PASSAGE

Friends of the Museums Singapore

May / June 2020

art
history
culture
people

President's Letter

Dear Friends,

I hope you and your loved ones around the world are safe. These are unusual times, one that many of us thought existed only in movies. I remember when SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) affected Singapore in 2003, but it was nothing like what we are facing now. This new disease, named COVID-19, is far more contagious. If, like me, you have wondered what COVID-19 stands for, according to the World Health Organisation, CO is for corona, VI for virus, D for disease and 19 is for the year the outbreak was first identified.

At the end of January, when the coronavirus did not have a name, it looked as if the virus was something to watch out for, but we could proceed with caution. When Singapore went from Disease Outbreak Response System Condition or DORSCON Yellow to DORSCON Orange on 7 Feb, we immediately suspended docent-led tours, public events and many of the FOM member events. In March, we made the tough decision to extend the suspension until the end of July. To comply with the circuit breaker measures announced by the Singapore government, FOM closed its office from 7 April until 30 May 2020.

With the extension of the circuit breaker period, the FOM office will now remain closed until 1 June. These measures may affect the printing and delivery of *PASSAGE* magazine as well. All Singapore museums will also be closed during this period. These closures may be extended further if necessary.

Our Volunteer Appreciation Morning (VAM) and Public Information Meeting (PIM) have been postponed to the second half of the year and the coffee morning had to be cancelled. While it has been disappointing for our docents, activity leaders and members to have FOM events cancelled, I want to thank you all for rolling with these changes and finding ways of adapting to keep us moving forward. Asian Study Group coordinators, Kim Arnold and Priti Sanghavi, were early adopters of technology for their group. Instead of meeting in person, members met online via Zoom. Book groups, DOTs and even gallery talks and mentor tours for docent training are now being hosted online.

A very special word of thanks to the overall heads of docent training, Millie Phuah and Sarah Lever, the co-heads of docent training, group leaders, evaluators and everyone who has been involved with docent training for ACM, NMS, SYSNMH, STPI and the URA. During these uncertain times, you gave courage to the trainees and saw them through this journey all the way to the finish line. Also, to this very special group of 2020 docents, thank you for your tenacity and perseverance. Soon you will be done with your mentor tours and I shall look forward to welcoming you to the docent family. The current social distancing rules do not permit large social gatherings but once the situation improves, we will find a way to celebrate your achievement.

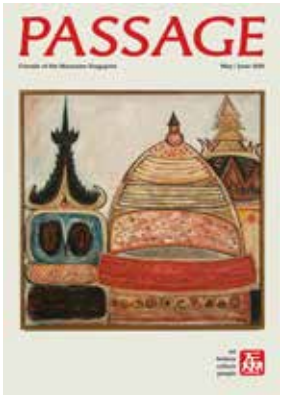
While many of our members may not be able to be with their family during this time, please remember, we are all in this together. Be sure to check the Singapore Ministry of Health (MOH) website at www.moh.gov.sg or subscribe to the Govt WhatsApp messages to get the latest information. I have downloaded the TraceTogether app and hope you have as well. A shout out to all the health care workers, here in Singapore and around the world, for their immense contribution.

During this period of extended social distancing, while we all stay at home, I hope that *PASSAGE* magazine brings you cheer. This issue focuses on Malay history, cultural practices, family traditions and artists from Singapore and Southeast Asia. Best wishes to our members celebrating Hari Raya and Vesak Day!

Stay safe and stay healthy.

Garima G Lalwani
FOM President 2020

Because of the COVID-19 situation, our Volunteer Appreciation Morning (VAM) and the Public Information Meeting (PIM, scheduled for 12 May) have been postponed to the second half of the year and the coffee morning had to be cancelled.



