Introduction

It is often assumed that piracy in Southeast Asia – as in most other parts of the world – came to an end around the middle of the nineteenth century as a result of the resolute efforts of the expanding colonial powers and their navies. Aided by steam navigation and their increasingly superior military technology, the European naval forces were, at long last, able to suppress the large-scale piracy and other forms of maritime raiding that seemed to have plagued maritime Southeast Asia since the dawn of history. As the colonial regimes took control over most of the land in the region, the Malay, Chinese and other Asian pirates were deprived of their markets and safe havens on land. At the same time, increasingly frequent patrols by the colonial navies and other maritime forces made piratical ventures ever more difficult and precarious. The anarchy of the past gave way to the modern regime of relative security at sea, allowing for the freedom of navigation and the progress of maritime commerce, economic development and civilisation.[1]

For the advocates of colonisation the suppression of piracy was (and sometimes still is) hailed as a major achievement and a manifestation of the civilising and benevolent influence of Europe's and the United States' imperial expansion.[2] Colonisation, from this point of view, did not only mean the imposition of law and order on land, but also at sea, enabling people and goods to travel unmolested across the water. Meanwhile, the need to suppress piracy was often used as a rationale for colonial expansion. Sovereignty and the suppression of piracy were intimately linked with one another, albeit in varying and often complex and contested ways.

[1] E.g., Tarling, *Piracy and Politics*, 228; Blue, 'Piracy on the China Coast', 75; Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, 123, n. 1; Brooke, 'Piracy', 299; Glete, *Navies and Nations*, 419; Young, *Contemporary Maritime Piracy*; Reid, 'Violence at Sea', 15; Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, 3rd edn, 140.

[2] E.g., Lloyd, *Navy and the Slave Trade*, xi, calls the British Navy's suppression of piracy and the slave trade around the world in the nineteenth century '[p]erhaps the most admirable work it ever performed'. Cf. also Layton, 'Discourses of Piracy', 81; Dickinson, 'Is the Crime of Piracy Obsolete?', 334–60.

This book investigates the role of what Europeans, Americans and Asians of different nationalities called 'piracy' in the context of the modern imperial expansion in Southeast Asia. The origins of the colonial discourses and practices associated with piracy are traced to the onset of the European maritime expansion in the early modern period, but the focus of the study is on the period from around 1850 to 1920. This focus is in part motivated by the relative scarcity of studies of piracy and other forms of maritime violence in the region beyond the 1850s. Apart from some important studies of the Dutch East Indies, which deal with all or most of the nineteenth century, most full-length studies of piracy in Southeast Asia to date focus on the first half of the nineteenth century or earlier periods in history.[3]

The fact that organised piracy and maritime raiding were brought largely under control around the middle of the nineteenth century, however, does not render the study of the phenomenon obsolete for the remainder of the century or the twentieth century. For one thing, maritime raiding continued to cause problems in parts of maritime Southeast Asia and the South China Sea throughout the nineteenth century and, in some parts of the region, well into the twentieth century. For the most part the victims were Asian seafarers or coastal populations, including Chinese merchants, Malay fishermen, Vietnamese coastal populations and Japanese and other Asian pearl fishers. In addition, some of the attacks that befell Europeans or Americans attracted widespread attention, not only in the region but also in the colonial metropoles.[4]

Second, and most important for our present purposes, the suppression of piracy continued to be an important rationale for colonial expansion even though maritime raiding in itself, for the most part, had ceased to constitute a major security threat for the colonial authorities when imperial territorial expansion began to intensify in the region from the 1870s. As noted by Eric Tagliacozzo, with reference to Dutch and British writers and statesmen at the time, the threat of piracy was most immediate in the decades leading up to 1865, when it constituted a real impediment to the progress of commerce and administrative stabilisation on the peripheries of the Dutch and British colonial possessions in Southeast Asia.[5] Maritime raiding, however, did not cease in 1865, and the threat of piracy continued to be invoked throughout the rest of

[3] E.g., Antony, *Like Froth*; Tarling, *Piracy and Politics*; Graham, *Great Britain in the Indian Ocean*, esp. 362–90; Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*. Warren, *Iranun and Balangingi*, covers the second half of the nineteenth century but deals mainly with the period up until 1848, as does his earlier major study on the subject, *The Sulu Zone 1768–1898*. The most comprehensive study of piracy in the Dutch East Indies in the nineteenth century is Teitler, van Dissel and à Campo, *Zeeroof*; see also Tagliacozzo, 'Kettle on a Slow Boil'; Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades*, 108–27.

