

PASSAGE

Friends of the Museums Singapore

May / June 2021



art
history
culture
people



President's Letter

Dear Friends,

Have you received a letter or an SMS about getting vaccinated? I have never been more excited about getting an injection than I was when I received a message informing me of my eligibility to sign up for the Covid vaccine. My hope is that we all get vaccinated soon for our own protection and that of our loved ones as Singapore and the world gradually opens up.

Docent training resumed with the Kampong Gelam Heritage Trails' training starting earlier this year. Fifteen trainees participated in the programme, which ran from 22 February to 9 April. Congratulations to the training team and the new docents on successfully completing the course while following all the safe distancing guidelines. We hope to conduct docent training for several other museums this year. The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), the National Museum of Singapore (NMS) and the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) will commence theirs on 13 September 2021, while Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall will launch its session in February 2022.

Our Overall Heads of Docent Training, Aditi Kaul and Charlotte Dawson, along with the co-heads of the respective museums, shared detailed information about what to expect from the training during a Zoom Public Information Meeting (PIM) held on 23 March. The PIM was attended by about 180 people. Applications for training are now open and can be accessed via the FOM website, www.fom.sg. For those of you who may have missed the PIM but are interested in knowing more about the 2021-22 programme, a video recording of the session is also available on our website.

Singapore's museums are the places to visit with the entire family this summer. The nostalgic special exhibition at NMS titled *Home, Truly: Growing Up with Singapore, 1950s to the Present*, includes items contributed by members of the public. It explores past and present experiences, ones that express the identity and collective memory of Singaporeans. The IHC exhibition, *Sikhs in Singapore – A Story Untold*, showcases the culture and heritage of Singapore's Sikh community, while *Life in Edo/Russel Wong in Kyoto* is the special exhibition showing at the ACM. Join one of our docent-led tours and watch the artefacts and exhibitions come alive.



A new Minimum Guiding Points System has been rolled out for FOM docents to accommodate safety concerns related to in-person guiding. Rather than just the mandatory four tours a year, this year our docents will have multiple additional opportunities to get involved and contribute, ensuring they are able to maintain their active docent status. I want to thank our museum coordinators for their innovative thinking and constant support for their docent groups.

The Salome de Decker Award was established in 2005 and honours volunteers who modestly and quietly contribute towards FOM causes, making a difference without seeking any acknowledgment or return. It is my pleasure to share with you that this year's recipient of the award is Mr Sim Chong Teck. He has served quietly and tirelessly on the FOM hospitality team for many years. Chong Teck truly embodies the spirit of the Salome de Decker award.

For Muslims, Hari Raya Puasa marks the end of Ramadan, the fasting month. Hari Raya means 'the grand day of rejoicing' in Malay and is celebrated with a feast. Do not miss Khir Johari's centrefold article on Malay food. Khir commissioned many articles for this issue of *PASSAGE* magazine, one that focuses on the Malay world. Meet Khir (in the photo on the right) and some members of the *PASSAGE* team (the photo above left) led by Managing Editor Andra Leo. Do let them know what you most enjoy about the magazine by sending them an email at passage@fom.sg

My best wishes to all FOM members who celebrate Hari Raya Puasa and Vesak Day!



Garima

Garima G Lalwani
FOM President 2021



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Welcome PASSAGE

President's Letter

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On the Cover: *Nasi Ulam*, a rice dish created by combining pre-cooked plain rice with myriad finely diced herbs and foraged raw shoots. Collectively known as *ulam*, it is one of the key pillars of traditional Malay cuisine. Photo courtesy of Khir Johari.

FOM is a volunteer, non-profit society dedicated to providing volunteer guides and financial support to Singapore's museums and cultural institutions and to delivering programmes to enhance the community's knowledge of Asia's history, culture and art.

FOM is an Associate Member of the World Federation of Friends of the Museums.

FOM member privileges include free admission to NHB museums (excluding special exhibitions); access to FOM programmes including docent training, lectures, study tours, volunteer opportunities; a subscription to the FOM magazine, *PASSAGE*, and discounts at selected retail outlets, theatres and restaurants. Membership in FOM ranges from \$30 (senior) - \$120 (family) depending on category of membership.

For more information about FOM, visit our website www.fom.sg or contact the FOM office.

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A Walk Down Memory Lane

By Yusoff Abdul Latiff

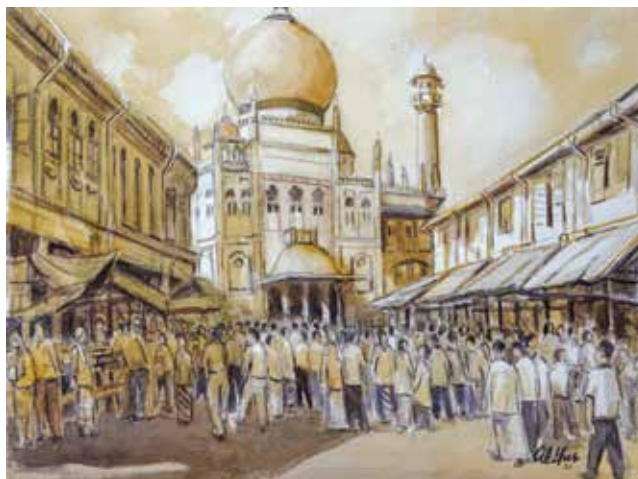


The heyday of the Malay film industry in Singapore lasted from 1947 to 1967 when Shaw Brothers established its studio at 8 Jalan Ampas while its rival, Cathay-Keris, was in East Coast Road. For their enterprise to succeed, the brothers brought in directors from India, Hong Kong and Indonesia; an experienced film crew; composers, choreographers, musicians and other expertise. Jalan Ampas became the mecca of the Malay film industry and the talents of many artists from the Malay world were nurtured here.

The studio produced more than 160 films and the multi-talented P Ramlee (born Teuku Zakaria B Teuku Putih), was responsible for 70 of them, starring in 66 and writing 200 songs. He was an actor, singer, musician, composer and later on, an award-winning producer and director. You can see him in this sketch with S Shamsudin and Aziz Sattar, who both acted in the hugely successful *Bujang Lapok* (Rusty Bachelors) series. Ramlee was responsible for award-winning films that touched on societal issues of the day in films such as *Ibu Mertua Ku* (My Mother-in-Law), *Penarek Becha* (Trishaw Rider), *Annakku Sazali* (My Son Sazali), and others.

His move to the Merdeka Film Studio in Kuala Lumpur was a failure mainly because he did not receive the same amount of support he'd been used to in Jalan Ampas. He was shunned, his talent was ignored and he died at 44. Malaysians felt remorseful and posthumously awarded him titles, named cultural centres, roads and schools after him and turned his houses into museums.

The studio at 8 Jalan Ampas is part of our cultural heritage, but for the past 50 years the premises have been left untouched. Once in a while, nostalgia hunters come in to view the limited memorabilia. Perhaps the National Heritage Board could negotiate with the owners so that this aspect of our heritage can be more conspicuously exhibited.



Old Bussorah Street was once a bustling urban village where Javanese, Bugis, Banjarese, Baweanese, Minangkabaus, Arabs, Indian Muslims, Chinese and others, lived as one big family. The houses near the Sultan Mosque were fondly referred to as “Kampong Khaji” because the head of the family was the Sheikh Haji (Haj agents), providing lodging for Haj pilgrims from Indonesia and Malaysia, before sending them off on their sea journey to Mecca.

Old Bussorah Street was also known for its food. Almost every family’s *makcik* (aunty) was an expert in one kind of Malay *kueh* (cake) or dish, whether it be *koleh-koleh* (green bean pudding), *epok-epok* (curry puff), *mee siam* (Siamese noodles), *sambal gado-gado* (salad with peanut gravy) or a range of other dishes. A well-known culinary teacher, Hajjah Asfiah Abdullah, wrote a recipe book on Kampong Gelam’s traditional dishes.

Many houses had windows that opened downward, so when unlatched, they could be used as ‘trays’. On these, the ladies displayed their offerings of *kueh* and other delicacies. During Ramadan, tables were laid out in the passageways and tents erected to accommodate the larger offerings. This was the original Ramadan Bazaar. Many houses also had *ambin* (raised platforms), occupying about half of the living room, on which the men and women sat with the food ceremoniously laid out on the *sapra* (tablecloth). The muezzin call for Maghrib prayers would signal the breaking of the fast.

Today the kampong folk have been resettled and Bussorah Street is highly commercialised with a hotchpotch of shops selling souvenirs and clothing and with many cafés. In recent times, Lebanese and Turkish restaurants as well as carpet dealers have settled in the street, which is no longer as authentic as it used to be.



When the authorities approved a plan to build a new mosque in Siglap in the 1980s, they decided to conserve the old one, which was most likely built by Tok Lasam, the founder of Kampong Siglap in the 1840s. To reinforce the conserved building, engineers dug into the foundations, but found the concrete to be so deep and strong that no further work was needed.

The mosque has a three-tiered Nusantara roof (last seen on the original Sultan Mosque and the Maarof Mosque in Clyde Street), and a kampong-style *serambi* (veranda) on three sides. The *kentong*, a traditional bell suspended from the roof and beaten with a wooden stick so it resonates, was carved out of a jackfruit tree trunk and is to the right of the veranda. It is beaten with an increasingly rising tone followed by three beats on the *bedok* (a drum) and repeated before the *azan*, the call to prayers. In the old days, when only the *bedok* was beaten, it informed villagers of a death or calamity. The mosque still maintains the original well for *wudhu* or ablutions (ritual cleansing of the hands, face and limbs, before prayers). In the old days, before coastal reclamation, the breaking waves at high tide would rush up to the lower steps of the staircase. I was there watching in fear as fire razed the new mosque a few years ago, but surprisingly the old mosque remained undamaged.

Siglap Village used to surround the mosque; today the site is a condominium. On the Jalan Sempadan side, only the graves of Tok Lasam, his wife and his chief remain in the old village cemetery. The graves have been refurbished with the two tombstones placed not vertically, but in a V shape, to resemble a buffalo’s horns to indicate that they were of Minangkabau descent.

Yusoff Abdul Latiff is a retired teacher who now indulges in painting watercolours with a focus on intricate Peranakan houses, colourful landscapes and detailed portraits.

Shine Bright Like a Banjar Diamond

By Darlene D Kasten

If you think the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) has been looking a bit more sparkly lately, you're not imagining it. It is coming from the special exhibition *Urang Banjar: Heritage and Culture of the Banjar*, the fifth and final offering in MHC's *Se-Nusantara* series focusing on individual communities that make up the greater Malay population in Singapore. The exhibition highlights one of the lesser-known Malay communities who migrated here, the Banjar.

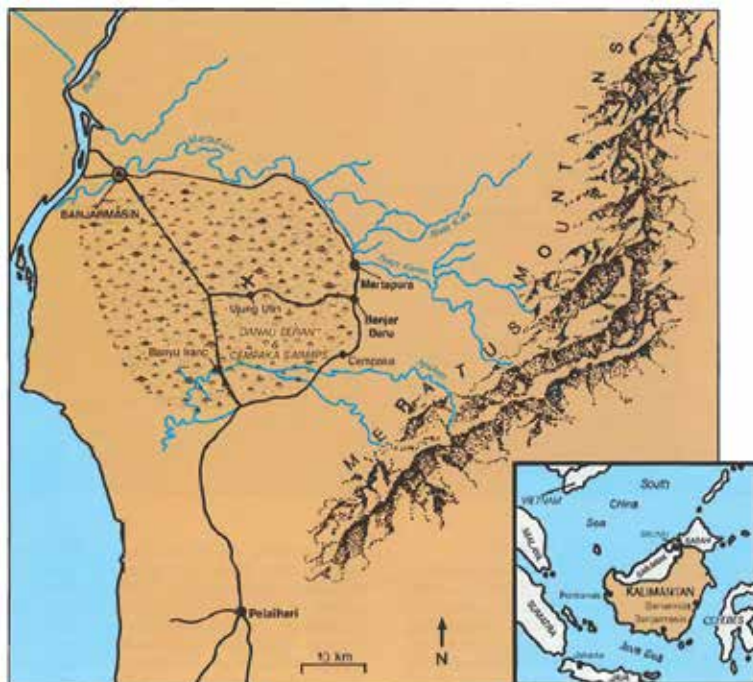
The Banjar are from South Kalimantan in Indonesian Borneo. They are known for their devout faith, connection to ancestry, social gatherings, unique cultural traditions, and diamonds. A significant portion of the exhibition is dedicated to the diamond industry in South Kalimantan and the diamond trade that brought many Banjarese to Singapore in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The diamond deposits of Kalimantan are believed to be one of the two earliest worked diamond mines in the world. India's is the oldest, and it was Hindus from India who began mining operations in the Landak region of Borneo as early as 600 CE. According to Mr Tay Thye Sun, a leading Singaporean gemologist, diamonds from the interior of Kalimantan were traded for centuries with the coastal natives for salt. Beginning in the 10th century, Song Dynasty Chinese and Malays worked the mines together, and after the arrival of the Majapahits in the 14th century, diamonds from Kalimantan were traded throughout Southeast Asia.

Trade in diamonds mined in Borneo reached an all-time high during the 200-year period beginning in the 18th century after the arrival of the Dutch. In 1738 alone, the Dutch East India Company exported approximately 300,000 Dutch guilders' worth of diamonds from Kalimantan. That is the purchasing power today of about S\$5,950,000! Records show that between 25,000 and 30,000 carats of diamonds left the Banjarmasin port from 1836 to 1880.

However, the discovery of major diamond deposits in South Africa in the late 19th century caused the decline of the Borneo diamond trade with the Dutch, and in the 20th century, diamond production dropped back to its pre-colonial level. This drop in demand may be why so many Banjarese diamond merchants, cutters and polishers migrated to Singapore at about the same time.

Today, diamonds are mined exclusively in the Cempaka region near Martapura, South Kalimantan, about 36 km southeast of the provincial capital of Banjarmasin. Martapura, formerly ruled by the Hindu Majapahit empire, is Sanskrit for City of Mortals, but the Malays call it *Kota Intan* or Diamond City.



Artwork by Ian Newell, from *The Diamond Deposits of Kalimantan, Borneo* by L K Spencer, S David Dikinis, Peter C Keller, and Robert E Kane, *Gems & Gemology*, Summer 1988, p 69

Diamonds are found in kimberlite pipes formed deep within the earth's mantle. Such pipes exist near the headwaters of rivers at the base of the Meratus Mountains east of Martapura. Eroded pipes allow the kimberlite rocks to be carried down rivers to the swampy Cempaka region, creating a literal field of diamonds.

Traditional alluvial diamond mining techniques are still used in Cempaka. Local miners create quarries below the swamp-surface and pump out the gem-bearing gravel into a stream bank. Another team of miners manually washes off the silt, larger rocks and lighter gravel to create a 'concentrate', which in turn is divided among the panners who squat waist-deep in the stream, swishing the concentrate around in wooden pans, searching for a glint of light that indicates a diamond.

Along with the material draw, there is another non-economic reason that encourages prospecting and mining. Every miner hopes to find a large diamond that can be sold for a bonanza amount, allowing the finder to make a pilgrimage to Mecca and thus become a haji. In this strongly Muslim region, this will establish him as a man of religious stature and influence.

South Kalimantan diamonds are classified according to colour: petrous diamonds (yellow and of low quality), black (believed to possess mystical powers), white, and pink (the best sparkling with the colours of a rainbow). From the mines in Cempaka, the diamonds are sold to buyers in Martapura where the stones are either cut and polished, or sold in their raw form to foreign buyers.