PASSAGE
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Managing Editor
Andra Leo
passage@fom.sg

Commissioning Editor
Khir Johari

News Editor
Durriya Dohadwala

Photography
Gisella Harrold

Editors/Contributors
Jemima Barton
Patricia Bjaaland Welch
Carla Forbes-Kelly
Amanda Jaffe
Anne H Perng

Advertising Manager
Michelle Foo
advertising@fom.sg

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Xpress Print Pte Ltd
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Singapore 534167
sales@xpress.sg

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On the Cover: Latiff Mohidin, *Pagoda II*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 99.4 x 99.2 cm. Collection of the National Gallery Singapore. This artwork has been adopted by Binjai Tree in memory of Chia Yew Kay and Tan Kim Siew.

Friends of the Museums Singapore

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.

FOM Office
Friends of the Museums (Singapore)
No.61 Stamford Road,
#02-06 Stamford Court
178892 Singapore: (tel: +65 6337 3685)
Website: www.fom.sg

Administration: Katherine Lim
Office Hours: Monday-Friday
9:30 am – 2:30 pm

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Historical and Contemporary Malays

By Yusoff Abdul Latiff

Sang Nila Utama, aka Sri Tri Buana, Prince of Palembang, sailed out from Palembang to look for a site to build a new city. The story goes that during the voyage, a storm broke out, but after an aide urged him to do so, he threw his crown overboard. Miraculously, the storm subsided and they were able to sail on safely. After landing at Temasek, he spotted a lion-like animal on the beach, so he renamed the island and called it Singapura, the Lion City. He chose Bukit Larangan (today's Fort Canning Hill) as his seat of government. During his reign, Singapura flourished as a trading centre.

Sang Nila Utama was succeeded by his eldest son, Sri Pikrama Wira who successfully foiled a Majapahit invasion. During the following reign, the legendary strongman Badang won a contest of strength against an opponent from Kalinga. Badang hurled a boulder from the slope of Bukit Larangan, landing it 500 metres away at the mouth of the Singapore River. A fragment of this boulder is believed to be the piece known as the Singapore Stone, now displayed in the National Museum. The British blasted the original boulder to build Fort Fullerton, which is why only a portion remains.

Modern-day immigrants from Palembang used to live in the now-defunct Palembang Road in the Kampong Gelam area. They are easily recognised because the men prefix their names with 'Masagos' and the women with 'Masayu'. In Singapore's current Cabinet, Mr Masagos Zulkifli Bin Masagos Mohamed is the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources and also the minister in charge of Muslim affairs.

Enrique the Melakan, aka Panglima Awang, and Ferdinand Magellan were probably the first seafarers to successfully sail around the world. Enrique is said to have been Sumatran, possibly a fighter defending Melaka when he was taken prisoner by the Portuguese in 1511. He became Ferdinand Magellan's indentured servant and was taken along as the interpreter for Magellan's journey to the *Visayan* (the Philippines). Magellan also took him to the Spanish royal court as a human specimen so as to convince the Spanish king of the need to sail west to the Spice Islands. Having accompanied Magellan from Melaka to the Philippines, then on to Spain before sailing west across the Atlantic and the Pacific to reach the Philippines once again, means that this Malay seafarer and his master had made a complete circumnavigation of the world by the time of Magellan's death. His voyages were documented by Antonio Pigafetta. Later, Harun Aminnurashid's book, *Panglima Awang*, alerted researchers to the existence of this Malay hero.

This daughter of an *Orang Seletar* (a man from Seletar) looked just like any average Malay girl as she welcomed a Singapore team whose members had gone to Kuala Sungai Temon to document the lives of the tribe and to interview the *Tok Batin* (chieftain). The *Orang Seletar* were one of several *orang laut* (sea people), indigenous tribes who inhabited the riverine and coastal areas of Temasek, southern Malaya and the Riau Archipelago. They lived a nomadic sea-faring life in boats or lived in houses on stilts. When Raffles landed in Singapore in 1819 there were almost a thousand *Orang Laut* living here. The *orang laut* have largely been assimilated into the wider Malay community, but many have played significant roles in modern Singapore. The late Othman Wok, a descendant of an *orang laut*, was the Minister of Social Affairs in Singapore's first Cabinet.