[4] E.g., à Campo, 'Patronen, processen en periodisering', 78–107; Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades*, 113–16; Eklöf Amirell, 'Pirates and Pearls', 1–24; Lessard, *Human Trafficking*.

[5] Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades*, 109.

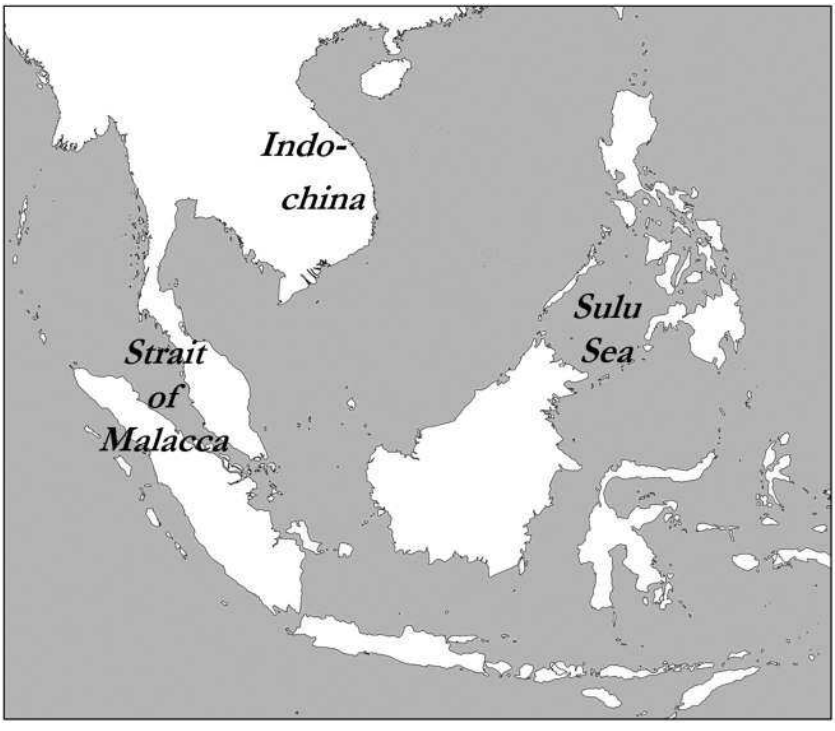
the nineteenth century and, in some cases, well into the twentieth century. The suppression of piracy – whether real, alleged or imagined – was thus an integrated part of the intensified process of colonisation in much of Southeast Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The perceived threat was not confined to maritime parts of the region but was also invoked in mainland Southeast Asia, particularly by the French in Indochina.

Against this background, piracy can be used as a lens through which the processes of imperial expansion and colonisation and the encounters between fundamentally different economic, social, political and cultural systems can be studied. In doing so the present study aims to provide fresh comparative insights into one of the most formative periods in the modern history of Southeast Asia and the world.