Borneo diamonds have a distinct look; they are unusually hard and are hand-cleaved, so the end result appears rough. They are rose cut, meaning simple faceting worked down from a central peak with a flat base. Rose cut diamonds are not as sparkly as those that are brilliant cut with facets both



The Banjarmasin Diamond, c. 1875, Rijksmuseum, Netherlands

above and below their centre. But brilliant cut diamonds are not esteemed by Borneo diamond cutters who are reluctant to sacrifice large stones in the pursuit of additional sparkle. The European desire to match stones in jewellery is not considered important either. Here, the individuality of each stone is greatly appreciated and even uncut diamonds of a suitable size and shape are thought to be very auspicious and are set into jewellery in their natural state.

The cutters and polishers largely work as independents. The Martapura diamond factory for instance, rents space and equipment to individual craftsmen who process diamonds for sale. This independence would have served the Banjar diamond industry well after the market decline at the turn of the 20th century when many Banjarese left for the Straits Settlement of Singapore, attracted by the promise of growth and free trade.

According to the National Heritage Board, many Banjarese diamond traders and goldsmiths settled in the area around Baghdad Street in Kampong Gelam, once known as Kampong Intan or Diamond Village. On display at the MHC are gem and diamond-weighting tools, on loan from the family of Haji Ahmad Jamal whose father, Haji Mohd Hassan, made the trip from Martapura to Singapore in the 1920s. He worked nearby as a diamond trader, cutter and polisher in his shophouse on Jalan Pisang in the former Banjarese Kampong Selong.

In the 1950s, Haji Jamal inherited the business and began to design diamond jewellery. Among his clients were prominent Chinese Peranakans who would have appreciated the *kerongsang* and other jewellery on display at the MHC, including one particularly large, resplendent paisley-shaped brooch with a floral and bat design, accompanied by a smaller insect-shaped brooch and a simple circlet with another bat. In China, the bat symbolizes good fortune, and the insect resembles a June bug beetle or a cicada, seen as a symbol of rebirth and immortality.

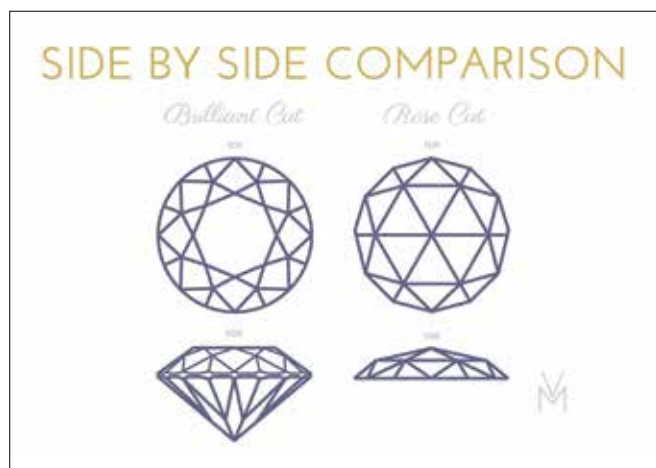


Illustration of a rose-cut and brilliant-cut diamond, from <https://www.valeriemadison.com/blogs/the-studio-blog/what-is-a-rose-cut-diamond-a-guide-to-brilliant-cut-vs-rose-cut-diamonds>

You can't miss the sparkle from the 40-carat Banjarmasin diamond replica on display, reproduced in partnership with the Rijksmuseum by Singapore's Gem Museum using South African white quartz. The original diamond was a 77-carat uncut stone in the shape of an octahedron and it has an interesting provenance. It was documented in an 18th century Dutch travel journal whose author witnessed Sultan



Still photo of a diamond miner, from a video produced by the Malay Heritage Centre

Panenleka Adam of Banjarmasin wearing this hefty raw stone set in gold and hanging from a simple string around his neck. After the sultan's death in 1859, war erupted and ultimately led to the Dutch dissolving the centuries-old sultanate. The Dutch seized the sultan's royal regalia and treasury, including the diamond, which curiously weighed in at 70 karats by the time it arrived in Rotterdam in 1862.



Kerongsang set featuring a June bug, bat and floral motifs, late 19th-early 20th centuries, Singapore and Malacca. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board

Despite the Banjarmasin diamond's remarkable size, no Dutch museum wanted it. Even after it was later recut into a 40-carat square cut gem, it still found no buyers and finally made its way into the vaults of the Rijksmuseum. On display in Amsterdam since 2001 and marked as "war booty", a re-established Banjar Sultanate has lately called for the Dutch government to return it.

Note: The exhibition runs through 25 July 2021. If you have time, follow the sparkle over to the Gem Museum in Kandahar Street afterwards to learn more about diamonds and other gemstones.

Darlene D Kasten is an FOM docent at the Malay Heritage Centre, the Asian Civilisations Museum and STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery, and like a magpie, she is attracted to shiny objects.

The Tradition of Green in Islam

By Margaret White

Upon them will be green garments of fine silk and heavy brocade and they will be adorned with bracelets of silver: and their Lord will give them to drink of a Water Pure and Holy (Qur'an, Sura 76, verse 21)

Green is perhaps the colour most strongly associated with Islam. Historically, green is said to have been the favourite colour of Islam's founder, the Prophet Muhammad (ca 570-632), who is frequently depicted wearing a green cloak and turban. It is also said that when Allah's Apostle died, he was covered with a *Hibra-Burd*, a square, green garment. Muhammad invoked this connection when he wrote about a folkloric figure called al-Khidr (the Green One) who symbolized immortality. An examination of the use of the colour, reveals differences across the Islamic world over many centuries. Art in the first centuries of the Islamic period, saw green derive its identity from a synthesis of sources, but took on unique forms and functions in civil and religious architecture, paintings, ceramics and textiles.

During the First Crusade (from 1096-1099) Islamic soldiers wore green to identify themselves. In the 12th century, green was chosen by the Shi'ite Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171) as its dynastic colour to distinguish it from the black used by the Sunni Abbasids. After the Fatimids, green remained particularly popular in Shi'ite iconography. For centuries, only the *Sayyads*, or descendants of Muhammad, were permitted to wear green turbans, anyone else doing so was punished. Green is used for the binding of Qur'ans, prayer rugs and the domes of mosques. It is also associated with mystic Sufi lore. Today, green is used in several national flags as a symbol of Islam, including Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Green is venerated in Islam as a symbol of nature and life, of regeneration, fertility and rebirth. In the Qur'an, a garden epitomises the ideal of an earthly paradise and is described as a walled garden filled with cypress trees and flowers, full of lush vegetation. The faithful are promised "a paradise containing four gardens beneath which waters flow" (Qur'an 44: 51-55). The walled *Chahar-Bagh* (four parts) style of garden, for example, originated in Persia and was used throughout the Persianised Islamic world, including Iran and India.

The garden was integral to the house, while great palace gardens had kiosks or pavilions in the centre where rulers held court, talked and played (Tiley 1991: 26). The green, cooling, shaded gardens across the Islamic world were very important and an especially potent contrast to the searing heat of the arid, desert environment.

Persian miniature painting became a significant genre in the 13th century, reaching a high point in the 15th and 16th centuries. It was the dominant influence on other Islamic miniature painting traditions principally among



Green dome inside the Sultan Hassan Mosque, 12th century, Cairo, Egypt

the Ottomans in Turkey and the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent. Many green pigments used for painting were obtained from minerals, with malachite being the oldest known, producing a bright, grassy green. Sometimes, green earth pigments were used while other greens were chemically manufactured, the most common being emerald green verdigris or copper acetate (Chakraverty 1996: 21).

Persian artists used green pigment in the court scenes of their miniature paintings to depict lush gardens and to paint halos around the heads of particularly important secular or spiritual men. Green appeared extensively in the more risqué scenes, often set in green bowers – places where normal rules did not apply (Finlay 2002: 302). The Mughals also obtained the green colour from powdered malachite or verdigris and sometimes by mixing yellow orpiment (arsenic sulphide mineral) with indigo or lapis lazuli. Green halos were also used by late 17th and early 18th century Mughal artists, using verdigris.

Textiles were among the most valued of the Islamic arts, especially in early times since they were portable (tents, bedding, storage) and accessible to fast-moving, mounted nomadic tribesmen (Gillow 2010:11). The main source of textile dyes was from plants, fruit and to a lesser extent, insects. Until the mid-19th century, the only way to obtain dyestuffs was to laboriously squeeze, crush or boil the raw materials. Transferring the brilliant colours and the multitude of shades from plants to fabrics was not simple. It is likely that an enormous range of plants was tried over time; very few provided dyes that did not fade rapidly or wash out easily (Finlay 2002: 305). However, green could be created by double dyeing with blue and yellow dyes as practised in Central Asia, which could be one explanation for why large areas of green are rarely found in old handwoven textiles (Close 1990:38).

Carpet and garden designs are closely related arts in

Persian history, some predating Islam. Flowers, plants and stylised tree pattern rugs often resemble a field of flowers, bringing the outdoors into the garden pavilion and home. These designs were heavily influenced by the paintings of renowned Persian miniaturist Bihzad (c.1450-1535) who used Sufi symbolism and symbolic colour to convey meaning. He was famous for the technical innovation of representing scenes in plan view, which is how many carpets were drawn (ibid: 20). So-called 'garden carpet' designs included fish in channels, ducks in pools and flower beds in-between the channels, surrounded by trees and shrubs – another reminder of the Islamic earthly paradise.

In Islamic architecture, artisans adopted motifs from antiquity and placed them in new cultural contexts influenced by location and historical period. Glazed ceramic tiles clad the interiors and exteriors of palaces, mosques, madrassas, minarets and mausoleums. There was overwhelming visual importance given to plant motifs – flowing green arabesque vines and tendrils. The use of abstract, geometric tile patterns evoked visual harmony, an important spiritual feature of Islamic art.

The copper green used on early West Asian ceramics – generally copper oxide in lead glaze – resulted in an intense, almost bottle or even emerald green (Degeorge 2001:17). From 1770, a vast palette of brilliant greens and yellows was introduced through a combination of iron oxide and chromium oxide (Chemistry of Chromium). Some wonderful examples of green tiles used in Islamic architecture include: the Green Palace near the mosque built by the Umayyads (661-750) in Damascus, Syria; the wall of the Lahore Fort, Pakistan (1631), where one can savour the vibrant greens/blues and yellows of its vast mosaic of cut tile panels; and in Cairo, Egypt at the 12th century Sultan Hassan Mosque where one may gaze up at the wonderful cupola dominated by shades of green.

In Europe, a new generation of synthetic greens was developed from the middle of the 19th century when vivid cobalt-green, viridian and emerald green appeared. It seemed that the problem of producing a good, commercially fast green had been solved. A green craze followed, with this colour used on everything from dresses, hats, wallpaper and carpets to paint. However, this was an especially hazardous venture as the use of copper arsenite in its manufacture emitted toxic fumes for both factory workers and the people who wore the deadly colour (Matthews David 2015: 83).

Despite the declared dangers, synthetic dyes, including bright greens, headed straight from European laboratories to Asia around the 1860-1870s. Although more expensive, these dyes were easier to manufacture and gave reliable results.



'Tree of life' design Tabriz, Iran. Rug, ca 1952



Contemporary glazed plate with geometric pattern, Uzbekistan

These early synthetic colours have since been displaced by cheaper dyes, but you can still see examples of the garish greens that were used in a limited way in West Asian carpets and textiles of the late 19th century, replacing natural dyes. Although the use of synthetic greens has changed the way green is used aesthetically in more recent Islamic arts, the central symbolism and appeal of its use in the Islamic world remain the same and today we can appreciate this beautiful and varied green legacy.

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Margaret White has had an interest in the arts of West Asia since her first visit to Uzbekistan 20 years ago. She serves on TAASA's Committee of Management and is convenor of the NSW Textile and Ceramic Study Groups. This article was first published in the TAASA Review Vol 28 No 1 March 2019

All photos by the author

Songket Sarongs from Sambas

By Noor Azlina Yunus

Sambas is one of twelve regencies in West Kalimantan, one of five Indonesian provinces in Kalimantan that comprise 70 percent of the large island of Borneo (Fig 1). Located in the northwestern part of West Kalimantan, Sambas shares a land border with the Malaysian state of Sarawak. It is an area where there has been an extensive weaving tradition, locally known as *bannang ammas* (gold thread), stemming from its location as an early trade port and sultanate.

Much has been written about the rich inventory of textiles in what is referred to, among other terms, as the Malay Archipelago. Foremost among them is gold-threaded *songket*, an opulent and prestigious supplementary weft-woven ceremonial textile in which additional metallic gold or sometimes silver threads are inserted between silk weft threads as they are woven into warp threads fixed to the loom. Intricate *songket* patterns may cover the entire surface of a cloth, be confined to panels and borders, or form an arrangement of small motifs on a plain-woven foundation.

It is generally agreed that supplementary metallic weft weaving is of foreign origin and took root in those parts of the Malay Archipelago lying at the heart of a vast network of maritime and overland trading routes between Muslim north India, China, mainland Southeast Asia (Laos, Cambodia and northern Thailand) and coastal entrepôts throughout the Malay Archipelago.

Significant early areas included Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra, the east coast of Sumatra, the Riau archipelago, the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, Brunei and the west coast of Kalimantan. As the *songket* weavers were, and still are, predominantly Muslim Malays, it is believed that the technique was brought from India to Southeast Asia by Indian or Arab merchants at the start of the Islamicisation of the Malay Archipelago. These coastal and riverine settlements were also the sites of Muslim Malay sultanates, which engaged in mutual trade and gift exchange and were the primary patrons of *songket* weaving. They also shared the same basic components of court dress for males and females – long rectangular waist wraps, tubular sarongs, shawls, shoulder cloths and head ties – worn for ceremonial and festive occasions and used in ritual exchange. Given the complexity of the dyeing and weaving processes and the cost of obtaining the necessary silk and metallic threads, the cloths were formerly made and worn by women of economic privilege and high status.

Textiles from abroad, particularly from India, were important commodities in the maritime trade. Foreign designs and motifs were absorbed and adapted according to the tastes of local weavers, resulting in fabrics characteristic of their region. The obvious similarities in the *songket* textiles from the coastal areas suggest that local seafarers and traders also carried techniques and ideas between coastal



Fig 1. Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia), Brunei and Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo)



Fig 2. (Detail) An unpretentious plain-dyed silk sarong with a supplementary weft head panel (kepala) comprising rows of the mawar motif. Collection of the author

settlements. Cross-migration and intermarriage among royal Malay families also played a part in establishing common elements among *songket* sarongs of the region.

While Sumatran *songket* is regarded as the pinnacle of the weavers' art because of its complex supplementary weft weaving techniques and elaborate design and motif repertoire, less glamorous *songket* has received relatively little attention, including the sarongs from the small coastal settlement of Sambas. Yet the design structure of sarongs across the region, regardless of provenance, has remained largely consistent, comprising a decorative head panel (kepala) flanked by the main body (badan), with the ends stitched to form a tube or left free in the form of a long cloth. Borders of various widths and complexity demarcate the main elements. Likewise, some of the major design formats and motifs have remained regionally consistent, in particular the two rows of opposing triangular motifs, known as bamboo shoots (*pucuk rebung* or *tumpal*; *suji bilang* in Sambas), arranged on the head panel. Another is the diagonal lattice on the badan, each diamond-shaped centre filled with a



Fig 3. A two-tone warp-ikat badan featuring large mawar motifs, the kepala bearing similarly linked supplementary weft-woven mawar motifs in gold thread. Collection of the author



Fig 4. Typical of much of Sambas weaving, this sarong features the ubiquitous opposing triangular pattern on the *kepala* and scattered songket weaving on the *badan*, as well as the localized wavy centipede-like motif and the narrow rows of plain warp ikat. Collection of the author

stylised motif. But despite the many shared, centuries-old ethnic, cultural and historical experiences that have influenced both the form and use of their textiles, there are variations in the *songket* textiles of each region, such as the motifs employed inside the opposing triangles on the *kepala* as well as on the multiple borders.

