

More than Just Culture: Ramadan Bazaars in Bussorah Street and Geylang Serai

An Urban Historical Perspective

By Dr Imran bin Tajudeen



Geylang Bazaar at night, photo by the author

Two Ramadan bazaars in Singapore distinguish themselves in cultural and socio-historical significance, not just locally but also regionally. They are to be found in the two nodes of Malay cultural life in Singapore – at Bussorah Street in front of the Sultan Mosque in the old quarter of Kampong Gelam, and at Geylang Serai, a historical suburban market hub. They have continued to exist in spite of the tremendous upheavals in their respective place histories.

The annual bazaar at Geylang Serai is by far Singapore's biggest and most well known. Unlike typical Ramadan bazaars it is connected not with a mosque, but to the area's historical role as a hub. Geylang Serai was the site of the eastern terminus of Singapore's tramline in 1905, later the trolley-bus and finally the bus terminus. By the 1910s Geylang Serai was a full-fledged marketplace and by the next decade was infamous for traffic congestion and innumerable hawkers. It lies at the heart of the extensive eastern suburb of Singapore where a large number of Malays and Javanese lived; areas that include the Jalan Eunos Malay Settlement, founded in 1929, and the middle-class suburbs of Kembangan, Telok Kurau and Opera Estate.

Up to the early 1960s Ramadan shopping in Geylang Serai was served by the shops and the itinerant and seasonal traders converging around the lane called Geylang Serai and later the adjoining Eastern Trade Fair, when this was opened in 1948. The Trade Fair, demolished in 1962, made

way for the Geylang Serai HDB scheme, completed in 1964. It included a market and concourse complex called Pasar Baru (New Market). Most of the affected hawkers and itinerant traders were to be relocated there.

There are indications that the transition was not smooth. As late as 1967 Pasar Baru remained unoccupied and the old twin markets called Changi and Joo Chiat (both on the site of today's Joo Chiat Complex) were still operating. Pasar Baru complex included stalls for a wet market, a cooked food centre, a section for sundry goods and a warren of shops (the so-called Concourse). An appeal made in 1962 for an additional bazaar facility for the area's Malay traders, suggests that Pasar Baru could not accommodate the full extent of the bazaar economy it had displaced. Once it was fully occupied, however, Pasar Baru assumed the mantle of the older hub and became the focal point for Geylang Serai's annual bazaar, until the rebuilding of the market between 2005 and 2009.

Geylang Serai's marketplace role and its Ramadan bazaar remained viable despite the demolition of its houses and the resettlement of all residents in the 1970s and 1980s. People simply came back. Further, Geylang Serai received a definite boost beginning in 1977 when, as some stallholders will fondly relate, as many as 50 MARA express buses a day conveyed Malaysian shoppers from as far afield as Kelantan. Bruneian visitors also flew in to shop.

In fact the following decade witnessed a consolidation of Geylang Serai's bazaar tradition: in 1980 Ramadan hawkers were accommodated in Dewan Kampong Ubi (a sports hall) in what was advertised as the "Once-a-year Bargain Market" (*Pasar Murah Setahun Sekali*); this continued under the Sepaktakraw Federation of Singapore's (PERSES) management when the organisation moved into the hall from its Jalan Eunus clubhouse in 1985. The Singapore Tourism Board's (then STPB) annual street light-up began in 1984, accompanied by guest star performances staged as part of the Geylang Serai bazaar. Geylang Serai's Citizens' Consultative Committee (CCC) and later Kampong Ubi's CCC also began organising additional Ramadan bazaars and trade fairs in Geylang Serai, further formalising the set-up and leasing of stalls. In 1983 and 1984 Tanjong Katong and Joo Chiat Complexes were opened, with a considerable number of Malay-oriented shops whose atriums accommodated Ramadan sales. Together with the marketplace, they form Geylang Serai's shopping circuit, which continues to attract Singapore Malays from all across the island.

The now-demolished Geylang Serai Malay Village Theme Park (1989-2011) was also drawn into the bazaar circuit of Geylang Serai during its existence. By 2003, it had begun organising its own bazaar in a commodious tent that breached its metal fence and connected the Geylang Serai-Joo Chiat Complex with the Tanjong Katong Complex, creating a continuous Ramadan bazaar network. The provision for a broad promenade along Geylang Road for Ramadan bazaar stalls in URA plans for the now-empty site formalised this development.



Drinks stall selling air katira, bandung and katira, photo by Jerome Lim

The Ramadan food bazaar at Kampong Gelam along Bussorah Street and Muscat Street, or Kampong Kaji and Kampong Jemput as the communities were called, enjoyed its heydays in the 1950s and 1960s, when one could count as many as 80 stalls along the small street leading to Sultan Mosque. Kampong Kaji residents served up distinctive dishes, *kuehs* and savouries. Visitors included those who patronised the shops in adjacent Arab Street, then an unrivalled shopping street, and the numerous eateries found around Kampong Gelam.

In 1988 the Trustees of Sultan Mosque decided to endorse the Ramadan bazaar to raise funds for an annex and invited the STPB to bring the annual street light-up programme to Kampong Gelam for the fasting month. The eviction of



Street view of some of the stalls in the bazaar, photo by Jerome Lim

Bussorah Street residents and shopkeepers in 1993, however, dealt a definite blow to the continuity of the street's bazaar, which shifted to neighbouring Kandahar Street while Bussorah Street's shophouses underwent restoration until 1955, remaining devoid of street life until the early 2000s. After a decade-long hiatus, Bussorah Street's former residents resumed the Ramadan bazaar tradition in collaboration with the Malay Heritage Centre, although this took place along Kandahar and Muscat Streets, since Bussorah Street is now a pedestrian mall lined with palm trees.

Two special items on the Ramadan menu associated with mosques and in particular with Sultan Mosque, appear to have spread throughout the Straits region from Singapore: *air katira*, a beverage whose recipe originates in Southern India, and *bubur lambuk*, a special porridge. These two Ramadan specialties have been popularly attributed to Kampong Gelam and therefore indicate Singapore's centrality in the Malay Muslim culture of the Straits.

By the 1980s Geylang Serai had the upper hand with a wider variety of items, from the latest fad in Hari Raya greeting cards to decorative lights and cheap crystals. Shouts of *lelong* (bargain, auction) and the rapidly-repeated call to *pilih-pilih-pilih!* (choose, choose, choose!) created a lively atmosphere. Geylang Serai's Ramadan bazaar hosted not only full-time shopkeepers and stallholders but also large numbers of seasonal Ramadan traders, some of whom have run Ramadan stalls for several years with specific business niches and are even recognised as bazaar icons. The stall named *Bunga Kembang Malam* (Night-blooming Flowers) enlivened the bazaar atmosphere through *pantuns* or quatrains, often tongue-in-cheek, broadcast by loudspeaker to promote plastic flowers, while *Ikan Tangkap Sendiri* (Fish We've Caught Ourselves) sold a variety of *otak-otak* (fish cake) and went on to operate in other itinerant *pasar malams* (night markets) beyond Ramadan.

Bussorah Street's food bazaar, conversely, was more directly connected with a mainly Javanese urban community that took pride in its proximity to the historically significant Sultan Mosque. The implications of this simplified socio-economic and cultural distinction can be felt to this day.

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