance on the belief in the support of God in the fight against the heathen. However, they also developed an intellectual framework for understanding violent resistance wherever they encountered it, in the form of Muslim machinations in the context of a worldwide struggle between the forces of Christendom and those of Muhammad.

The indigenous populations of maritime Southeast Asia were hardened up almost in the same way. They had long been exposed to that most novel of European technological achievements, the firearm, because they were supplied from India and Java, if not China as well. One of the key "shocks" of the encounters in the Americas and Sub-

⁴³ Leonard Andaya, "Interactions with the Outside World and Adaptation in Southeast Asian Society, 1500-1800," in Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): I, 387.

Saharan Africa were thus denied to the Iberians in maritime Southeast Asia. Moreover, the Europeans were not the first foreigners to come to the region, for the region had entertained Chinese, Japanese, Arab, and Indian shipping and soldiers for centuries as well. Moreover, Muslim traders had already let indigenous kingdoms know what to expect from the Iberian arrival and local rulers were ready for the violence.

Ultimately, then, it was not that the first violent encounters between Iberians and indigenous populations in Southeast Asia did not provide the basis for cultural change, but instead the more peaceable interactions that resulted from Portuguese and indigenous populations crossing the lines for employment on either side. Those Portuguese who most changed were those renegades or fortune-seekers who developed new lives for themselves outside of the service of the Portuguese crown, instead joining indigenous courts as mercenaries. Likewise, those indigenous people who underwent significant cultural change were those who affiliated with Portuguese forces. However, this kind of cultural interchange operated more slowly and less evenly across the region and slowed down to a snail's crawl of centuries, more fundamental changes in state and social institutions which would have been necessary for full technological accommodation. As Jeremy Black explains, the

adoption of weaponry, and even tactics, is of limited value unless there are accompanying cultural changes. These changes have to occur both within the military, whether drill and discipline, or meritocratic promotion, or the creation in modern specialised forces of a bureaucratic-technical ethos, and in society as a whole...⁴⁴

While, organizational or tactical change is not the limit of the potential cultural impact of the introduction of new technology and important cultural responses can occur without them, as we have seen, more complete adaptation in a practical sense can only occur with the former changes. One could easily argue that Southeast Asia had not achieved this degree of change by the last half of the nineteenth century, when the last remaining independent states of the region (with the exception of Siam), fell under European control.

Between societies, however, amongst those people living between the cracks of

⁴⁴ Black, "War and the World, 1450-2000," 674.

the European and Southeast Asian worlds, there was substantial change that was not necessarily a response to the violent encounters with between the two societies. Instead, this amounted to change in response to the physical environment and operational context. As Portuguese mercenaries were now to fight against indigenous armies in jungle warfare, they had to adopt similar styles of dressing, fighting, and surviving as those of their indigenous hosts. Likewise, those indigenous warriors who joined the Iberians aided the latter against other indigenous armies; however, they also had to aid the Portuguese in manning their vessels, firing their guns, and fitting into their warfare mechanism. This meant the encounter led to an overlap of combat worlds that was productive of warfare culture synthesis. The Portuguese in indigenous employ and the indigenous warrior in Portuguese employ represented a key point of cultural adaptation and technology transfer.

By the end of the sixteenth century, a new kind of warrior had emerged in maritime Southeast Asia because of this synthesis. The freebooter communities that collected around places like Chittagong and in the palace armies of major kingdoms throughout Southeast Asia soon made their own attempts to carve out economic niches in the maritime world.⁴⁵ While many would be viewed simply as pirates, others, through marriage alliances on both sides of the Portuguese/indigenous world, legitimized themselves in the eyes of both, being perceived as servants of the Portuguese king and as local rulers.

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⁴⁵ The earliest Portuguese pirates operating in Southeast Asia appear to be those under Games Jago in the seas off Burma in 1522. Faria y Sousa, *The Portuguese Asia*, I, 273.

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