Although the earliest *songket* sarongs woven in Sambas were purportedly once indistinguishable from those made in Riau across the Java Sea and are very similar to sarongs made in Brunei, with whom Sambas had close historical ties, the complexity of Sambas *songket* sarongs has diminished over the years as demand has risen for more affordable pieces. Single-colour sarongs that were once entirely covered with gold thread patterning on the *badan*, *kepala* and borders, have given way to less densely decorated cloths, as the mid-20th century sarongs here reveal.

The plainest of Sambas sarongs lack decorative borders but have a *kepala* worked in metallic patterning (Fig 2). Here the single-colour silk *badan* is offset by rows of *songket* in the *mawar* (rose) motif lined close together on the *kepala*. It is believed that the *mawar* motif is based on the Chinese magnolia commonly found in Chinese embroidery, reflective of Chinese immigration and influence in multicultural Sambas society.

Slightly more elaborate sarongs combine warp ikat on the *badan* with a gold- or silver-threaded panel (Fig 3). The warp ikat is comparatively basic. This sarong features rows of the *mawar* motif in cerise warp ikat, worked diagonally across a pink ground on the *badan*, alternating with tiny interwoven silver motifs and diagonal rows of linked gold thread roses on a deeper pink *kepala*. The *badan* on other warp-ikat Sambas sarongs are often tied in a simple rhomboid- or lozenge-shaped trellis with small metallic highlights woven into each bay.

More elaborate sarongs typically have widely spaced half-drop repeats of small gold *songket* motifs scattered across the *badan*, and a *kepala* pattern comprising two rows of opposing triangles, the rhomboid spaces between each pair filled with rows of small floral motifs and here, sequins (Fig 4). The triangles on such sarongs have fairly rigid edges and internal

decoration. On more elaborate sarongs, the triangles are filled with dense feathery motifs (see Fig 5). A striking feature of many of these Sambas sarongs is the bold, wavy, centipede-like motif enclosing the *kepala* and along the top and bottom borders. The plain narrow bands at the top and bottom are another feature, perhaps they are a cheaper alternative to expensive gold threads or maybe a preferred local design detail, created by dyeing certain warp threads in a different colour. Small metal rounds enclosing mirrors are couched onto this *badan*.

A fourth, even more complex category are the sarongs that combine the zone-dyeing of threads before weaving, to create cloths with a plain-coloured *badan* and more intricately patterned borders and *kepala* in a different, often quite contrasting colour (Fig 5). Although zone-dyeing is not unique to Sambas sarongs, it appears to be a favoured feature. To create such zone-dyed cloths, the unwoven warp and weft threads are carefully measured out on a frame and then tightly tied into a bundle to separate what will form the *badan* from those that will form the borders and *kepala*. The *badan* threads are then immersed in a dye bath, after which the *kepala* and border threads are dyed in another colour. When the two sets of threads are dry, the zone-dyed warp threads are arranged on the loom and the zone-dyed weft threads and supplementary gold threads are woven in. The measuring and tying of the threads for the zones requires great skill, and if not done carefully will lead to colours 'bleeding' into adjacent zones, as in this example.



Fig 5. A zone-dyed sarong featuring a densely worked *kepala* of highly decorative triangles bordered by scrolling motifs and the centipede-like wave over a purple ground, juxtaposed against a pale green *badan* with widely spaced half-drop repeats of a gold *songket* motif. Photo courtesy of Sim Tan

Sambas weavers continue to weave sarongs for local use but also for export to other countries in Southeast Asia, including the Malay Peninsula and parts of Indonesia. However, Brunei is still the most important consumer of Sambas *songket*. In addition to sarongs, matching *songket* shawls are woven, and *songket* is used as decorative trimming on men's shirt collars and on the traditional Muslim hat (*songkok*).

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Nusantaran Currencies Across the Centuries

By Shukery Idrus

Currencies play an important role in the history of trade and commerce of a country. Their use, however, is not only to facilitate its economy but can also be a repository and record of a country's past. Maritime Southeast Asia, Nusantara, is not short of histories with polities that derived much of their wealth and power from international and regional trade through their entrepôts. Their currencies mirror their heritage, combining internal and external influences when developing a general and uniform system of currency. Early coins come in many forms, but across the region most of them closely resemble one another – globular and dice-like, or round with a cup-shaped flan, or less commonly, types such as tin ingots that are moulded into pagoda and animal shapes.

Javanese Weight System as a Base for Currency

The most common form of currency used in Nusantara was gold and silver coin ingots. Some of the earliest are found in Java, centred around the Medang Kingdom, dating back to the late eighth century, with those minted in the ninth and 10th bearing the character *ta*. The general consensus is that this is a



Javanese silver maa with sandalwood design. Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, collection 1997-03908

denomination of the monetary unit called *māṣa*. This system, called “the *māṣa* system” by modern scholars, consisted of gold and silver being measured in *tahils*, which weighed 38 grams each and were divided into 16 *māṣa* of 2.4 grams. This was then subdivided into four *kupang* of 0.6 grams each. Terms such as *māṣa* were borrowed from India and adapted into the local weights system for indigenous currency. This demonstrated the general understanding of the need for a standard on which to peg the currency.

Regional Adaptation

As change occurred through the centuries, the use of precious metals for currency became widespread. Gold ingots called *piloncitos* were used in the pre-colonial Philippines and were equivalent to the Javanese *māṣa* in weight. Such regional similarities and adaptations led to the incorporation of Javanese weight terms into the local lexicon. This was evident in Malay currency, when it was



Javanese gold coin with Devanagari script. Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, 1997-03992



Aceh dinar mas from the reign of Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah al-Qahar (r 1537 – 1573), bearing the words “Sultan Ala’a-Din bin Ali Malik Az Zahir” (left) and “Al Sultan Al Adil” (right). Photo by the author. Personal collection

adapted to Islamic polities. In the 13th century, the Sultanate of Samudra-Pasai and later Aceh in North Sumatra, issued *dinar mas* (from *māṣa*) with Arabic inscriptions on the obverse side bearing the names of the rulers in whose reign the coins were struck. The reverse of early minted *dinar mas* often bore the inscription *Al Sultan Al Adil*, meaning ‘The Just Sultan’, the ruler’s honorific title. Compared to their Javanese counterparts, the weights of these *dinar mas* were reduced from the standard by circa 0.58 to 0.62 grams. This, however, created confusion for British officials based in Fort

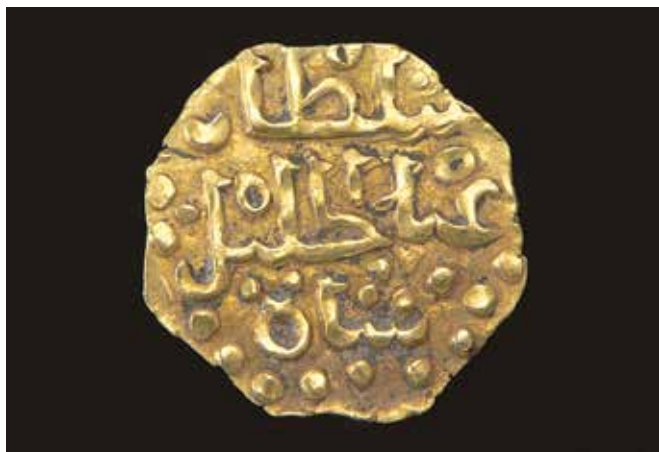


A heavily eroded Melaka tin pitis of Sultan Muzaffar Shah. Photo by the author. Personal collection.

Malborough and Bencoolen with regard to another Javanese currency unit called *kupang*. It had the same weight (0.6 grams) and so they erroneously called the *dinar mas*, “*coupang*” or “*kupang*”. Aceh minted its own denominations, made of tin called *keping* and *pitis*. These terms were in their turn, adapted from the Majapahit kingdom during their hegemony in Java. They popularised the use of Chinese *pilis* in the 14th century to replace the *māṣa* system.

Malay Peninsula Use

Melaka had predominance over its neighbouring kingdoms and minted its own forms of currency with similar denominations. Although transactions in *dinar mas* and Chinese copper *pilis* were accepted, tin *pitis* coins were struck in the name of Melaka’s rulers and weighed about 2.7



Johor gold mas of Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah III (r 1623 – 1677) found during the 2015 Empress Place excavation. Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

grams, similar to one *māṣa*. All but Sultan Muzzafar Shah's (r 1446 – 1456) and Sultan Mansur Shah's (r 1456 – 1477) coins have exactly the same inscriptions on the reverse as did Aceh's *dinar mas*. The reverse of Sultans Muzaffar Shah and Mansur Shah's half-tin *pitis*, bears the inscription *Nasir al Dunia Wa'l Din*, which means 'Helper of the World and of the Religion'. Such *pitis* were cast in tree-shaped brass moulds with the coin casts branching off from the central channel. Molten metal filled the casts during production and the coins were broken off when the metal cooled. This method of coin production existed in China and was called *qián shù*, meaning money tree, and was introduced to the region during the Nanhai trade.

After the fall of Melaka, the successor state Johor began to strike its own *dinar mas* and *kupang*, weighing around 2.4 grams and 0.62 grams respectively. The minting of gold coinage stopped during the reign of Sultan Sulaiman Shah (r 1722 – 1760) when the administrative capital of Johor was moved near the old fort of Kota Kara in Sungai Carang, Bintan, Riau. Most of the coins from this period were octagonal in shape and were impressed with the honorific title of *Khalifatul Mu'minin* or 'Ruler of the Faithful'.

Unconventional Forms of Currency

Apart from the *pitis*, commercial tin blocks were in circulation, a fact recorded by foreign visitors. The earliest records of their use as currency were made by Ma Huan during his voyage with Admiral Zheng He to Melaka in 1413. After a period of turmoil and instability over the following 200 years, Manuel Godinho de Erédia also wrote about the *calim* that were being produced locally and exchanged for cloths from the Coromandel Coast and Bengal. An English merchant called Thomas Bowrey wrote in 1675 about tin blocks used as local currency in Ujung Salang, known then as Junk Ceylon, today as Phuket, in Thailand. These writings were the earliest mention of tin blocks, which were understood to be *tampang* – locally smelted tin ingots used as a form of currency. These tin ingots were shaped like pagodas and pyramids, with the smaller, truncated version, given a sugar-loaf shape and used in the Malay Peninsula up to 1893.

Another type of tin ingot currency was shaped into rudimentary animal forms and can be found throughout the Malay Peninsula – the most common were cockerels, fish, tortoises and elephants. Several hypotheses have been proposed regarding the true purpose and use of such money. There are two widely accepted explanations; it was used either as a magical ingot with talismanic properties

during ceremonies to appease the spirits, especially during the opening of a new tin mine, or as a measure for weight standards to countercheck the precision of *tampang* weights during transactions.

Kedah Rial and Reale

In the northern Malay Peninsula state of Kedah, *duit ayam* (cockerel money) was used as currency during the reign of Sultan Muhammad Jiwa (r 1710 to 1773) and remained in circulation until the late 1800s. The tin of the *duit ayam* was shaped like a fighting cockerel perched on a series of tin rings, which could be broken off individually to use as smaller denominations. Each had its own value in relation to the Singapore merchant tokens and to the Spanish Eight Reales of the late 1850s. The Spanish Eight Reales played a role in developing Kedah's own currency. Its widespread use resulted in its value being pegged to the Spanish currency with Kedah minting its currency and pegging it to a local *rial* denomination.



Duit Ayam from Kedah. Image courtesy of NumisBids, Stephen Album Rare Coins

Thus, the major legacy of interactions among states and polities throughout the centuries was the many forms of currency that were adapted and localised to mirror internal and external influences. These various currency types were important for economic development and today, as we study this intertwined history, we can understand the roots of the many terms adopted and how such usage came into being.

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Caps, Caliphs and Cannons

Connecting Aceh to West Asia and Ottoman Turkey

By Maddie Tham



An Achinese Kupiah Meukeutob circa 20th century, courtesy of the Malay Heritage Centre

The *kupiah meukeutob* (also spelt *meukeutop*), is a distinctively patterned Achinese cap marked by bands of geometric motifs and the symbolic colours of red, yellow, green and black. There are various interpretations regarding the colours and motifs on the *kupiah meukeutob*, but according to one source, red stands for courage and strength of purpose, yellow for kings/nobles, green for religion (Islam) and black for the populace (Toshiyuki, 2016).

Various origin theories link this hat to West Asia or India – one being that the Achinese *kupiah* was inspired by headgear worn by Indian Muslim traders known as *Topi Rumi*. The word *topi* is an Indian subcontinent term for cap. In fairly modern use, the Malay word *Rumi* refers to Roman, as in the Roman alphabet used for Malay script. However, *Rumi* in older context translates to an adjective for things related to Ottoman Turkey. This geographical leap is somewhat explained by the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 CE, which made them the new Turkic masters of the Eastern Roman Empire. Foreign influence origin stories of the *kupiah meukeutob*, have as their context Aceh's past and the international pan-Muslim trade network that eventually connected this North Sumatran kingdom in the 16th century to the corridors of power in Istanbul.

The Ottoman Caliphate

In 1517 CE, following their victory over the Mamluk dynasty, the Ottomans gained control of Egypt as well as Islam's holy cities, Mecca and Medina. Besides assuming Islamic religious leadership as the Caliphs of Mecca, a succession of Ottoman sultans adopted a protective role over Muslim commerce. This would eventually result in the Ottomans' involvement with Islamic polities in Southeast Asia. The catalyst for this was the Portuguese bid for control of the lucrative spice trade, traditionally dominated by Muslim merchants. From bases in India and the Arabian

Peninsula, the Portuguese managed to disrupt traditional supplies of Indian pepper to Egypt. At the same time, the Portuguese made inroads into the Southeast Asian end of the spice network. After the Portuguese captured Melaka in 1511 and Sumatran pepper ports in the 1520s, alternative ports and spice supplies were sought by Muslim traders operating in the Straits of Malacca.

The Alternative Pepper Route from Aceh

These merchants found a worthy ally in the Aceh Sultanate's founder, Ali Mughayat Shah, (1496-1530). By 1524, Aceh had recaptured the Sumatran pepper ports of Samudra-Pasai and Pidie from Portuguese control. Middle Eastern and Indian Muslim traders increasingly rerouted their trade to Aceh-controlled ports. By 1530 Aceh was established as the eastern stop of an alternative Islamic Spice Route that reached the Ottoman ports in the Red Sea with stops in the Maldives or Calicut, India (Reid 2014). Significantly, through this route, Banda Aceh, the capital of the Aceh Sultanate, also developed into a key transit point for Southeast Asian Muslim pilgrims travelling to the Hejaz. So much so that the city of Banda Aceh was dubbed *Serambi Mekkah*, or the Porch of Mecca.

Aceh as an Empire

Besides pepper, Aceh offered other valuable trade goods such as camphor and benzoin, which were obtained by Aceh's conquest of Batak lands. Portuguese accounts mention the presence of Turkish, African, Malabar (Kerala) and Gujerati soldiers, among the foreign troops in Aceh's 1539 expedition against the Bataks. This military assistance was most likely brokered by Gujerati Muslim traders as the then independent Gujerat kingdom had earlier sought and received military assistance from the Ottoman court to counter the Portuguese threat.

The direct establishment of diplomatic links between Aceh and the Ottomans took place later, in 1547, with an introductory mission to Istanbul. Aceh sent a subsequent mission to request military assistance from Istanbul, citing the Portuguese threat to Muslim traders and ports in the Malay Archipelago. Some Turkish gunners, military experts and artisans made their way to Aceh in response. Aceh thus gained the know-how to construct trenches and fortifications as well as to make their own cannons and guns. In ensuing decades, Aceh harnessed Turkish military tactics and improved weaponry to expand their territories and harass commercial rivals such as the Portuguese in the Straits of Malacca and the Johor Sultanate.