Piracy and Colonial Expansion in Southeast Asia

One of the first questions to ask in an investigation of piracy in Southeast Asia is what actually constituted piracy in the eyes of the actors involved. The terms *pirates* and *piracy* appear frequently in early modern and nineteenth-century sources pertaining to maritime Southeast Asia, but what were the reasons for using these and related terms to refer to the various types of illicit activities that usually – but not always – occurred at sea? A central purpose of this book is to highlight the different perceptions of 'piracy' held by contemporary Europeans, Americans and Asians of different nationalities, vocations and political convictions. To what extent and under what circumstances were piratical activities seen as troublesome, barbaric or horrific, and to what extent were they seen as trifling, legitimate or even honourable, depending on the point of view of the beholder? When and why did piracy begin (or cease) to be seen as a major security threat by, for example, the colonial authorities, the governments and general public in the colonial metropoles, Asian sovereigns and notables or merchants of different nationalities? Did the problem subside or disappear, and, if so, when and for what reasons? In what measure did the suppression of piracy, from the point of view of the colonial powers, necessitate the conquest of territory and the demise of local rulers and states? Put otherwise, were conquest and colonisation necessary in order to uphold security and the freedom of navigation, or should the invocation of piracy as a security threat or a barbaric practice be understood primarily as a fig leaf meant to conceal other, less honourable, motives for colonial expansion, such as the quest for land and natural resources, or strategic and commercial advantages?

To answer these questions, three allegedly pirate-infested areas in Southeast Asia are analysed comparatively with regard to how piracy was talked about, suppressed and used to motivate colonial expansion (Map 1). The first of these is the Sulu Sea in the southern Philippines. The region was the homeland of the



Map 1: Southeast Asia

feared Iranun and other maritime raiders, whose depredations surged in the second half of the eighteenth century and reached a climax in the first half of the following century. From around the middle of the nineteenth century, the Spanish naval forces, like the British and Dutch in other parts of maritime Southeast Asia, began to gain the upper hand in the fight against the Sulu raiders, and particularly from the 1860s a more permanent Spanish naval presence in the southern Philippines brought large-scale maritime raiding under control. Attacks on local vessels at sea and coastal raids on neighbouring islands for the purpose of capturing slaves nevertheless continued throughout the Spanish colonial period and during the first decade of the American colonial period from 1899.

The second area is the Strait of Malacca and the shipping lanes around Singapore and the Riau-Lingga Archipelago, where Malay and Chinese raiders attacked local trading and fishing boats and occasionally large cargo steamers as well. Even though British and Dutch gunboats were able in principle to control the major sea-lanes of communication from around the middle of the nineteenth century, plunder and extortion of riverine traffic, coastal raids and

violent attacks at sea, targeting mainly small local vessels, continued for the remainder of the century and, occasionally, beyond. Civil and colonial wars and political instability in the autonomous Malay states bordering the Strait seemed on several occasions to lead to outbreaks of piratical activity throughout the nineteenth century.

The third region is the northwest part of the South China Sea and the rivers of Indochina, where Chinese and Vietnamese pirates and other bandits attacked local vessels at sea and on rivers, and raided villages and settlements on the coast and inland, mainly for the purpose of abducting humans for trafficking. Maritime violence at sea and coastal raiding were largely brought under control by a series of French naval expeditions in the 1870s, but extortion and plunder on Vietnamese rivers and other forms of banditry, as well as anticolonial resistance – all of which was labelled piracy by the French colonists – continued largely unchecked until the last decade of the nineteenth century and resurfaced sporadically even in the early twentieth century.

Several similarities between the three zones provide the rationale for the comparative study. First, the natural geography of all three regions was (and still is in many places) favourable for maritime raiding, a circumstance that was frequently noted by nineteenth-century observers. The coastlines were often thickly forested, and there were many small islands, sheltered bays and hidden passages that provided maritime raiders with safe havens and suitable bases from which to launch their attacks. Many rivers were also navigable inland for vessels of shallow draft and could serve as a means of quick refuge for the perpetrators after raids at sea or on the coast. By controlling strategic points along the rivers, pirates and other brigands, often supported by local strongmen, could control riverine traffic and demand tolls from or plunder trading vessels navigating on the river. As a crossroad for Eurasian maritime commerce, moreover, Southeast Asia has throughout history been amply supplied with richly laden targets for violent attacks. Combined with the seafaring skills of many of the peoples of maritime Southeast Asia, these factors go a long way to explain why the region has figured so prominently in the global history of piracy and why it at times has been regarded as one of the most dangerous regions of the world with regard to piracy and armed robbery against ships – not only in the past, but also in recent years.[6]

Second, most of the coasts and lands of all of the three zones were still by the middle of the nineteenth century governed, at least nominally, by