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.*

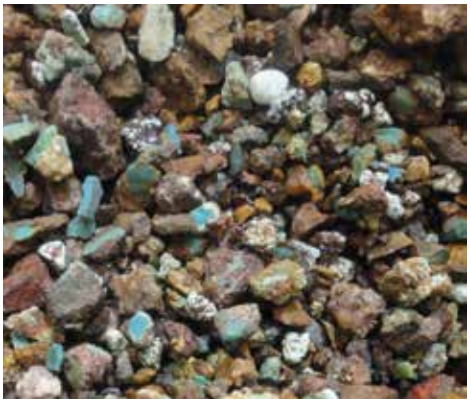
On the Wings of a Bird... From Nishapur to Norfolk

By Carolyn Pottinger

Nishapur, Iran, 10th century, image attributed to Roots.sg

The Middle East has a tradition of ceramic production going back many millennia, but during the period leading up to the production of this bowl, on view in the Islamic Gallery of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), the ceramic arts there were radically transformed. The 7th to the 10th centuries saw the burgeoning of an Islamic empire, first under the Ummayads and later the Abbasids. With this came the development of an artistic and intellectual revolution marked by the nascence of a category of art commonly referred to today as 'Islamic'. This bowl, with a bird at its centre, is a fine example of early Islamic art. It comes from Nishapur, in the Province of Khurasan, Iran.

Nishapur lies in a dusty plain protected by mountains and along a route that formed part of the ancient Silk Road linking Afghanistan and Tehran. Built originally in Sassanian times, the city fell to the expanding forces of Islam when the Abbasids conquered it in 748. With them came a significant transformation. Archaeological evidence gives no clues to suggest a particularly important role for the city in Sassanian times, but under the Abbasid and later the Samanid empires this was to change. Initially Nishapur developed as a centre of military and political power, evolving to become a significant entrepôt on the Silk Road, a true hive of activity where trade in linens, cottons and raw silk was robust. Turquoise was famously mined in the surrounding hills as well as, intriguingly, edible earth. This was highly valued for its medical qualities and widely traded, particularly to Egypt and the Mahgreb. Nishapur was, and still is, known for the wonderful rhubarb that grows there and is turned into a syrup. Men of letters gathered in their numbers amid a cosmopolitan society which included Sunnis, Shiites, Jews, Christians, Arabs, Turks and more.



Turquoise of Nishapur, image attributed to commons.wikimedia.org

At this time Nishapur also developed into a major centre for the production of ceramics. Potters had been making utilitarian wares across the region for millennia, but it was only in the course of the 9th century that a new degree of sophistication evolved. With increased trade came the wealth needed to invest in the ceramics industry. With the increase in trade, specifically with China, came a new impetus to raise the game in ceramics production. It is possible that one of the earliest spurs for innovation came from a diplomatic gift that was delivered to the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid (reign 786 - 809 AD). Said to have astonished its recipients, it included imperial quality *chini faghfuri*, or China ware, "the like of which had never been seen at a Caliph's court before". Among the collection, some pieces (possibly from the superior Ding and Xing kilns in northern China) showed an extraordinary whiteness quite unfamiliar to their Islamic recipients.

China possessed a much whiter clay than was available locally, as well as a key ingredient called kaolin which, combined with advanced technology, enabled the production of high-fired, fine, white ceramics, including wares which might qualify as 'porcelain'. Kaolin was not known in the Middle East and the clay there tended to be anything from egg yolk coloured to brown. One can only speculate whether the extraordinary gift to Harun al-Rashid triggered a search for the innovations that would follow, but the effect would certainly have been compounded by intensified trading relations between the Tang and Abbasid empires that came with the opening up of a maritime Silk Road between these two great empires, enabling far larger quantities of china to travel across such great distances (witness the spectacular Tang Shipwreck exhibition on view at the ACM).