The zenith of the Aceh Sultanate was during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (r 1607-1636) under whom Aceh achieved its greatest territorial extent, including tin-producing states in the Malay Peninsula (Kedah, Perak, Pahang). Besides being commercially powerful, the Aceh Sultanate held great sway culturally over the Malay World, as a Haj hub as well as an international Islamic learning centre and seeding place for Muslim Malay literature and scholarship.

The Kupiah Meukeutob as an Icon

Sultan Iskandar Muda is revered as a symbol of Aceh's heroic past, and tradition has it that it was from his reign that the *kupiah meukeutob* began to be used by sultans and Muslim clerics. Modern depictions of Sultan Iskandar Muda invariably show him wearing the *kupiah meukeutob*, the kind that was seen in late 19th century photographs.

In Aceh's social memory, the *kupiah meukeutob* developed into a nationalist icon as the headgear worn by resistance heroes such as Teuku Umar (1854 -1899) who fought in the Aceh War (1873-1904). Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Achinese envoys had been sent to Istanbul to appeal for Ottoman protection. However, interference from various



Group Portrait with Teuku Umar seated in the middle, Tropenmuseum Collection, Wikimedia Commons

Western imperial powers prevented the Ottomans from rendering effective and overt assistance. The ensuing war was protracted and disastrous for both the Dutch and Aceh sides. In 1903, the Aceh resistance crumbled with the capitulation of its key leadership, which included its last sultan – Alauddin Muhammad Da'ud Syah II (r 1875-1903).

Today an embellished form of *kupiah meukeutob* is still worn as ceremonial headgear, particularly by Aceh grooms as part of traditional wedding attire. The ceremonial versions usually sport gilded finials and other embellishments. One village currently known for producing these traditional hats is Garot in Pidie Regency, Aceh. There, women artisans laboriously hand-sew the *kupiah meukeutob*. It is largely not a woven hat although it resembles one. The rib-surfaced crown is made by sewing tight twists of local cotton tree (*Ceiba Petandra*) fibre into a patchwork surface layer constructed from coloured squares of fabric (Toshiyuki 2016).

Sculptured *kupiah meukeutob* also appear as architectural features on mosques and other structures – a unique icon of heroism and a reminder of the greatness of the Aceh Sultanate's past as one of the most powerful kingdoms in the Malay Archipelago.

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Ceremonial Version of the Kupiah Meukeutob, Early 20th Century, in the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum

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Exploring Batak Jewellery

By Clara Chan

Sometime last year, a docent from the Asian Civilisations Museum showed me an image of this intricately designed accessory (Fig 1), from Roots.sg, where it is described as a *kerosang*. *Kerosang* is the Chinese Peranakan term for the Malay *kerongsang*, which refers to a set of brooches used to fasten clothing. She believes that it has a very strong Islamic influence, given the star, crescent moon and bird motifs (Fig 2) and asked if I shared that impression. But I was more drawn to the feet-like spangles dangling from the brooch. Following a lead, I found that the spangles were not feet, but stylised palm blossoms called *pilo pilo* in Batak jewellery. This sparked a little exploration into the Batak and their jewellery, which I found fascinating.

The origins of the Batak are shrouded in myth and mystery. They are believed to be descendants of a powerful Proto-Malayan people who were driven out of northern Thailand and Burma and settled in and around northern Sumatra as early as 2500 BCE. While some inhabited the coastal region, the majority settled in the mountainous area of Lake Toba. To keep visitors away from the area, these highlanders garrisoned trails and passes leading to Lake Toba, making the Batak homeland inaccessible and impenetrable.

The Batak in North Sumatra's highlands are divided into six main tribes: the Toba, Pakpak/Dari, Simalungun, Karo, Angkola and Mandailing. These tribes are not homogeneous. Each one has its own distinct dialect, religious concepts, social structures, notion of justice, economic organisation and written characters. The only shared feature is the exogamous patrilineal social system. Historically, the Batak practised a syncretic religion of Tamil Shaivism, Buddhism and animism.

The Batak are known to be fierce warriors and had a notorious reputation

for indulging in cannibalism, which stemmed from their animistic beliefs. The arts and crafts of the Batak, from the land of man-eaters and exotic "savages", were once much sought-after as souvenirs.

However, by the beginning of the 20th century, most Batak had converted to either Christianity or Islam and the practice of cannibalism ceased. Christianity was introduced to the Batak around the middle of the 19th century when German missionary, Ludwig Nommensen, made inroads into the mountains. Today, most Batak are Christians, except for the Mandailing and the Angkola who are predominantly Muslim, influenced by the neighbouring Minangkabau. The spread of Christianity and Islam in the community

diminished the influence of shaman priests known as *datu*, once the most powerful members of the Batak community. The chief duties of the *datu* were to conduct esoteric rituals and customise amulets and concoctions to protect the village, family and individual from sorcery and malevolent forces. The *datu* were also the artists of Batak society, carving sculptures and cult objects out of wood, or occasionally stone, for ritualistic and magical purposes. With the growing influence of Islam and Christianity, these cult objects became superfluous and were either sold or abandoned as they were not compatible with the newfound faiths.

Nevertheless, the Batak didn't entirely abandon their animist cosmologies. As a result, some interesting and syncretic religious practices were maintained, such as engaging masked dancers to accompany the coffin to the grave, a part of traditional funerary rites. To some extent, they



Fig 1. Set of brooches, mid-20th century, from the Straits Settlements. Gift of Mr Edmong Chin. Collection of the ACM, 2002-00569



Fig 2. Close-up of the top disc



Fig 3. A Karo Batak girl adorned with kancing baju and sertali layang-layang kitik



Fig 4. Duri-duri made and worn by the Toba Batak

also maintain the use of talismans in their architecture and personal adornment.

This brings us back to the *kerosang* that first excited my curiosity. On a recent trip to the ACM, I saw this same *kerosang* in the Jewellery Gallery (see Fig 3). It adorned the neck of a young Karo Batak girl and was identified as *kancing baju*. After some research, I learned that the *kancing baju* is worn only by young, unmarried Karo Batak girls, to fasten their blouses or jackets. These are worn during festive rituals to make the girl's status known. The star motifs are to bless them with finding suitable husbands without difficulty. Featured in the image is also a necklace known as *sertali layang-layang kitik*. According to the accompanying text, this jewellery, "signalled wealth and increased a girl's marriageability."

The five-pointed star of the *kancing baju* is said to represent the five patriarchally organised clans within the Karo tribe, known as *merga* – the Ginting, Karo-Karo, Perangin-Angin, Sembiring and Tarigan. These five clans (*Merga si Lima*) are central to shaping Karo Batak lives, for example, marriage within a *merga* is prohibited. For a person who is not a Karo to marry a Karo, he/she needs to be adopted into one of the Karo *merga*. The community continues to practise traditional rituals such as donning accessories for blessings and protections, even though most of the community are either Christians or Muslims.



Fig 5. These padung-padung can weigh over one kilo each

Karo metalsmiths are known to be among the most talented craftsmen in Sumatra. The buffalo horn motifs seen on the brooch's top disc (see Fig 2), are called *tanduk kerbau paying*, seen frequently in Karo jewellery. They are also essential architectural features on the rooftops of Karo houses, where they are said to deflect evil forces. Owing to their close proximity to the Sultanate of Aceh, the Karo people have a long history of active trade relations with the neighbouring Islamic state. It is therefore not uncommon to find Islamic iconography such as the crescent moon, stars and birds, on Karo jewellery.

Nowadays, it is hard to find authentic and artistically valuable objects among the Batak, although traditional jewellery still remains as family heirlooms. This jewellery is emblematic of social status and wealth and worn to ward off malevolent forces. Those pieces made by the Toba and Karo Batak, such as the *duri-duri* (fig. 4) and the *padung-padung* (Fig 5), are highly sought after by collectors. The *duri-duri* are earrings made by the Toba Batak, typically of gilt brass, bronze, silver and solid gold. They are worn singly and their most striking feature is the radiating spikes or thorns (*duri*). The *duri-duri* can be seen on many Batak stone statues. The *padung-padung* are also ear ornaments, but are spectacularly



Fig 6. The padung padung are worn through the upper ears and attached to the headscarf to support its weight on the ears

heavy, with a single earring weighing between one and two kilos. Owing to their weight, when worn the earrings have to be supported by a hairpiece (see Fig 6). They are given to the bride by her father on the day of her wedding to indicate her new marital status. The s-shaped spirals on the *padung-padung* have been identified by scholars as a motif that dates back to the Indonesian Bronze Age.

Today, the Batak wear traditional jewellery only on special occasions such as festive celebrations and weddings. Traditional jewellery has been melted down to create new jewellery with more modern designs. The Batak homeland has also undergone rapid development. Many Batak have migrated to the cities of Jakarta, Palembang and Medan. Lake Toba, once fiercely protected by the Batak, is now a popular tourist destination.

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All photos except Figs 1 and 2 are by the author

In Harmony with Fruit and Foliage

The Way of the Malay Forager

By Khir Johari

Try for a moment to forget the supermarket with its aisles of tinned orchards and frozen oceans. Those shelves of straight lines and polychromatic labels present an image of abundance and all the conveniences of modern life, but also have a kind of monotony and sterility. Most people these days seldom think about where our food comes from. We take for granted that everyone on the assembly line – from the grower to the distributor, the food agency and the retailer – helps us ensure quality and safety. Those of us a little more discerning about where we get our *ikan tenggiri* (mackerel) from, can always retreat to the familiar comfort of the rustic wet market, which still reigns supreme in the heartlands of Singapore. But Malay mothers recognise that if you want the finest ingredients that nature has to offer, you have to get them yourself.

Foraging was an everyday reality for the island's Malays before industrialisation and resettlement. It required few to no specialised tools and demanded less physical exertion than agriculture and hunting. It is most likely the oldest means of acquiring sustenance. Gathering food from wild sources was never completely abandoned, certainly not in the Malay world where foraging, or *meramu*



Foraging for sea urchins was common in Singapore's Southern Island

(to collect all sorts of materials), has endured well into modern times. The verb *meramu* is a prefix for the root word *ramu*. The Malay word for food recipe ingredients, is *ramuan*, things that have been gathered.

On land, the Malays foraged in the spacious yards around their homes, in the *belukar* (jungle) near their villages and along the trails that connected them. Much could be made from the leaves, shoots, stems, roots and tubers found there. In the dish known as *botok-botok*, fish steak is marinated with spices and infused with flavourful foliage and herbs, before being wrapped in banana leaves and steamed. Flowers could also be gathered for consumption. The flowers of the durian tree, prior to the development of its fruit, were often collected and enjoyed as *ulam* (a dish of raw vegetables eaten with rice).

There was also much to obtain from the swamps, both freshwater and mangrove. *Běřěmi*, a native watercress (*herpestes monniera*) was once abundant in freshwater swamps but is no longer widely found owing to habitat loss. The mangroves were also a rich source of edible flora and fauna.

The sea was no stranger to Malays who lived by it, gathering shellfish, seaweed and other intertidal products (*berkarang* or *mengambil karang-karangan*). Those living in the wards of Tanjong Irau, Telok Mata Ikan, Padang Terbakar, Kampong Wak Hassan and Pasir Panjang, for example, were also engaged in foraging for seafood on beaches, intertidal zones, estuaries and rivers. This goes back to ancient times. The 17th



The laborious task of extracting the coconut tree's umbut or heart of palm

century *Sulalatus Salatin* tells us that when Seri Teri Buana (or Sang Nila Utama), the Sumatran prince who sired the Malay kings of old Singapura, landed on the island of Temasek, he and his men "amused themselves with collecting all manner of shellfish and seaweeds."¹

In the days before Singapore's southern islands were reclaimed and their inhabitants relocated to the mainland, they were home to Malay communities who had an intimate relationship with the marine ecology around them. Residents of outlying islands such as Pulau Sudong lived off collecting corals for home-decoration and seaweed for making *agar-agar*, in a place where land was too scarce to put under the plough.²

Other specimens commonly collected for consumption were sea-snails (*gonggong*, genus *Strombus*), spider-conches (*rangak*, *lambis lambis*), Noble volutes (*siput kilah*),



Latoh, commonly known as sea grapes, could be found in Singapore prior to coastal reclamation and is making a comeback now

sea urchins (*jani*), sea cucumber (*gamat*), sea grapes (*latoh*), jelly seaweed (*sangu*; agar-agar), mussels (*kupang*), surf clams (*remis*), Venus clams (*kepah*) and cockles (*kerang*). Cockles were once abundant all around the sandy shores of Singapore. Collected by the bucketful and carefully rinsed, they were “a favourite article of diet” for Malays who cooked them into *sambals* (spicy relishes), boiled them, stir-fried them with vegetables or skewered them into *Sate Kêrang*.³

This culture of foraging developed an understanding of ecological management. For example, fishing was controlled to provide time for the nurseries to replenish, according to the seasons, and no fishing grounds (*lubuk*) were exhausted of all their catch. Picking off vegetation sometimes facilitated the plants’ propagation: in the case of *turi* (*Sesbania grandiflora*) and *ubi kayu* (cassava; *Manihot esculanta*), a broken-off stem regenerated into two or more new ones. Even when flowers were picked, it was important not to strip the entire tree bare, but to leave some flowers to ensure there was no decline in the fruit crop.

If an entire tree had to be killed, for example to acquire *umbut*, the prized heart of the palm, no part went to waste. For instance, the coconut palm’s leaves were gathered for weaving *ketupat* (rice cake coverings) and for wrapping *otak-otak* (fish cake). The palm frond *lidi* (spines), had multiple uses, including being bunched up to make brooms. The tree’s



Picking *kenchur* (*Kaempferia galanga*) up from the ground. It is both medicine and food



Turi (*Sesbania grandiflora*) can be found in the belukar or secondary forest. Both leaves and flowers make delicious dishes. This is *gulai lemak turi*

trunk was often used as a beam in construction, while dried coconut husks were used as fuel for cooking.

This once symbiotic relationship between people and their natural environment is at odds with post-independence Singapore’s micromanagement of nature. In this manicured city-state, fishing is allowed only in designated waterways and venturing into the jungle to pick fruit, vegetables or minerals, is not always possible since some areas prohibit entry. As a result, younger Malays have been cut off from their heritage of native botanical and zoological knowledge.

Journalist and food writer Michael Pollan argues that the modern food industry has taken over the role that culture and living with nature once played in shaping our relationship with food.⁴ “The human omnivore,” Pollan wrote, “has the incalculable advantage of a culture, which stores the experience and accumulated wisdom of countless human tasters before him.”⁵ Whereas an ecologically aware existence once



Foraging for *gonggong*, a sea snail, (*Laevistrombus canarium*) at low tide

informed our choices about what and how much we could eat and when, today these decisions have largely been taken over by a highly organised, global food industry.

Cultural knowledge about consumption – providing a system of taboos, ethical and other dos and don’ts concerning nutrition – has become less relevant as advances in nutritional science offer more systematic guidelines. While the latter should be celebrated, we cannot help but mourn the loss of inherited wisdom from earlier generations. Food was understood within an ecological context, into which the human consumer was embedded. This was a practice that not only minimised the impact of human consumption on the environment, but also promoted the continued health of natural habitats. In the age of the climate crisis, it is time to look back upon this and consider how food in the Malay world has always been understood in the context of an ethical relationship with the environment. The West has its ‘Slow Food’ movement and eco-friendly diets; we can complement those with efforts to restore the historical balance between humans and the natural world right where we are.