[6] Teitler, 'Piracy in Southeast Asia', 67–83; Eklöf, *Pirates in Paradise*. The term 'piracy and armed robbery against ships' is used for statistical purposes by, among others, the International Maritime Bureau and the International Maritime Organization, taking into account violent attacks against vessels both on the high seas and in waters under the jurisdiction of a state; see further Beckman and Page, 'Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships', 234–55.

indigenous rulers: the Sultans of Aceh, Siak, Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Johor in the Strait of Malacca region; the kings of Vietnam and Cambodia in Indochina; and the sultan of Sulu in the Sulu Archipelago. However, European colonial powers had begun to make incursions into all of the three zones during the first half of the nineteenth century or earlier and continued to strengthen their presence after the middle of the century. European advances contributed to the destabilisation and decline of the indigenous states, although internal political developments and the repercussions of global and regional dynamics also were consequential. Regardless of the underlying reasons, the decline of the indigenous states and the ensuing disorder and lack of central control paved the way for the imposition of colonial rule in one form or another over most of the three zones between the 1850s and 1870s: by the British in the Malay Peninsula, the Dutch in northern Sumatra, the French in Indochina, and Spain and later the United States in the Sulu Archipelago. In all three zones European advances were met with armed resistance that led to protracted violent conflicts, particularly in the Sulu Archipelago and other parts of the southern Philippines, in Aceh in northern Sumatra and in Tonkin in northern Vietnam.

The third similarity concerns the preoccupation of the colonial powers with the problem of piracy. In all of the three zones, colonial officials and other agents of imperial expansion accused indigenous perpetrators, including not only obvious outlaws and renegades, but also members of the ruling families and other notables, of engaging in or sponsoring piratical activities. The precise nature and frequency of these accusations and the activities they concerned varied, however, and the question of whether the label *piracy* was appropriate in the different Southeast Asian contexts was the object of considerable contestation by nineteenth-century actors and observers. On the one hand, labelling entire nations and ethnic groups as piratical could serve to motivate European or American military intervention and colonisation. On the other hand, the opponents of colonial expansion, both in Southeast Asia and in the colonial metropoles in Europe and the United States, readily pointed to the flaws of such rhetoric and often rejected any claims that piracy justified colonial wars or the subjugation of indigenous populations. The response of the indigenous rulers of Southeast Asia, meanwhile, varied from active sponsorship of maritime raiding, often as a means of enhancing their own status, wealth and political power, to compliance and cooperation with the colonial authorities in suppressing piracy. Some Asian rulers, such as the sultan of Selangor, seemed indifferent to the problem, whereas others, such as the Vietnamese Emperor Tu Duc, turned the allegation around and accused the French of piracy.[7] The lines of

[7] Swettenham, *British Malaya*, 183; Retord, 'Lettre de Mgr Retord', 226; see Chapter 4 below.

division in the struggle to define piracy and to identify the best measures, if any, to curb it were thus not neatly drawn between colonisers and colonised, nor between a 'European' and an 'Asian' understanding of piracy and maritime raiding.

Fourth, and finally, for the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europeans and Americans who regarded piracy as a serious problem, allegations of piracy were often linked to presumably 'innate' ethnic or racial, traits of character associated with certain indigenous groups of Southeast Asia. This was particularly the case with regard to the coastal Malays throughout the archipelago and the formidable maritime raiders of the southern Philippines, such as the Tausug, Iranun and Sama, all of whom by the nineteenth century had acquired a reputation among Europeans for being more or less pirates by nature.[8]

Piracy in Southeast Asia and elsewhere was thus often held up by those in favour of colonisation as a manifestation of the presumed lack of civilisation among the nations and peoples concerned. The failure on the part of indigenous rulers to control illicit maritime violence both within their jurisdiction and emanating from their territories meant that they failed to meet the so-called standard of civilisation, which was the benchmark used by nineteenth-century European lawyers and statesmen to determine whether a state was civilised or not. Lacking the proper laws against piracy and other forms of illicit maritime violence or being unable to control non-state-sanctioned violence within or emanating from its territory disqualified a state from being recognised as a full member of the international community of nations.[9]

