

# Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

We will now bring our fourth and final speaker, Sonia Latha, who will discuss between tribute and tied Siam-Pahang relations in the many worlds.

00:00:15 Speaker 2

Good morning, everyone.

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It's a pleasure to be here today and to share with you my paper on the Siam-Pahang relations.

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I have to thank Rowena for organizing this and for having me today.

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As everybody in the room may already know, I am a former student of Rowena's.

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So this day is extra special for me to just show her how much I've accomplished post-studies.

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So this paper began, in some ways, with two simple questions.

00:00:43 Speaker 2

If Plantin and Trugano were known tributaries of Siam, what about Pahang?

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And where does it fit in the geography of Siam's southern world?

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It is a well-established fact that the Siam exercise

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considerable influence over the states of Plantan, Chungano, Kadang, and Perlis.

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All the states are acknowledged in chronicles, Malay texts, and colonial records, especially written by William Langhan and Aruna Govinda.

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However, the case of Haham is left clear.

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While Sayam undoubtedly claimed overlordship, the historical record remains uncertain.

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It is precisely this uncertainty that makes his research so fascinating.

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I mean, as a historian, the words research and uncertainty excites me all the time.

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But to reconstruct Sien-Faham relationships requires us to work with the occasional mention of Malay chronicles, the scattered remarks in Siamese records, and interpretations of later historians.

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What emerges from this is a relationship that was neither of complete absence nor of consistent subordination, but something more complex, more intermittent, and more symbolic.

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So the question of how far Siamese or the Rainzi extended into Pahang is less a matter of straightforward effect than reconstructing influence from the gaps of history.

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So my approach then is not to treat Siamese power as a monolith, but to examine how it was experienced and enacted through ritual, geography, and exchange.

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In other words, rather than asking, did Siam rule Pahang, I ask,

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What did the idea of science power mean and power, and how did it travel across land and sea?

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Now, before I proceed with the core elements of my paper, I would like to first acknowledge the personal friend that first drew me to this paper.

00:02:40 Speaker 2

The paper I present today is at its heart an ode to my maternal grandfather of Siamese lineage.

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This is a photograph of my grandfather, Simon.

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However, I am not in this paper attempting to trace the Siamese lineage, maybe that's for the future, but rather the echoes of the wider world.

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I did not have the honor of meeting my grandfather before his passing, but I came to know friends of his life through his personal belongings.

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I found out that during the Japanese occupation of Malaya, he was forced to work for the Japanese as a lithographer, so a Malayan printing maps of his own homeland under foreign command.

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It stays with me that his work, rooted in the reproduction of geography, has in its own way, inspired mine, rooted in the reconstruction of history.

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Perhaps fittingly then, I find myself drawn to the study of Fahab, another landscape defined by its rivers, its crossings, and place within large amounts of power and exchange.

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In his prints, he gave form to Terekorin.

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In this paper, I try to give form to memory.

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trying to trace the contours of history to find the spaces where Siam and the Malay were met.

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So now to return from the personal to the historical, to understand Siam-Pahang relationship, we need to place Lagorm at the center of the Suri.

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Lagorm, or also known as Nakasita Marang, was the southern arm of Siamese expansion, the outpost through which orders, fleets, and tribute passed.

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It embodied both Saini's ability to project influence and the limits of the influence when it encountered resilient qualities.

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The governors of Lagor were responsible for managing these delicate relationships, balancing the prestige of Bangkok with the realities of local politics.

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From early times, Pahang was a contested frontier.

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In the 15th century, it was part of Malacca's orbit, yet Saini's claims were still asserted through Lagor.

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So tribute was sometimes demanded, sometimes given, but not really consistent.

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This pattern reflected the logic of Siamese power, which operated through which historians now call the Mandela system, an arrangement of overlapping spheres of influence rather than fixed territories.

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So tribute, symbolic gestures, and occasional expeditions was enough to signal allegiance, though real control varied greatly.

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Now turning to geography, the Pahang River in its estuary was central to the storing.

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The river opened the state's rich interior to trade in gold, tin, and forest products.

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The coast, meanwhile, exposed it to external powers.

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So fleets from the door sailed south of the coast, demanding mission of Siamese overlordship.

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But these were not continuous campaigns of conquest.

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They were mostly seasonal interventions shaped by the winds of the monsoon.

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So when those winds shifted east, they returned home.

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Sorry, when the northeast winds blew, fleets moved south.

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When the winds shifted, they returned home.

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So essentially, the boundaries of science, Marita Mandela moved with the tides.

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In this rhythm, power was never really permanent.

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It was cyclical and performative to renew through each voyage and tribute mission, then allowed to fade again.

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As Anthony Reed and Oliver Walters have both argued, the sea in Southeast Asia was not a barrier, but a connected medium.

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So political authority followed the routes of ships and trade, expanding and contracting with the seasons.

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So science influence at sea extended only as far as its fleets could sail and its envoys could be received.

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A key illustration of this is the Bunga Mars missions.

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I'm pretty sure all Malaysians in the room have heard of Bunga Mars.

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These golden flowers were not carried in the land of our sea through long and risky voyages.

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The act of sending tribute was both an acknowledgement of Siamese power and a display of maritime competence.

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So Malay envoys were sailors and traders, as you can say, pretty much also diplomats.