This article has been excerpted from the chapter *Rustic Trails* in the writer’s upcoming book and edited for publication by the *PASSAGE* editorial team.

¹ Tun Sri Lanang, *Sejarah Melayu*. Compiled by Cheah Boon Keng and transcribed by Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail. Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS. 2009. p.91.

² Choo, S.B. 1982. *Fishermen in Flats*. Monash Papers on Southeast Asia: 9. Monash University: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies.

³ McNair, Maj. Fred. 1878. *Perak and the Malays: “Sarong and Kris”*. London: Tinsley Brothers. p.90.

⁴ Pollan, M. 2006. *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: a natural history of four meals*. New York: Penguin Books. p. 7.

⁵ Pollan, 2006. Op. cit. p.4.

Khair Johari researches Malay heritage and history. His book *The Food of Singapore Malays: Gastronomic Travels Through the Archipelago* will be released this summer.

All photos by the author

Seven Sails and Two Masts

Charting the Course of the Pinisi and its Builders

By Khong Swee Lin

On previous trips to Indonesia, I chanced to tour some islands aboard a ship modelled after a traditional Indonesian sailing craft called *pinisi* or *phinisi*. Local legend has it that *pinisi* ships have sailed in the Indonesian Archipelago for many centuries, with Bugis, Mandar and Makassar crews. Nautical scholarship suggests that the early beginnings of the *pinisi* are probably related to Sulawesi cargo ships known as *padewakang*, which predate the arrival of the earliest European trading ships in the region, during the 16th century.

It was towards the end of the 19th century that *padewakang* began to be fitted with *pinisi* type rigs that combined both European fore and aft sails with indigenous *tanja* sails. The *pinisi* rig form was eventually fitted on a variety of Sulawesi ship types. Thus, the term *pinisi* has come to refer to any traditional Sulawesi sailing ship bearing *pinisi* rigging, which is distinguished by two masts, seven to eight sails, and a bowsprit (a projection from the bow used as an anchor point for foresails). However, the hull shape that became strongly associated with *pinisi* belonged to a type of ship called *palar*. A *palar* with *pinisi* rig became known in Singapore as a “Makassar trader” or “Makassar schooner”, one of several types of Indonesian ships that used to frequent Singapore waters in the mid-20th century. *Pinisi* ships are technically not schooners as schooners are defined by a different rig. Most obviously, the *pinisi* foremast is taller than its main mast whereas schooners have a foremast that is shorter than its other masts.

The “Bugis schooner” was also a misnomer. It was used to denote the *pinisi* merchant ships that regularly carried Bugis traders from various Indonesian islands to Singapore shores in the 20th century. Anchorage was made in the Kallang River Basin at Tanjong Rhu, (previously called Sandy Point) before the Bugis traders made their way to the port town



Line drawing, the construction of a hull at Tanah Beru, Richard Gregory. From: Boats in Sulawesi: An illustrated Journey - Australian National Maritime Museum, 19 July 2016 <https://www.sea.museum/2016/07/19/boats>

of Kampong Gelam to transact with local agents and various other merchants. By the early 1980s, the billowing sails of these Bugis cargo ships had disappeared from Singapore waters, eclipsed by regional competition from international shipping corporations.

Today *pinisi* cargo ships are limited to Indonesian inter-island trade and are the key transporters of the timber and general goods exchanged between Kalimantan and Java. At the old port of Sunda Kelapa in Jakarta, you can take a walk back in time, imagining 16th century Portuguese ships being loaded with supplies of precious pepper. Sunda Kelapa is a working port where you can spot as many as 200 *pinisi* ships at the docks. However, the *pinisi* you see these days are largely modified and motorised. The once iconic *palar-pinisi* is now a rare sight as it has been supplanted by a hull shape called the *lambo*. The *lambo pinisi*'s square stern lends itself to adding engine parts as well as a central rudder. *Lambo pinisi* fitted with cabin spaces are a popular choice for tourist charter boats, which helps boost the order books of *pinisi* boat builders. Many of the new ships are equipped with state-of-the-art navigation systems. Not many ship's captains now are likely to be navigating with the help of the stars, but there remains a certain romance and glamour about cruising on a ship that today is still made according to a centuries old recipe.

There are several locations in Sulawesi and its surrounding islands where *pinisi* are still traditionally built by various communities such as the Makassarese, Bugis and Sama Bajau. I had a chance to visit Tanah Beru, located on the left southwestern ‘leg’ of Sulawesi island, famed for its community of Konjo boat builders. On landing, I was greeted by a symphony of hand tool sounds – the rhythmic pounding of hammers, clinking chisels, buzzing saws and the shrill sopranos of drills at work. The artisanal construction methods mean that depending on complexity, ships can take a year or more to complete.



Line drawing of a map of Indonesia and the surrounding regions and Sulawesi

The unique feature of traditional shipbuilding here is the 'shell first' construction. The hull structure is built up with planks joined edge to edge and secured by wooden dowels. The frame is added later. This is generally the reverse of Western ship construction where the frame is created first, followed by planking over. There is no blueprint, as we understand it, relating to components of pre-measured sizes. Instead, the structural parts of the ship, their size, the order and location of their assembly, are orchestrated by the Master Shipwright whose knowledge is the legacy of generations and whose skills have been honed through years of experience.

Knowledge is transmitted orally, and the craft is learned through an extensive period of apprenticeship. By now you can imagine how wondrous yet fragile this knowledge base is. Today only a few master shipwrights with this depth of learning remain, and most of the current ship builders have never seen a traditional vessel. It is this age-old knowledge base rather than the physical aspects of *pinisi* ships that was inscribed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in December 2017.

Part of the Sulawesi shipbuilding culture is of a spiritual nature. Co-existing with the practice of Islam are deeply ingrained beliefs in spirit guidance and protection. There are several beliefs and rituals practised by the Konjo at different stages of ship construction. Apparently, the fifth or seventh day of the month are auspicious days to purchase the wood for shipbuilding. Because the wood's quality is important, the Konjo shipbuilders go to great lengths to secure timber – including moving to Kalimantan to be near supplies of ironwood (*Eusideroxylon zwagerii*), locally referred to as *kayu ulin*. This seeded a Konjo shipbuilding community in Batu Licin, Kalimantan.



Image of a palari on a stamp from Singapore, shipstamps.co.uk
1 January 2009

Ironwood is preferred for the ship's structure and keel (the lengthwise supporting base of ship). The all-important keel is hewn from a single tree and is thought to be the ship's soul. Thus the cutting of the keel is customarily accompanied by a ceremony known as the *potong lunas*. This involves laying simple food offerings and shipbuilding tools on the keel, which is set out in a north-east direction. Amidst burning incense, prayers are recited for the safe passage of future ship's travellers as well as the safety of the builders. Prior to the launch of a completed ship, a blessing ceremony is held on the unlaunched ship, culminating in a feast for the



A line-up of pinisi at Sunda Kelapa, Pelabuhan Sunda Kelapa (Dok: Infojakarta.net)
Potret Sunda Kelapa Masa Kini, Nusantara Maritime News, maritimeneeds.id Retno Safitri, 4 July 2019

villagers prepared from sacrificed livestock – goats or cows, depending on the size of the vessel. While at Tanah Beru, I asked a shipwright how far these ship blessing rituals continue to be observed and his answer was a cryptic, "it depends on one's needs". This was a man attuned to the vagaries of the seas and time. I gazed across the beach to the horizon with the hope that the future of the *pinisi* shipwrights and their centuries-old craft will continue to be supplied with fair winds.



The construction of a pinisi hull. Indonesia's traditional boat builders reach into the past. Agence France Presse, 12 July 2018, au.news.yahoo.com

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Khong Swee Lin guides at various museums and galleries in Singapore. She has been on at least five pinisi voyages around eastern Indonesia from Sumbawa to Papua, (including visits to the boat-builders of Tanah Beru, the Lesser Sundas and the Spice islands).

Kain Sasirangan – The Cloth with a Soul

Its Mythical Origins, Mystique and Magic

By Sadiyah Shahal

Step into Gallery 2 of the *Urang Banjar Special Exhibition* at the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) and be amazed at a huge velvet artefact, resplendent in golden sequins. Known as *kain arguci*, it is the quintessential backdrop for the traditional Banjarese wedding dais. Just adjacent to it, is a drastically humbler-looking textile made of cotton. This cloth is called *kain pamunting* or *pamunting* cloth (Fig 1). Its lacklustre look belies the ‘power’ it possesses as a sacred cloth – a belief upheld amongst the Banjarese since the 12th century. Through the passage of time, *kain pamunting* became known as *kain pamintaan* (special order cloth) and now it is widely known as *kain sasirangan* (pronounced sa-si-ra-ngan). Today, *kain sasirangan* has been re-imagined as the *adivastra* (iconic textile) of the Banjarese in South Kalimantan (Fig 2), the way batik is to the Javanese¹.

The captivating myth surrounding the origin of the *kain pamunting/sasirang* was first documented as a folktale in J J Ras’s version of the *Hikayat Banjar*. The Banjarese are a sub-ethnic group from the region of South Kalimantan. They used to be ruled by a Hindu King named Lampung Mangkurat. Legend has it that he was ‘visited’ by Putri Junjung Buih (Princess Mystical River) after 40 days and nights of meditation. The king commanded the princess to show herself. She agreed, on condition that a *sasirangan* cloth be produced within a single day by 40 young maidens. The feat was accomplished, and the princess appeared from the mystical world. Captivated by what he saw, the king made her a princess of the kingdom.

Another legend regarding the *kain sasirangan* relates to the Hindu Kingdom of Amuntai, also in South Kalimantan during the rule of King Patmaraga. The king was praying fervently for a child at the Great Temple. On his return journey to the palace, he chanced upon a baby floating along the river. Pleased that the gods had answered his prayers, he was about to take the baby girl back to the palace when miraculously, she spoke to him and requested that a special cloth be prepared for her by the end of the day and for 40 maidens to accompany her to the palace. Undaunted, the

king commanded that the cloth be produced and once made, it was known as *pamunting* or *sasirangan*. Wrapped in this sacred cloth, the baby was taken to the palace. The people of Amuntai hailed her as the Princess of South Kalimantan.

Transcending its mythical origin, *kain sasirangan* is said to permeate the realm of mysticism and even magic. The Banjarese believed that this sacred cloth had healing powers. Shamans and spiritual healers created *kain sarirangan/pamintaan* exclusively for their individual patients. According to Bapak Mohammad Redho who loaned the *kain pamunting* on display in the MHC’s special exhibition, the spiritual healer would invoke the spirits to assist him/her in deciding the colours and/or motifs that would cure the illness presented.

Over the centuries, with the advent of science and modern medicine, the belief in *kain sasirangan* as a sacred cloth imbued with mystical and magical powers waned. Notwithstanding this, Bapak Redho, a well-respected *sasirangan* doyen in Banjarmasin who champions the use of natural colours, avers that this belief and practice persist within the Amuntai clan, albeit on a smaller scale. Those who are convinced that their illness originated from the mystical realm, such as *kepuhunan* (bad luck), *kepidaraan* (disturbed by spirits) and *kepingitan* (falling into trances and entering mystical realms), still seek to have a *kain sasirangan/pamintaan* made for them, especially by a spiritual healer with a long family tradition so as to increase the efficacy of the cloth.

The healers acknowledge the synergy between the spiritual world and nature. Thus, all colours used were obtained from natural plants – yellow from turmeric, red from gambier, green from ginger leaves, purple from the

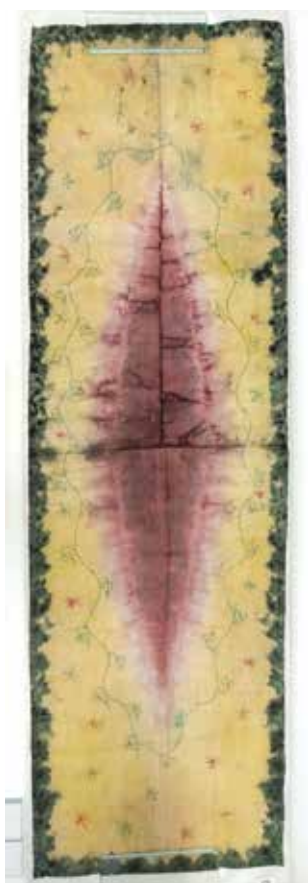


Fig 1. Kain pamunting/ sasirangan on display at the MHC’s *Urang Banjar Special Exhibition*. On loan from Mr Muhammad Redho of South Kalimantan. Photo courtesy of the MHC

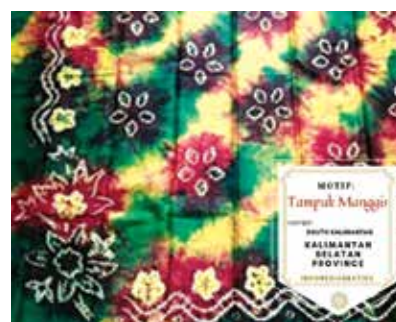
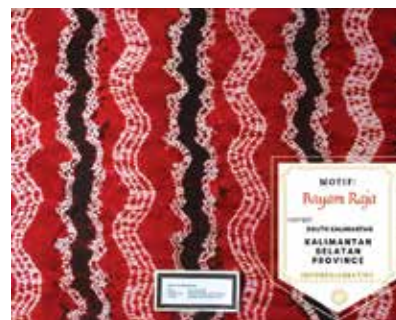


Fig 2. Three of the 15 traditional motifs of sasirangan have been patented by the South Kalimantan Provincial Government as part of its serious effort to raise the status of the sasirangan as the Banjarese iconic textile. Photo: <http://www.iwarebatik.org>

seeds of the gandaria fruit and brown from rambutan skins.

Specific colours represent/symbolize the treatment that the wearer is receiving. For example, yellow is used to treat jaundice, red for headaches and insomnia, green for stroke or paralysis, black for fever and rashes, purple for abdominal problems, while brown is used in the treatment of depression.

Following a ritual to invoke the mystical spirits, their magical forces are infused into the cloth through the stitching of the outlines of the patterns drawn on the *kain sasirangan*. 'Sa' means each and *sirangan* means stitch. Guided by the spirits, the healer masterfully stitches the cloth into a tight smocking pattern which will later appear as white dotted marks, creating a glowing matt outline around the motif. After a sequence of dye baths, the *sasirangan*'s fibres have been completely imbued with the mystical and magical powers needed to heal the wearer².



Fig 3. A man undergoing treatment using kain sasirangan worn as a laung - a square cloth folded and worn as a triangular head dress. Photo: <https://medium.com>



Fig 4. The sasirangan cloth with the modang (diamond) motif. It is known as kekemben/kerudung (head scarf) meant for women. Photo: <https://medium.com>

The men wear their square *sasirangan* as a *laung* (head dress), tied as a triangle around the forehead (Fig 3). The women wear their rectangular *sasirangan* as *kerudung/kekemben* (a scarf) over their heads. The optimal period to don it is at dusk, for "just as long it takes to leisurely smoke a cigarette" quipped Bapak Redho. Colloquially, this means 15 minutes.

The *modang* or diamond shape is the most common motif for the *kain pamintaan*, as it is believed to be a cure-all motif (Fig 4). This is not surprising since diamonds are as numerous in South Kalimantan as rivers are ubiquitous. The river ecosystems of the Barito and the Martapura unpretentiously inspire new motifs for the *sasirangan*. *Kang kong berombak*, or wavy water spinach, is believed to cure vertigo. While the *naga belimbur* (twisting dragon) is used to cure spiritual disturbances, clearly inconceivable in modern medicine³.