Such notions provided a rationale for European and American colonisers' efforts not only to subjugate but also to 'civilise' indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. The civilising mission, as put by Jürgen Osterhammel, involved the self-proclaimed right and duty of European and American colonisers to propagate and actively introduce their norms and institutions to other peoples and societies, based on the firm conviction of the inherent superiority of their own culture and society.[10] In this sense, the civilising mission enjoyed its most widespread influence during the period in focus for the present study, as the economic, political and technological superiority of the

[8] See Reber, 'The Sulu World', 2–4, for what she calls the 'innate' theory of piracy put forward by Thomas Stamford Raffles. Cf. McNair, *Perak and the Malays*, 269. This image was cemented and dispersed in Europe through popular fiction, including novels by Joseph Conrad and other British authors, as well as various purportedly true accounts of peoples and events in the Malay Archipelago, including those by James Brooke and Alfred Russell Wallace; see further Wagner, 'Piracy and the Ends of Romantic Commercialism'.

[9] Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilisation'*; Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns*; cf. Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations*.

[10] Osterhammel, 'Approaches to Global History', 14; cf. Barth and Osterhammel (eds.), *Zivilisierungsmissionen*.

West in relation to the rest of the world culminated between the mid nineteenth century and the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. The colonial discourse about and the antipiracy operations in Southeast Asia should thus be understood against the backdrop of the apparent triumph of Western modernity and civilisation at the time and the accompanying conviction on the part of many (but far from all) contemporary observers in both Western and non-Western countries that it was the manifest obligation of Europeans and Americans to civilise and to bring order, progress and prosperity to the rest of the world.[11]

Piracy in the Colonial Lens

The colonisation of Southeast Asia, including the three zones under study here, has been extensively researched ever since the nineteenth century, as have the subjects of maritime violence and the suppression of piracy in many parts of the region, particularly the Strait of Malacca and the Sulu Sea. Historians of French Indochina, by contrast, have shown less interest in the subject of piracy as such, at least with regard to modern historiography.[12]

Despite the obvious differences between the national historiographies of the countries concerned in the present context – including not only the former colonial powers Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain and the United States, but also the postcolonial states of Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam – some general features of how the history of colonisation and the suppression of piracy has been written since the nineteenth century can be discerned.

The first historical studies of the colonisation of Southeast Asia were written as the events in question were still unfolding, or shortly thereafter, often by military officers or colonial civil servants who themselves took part, in one capacity or another, in the developments concerned. Much of this colonial-era literature was, as put by Nicholas Tarling, 'cast in a heroic and imperialist mould', but there were significant exceptions.[13] Some European observers were highly critical of imperial expansion and colonialism, or at the very least of certain aspects of it, such as the use of dubious allegations of piracy in order to motivate territorial expansion or the use of indiscriminate violence against militarily inferior enemies.[14] Read critically, nineteenth-century historiography

[11] See further Eklöf Amirell, 'Civilizing Pirates'.
[12] An exception is Chérif, 'Pirates, rebelles et ordre colonial'. See also Lessard, *Human Trafficking*, who discusses piracy in colonial Vietnam with a focus on abductions and trafficking.
[13] Tarling, 'The Establishment', 73.
[14] E.g., Maxwell, *Our Malay Conquests*; 'The Expansion of the Empire', *The Economist* (13 December 1884). For examples of anti-imperialist texts from France and the United States written at the zenith of modern Western imperial expansion, see, respectively, Ageron, *L'Anticolonialisme en France*; Bresnahan, *In Time of Hesitation*.

also contains many valuable clues for understanding the actions and decisions taken by the agents of history from their point of view and for understanding the *Zeitgeist* of the age of empire in Southeast Asia.

