

Growing up in **Katong** Part 3

By Cynthia Wee-Hoefer

The best part of life in Katong was the casual way we'd drop in to the home of a friend or relative. One always visited with a small gift – a bag of hairy, red-skinned rambutans from the garden or a jar of pickles; this was often reciprocated with something from the friend's or relative's larder.

In the afternoons, Bibik Burok ('Ugly Bibik'), her hair rolled into a shell-bun decorated with three pins, dressed in a cotton *baju panjang* and *sarong batik*, would arrive on a trishaw carrying two *bakol* (stacked trays) of *nonya kueh* (cakes) for sale. In addition to selling her delicious and varied confections – few bakeries could match the quality of her cakes – she was a supreme tell-tale, peering through her round gold-rimmed glasses and spitting her chewed-up *sireh* (betel nut leaf) as she gossiped.

In addition to the *nonya* cake seller, the roll call of street hawkers included the *yong tau foo* (stuffed bean curd) man, the *lo mai kai* (glutinous rice chicken) seller, the *aak-bak* (duck) seller who would roll the dice with you for half a duck, the *rojak* (mixed salad) man, the *chee cheong fun* (steamed rice roll) woman balancing her baskets of ingredients on a bamboo pole, and the *satay* man carrying his skewered barbecued meats and little stools for his customers to sit on.

Itinerant vendors sold everything from needles to face powder and household wares. One vendor sharpened your knives and scissors for a small fee. The children's favourite was the Indian man who sold thin wafers and spun sugar from a battered tin can with glass windows.

He also carried a crudely made board game in which a ball-bearing rolled down a chute into a numbered hole. If it landed on a certain number, you won a treat. This was an enticement to buy his sweets and a harmless form of gambling.

The bread man was a *bhai* (Indian from Bengal) who rolled up on a bicycle outfitted with a cabinet that was filled with triangular curry puffs, *sugee* (semolina) biscuits, sweet buns and breads. The Indian milkman made his rounds with a can stacked on his head; with his bare chest and white *dhoti*, shaven head and ponytail from the crown, he was a sight to behold. The other interesting Indian was the *kachang* (nut) seller with a curled moustache who balanced a large tray of fried lentils, sugarcoated peanuts and various savouries on his head.

Our street was filled with the friendly calls and honks of the congenial vendors who, despite their diverse origins, all spoke the common bazaar Malay with the delightful lilting accents that we took childish pride in mimicking. Everyone lived very modestly, some subsisting on so little that spending two or three cents on hawker fare was considered a big treat.

I spent many happy childhood days at Marine Parade, a sea-front promenade originally established as Crown Colony land. To get to the beach, we walked along a sandy lane through a small Malay *kampong* (village) and the side lane of a once-grand bungalow. The *kampong* folk were Boyanese, dark-skinned seafarers from Madura who eventually settled in this part of Katong. There were at least 10 families living in tiny palm-roofed huts that increased in number as the population grew. They drew water from a well and, quite a distance from their dwellings, had an outhouse, which, unfortunately, was very near our house! We watched from a distance the rituals of their life – the circumcision ceremonies of the young lads, the garlanded horses ridden during this grand event, the colourful wedding rites and the Hari Raya celebrations.

When one of the Boyanese womenfolk helped out with our laundry, we invariably got invited to their houses for cakes and drinks. They lived simply, but were such proud householders, decorating their house fronts with flowering shrubs, coloured lights and neat curtains.

One family stood out from the rest, that of Mak Neng, who was the matriarch. She made cakes and snacks for sale from her tidy kitchen and her son and grandchildren spoke English to us. They were relatively prosperous; the son eventually owned a car.

Marine Parade was everyone's playground. There was a weekly *joget* or dance in a bungalow with a roomy verandah next to the beach mansion of Tan Lark Sye



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(both houses now demolished). Eager Malay lads and the occasional Baba would cough up some money to have a spin with one of the beautified dancing girls doing the energetic *ronggeng*. The air was heavily scented with fragrances of 'Evening in Paris' and *bunga chempaka* (a type of magnolia) and jasmine in the ladies' coiffed hair. The fashion of the day was the body-fitting *baju* and *sarong* ensemble that the Dutch-Indonesian singer Anneke Grönloh popularised.

It was thrilling to stand on tiptoe to try to view the action as groups of daring Malay boys made audacious suggestions to the bands of giggling girls as they all strolled along the Parade. I expect that many of these flirtations ended in marriage.

The biggest event in Marine Parade's Malay community was the *mandi safar*, an act of ablution that was originally a Hindu practice, but was later considered un-Islamic and therefore abandoned. The area would be packed with picnickers; families would arrive with pots of food, seats and mats and portable radios, and they partied with great merriment, playing games and dunking in the frothing sea. It was delightful to watch young and old, the well off and the poor, put aside the daily grind for a day of pleasure. For the rest of the community, the partying crowd added to the pleasure of their day of leisure as they

jostled for seats at the outdoor Teo's Café, a two-storey bungalow where hawkers sold the best *kueh pai tee*, *laksa*, *yong tau foo* and *satay* on the island.

My days on Marine Parade drew to a close as the East Coast land reclamation projects of the late 1960s edged closer to our beloved patch of sea front. The drone of machinery and the relentless piling of sand eventually buried most beach activities. Within a decade, Singapore's first public high-rise housing estate built on reclaimed land facing the sea, Marine Parade, became a shining example of efficient land use and urban planning. Today the bustling neighbourhood has completely erased the identity of the original tree-lined promenade and elegant millionaires' mansions of my adolescence. In a way, one might say that as Singapore developed, it eliminated the carefree spirit and innocent days of our communal lives in Katong.

Cynthia Wee-Hoefer, a women's magazine and newspaper journalist most of her career, likes to think of herself as a nonya thoroughbred who promotes Peranakan culture through her writing for the Peranakan Association Singapore. An FOM member, she hopes to widen her personal approach to what being a Peranakan is about.

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