Pic 5: Wim Anshori (left), showing his award-winning The Hornbill on silk. He impressed the judges in the first Sasirangan Motif Competition in 2016 with his A Thousand Rivers motif. Photo: <http://banjarmasin.tribunnews.com>

Today, *sasirangan* as an art form continues to draw inspiration from the meandering rivers of Banjarmasin. A prolific designer, Mr Wim Anshori, is an Amuntai and a descendant of a long line of *sasirangan* traditional healers. He won the 2016 Banjarmasin Sasirangan Design Competition with his *Seribu Sungai* (A Thousand Rivers) motif (Fig 5). Unlike the typical *sasirangan* makers who trace cardboard stencils onto the cloth, Anshori draws freehand and effortlessly creates intricate designs.

Anshori's masterpieces are undeniably exquisite and enigmatic. Amazingly, he announced that his *sasirangan* has a soul! As an Amuntai, he continues the ritual of preparing a *sesajian* (feast) for the spirits before he embarks on his creative journey. For assistance, he calls on the spirits of his forebears from the mystical realm. He believes that while Allah guides his hands, he also receives inspiration from invisible forces. Anshori likes to tell listeners about the successful healing he received from the *sasirangan* prepared by his Amuntai mother. Strangely, the spirits guided her to prepare a *kekemben* (a woman's headscarf) to cure his debilitating headaches. Anshori said that he was completely healed after three treatments⁴.

Against the backdrop of a 'whole-of-province' approach to popularise and unlock the economic potential of the *sasirangan* as the *adiwastra* for South Kalimantan, it is incredibly fascinating that the magic and mystique of this sacred cloth lives on, albeit for a small community.

Sadiah Shahal is the current FOM Museum Coordinator for the Malay Heritage Centre and has been a docent at Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall since 2015.

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² Conversations with Muhammad Redho. Lender of the *Kain Pamunting/Sasirangan* on display at the *Urang Banjar Special Exhibition* at the MHC. Founder of the ASSALAM (Promoting the use of only natural colours for the *sasirangan* cloth) Organisation in South Kalimantan.

³ Maryanto & Nugraheni, E Y, *Motif Variety of Sasirangan on Martapura Riverbank Communities*. Advances in Social Science and Humanities Research, Vol 271. 2nd International Conference on Arts and Culture 2018. Atlantic Press. Accessed March 2, 2021. <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/iconarc-18/125911153>

⁴ Conversations with Wim Anshori (winner of the 2016 Sasirangan Motif Competition in South Kalimantan). Owner of *Orie Sasirangan* in Banjarmasin.

Muslim Tombstones and Their Carvers

A Forgotten Cultural Marker

By Fistri Abdul Rahim

When we talk about Kampong (Kg) Gelam, situated in the vicinity of the old Malay palace in Singapore's central area, images of hip cafés, internationally themed restaurants and artistic murals come to mind. The one sight that always mesmerised and captivated me was the one I saw when I was eating *rendang* (a spicy beef dish) lunch with my family. That day, we saw a Chinese man (Fig 1) who seemed to be busy preparing a large number of tombstones. Strewn all over his compact yet functional space, were various sizes of both Chinese and Muslim tombstones. I had never thought that the two could share a space, considering that most, if not all, the Muslim tombstones I have seen, had Jawi (Malay written in Arabic script) words inscribed on them. What I also found strange was that the closest cemetery was a good 20 or so kilometres away and the next cemetery, which was a block away, had long been abandoned. So why was he there and what had made him choose this place? As I grew older, I realised that he was part of the remnants of a forgotten past of Kg Gelam and a piece of a larger puzzle that allows us a peek into who the Malay Muslims were in the past.

Before Kg Gelam became the hip and happening place that it is now, it was already a place for a multitude of communities that came from in and around present-day Malaysia and Indonesia as well as China and India.

Along with their communities, they had brought their skills, traditions and languages. Thus it is no wonder that the Chinese of Kg Gelam were known to have been able to speak Javanese, the language of the people of Java in present-day Indonesia, and also learned to write in Jawi, the preferred script used by the Malay Muslim community of the time. The Chinese immigrants from southern China who trickled in during the 1920s, first opened sundry shops before more of their craftsmen arrived and

banded together to form cluster residences that specialised in blacksmithing and stonemasonry. The stonemason cluster in Pahang Street even had a Hokkien name, *Pak Chio Koi*, meaning Masonry Street. Besides tombstones, they also produced stoneware mortars and pestles as well as stone mills for the Chinese and Indian communities.

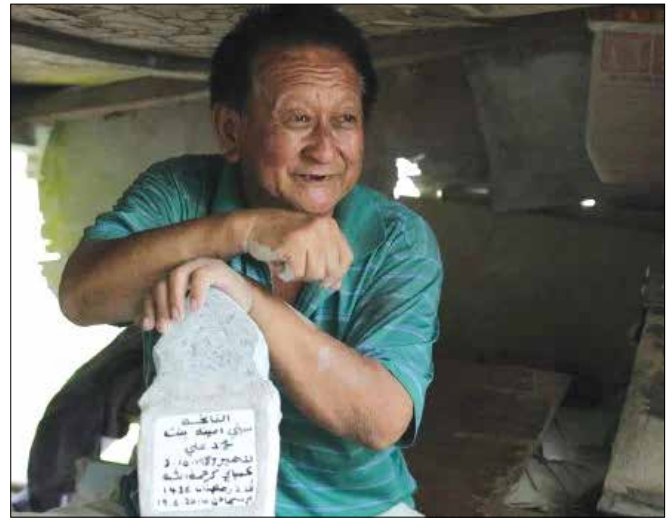


Fig 1. Leong Chuan, the last Chinese carver of Muslim tombstones from Selangor, photo courtesy of Alzahrin Alias BH Online, 9 July 2015

But the biggest draw had always been the tombstones. Costing from \$10 to \$20 per piece in the 1950s (equivalent to present-day \$50 to \$60), these Chinese stonemasons did not just serve the Singapore Malay Muslim community, but also those from neighbouring Sabah, Indonesia and Brunei, the latter preferring marble tombstones costing from \$300 to \$400 each. Those clients would sometimes arrive in busloads and wait for the commissioned tombstones to be carved and polished.

The practice of commissioning tombstones was not unique to Singapore, since in places such as Penang, Malacca and Selangor, similar requests were made to Chinese tombstone carvers. The need to commission from the Chinese came about since there were no other stone carvers, Malay Muslim or Indian, in the region. Only in 1935 did Kg Gelam see a lone Malay Muslim tombstone carver, the political satirist Wak Ketok. He had switched from hawking food to tombstone carving as he found it more lucrative. While Malay Muslims of the time regarded tombstone carving as taboo, seen as wishing fellow Muslims an early death, the income allowed him to finance his children's education.

Looking further into history, tombstone commissioning and hence trading, was quite a common activity in 15th century maritime Southeast Asia and no different from the ceramic trading of the time. But the styles were different from the commissioned pieces of the 1920s to 1960s, when Malay Muslim tombstones took on standard forms, either flat (for female graves) or phallic (for male graves). Those that had been traded were more intricate. Commonly known as *Batu Aceh*, the tombstone (Fig 2) gained attention for its association with the first known Muslim ruler in Southeast Asia, Sultan al-Malik al-Salih of the 13th century kingdom of Samudera Pasai in present-day Aceh, Indonesia. Its widespread use throughout the Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Sulawesi and Sumbawa was also an indication of Aceh's strong cultural and political influence throughout the 16th through to the 18th century. This can be seen in Melaka's Sultan Mansur Shah's tombstone (dated 1477), (Fig 3) which

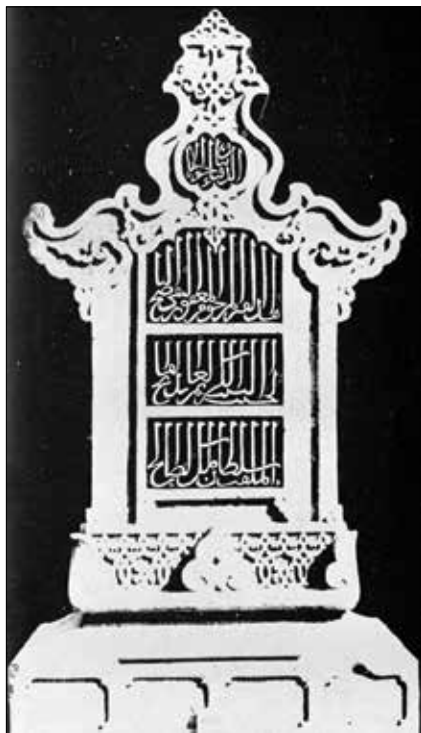


Fig 2. The headstone of Sultan al-Malik al-Salih's grave

mirrored its style. Sultan Mansur Shah, who was known for his expansionist policy, was credited with the spread of Islam in the region and was also said to have consulted Islamic scholars from Pasai on religious matters.

While these wing-tipped, thick flat tombstones recorded mostly 13th century deaths of Aceh royals when they were first discovered, there was no indication that tombstone carving was an active vocation at the time. It is believed that they had been carved a few centuries later as the style matches that of later tombstones. The material used is also a good indication that this tombstone had been created elsewhere and imported. Sultan al-Malik al-Salih's successor's tombstone is a prime example. The tombstone is made of granite, a material not found in the vicinity of Pasai whose nearest quarry produces sandstone.

However, *Batu Aceh* tombstones were not the standard Islamic shape. The Ujung Islamic cemetery near Jera Lompoe in Soppeng, Sulawesi, is home to at least 84 *menhir* (upright) tombstones, the cemetery complex of Jera Lompoe itself is home to a keris handle style tombstone similar to the ones in Mamuju, West Sulawesi, while the Tosora, South Sulawesi cemetery, houses a Bugis *songkok* style tombstone.

Interestingly, we could not find copies of these tombstones outside Sulawesi. Although closer to home, Kg Gelam's ancient Jalan Kubor (Cemetery Road) Cemetery, houses myriad tombstone shapes. A study of the cemetery, commissioned in 2014 by the National Heritage Board, uncovered not just a multitude of shapes but inscriptions as well. The inscriptions were written in Arabic, Malay, Javanese *aksara* (letters/alphabets), Bugis *aksara* (Fig 4), Gujarati, English and Chinese and show the diversity of Kg Gelam and the cosmopolitan nature of 19th century Singapore.

Unfortunately, this may be the last cemetery that houses such a collection because Malay Muslim cemeteries are now machine-inscribed in Malay and/or English and take the form of the standard phallic and flat shapes (Fig 5). These tombstones are now part of the funeral service packages offered by various providers.

With new technology available for stone carving and the tombstone carvers not wanting to have their next generation take over this manual work, we need to ask how much of our social and cultural identity we are losing.

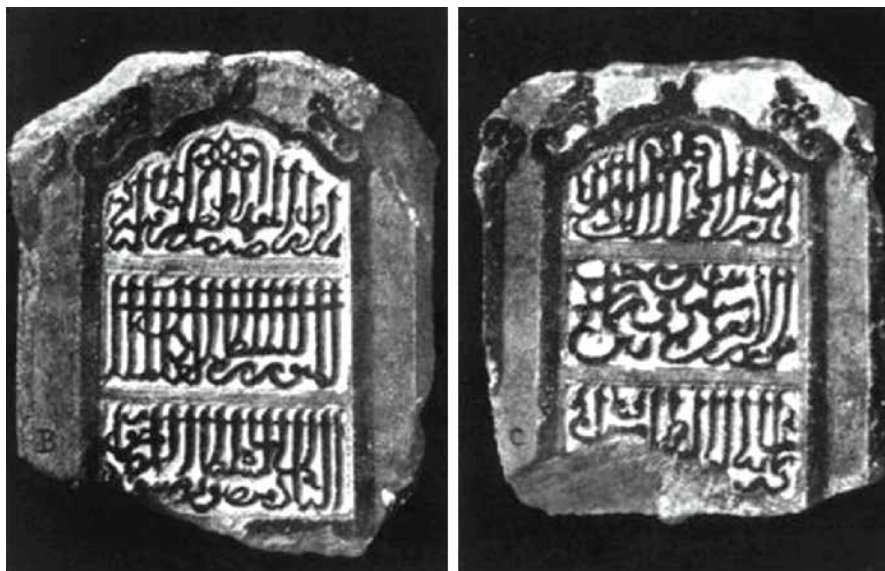


Fig 3: The two faces of the defaced headstone of Sultan Mansur Shah of Melaka



Fig 4: The tombstone of Ambo Soloh written in Bugis *aksara* (Lontara) in the Jalan Kubor Cemetery. Photo courtesy of Hafiz Rashid



Fig 5: Present-day Muslim cemetery with standard phallic and flat-shaped tombstones and plastic name markers as part of funeral service packages

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A special thank you to my fellow grad school classmate, Yi Ming Chng, who graciously helped to transcribe the Chinese language interview of Mr Ng Bah Bee from the National Archives of Singapore collection.

Fistri Abdul Rahim is a docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum and Malay Heritage Centre and a graduate of the NUS Southeast Asian Studies Master's degree programme. She was a guest lecturer in the department's summer school module, Southeast Asian Cultural Mosaic.

Malong Andon – Exploring the Ties that Bind

By Hafiz Rashid

The Maranaos or ‘People of the Lake’ inhabit the areas surrounding Lake Lanao in the highlands of Western Mindanao and are renowned for their artistry in crafts such as metalworking and woodcarving. However, it is in the art of weaving that they truly shine.

Textiles feature prominently in the social and ritual life of the Maranaos, ubiquitous in a joyous celebration as well as sombre mourning. Within Maranao society, textiles are part of a rich visual language that serves to communicate one’s social status, clan affiliation and even place of origin. Colours and motifs play an important role in narrating the stories embedded in these textiles and examples of this can be seen in their primary garment – the *malong*.

The *malong* is a tubular garment worn by both Maranao men and women. Although at first glance it may seem like a simple garment, in the hands of Maranao weavers, the *malong* is turned into an exquisite work of art. Maranao weavers embellished their *malongs* with every textile technique at their disposal – from tapestry weaving to ikat. One of the rarest is the *malong andon*. Unlike most *malongs*, which are

unisex, the *malong andon* is the prerogative of women, often worn by women of nobility such as the sultan’s relatives.

Secondly, the *malong andon* is executed using the exacting technique of weft ikat and floating supplementary weft. Weft ikat is not widely practised in the Philippines and is mostly limited to Maranao and Maguindanao weaving traditions. The *malong andon* featured here has weft ikat motifs reminiscent of the flower basket design known as *Chaabdi Bhat*, found in the coveted double-ikat *patola* cloths once extensively traded throughout the Malay Archipelago.

Records of *patola* cloths being traded and used by the people of Mindanao can be traced back to the 16th century. In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan’s diarist recorded the ritual

use of *patola* cloths among the inhabitants of the Southern Philippines and the Moluccas¹ and in 1543, the pilot of Villalobos’s Spanish expedition described the clothing of the people of Mindanao as being “sleeveless robes called *patolas*, adding that those of wealthy were made of silk, and those of others were made of cotton cloth”.²

Despite its foreign origin, the *patola* was thoroughly indigenised by the Maranaos who incorporate its motifs into their own textile repertoire and featured it in their epics such as the *Darangen* in which the hero wields a fantastic magical sash known as *Patola Kaorayan*. It bestows invisibility and hence invincibility upon the wearer.³

On the *malong andon*’s centre panel, one can see *okir* motifs – *okir* means ‘to carve’ in Maranao although its semantic meaning has expanded to include motifs related to the woodcarving tradition. The *okir* motif featured here includes a bamboo shoot and eight rayed star motifs known as *pako rabong* and *bitoon* respectively. These motifs are also commonly found in Malay *songkets* and Javanese *batiks*.