One result of the push for innovation was the invention of a new technique in the Middle East, perhaps originally in Iraq but spreading rapidly across Iran and Egypt. Ground glass was added to clay so that it fused at lower temperatures than it would otherwise. It was not porcelain, but it offered a different way of dazzling the viewer. Called fritware for the 'frit' or ground glass (aka stone paste or faïence), the end result had a strong white body which, combined with a light tin glaze, looked more like the much-admired Chinese porcelain. True porcelain was not manufactured in the Islamic world until modern times and most fine Islamic pottery was made of fritware. Frit was also a significant component in some early European porcelains.

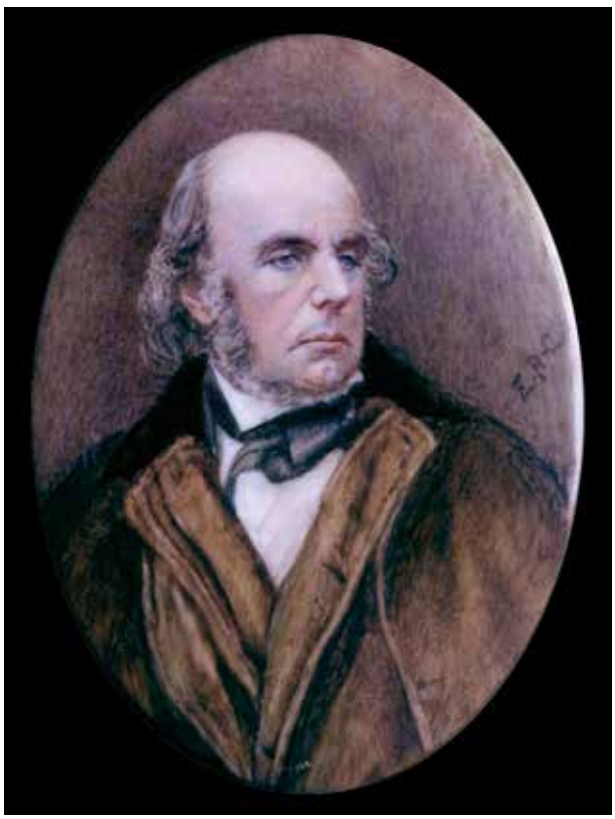
The Nishapur bowl is an example of fritware. It dates to the 10th century, with its elegant bold foliated Kufic script reading "Generosity is a disposition of the dwellers of Paradise". Calligraphy had been used decoratively pre-Islam, but the Islamic Arabic calligrapher was required to transpose the words of Allah as delivered to the Prophet *in all their beauty*. As objects of beauty, aided by the avoidance of figural art in religious works, Arabic calligraphy became a key component of much Islamic art, both religious and secular. Arabic proverbs often appeared on decorative artworks of the Samanid period (891-1005 AD), and this blessing is one of the most commonly found in Nishapur decoration.

Mausoleum of Omar Khayyam, image attributed to commons.wikimedia.org

If the appearance of a bird in a piece of Islamic art surprises the viewer, it should not. The ban on figural art associated with Islam tended to apply to objects in religious settings, but the bowl was made for eating, the diner seated on the floor, selecting each morsel with his right hand only, and the presence of animals (particularly birds) was very common on Nishapur pottery during the 10-12th centuries. Perhaps their soaring flight lent an association with the spiritual world, a metaphor for the Sufi's ultimate goal of achieving unity with God.

