# Bugis, Arab, Indian and European traders

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## The Bugis season

The Bugis traders of Sulawesi, who had made Riau prosperous in the eighteenth century, followed a different rhythm. Most of them arrived with the east wind, the *angin timur*, during a three-month period starting around late August, and left in November with the north-east monsoon.[1] Some 120 Wajo Bugis ships came to Singapore in 1825, against 90 the year before. By the 1830s around 200 prahus visited Singapore every year, each with a crew of about thirty.[2]

The Bugis cargoes illustrate the range of goods that passed through the entrepôt. From the eastern archipelago they brought birds of paradise, medicinal bark, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, trepang, birds' nests, sandalwood, gold dust, beeswax, cotton and coffee. In return they took British and American firearms and gunpowder, Malayan tin, iron blades, Chinese raw silk, earthenware, opium, Bengal cotton cloth and European woollens and linens.[3] The exchange connected the forests and reefs of eastern Indonesia with the factories of Lancashire and Bengal and with the consumers of China.

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Bugis trade in Singapore lasted far longer than the junk trade in its traditional form, though it declined in importance. In 1907 the Bugis fleet stayed away from Singapore altogether. By 1973 only twenty Bugis ships moored in Singapore for barter trade.[4] The name of the Bugis district of the city, and of the nearby Kampong Glam area assigned to them in the Town Plan of 1822, preserves the memory of their importance.

## Arab merchant houses

The first Arabs to settle in Singapore were two wealthy merchants from Palembang who arrived in 1819. The census of 1824 counted fifteen Arabs in a population of 10,683, a number that had grown to 465 by 1871.[5] Most of these families traced their origin to the Hadhramaut in southern Arabia, from which a trading diaspora had spread across the ports of the Indian Ocean and the archipelago. The Aljunied, Alkaff and Alsagoff families became the most prominent.

The Arab merchants built fortunes from textiles, spices, property and shipping.[6] Their shipping interests included the transport of pilgrims from the archipelago to Mecca, a business in which Singapore became an important staging point. Their investments in land made several families among the largest property owners of the town. Their standing in the commercial community is shown by the appointment of a member of the Aljunied family to the largely European Chamber of Commerce in 1837.[7]

The Arab houses also founded religious and charitable institutions: mosques, schools and endowments (*wakaf*) whose income supported them. The management of these endowments, several of which survive, forms an early chapter in the history of philanthropic structures in Singapore. It shows that the practice of dedicating property to long-term purposes, which Chapter III discussed in the context of Chinese ancestral trusts, was common to several communities.

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## Indian merchants and the Chulia trade

Merchants from India formed a further community. The census of 1824 recorded 756 natives of India, among them traders, boatmen, labourers and soldiers.[8] The most important commercial group were the Chulias, Tamil Muslim traders from the Coromandel coast, who had long traded across the Bay of Bengal with Aceh, Kedah, Penang and Malacca. In Singapore they dealt in textiles, spices and foodstuffs, ran boats and lighters on the river and worked as money-changers. Raffles' Town Plan assigned them a quarter upriver from the commercial centre.[9]

Indian traders connected Singapore with the textile production of southern India and Bengal, whose cotton cloth was one of the principal imports of the archipelago. Hindu merchants and financiers joined them later in the century. Among these, the Chettiars from Tamil Nadu became the most important moneylenders of the region and financed Chinese and Malay traders, planters and smallholders across Malaya and Burma.[10] Their role in the history of credit in Singapore belongs to Part B.

## European and American traders

The European merchants of Singapore were few in number but controlled the largest concentrations of capital and the links with the markets of Europe. Most were British, many of them Scots. Their houses acted as agents for manufacturers and merchants in Britain and India and handled the shipping and insurance of cargoes. American ships also called at Singapore from the 1820s, bringing cotton goods and specie and loading tin, pepper and other produce.[11] The presence of American traders confirmed the character of Singapore as a port open to all flags, since Americans had no privileged access to British territories elsewhere in Asia.

# Notes

1. National Library Board Singapore, "Bugis trade" (nlb.gov.sg, accessed September 2026): "most arriving with the angin timur (east wind) during a three-month period starting from around late August", departing in November. ↩

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2. National Library Board Singapore, “Bugis trade” (nlb.gov.sg, accessed September 2026): “Some 120 Wajo Bugis ships came to Singapore in 1825, while the previous year saw 90 ships”; by the 1830s “around 200 prahus visiting Singapore every year, each with a 30-strong crew”. ↩
3. National Library Board Singapore, “Bugis trade” (nlb.gov.sg, accessed September 2026), on the goods brought and obtained by the Bugis traders. ↩
4. National Library Board Singapore, “Bugis trade” (nlb.gov.sg, accessed September 2026): “In 1907, the Bugis fleet completely stayed away from Singapore”; by 1973 “only 20 Bugis ships had moored in Singapore for barter trade”. ↩
5. Wikipedia, “Arab Singaporeans” (accessed September 2026): two wealthy merchants from Palembang arrived in 1819; “By 1824, there were 15 Arabs out of a population of 10,683”; 465 by 1871. ↩
6. Wikipedia, “Arab Singaporeans” (accessed September 2026): “Trade in textiles, spices, property, and shipping allowed leading families to accumulate considerable fortunes.” ↩
7. Wikipedia, “Arab Singaporeans” (accessed September 2026): “a member of the Aljuneid clan was appointed as a member of the mostly European-dominated Chamber of Commerce in 1837”. ↩
8. National Library Board Singapore, “First census of Singapore is taken” (HistorySG), January 1824: 756 natives of India. ↩
9. Wikipedia, “Jackson Plan” (accessed September 2026): the Chuliah Kampong was placed further upriver for Indians. ↩
10. On the Chettiar moneylenders in Singapore and Malaya, who became important from the second half of the nineteenth century, see Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown, *Capital and Entrepreneurship in South-East Asia*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1994, and David West Rudner, *Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India: The Nattukottai Chettiars*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994. ↩

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11. On the American trade with Singapore in the 1820s and 1830s, and the US consulate established in 1836, see the history of US–Singapore relations published by the US Embassy in Singapore and C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819–2005*, chapter 2. ↩

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