The diffusion of these motifs across textile traditions in the Malay Archipelago shows the interconnectedness and mobility of the people in this region. The Maranaos, despite being highland people, have a long history of inter-island trade. Their traders, especially from the lowlands (*basak*) would travel to neighbouring islands to exchange locally made produce (mats, cloths and brassware) for foreign goods such as Chinese silks and Indian trade textiles. These interactions also led to the exchange of technical knowledge and invigorated the Maranao weaving industry, inspiring Maranao weavers to produce unique textiles such as the *malong andon* – a textile that tells the story of the ties that bind.



Fig 1. Close-up of *patola* motif executed in weft ikat. Photo courtesy of the author



Fig 2. A mid 20th century *malong andon* made from hablon threads – a silk-cotton blend. Author’s personal collection

¹ Casino, Eric S., *The People and Art of the Philippines*, Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1981.

² Guy, John, *Indian textiles in the East: from Southeast Asia to Japan*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2009.

³ Hamilton, Roy W., *From the rainbow’s varied hue: textiles of the southern Philippines*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998.

Hafiz Rashid is a long-time docent at the Malay Heritage Centre. His research interests include studying the textile traditions of the Malay Archipelago and understanding the stories embedded in their motifs.

STPI: The Malay Connection

By Darlene D Kasten



Suraya Binte Mohd Yusof, *Home*, 2017, screen-print, paper pulp painting, collage, inkjet print on C-type print, STPI handmade kozo paper, stained cotton paper, fabric and acrylic © Amanda Heng / STPI. Photo courtesy of the artist and STPI

For its residency and exhibition programme, STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery invites artists to come to STPI to experiment with paper. While many come from afar, some do not. They come instead from all over Southeast Asia, from Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and even Singapore. Their works often portray iconic images and the traditional cultural references we associate with the Malay world.

Take, for instance, Singaporean Amanda Heng, an STPI resident in 2016. A performance and visual artist, Amanda's work relies on spoken narratives as catalysts for artistic expression. For *We Are the World – These Are Our Stories*, she sought the memories of twelve friends, who shared storied histories of cherished possessions. The narratives were included in the final artwork as performance-accessible QR codes. For *Home*, the narrative by Suraya Binte Mohd Yusof, Amanda screen-printed a collage of the *baju kurung*, the traditional dress worn by women throughout the Malay world.

Painter Entang Wiharso and installation artist Heri Dono, both from Yogyakarta, Indonesia, were STPI resident artists in 2014 and 2015 respectively. Both use the imagery of *wayang kulit*, the traditional Javanese shadow puppet theatre. *Wayang kulit* is a form of popular entertainment that merges visual arts and song to promote mythologies, philosophies and social criticism. While the earliest performances revolved around the classic Hindu epics, over time the stories became more localised with the addition of Javanese folk tales and Muslim themes.

Heri Dono continued this evolution of *wayang kulit* by introducing his own characters and narratives to explore socio-political and contemporary issues in *Zaman Edan (The Age of Crazyness)*. Along with wearing the traditional Malay keris, his protagonists could also be seen with a revolver in one hand or a machine gun hanging off their shoulder. He takes his association to the Malay world further by using a batik technique to produce his acrylics on fabric. The keris makes an appearance in Entang's *Never Say No* as well, on paper casts of figures in profile, reminiscent of Javanese shadow puppets.

Javanese myths and traditional culture were a powerful source of inspiration for the 2018 residency of Melati

Suryodarmo who was born in Surakarta, Indonesia. The result was her oeuvre, *Memento Mori*, centred on the ruins of Singapore's Istana Woodneuk, built in the 1870s by Johor Sultan Abu Bakar ibni Daing Ibrahim. Melati's *Mulberry Objects* consist of STPI handmade, sisal paper casts of the istana's architectural debris, juxtaposed on canvas with unbleached mulberry fibres. They are titled with the names of Jawi letters, the Arabic script used to write Malay. She employed all 20 consonants, so the titles formed a perfect pangram when displayed in order. The pangram is linked to the myth of Aji Saka about two emissaries who meet, disagree, and since they are equally matched in strength, end up fatally injuring each other.

Filipino artists Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan, residents in 2016, have made a career of artworks and installations related to migration and displacement often inspired by the Badjao, the *Orang Laut* (sea gypsies) who live between the borders of Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. Their works consistently seek to pin down the meaning of home and identity. With *Fragments*, the Aquilizans used recycled cardboard from previous projects to create collagraphs and embossed prints of their three-dimensional counterparts.

One of the earliest artists to come to STPI was Malaysian Ahmad Zakii Anwar. Zakii began his career as a graphic artist, later building a reputation for stunning photo-realist, still-life paintings and expressive portraits. For STPI's 2005 exhibition, *Primordial Dream*, he created over 150 unique paper pulp pieces, etchings and lithographs. His *Actors* series explored the metaphors of traditional theatre and masked performance through etchings of northern Malay Mak Yong performers.

There have been many more examples of the Malay connection since STPI opened its doors in 2002, proving that even with contemporary art, traditional Malay culture remains a limitless reservoir of inspiration for local artists.

Darlene D Kasten is an FOM docent with STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery, the Malay Heritage Centre and the Asian Civilisations Museum

The Melodious Gamelan

By Durriya Dohadwala



The kettle pots

In his book, *Music of Java*, Dutch ethnomusicologist Jaap Kunst (d 1960) describes gamelan as “comparable to only two things, moonlight and flowing water – mysterious like moonlight and always changing like flowing water”.

If you have ever travelled to Indonesia, chances are you

have heard the melodious layered sounds of the gamelan. And if you haven’t, then a good way to hear them during this time of limited travel, is to watch Disney’s latest animated film, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, in which gamelan influences can be discerned in the music.

The term ‘gamelan’ comes from the word *gamel*, which means to strike or to hammer. It refers to an ensemble or orchestra made up of metallophones, xylophones, kettle drums, gongs, flutes and string instruments. Originating in Java, Indonesia, where it initially served as a form of communication for Javanese kings, gamelan can be grouped into two principal styles – Javanese and Balinese – although there are also regional variations such as the Sundanese and *Melayu*. The bas reliefs in Borobudur, Prambanan and other Javanese temples, show evidence that the prototypes of the instruments that make up the gamelan have been in existence since the eighth century. However, the term gamelan came into usage after Islam arrived in the archipelago.

While it is an ensemble, the gamelan operates quite differently from the Western orchestra. Learning it is a communal experience: there is a place for everyone, though mastering the skills can take a long time. It is extremely fluid, working on an open-door concept whereby members



The mallet which has a head padded with thick, red cloth and is wrapped with cord



A metallophone made of seven bronze plates placed over bamboo cylinders

can come and go depending on their availability and most musicians are able to play more than one instrument. As a result, it can have anywhere from four to 30 members. While musical notation may be in use today, traditionally, gamelan was taught aurally and orally with the belief that the melody resides in the individual and, by harmonising with the group, the individual is able to find his or her higher self. This link to spirituality makes gamelan an integral part of all community events from births to weddings and deaths. In fact, it is rarely played in a concert setting and is almost always an accompaniment to community rituals or activities such as dance or shadow puppet theatre. Lastly, the group has no conductor to direct the musicians – they must listen to the drummer who controls the tempo and signals the opening and conclusion of each piece that is played.

Making Music

No two gamelans are tuned alike. Each instrument in an ensemble is tuned to match the rest and a gamelan can be tuned to a scale of five (*slendro*) or seven (*pelog*). A short melody typically extends over four-beat bars against which the other instruments play a related counter melody. A third group may play rhythmic repeats of this theme and a fourth group will further embellish or fill out the tune with other



One of the four gongs in the ensemble at Gamelan Asmaradana



Intricate carving on the frame that holds the metallophone

instruments. The whole theme is punctuated with the gongs, which mark the time intervals as well as the end of the music. Lastly, the flute, (*rebab*) or a singer's voice, bring everything together into harmony.

There are three categories of gamelan instruments that directly relate to their shapes. The first category is the instruments that are shaped as a flat, metal or wooden plate and are suspended over a resonance trough or on resonance tubes. These include the metallophones (*saron* and *gender*) and the xylophone (*gambang kayu*). The second category is the instruments that are shaped like gongs (*gong*, *kenong*, *kempul* or *ketug*) but have an extra head that protrudes from the top and functions as a resonator. These can be suspended vertically or, as in the case of the kettle pots (*bonang*), placed flat in a wooden frame. All the instruments in these two categories are played by striking them with a padded mallet, hammer or sticks. The third category includes the rest of the instruments, those that have shapes different from the first two categories, such as the lute (*rebab*) and the drum (*kendang*). All the instruments are placed or held in frames that are elaborately carved and beautifully decorated, usually in gold.

Gamelan Etiquette

The gamelan is considered sacred and is believed to have supernatural powers, thus both musicians and non-musicians will show respect to it. Before a performance, musicians burn incense and make offerings of flowers. They will usually be seated on the floor and take their shoes off when playing their instruments. It is also believed that each instrument in the gamelan is guided

by spirits. It is therefore inappropriate to step over any of them since doing so might offend its spirit. Some gamelans are believed to have so much power that playing them may exert an influence over nature – for instance, to bring rain or a good harvest. Others may be touched only by persons who are ritually qualified. In Javanese gamelan, the most important instrument is the *gong ageng*, which is believed to be the main spirit of the entire gamelan.

In Singapore, there are very few places that teach and perform the gamelan. In March, *Explore Singapore!* organised a half-day visit to Gamelan Asmaradana, where participants were introduced to the history of this art form and given a chance to learn how to play some of the instruments.



The FOM Explore Singapore! ensemble

Durriya Dohadwala is an FOM member and art docent. She also writes about South and Southeast Asian contemporary art and artists for both print and online magazines.

All images are courtesy of the author and Elsa Gianno

The Quiet Volunteer of Jalan Kubor Cemetery

By Angela Echanove



Raja Abu Bakar was born in Singapore, as was his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, so he comes from many generations of Malay Muslim Singaporeans. Raja Abu has three daughters and nine grandchildren; he is proud of his family as well of his Muslim heritage. He used to work as a crane operator and his job took him to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Brunei and Sarawak. He is now retired and is a volunteer taking care of the old Malay Muslim Cemetery (Jalan Kubor Cemetery), located in Victoria Street, near Jalan Sultan, at the back of the Malabar Mosque.

Raja Abu quietly mentioned that there are no funds to clean and restore the graves and that the local council doesn't provide any maintenance. Therefore, only private hands are there to tend to the cemetery to which he dedicates his time, energy, generosity and care. If you are lucky enough to find him around, he will explain that the larger gravestones are for women and the smaller ones are for men. Some are covered with vibrantly coloured cloths, which means that the families visit to honour their ancestors. However, many others are uncovered and are crumbling, overgrown with grass and other vegetation, their inscriptions fading along with the families' memories.



Angela Echanove is a photographer from Spain, now based in Singapore, specialising in portraits, architecture and travel photography. Her works can be seen at www.angelaechanove.com and IG @angelaechanove

All photos by the author

The Queen of Geylang

By Darly Furlong



Hari Raya is on the horizon, so the heart gravitates towards Geylang Serai Market. It has earned the reputation of being the Malay emporium of Singapore. The word *geylang* may have been a corruption of the word 'kilang' in Malay, meaning factory or mill and *serai* means lemongrass. This is a reference to the lemongrass plantation owned by the Alsagoffs that used to be here. Lemongrass was cultivated in this area in the late 19th century. Geylang Serai Market's beginnings were as a wet market and food centre before 1930. It became an amusement park during the Japanese occupation and went through several transitions to attain its current form. Today, it's a two-storey kampong-style market for all things Malay, whether it be the rich fabrics and batik designs for *bajus* (blouses), its fabulous wet market or the eateries. Hope to bump into you there this Hari Raya.

Darly Furlong is a passionate volunteer of museum-based learning for children and leads other causes in Singapore that facilitate social justice.

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Vishnu and Lakshmi, Angkor Wat, period, 12th c



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Japanese Docents

When I saw the *wayang topeng* masks (used during a Javanese masked dance performance) at the ACM's special exhibition in January, they brought back memories from when I was a child. Those masks have a lot in common with the Japanese Noh masks that were hung on a wall at the entrance to my uncle's home. I used to wonder why someone would hang them up because I found them scary, especially in the dark. But I know now that they are *yaku-yoke*, which in Japanese means to protect against misfortune. The photo of the mask is one of the Noh masks that were in his home. When I was young, my family went to visit my grandmother almost every weekend because my father worried about her living alone. My younger sister and I always got to play at my uncle's home because it was near grandma's.



We used to spend time and played with my cousins in both homes and their spacious gardens. My uncle was a highly respected person, always gentle and the



representative of my mother's family. He taught us lots of practical things about life. He and his wife sometimes even took us on their trips to teach us and to experience different things. My childhood memories are bound up with my dearest uncle, memories that always make me feel warm. Countless sorrows hit us last year because of COVID-19 and I couldn't go to my uncle's funeral ceremony. This photo with my uncle was taken two years ago. I can't go to his graveyard to express gratitude, but he will always live on in my heart.

Ikumi Ebihara, Japanese Docent

Monday Morning Lectures

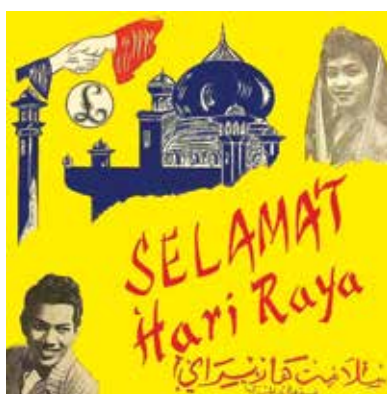
Currently all MML lectures are held online. Please download the ZOOM app in order to attend. All lectures are open to FOM members only. Visit the Community Events page on the FOM website to sign up, registration opens one week before the event. The lectures will begin promptly at 11:00 am.

3 May: No Lecture Owing to Labour Day

10 May • Hari Raya – the Celebration at the End of a Fast

Speaker: M L Khir Mohamad Johari

Hari Raya is often thought to be the Muslim New Year. It is, however, a Muslim high holiday to mark the completion of a month-long fasting period during Ramadan. The celebration is heralded by the sighting of the new moon, a tradition practised since Islam's inception. Globally, observance varies according to geography and different cultures. So how is Hari Raya celebrated in Singapore? Khir Johari invites you to take a peek inside Muslim homes as family, forgiveness and food take centre stage.



17 May: No Lecture Owing to Hari Raya Puasa

24 May: No Lecture Owing to Vesak Day

31 May • Remembering the Enlightened One

Speaker: Abha Dayal Kaul

The full moon day of Vaishakha is celebrated as Buddha Purnima or Vesak across Asia. An Indian spiritual giant is remembered by Buddhists worldwide on the day Siddharth Gautam was born, achieved enlightenment, and reached the end of his life. Travel to venerated pilgrimage sites where these events occurred over 2,500 years ago and experience the wisdom associated with the Buddha's life and teachings.



7 June • Edo – Life Through Woodblock Prints

Speaker: Clement Onn

Today, woodblock prints evoke an unfamiliar social environment, informed by values far removed from old Edo (today's Tokyo). But a visually compelling print produced by an artist (or rather a team of artists and artisans) helps us understand the Edo audience's response, similar to how many of us engage with social media platforms today. This talk looks at how woodblock prints could help us better understand the lifestyles and fashionable trends in Edo-period Japan.



Explore Singapore!

Painted Prayers of India: The Art of the Kolam

Thursday 6 May
10:00 am – 12:00 pm
Fee: \$40



Through the ages, Indian women have drawn *kolams* (geometric designs) at their doorsteps or in their courtyards as a welcome sign, using rice powder mixed with water. This South Indian artform is a religious ritual, a social activity, and an ephemeral channel for a commoner's artistic expression, not meant to be permanent. It must be constantly regenerated (a *kolam* usually lasts just one day). Join Explore Singapore! to learn more about them.