The birds of Nishapur were not only found on its ceramic wares but in its poetry. A century or so after this piece was made, Nishapur's still thriving intellectual circles included a poet whose work encouraged the reader to live life to the full for it was but short. Birds feature again and again, as in this example:

"The bird of life is singing in the sun
Short is his song, nor just begun
A call, a trill, a rapture, then-so soon!
A silence, and the song is done-is done"



Edward Fitzgerald, image attributed to commons.wikimedia.org

The poet was the Sufi intellectual, Omar Khayyam, better known in the land of his birth as an astronomer and mathematical genius than as a poet. The hedonistic tone of his poetry ("Wine! Wine! Wine! Red Wine! - the Nightingale cries to the Rose") was not always appreciated by successive Islamic regimes in the area, so it is probably thanks to his other strengths that his tomb still stands and can be seen in Nishapur today.

While his name was thus preserved for posterity, it would be known to few today were it not for events many miles away, some 800 or so years after his lifetime, when an English poet from Norfolk named Edward Fitzgerald chose to render a translation of one of his poems, giving it the title *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. It became Fitzgerald's best-known work, Tennyson later writing in tribute to "Old Fitz",

"… but none can say
That Lenten fare makes Lenten thought,
Who reads your golden Eastern lay,
Than which I know no version done
In English more divinely well;
A planet equal to the sun
Which cast it, that large infidel
Your Omar …"

Although Fitzgerald's first version – a penny pamphlet printed in 1859 – was remaindered, the work subsequently sold like hot-cakes and today boasts at least 650 different editions across the world, is translated into over 70 languages, and even put to music by over 100 different composers. Omar Khayyam's sybaritic message seems to sit more comfortably amid a Western audience.

Thus the flourishing of Nishapur a millennium ago continues to resonate. Its turquoise, edible earth and rhubarb syrup are available today, its ancient ceramics can be viewed in museums across the world, and its poetry has proven even more pervasive.

Carolyn Pottinger *was an FOM docent during her years in Singapore, guiding principally at the Asian Civilisations Museum where she also ran the lecture series Fridays with Friends. Now living in London, she guides at the British Museum and the Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich.*

A Joyous Buka Puasa at My Local Mosque

By Cécile Collineau

Last June, my husband and I, together with several of our neighbours, were invited to attend the *buka puasa*, or breaking of the Ramadan fast, at our local mosque in Novena, the Masjid Abdul Mosque, also known as Kampong Pasiran Mosque. Originally built in 1932, when the area was still a kampung peppered with many fruit trees, this small mosque was rebuilt in 2003. Its architecture is contemporary and includes a glass minaret. During Muslim festivals, we sometimes hear the pounding of the *bedok* (a drum for public announcements or to indicate prayer times).

Upon arrival at 6:45 pm we were greeted by the mosque's caretaker. After removing our shoes, my husband stayed downstairs with the other men while I was ushered upstairs, to the area dedicated to women. Following recommendations from our neighbourhood committee, I wore a long-sleeved tunic over loose trousers and brought a headscarf (although as a non-Muslim I was not required to do so). Several of my female neighbours did not wear a head covering.

Long green plastic mats were laid on the floor of the large room, in which 60-80 Muslim Singaporean women of all ages (mostly ethnic Malays), sat in four rows facing each other. Most wore the festive and colourful *baju kurong*, the traditional Malay dress of a long tunic worn over a sarong, with their head covered with a scarf. In front of them were displayed tubs of dates, trays of food (Malay cooking, obvious from the distinct mouth-watering aroma) and drinks: water and juice.

The atmosphere was joyous and chattery in English and Malay. While more than half of the women were already seated, a large number were still busy setting up the drinks and food trays, ensuring everything was in order. There was a lot of laughter as well as running back and forth. Although there was a sense of urgency, a good mood prevailed.