Piracy was a prominent topic of analysis and discussion among nineteenth-century European writers, statesmen, politicians, colonial officials and naval officers in Southeast Asia. Their writings show that the term *piracy* was not, for the most part, applied unreflectedly to the Southeast Asian context but that it was often highly contested, particularly in the British colonial context. Some texts demonstrate that their authors had substantial knowledge about the historical, cultural and legal aspects of piracy and other forms of maritime violence, both in Southeast Asia and in global historical perspective. Many observers analysed the phenomenon with reference to broader temporal and cross-cultural frameworks, frequently comparing contemporary Southeast Asian piracy and maritime violence with earlier periods in classical and European history.[15] Although such analyses sometimes were imbued with Eurocentrism, stadial theory and racism, they could also be sincere efforts to understand, and not just condemn or suppress, indigenous piracy and other forms of maritime violence in Southeast Asia.

Without defending the often brutal methods used in the colonial efforts to suppress piracy, it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that, in contrast to latter-day scholars who study piracy in retrospect and from a distance, colonial officials and military officers in the field had to make decisions that had a real effect on people's lives. They also frequently had to argue for their preferred course of action, not only from legal or pragmatic perspectives, but also from a moral point of view. Writing in 1849, James Richardson Logan, a British lawyer and newspaper editor in the Straits Settlements, described the moral dilemma between taking the side of the perpetrators of maritime violence or that of their victims:

> Piracy is doubtless less reprehensible morally in those who have never been taught to look upon it as a crime, but that is no reason why every severity *necessary* for its extirpation should not be resorted to. A tiger is even less reprehensible in this point of view than a professional pirate 'to the manner born'. But we must do what is necessary to prevent injury to others from piratical habits, before we can indulge in compassion for the pirate. Our sympathy must be first with the victims and the endangered; with the murdered before the murderer, the slave before the slave dealer.[16]

Although allegations of piracy frequently were deployed for opportunistic reasons, there were strong moral arguments for acting against the large-scale and often brutal maritime raids that affected large parts of the Malay

[15] E.g., Raffles, *Memoir of the Life*, 180; Crawfurd, *Descriptive Dictionary*, 353–4; Maxwell, *Our Malay Conquests*, 5–6.
[16] Logan, 'Malay Amoks and Piracies', 466; italics in original.

Archipelago in the nineteenth century. The raids often involved the killing, abduction and robbery of innocent victims, including men, women and children, many of whom were forced to endure terrible abuse and hardship. From this perspective – and notwithstanding that other, less noble, motives frequently were decisive in the formulation of colonial policies, and that the measures adopted were at times excessively brutal – it is difficult to see the decline of maritime raiding in Southeast Asian waters from the middle of the nineteenth century as an altogether negative development.

Moral Relativism and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Compared with most historians of the colonial era, their successors in the wake of the decolonisation of Southeast Asia from the 1940s have for the most part been much less favourable in their assessments of colonial efforts to suppress piracy in the region and of colonialism in general. The use of the very terms *piracy* and *pirate* in the Southeast Asian context has been one of the main points of criticism. Among the first scholars to draw attention to the problem was J. C. van Leur, a Dutch historian and colonial official in the Dutch East Indies during the final years of the colonial period. In an article originally published in 1940, Van Leur criticised the tendency of European scholars and observers to belittle Asian civilisations and to pass value judgements on precolonial states in Southeast Asia based on condescending notions drawn from European history and society:

> Even without knowing further details, it seems to me inaccurate to dispose of such Indonesian states as Palembang, Siak, Achin, or Johore with the qualifications corrupt despotisms, pirate states, and slave states, hotbeds of political danger and decay. Inaccurate, if for no other reason, because despotism, piracy, and slavery are historical terms, and history is not written with value judgements.[17]

Building on Van Leur's and other critical views of colonialism that emerged during the interwar years, the 1950s and early 1960s saw the rise of new historiographical frameworks with regard to colonial and imperial history imbued by a more professional historical ethos and methods. Profiting from the greater availability of primary sources, particularly in the form of colonial archives, the efforts to write imperial history tended to focus on political and administrative developments in London, Paris, Madrid and other colonial metropoles. The focus was often on official policy and less on the impact of the policies and the adopted measures in the colonies. Prominent themes included political debates and policy processes and the relations between different branches of the government, the military and the colonial

[17] Van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society*, 276; originally Van Leur, 'Eenige aanteekeningen'.