Nature and Nostalgia in Labrador Park – Crossroads of Maritime, Migration and Manufacture

Thursday 20 May
8:45 am – 11:00 am
Fee: \$30



Labrador Park is an interesting nexus of significant activities and events in Singapore's pre-modern and modern history. For over a century it was protected by a sophisticated series of defence fortifications. Today this is the last nature reserve on Singapore's southern shoreline. Join us on a walk through this area filled with nature and nostalgia.

The Learning Forest

Thursday 3 June
9:00 am – 11:00 am
Fee: \$35



Join Explore Singapore! for a tour of the Learning Forest to explore different habitats, learn about freshwater wetland ecosystems, and admire a collection of some of the tallest tree species in Southeast Asia. Another collection features plants cultivated for human use, items such as building materials and food. End the tour by listening to the sounds of the forest.

A Tour of Bukit Brown Cemetery

Thursday 10 June
8:30 am – 11 am
Fee: \$35



Spend a morning in a unique way, join us for a walk to Bukit Brown Cemetery. This was the first municipal Chinese cemetery in colonial Singapore and was once the largest outside China, with nearly 100,000 graves. Our guide will share the fascinating stories and history behind the various graves. Learn about the graves' different styles, *feng shui* elements and other features. Admire the art, sculptures and beautiful tiles that adorn them.

FOM Cares

We came, we dug, and 64 FOM members and friends planted five species of native trees along Ang Mo Kio Avenue 8 in March. Partnered with Singapore's One Million Trees Movement, FOM contributed to ongoing conservation efforts to make Singapore a true City in Nature.

We were joined by several members of Singapore's Friends of Trees including the chairman, Dr Thomas Eashaw, and NParks Director Mr Tee Swee Ping. Thank you to FOM member George Goh for organising their participation.

Also in March, FOM members and friends exercised their brains over their brawn for the NParks Dragonfly Watch in Gardens by the Bay (GBTB), an activity suggested by FOM member Sim Chong Teck. Sixteen participants trained with NParks to prepare to conduct our socially distanced surveys of dragonflies along GBTB's Dragonfly Lake.

With this data, NParks can start piecing together information on where dragonflies and damselflies are found and in what numbers, to contribute towards better park management and conservation measures. A PDF with the results of last year's survey can be downloaded from the



FOM Members Care webpage. The results of this year's survey will be uploaded when available.

Next up are two heritage events, a Tile Tidy on 8 May in partnership with the Singapore

Heritage Tile Project to help uncover more of Singapore's ceramic tile heritage in historical Bukit Brown Cemetery, and a Dragon Kiln Firing at Thow Kwang Pottery Jungle (Date TBD), the recipients of an inaugural National Heritage Board Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award in 2020.

Check out our FOM Members Care webpage and join the FOM Members Care! public Facebook group for more details on these and future opportunities to show your care.



FOM President Garima Lalwani with Singapore's Friends of Trees, including Dr Thomas Eashaw on her right and Mr Tee Swee Ping on her left. Photos by the author.

Darlene D Kasten is a coordinator with FOM Members Care.

Museum Information and Exhibitions

Please check individual museum websites for latest information on guided tours by FOM docents.

Asian Civilisations Museum

1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555
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www.acm.org.sg

Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am - 7:00 pm

Fri 10:00 am - 9:00 pm



FOM guided tours:

Mon to Fri 11:30 am, Fri 7:00 pm (English)

Mon to Fri 10:30 am and every second Saturday 1:30 pm (Japanese)

First Wed of the month 11:30 am (Korean)

Second Thursday of the month 11:30 am (Spanish)

Third Thursday of the month 11:30 am (French)

Understanding Asia through Singapore

The new and renovated galleries at the ACM use Singapore's history as a port city as a means of understanding the interconnections among Asian cultures and between Asia and the world.

Life in Edo | Russel Wong in Kyoto

(Through 19 Sept)

FOM guided tours:

Mon, Tue, Wed 2:00 pm; Thu, Fri at 2:00 pm and 4:00 pm

The exhibition spotlights the lifestyles and trends of Edo-period Japan through over 150 ukiyo-e prints and paintings, while scenes of present-day Kyoto – including a peek into the lives of the geiko community – are presented through black-and-white photographs captured by acclaimed Singaporean photographer Russel Wong, in their first-ever display.

Gillman Barracks

9 Lock Road, Singapore 108937
www.gillmanbarracks.com



A cluster of 11 contemporary art galleries and the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), Gillman Barracks features an ever-changing selection of contemporary art exhibitions.

Opening hours: Tues to Sun – Refer to individual gallery pages on-line for opening hours

Closed Mondays & Public Holidays

FOM guided tours:

Sat 4:00 pm: Art & History Tour

Sat. 5:00 pm: History and Heritage Tour

To register please visit www.fom-gillman-barracks.eventbrite.com

Indian Heritage Centre

5 Campbell Lane, Singapore 209924
www.indianheritage.org.sg

Open Tuesday to Sunday & public holidays. Closed on Mondays.

Tues to Thurs 10:00 am to 7:00 pm, Fri &

Sat 10:00 am to 8:00 pm

Sundays & public holidays 10:00 am to 4:00 pm



FOM guided tours: Tues-Fri

12:00 pm for the permanent galleries

11:00 am on Wed and Fri for the special exhibitions

Tamil tours (FOM) 11:30am on the first Friday of each month for the special exhibition

The Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) celebrates the history and heritage of the Indian diaspora in Singapore and the Southeast Asian region. From early contacts between the Indian subcontinent and this region, the culture and social history of the community after the arrival of

the British, through to the early stirrings of nationalism and political identity, and the contributions of Singapore's Indian community – the five galleries take visitors on a fascinating journey through the Indian diaspora. Located in Singapore's colourful and vibrant Little India precinct, the centre opened in May 2015 and is our only purpose-built museum.

Sikhs in Singapore – A Story Untold (Through 30 Sept)

Co-created by members of Singapore's Sikh community and the Indian Heritage Centre, *Sikhs in Singapore – A Story Untold* is presented in 3 parts – Roots, which tells the story of the origins of Singapore's Sikh community; Settlement, which brings together some exemplary narratives of Sikh migrants to Singapore; and Contemporary Perspectives which offers glimpses into the experiences of some contemporary Sikhs.

Malay Heritage Centre

85 Sultan Gate, Singapore 198501
Tel: 6391 0450

www.malayheritage.org.sg



Opening hours:

Tues to Sun 10:00 am – 6:00 pm (last admission 5:30 pm), closed on Mondays

FOM guided tours: Tues to Fri 11:00 am; Sat: 2:00 pm (Subject to availability. Please call ahead to confirm the availability of a docent).

The Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) provides wonderful cultural exposure and learning opportunities for visitors of all ages and interests. Situated amidst the Istana Kampong Gelam, Gedung Kuning and the surrounding Kampong Gelam precinct, the Centre acts as a vital heritage institution for the Malay community in Singapore. Through its exhibits, programmes and activities, the Centre hopes to honour the past while providing a means for present-day expression.

Urang Banjar: Heritage and Culture of the Banjar in Singapore (through 25 Jul)

In the fifth instalment in MHC's *Se-Nusantara* series of community co-curated exhibition and programmes on the ethnic cultural and diversity of the Malay community in Singapore, this exhibition focuses on the Banjarese community, or *Urang Banjar*, who are arguably the smallest group that make up the Malay community in Singapore. Many of them are able to trace the journeys of their ancestors from South Kalimantan in Singapore from the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, but also share a common ancestral language, material culture as well as a distinctive set of cultural norms and practices. The exhibition introduces the *Urang Banjar* as well as their culture and identity through ethnographic objects, community stories and treasured family belongings, which showcase their strong sense of kinship, industry and history.

National Museum of Singapore

93 Stamford Road, Singapore 178897
Tel: 6332 3659

www.nationalmuseum.sg

Opening hours:

Daily 10:00 am – 7:00 pm



FOM guided tours:

Mon to Fri 11:00 am (English)

Mon to Fri 10:30 am and every first Saturday 10:30 am (Japanese)

The National Museum of Singapore is the nation's oldest museum that seeks to inspire with stories of Singapore and the world. Its history dates back to 1849, when it opened on Stamford Road as the Raffles Library and Museum.

Home, Truly: Growing Up with Singapore, 1950s to the Present (through Aug)

Museum Information and Exhibitions

FOM guided tours: Tue and Thu at 2:00 pm

The National Museum of Singapore presents *Home, Truly: Growing Up With Singapore, 1950s to the Present* in collaboration with The Straits Times, as part of the newspaper's 175th anniversary. Featuring photographs and artefacts, including those contributed by members of the public, as well as audio-visual footage, sounds, scents and special digital features, *Home, Truly* explores the moments and experiences in Singapore's past and present that express our identity and collective memory as a people.

NUS Museum, NUS Centre for the Arts

University Cultural Centre
50 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore
119279
Tel: 6516 8817
www.museum.nus.edu.sg



Free admission

Opening hours:

Tues to Sat 10:00 am – 6:00 pm, Closed on Sundays and Public Holidays,

Monday: Visits by appointment for schools/faculties only.

Wishful Images: When Microhistories Take Form (through 25 Dec)

Five artists — Lucy Davis, Kao Chung-Li, Kuniyoshi Kazuo, Nguyễn Trinh Thi, and Aya Rodriguez-Izumi — whose artistic practices question the governmentality between the lived and the non-living explore the impact of contemporary geopolitical realities recapitulated under the Asian Cold War through a re-historicisation of the past into the present. Together with five artists whose artistic practices question the relationship between the lived and the non-living - Lucy Davis, Kao Chung-Li, Kuniyoshi Kazuo, Nguyễn Trinh Thi, and Aya Rodriguez-Izumi – *Wishful Images* resembles a collective attempt to relate lesser-known historical events through the persistent efforts of artists, recounted and re-articulated in various forms and mediums. Featuring artists' films, experimental animations, photographs, prints, audio, and archival documents, each artistic inquiry illuminates how Cold War politics materialise as aesthetic processes under their respective geopolitical conditions.

NUS Baba House

157 Neil Road, Singapore 088883
Tel: 6227 5731
www.babahouse.nus.edu.sg

English heritage tours: Tues - Fri, 10:00 am; Mandarin Heritage Tour: First Monday of each month, 10:00 am

Self-Guided Visits: Every Sat, 1.30 pm/2.15 pm/3.15 pm/4.00 pm

To register, please visit babahouse.nus.edu.sg/visit/plan-your-visit

For enquiries, please email babahouse@nus.edu.sg

Now conceived as a heritage house facilitating research, appreciation and reflection of Straits Chinese history and culture, the NUS Baba House was built around 1895 and was once the ancestral home of a Peranakan Chinese family. During the one-hour tour, guests will be introduced to the history and architectural features of the house, and experience visiting a Straits Chinese family home in a 1920s setting, furnished with heirlooms from its previous owners and other donors.

The Peranakan Museum

39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941
Tel: 6332 7591
www.peranakanmuseum.sg

This intimate museum possesses one of the finest and most comprehensive collections of Peranakan objects.

Galleries on three floors illustrate the cultural traditions and the distinctive visual arts of the Peranakans. The museum is currently closed to prepare for its next phase of development.



Singapore Art Museum

71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore 189555
Tel: 6332 3222
www.singaporeartmuseum.sg



The Singapore Art Museum focuses on international contemporary art practices, specialising in Singapore and Southeast Asia. The main building of the Singapore Art Museum (located along 71 Bras Basah Road) is currently closed to prepare it for its next phase of development.

Wikiliki: Collecting Habits on an Earth Filled with Smartphones (Through 11 Jul)

Located at City Hall Wing, Level B1, The Ngee Ann Kongsi Concourse Gallery, National Gallery Singapore

The exhibition is titled after the constantly evolving work, <http://dbbd.sg/wiki>, by artist Debbie Ding. Maintained since 2008, Ding's work traces emerging issues around society's use of the internet, technology, design, architecture, linguistics and varied cultural topics. Could the museum endeavour to collect such an artwork that expands and grows with time? Wikiliki explores this question through a survey of six artists whose modes of working provide unique but interrelated entry points into a range of issues confronting contemporary practitioners in Singapore today.

STPI Creative Workshop and Gallery

41 Robertson Quay, Singapore 238236
Tel: 6336 3663
www.stpi.com.sg

Opening hours:

Mon to Fri: 10:00 am – 7:00 pm, Sat: 9:00 am – 6:00 pm, Sun: 10:00 am – 5:00 pm

Closed Public Holidays

FOM guided tours: Thurs 11:30 am, Sat & Sun 2:00 pm

Please refer to STPI's website at www.stpi.com.sg for STPI's public programmes and Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, French and special evening tours.



STPI is a dynamic creative workshop and contemporary art gallery based in Singapore. Established in 2002, STPI is a not-for-profit organisation committed to promoting artistic experimentation in the mediums of print and paper and has become one of the most cutting-edge destinations for contemporary art in Asia.

Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874
Tel: 6256 7377
www.wanqingyuan.org.sg



Opening hours:

Tues to Sun 10:00 am - 5:00 pm, Closed on Mondays

FOM guided tours: Wed to Fri 2:00 pm (English)

FOM Special exhibition guided tours: 10:30am on Fridays in English

Built in 1902, this double-storey villa was the nerve centre of Dr Sun Yat Sen's revolutionary movement in Southeast Asia. It re-opened to the public on 9 October 2011 and the revamped Memorial Hall pays tribute to the vital role played by Singapore and Nanyang in the 1911 revolution. Focusing on the contributions of Dr Sun Yat Sen's key supporters in Singapore, the refurbished museum sheds light on the lesser-known details of Singapore and Nanyang's involvement in the 1911 Revolution.

Free general admission to all NHB museums for FOM members and one guest.

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Annual Membership Form

Mail to: FOM – Membership Secretary
61 Stamford Road, # 02-06 Stamford Court, Singapore 178892

Family Name: _____

Given Name: _____

Date of Birth: / / Nationality: _____

Address: _____

Postal Code: _____ Tel: _____

Handphone: _____ (RENEWALS ONLY) FOM Membership #: _____

Email: _____

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Include Spouse/Partner details on a separate sheet.
- ☐ FAMILY MEMBERSHIP
2 Adults + 5 Children \$120
Include Family details on a separate sheet.
- ☐ YOUNG FRIENDS MEMBERSHIP \$30
Applicants under 21. Include proof of age.
- ☐ SENIOR CITIZEN MEMBERSHIP \$30
Applicant must be 60+. Include proof of age.
- ☐ JOINT SENIORS MEMBERSHIP \$50
Both Applicants must be 60+. Include proof of age.
Include Spouse/Partner details on a separate sheet.
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☐ Credit Card Payment: ☐ Visa ☐ MC: Card #: _____ Exp Date: _____

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Please Sign. "In consideration of my/our acceptance as a member(s) of FOM and permitting me/us/my spouse/partner/child(ren) to partake in any of the FOM activities in which I/we may enroll for myself/ourselves/my spouse/partner/child(ren), I/we, for myself/ourselves, my/our heirs, executors or administrators, remise, release and forever discharge the FOM, its officers, servants and agents or other persons authorized by FOM, from all claims, demands, actions or causes of actions, on account of my/our death or on account of any injury (including injury resulting in death) however caused or sustained by me/us or loss of or damage (however caused) to my/our personal belongings suffered at any time during my/our attending the said activities. I/we also agree, at all times, to abide by the Constitution of FOM and its By-laws (as may be amended from time to time)."



signature & date

signature spouse/ partner/ joint family & date

To find out more contact us at 6337.3685, info@fom.sg or at: www.fom.sg