ABSTRACT  Sylhet is an inland agrarian port settlement deep in the northern interior of the Bengal Delta. Upstream from the Bay of Bengal, in the vast Meghna River basin, it is nestled close to high mountains that now separate Bangladesh from India. Ibn Batuta visited Sylhet in the 1330s to meet its great local Sufi mystic, Shah Jalal, who had arrived from Turkestan and introduced Islam in the region. Shah Jalal’s fame probably reached Ibn Batuta when he was living in the Maldives, off the western coast of southern India. The Maldives are the major source for cowrie shells that formed the cheapest currency for sea trade from West Africa to Southeast Asia during the expansion of the Indian Ocean trade after 1300. Cowries formed the only currency circulating in Sylhet until the nineteenth century. The operation of the cowrie economy around Sylhet is the subject of this paper, based on research in local records of the Mughals, Bengal Nawabs, and English East India Company, whose first resident Revenue Collectors struggled to convert cowrie revenues into forms that would serve novel English imperial purposes. My paper focuses specifically on the role that cowrie exchange played in the integration of Sylhet traders, farmers, landed elites, and rulers into eighteenth century spaces of mobility embracing the Indian Ocean, Meghna River basin, tropical mountain communities, and transitions between Mughal and British empires.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER  Professor David Ludden is Professor of Political Economy and Globalization in the History Department at New York University, where he served as Chair in 2012 and will do again in 2016-19. He is on the Steering Committee of the South Asian Studies at NYU and the faculty liaison for History in the NYU Global Network. He is Professor Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania, where he served on the History faculty from 1981 to 2006. Professor Ludden was also elected as President of the Association of Asian Studies for 2002.

DATE  Wednesday, 19th August 2015
TIME  3.00pm to 4.30pm
VENUE  Malay Studies Seminar Room, AS7 #04-13, Kent Ridge Campus, NUS