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They carried goods alongside their symbolic offerings.

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Therefore, tribute was both political and commercial, an act of loyalty and a chance for profit.

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This meant that the Sayan Pahang relationship was not one of domination.

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It was transactional, shaped by ritual and opportunity.

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It depended on recognition, not coercion.

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So tribute and reception were performances that confirmed the shared political order, even if that order was unequal.

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But such relationships were fragile.

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So when tribute was withheld, when fugitives were sheltered, or when envoys were ignored, Lagor's governors sometimes launched punitive expeditions.

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However, even these displays of force showed science limits.

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So fleets could be turned back by storms, shallow waters, or even coordinated resistance.

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As William Landon has noted, science preference for ritualized authority over direct conquest was pragmatic.

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The symbolic power could be maintained at far less cost than military occupation.

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This arrangement also set a cultural dimension.

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Tribute and sovereignty were part of a shared political language across the region.

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The Siamese king's authority was linked to his role as , the universal monarch who upheld the cosmic order.

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So sending tribute was a way for rulers to affirm their place within a divine hierarchy.

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Refusing or delaying tribute was a form of political speech, basically a statement of autonomy within that same framework.

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Now to turn to the political mechanics of the relationship.

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Because of geography, the relationship between Siam, Ligor, and Pahang was triangular, rather than direct.

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So Siam relied on Ligor for mediate context and enforced demands, orders from Bangkok were carried south, and any expedition against Pahang began from Ligor.

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Some were successful, and most often failed, I'm being honest.

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instances where Pahang forces repel Sainese attacks, reinforcing the idea that power in this region was negotiated rather than absolute.

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Therefore, the history of Sai and Pahang must be understood as the history of negotiated suzerainty.

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Authority was claimed, recognized, and then renegotiated, often without violence, but rarely without tension.

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The book of Mars became the language through which the negotiation was conducted.

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You can say a golden ticket, a token of hierarchy and diplomacy.

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To speak of suzerainty, however, is to speak of ambiguity.

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The very concept rests on the coexistence of autonomy independence, of the independence performed through submission.

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Bahan's history within science sphere therefore mirrors the paradox, you can say, of Southeast Asian political order itself, a world of overlapping sovereignties,

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where power was not enforced through borders, but enacted through relationships.



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After the fall of Malacca to the Portuguese in 1511, this balance shifted again.

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But Malacca weakened, Simon revived its ambitions through Ligor.

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Expeditions were launched, and resistance followed.

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And as I said before, they failed miserably.

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And the pattern repeated itself over centuries.

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Advanced confrontation, withdrawal, and renegotiation.

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So by the 19th century, when British influence reached the peninsula, these older relationships still shaped with the political imagination.

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The treaties of the 19th century, as you can see here, finally froze what had once been fluid.

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The Berni Treaty of 1826 divided spheres of influence between Britain and Siam, and the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, as the borders we recognize today.

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But then, Ligor's political role had faded, but its memory remained strong in both Thai and Malay narratives.

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For Siam, it symbolized past reach, but for Pahang, it represented a history of negotiation and survival.

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So what then are we to make of all of this?

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So Siam's sovereignty of Pahang was never absolute, yet it was never really irrelevant either.

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It functioned through symbols and ceremony, though an understanding that recognition could, at times, substitute for rule.

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This arrangement allowed both Siam and Fahang to maintain dignity, so Siam as overlord and Fahang as participant.

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It reveals more broadly that sovereignty in pre-modern Southeast Asia was rarely binary.

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It was relational, enacted through ritual and diplomacy, and sustained shared understandings of hierarchy and respect.

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In recovering this history, we also recover a different way of thinking about the region, one that resisted neat divisions imposed by colonial historiography.

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Historian Sion Paha invites us to imagine a past where authority flowed, not from the possession of land, but from the recognition of status, where diplomacy was expressed through ritual rather than treaty, and by the sea, rather than separating qualities, connected them in a shared and contested world.

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And as I return to where I began, I find that these reflections bring me once more to my grandfather.

00:12:08 Speaker 2

Now, I've spoken to my mother, and there's no recollection of my grandfather ever speaking of Siam's overlordship or of the Bunga Maas fleets that once sailed across the Gulf of Siam, though it would have been pretty cool to end my presentation this way if he did.

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Yet his life,

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half-remembered, half-imagined, embodies the intertwined histories of this land.

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For me, this inquiry is both an academic pursuit and a personal act of remembrance.

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It is a way of tracing how legacies of Cizerainty, exchange, and cultural negotiation have shaped not only nations, but identities.

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To conclude, the relationship between Sy and Paham was neither one of subjection nor of isolation.

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It was a relationship enacted through tribute and tie.

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It was a relationship and through hierarchy and negotiation.

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To study it is to glimpse the complexity of Southeast Asia's political world, where the power was fluid, sovereignty relational, and history as ever, a conversation across generations.

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Thank you.

00:13:20 Speaker 1

Sylvia, thank you so much for bringing the elephant into the room.

00:13:25 Speaker 1

I'm keeping very much to our key.

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Mahang in the sea, that even more than the relations across land, it is relations across water that defines the area in which we are focused in this workshop.

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So thank you so much for your fascinating research, and your grandfather would be proud of you.