The assembly of women waiting to start

Madam Zainab Bte Ali, wife of Mr Haji Bahari Bin Suradi, ex-chairman of the Abdul Hamid Kg Pasiran Mosque's management board, greeting the author and her daughter. She passed away in March 2020

As we were getting closer to 7:10 pm, the official time to break the fast, everyone sat down. Suddenly and unexpectedly, a silence fell over the room for two to three minutes. It was a sharp contrast to the beehive activity that had taken place just before. These few moments, ending the day of fasting, are a time of reflection and prayer (and possibly fatigue). This highlights the contrast between the time of fasting (the sacrifice during the day) and the time of eating (the indulgence during the night). In the early days of Islam, the exact moment of sunset was defined by holding a black thread and a white thread, outside, away from artificial light. When one could not distinguish between them, the first verse of the Maghreb (evening) prayer was recited, and people could start eating. Today, people will wait for the signal on the radio, or will know the official time by reading the daily newspaper, or keeping up with modern times, they will receive an alert through a smartphone App.

Over the speaker, we heard a man's voice calling for prayer in Arabic, chanting the first verse of the Maghreb. After this verse, we were all invited to perform *Buka Puasa*, literally meaning "opening of the fast" in Malay. Increasingly, the Malays in Singapore use the Arabic term *Iftar*. We first

started by eating a date. Eating dates to break the fast is not mandatory but is traditional. This fruit is not grown in Southeast Asia: it is imported from the Middle East (Turkey, Morocco, and the UAE countries). Apart from being very nutritious (therefore a good way to replenish a famished body), dates are thought to be the fruit that the Prophet Muhamad was eating as he was breaking his own fast. Dates are highly emblematic in much of the Arab World, symbolising birth and fertility; they also remind Muslims of the geographical and historical origin of the birth of their religion, 7,000 kilometres away and 1,400 years ago. The dates were followed by a glass of Bandung drink (condensed milk mixed with rose cordial – a bit too sweet for my taste I admit). Four of us then ate from the same platter which consisted of various Malay foods: beef rendang, chicken curry, fried tempeh, dried anchovies and peanuts, stewed eggplants, green beans and chilli, all served with *nasi lemak* (rice cooked with coconut milk). Throughout the delicious meal, there was a lot of talking, chatter and laughter and the atmosphere was festive. Once the meal was over, after an hour, the room was cleaned. The Muslim women put white, body-covering robes over their clothes and tight headscarves to prepare for prayer. It was time for me to thank my hosts for the generous and joyous welcome and I left to rejoin my husband.

Volunteers in front of the old mosque in the 1980s

A special thank you to Mae Chong for translating an interview from Malay to English for me.

The Masjid Abdul Hamid Kampong Pasiran near my home

Cécile Collineau *is the FOM book groups' coordinator. This article is an adaptation of an assignment originally submitted for an online introductory course on social anthropology by Oxford University Continuing Education.*

All photos courtesy of the author

The History of the Abdul Hamid Kampong Pasiran Mosque

Masjid Abdul Hamid Kampong Pasiran is a mosque located in Gentle Road in Novena. Sporting a decidedly contemporary architecture with its thin glass minaret, it looks brand new but in fact it is a grand old dame of 88 years. It was originally built in a sandy area, which contrasted with the surrounding grasslands. Thus, the neighbourhood became known as Kampong Pasiran (sand in Malay being *pasir*), the 'village in the sands'. Today the small street near Jalan Pasiran joining Chancery Lane and Gentle Road, still exists. Some taxi 'uncles' remember coming to this area to harvest durians and rambutans when they were little boys because the area was covered with orchards. It's sweet to hear these 70-year-old gentlemen giggling at the memory of climbing trees to catch fruit. There already existed a prayer hall (*surau*) patronised by the kampong dwellers, but in 1932 Haji Abdul Latib bin Samydin donated the land *(wakaf)* for the mosque and Mr Abdul Hamid Ahmad Marang (who gave his name to the mosque) financed the construction. In 2003 the mosque was entirely rebuilt. Today it can accommodate up to 500 worshippers who are mostly office workers from the Newton and Novena areas (the IRAS building is just 200 metres away). It is one of Singapore's smallest mosques but is very active: food donations are organised; weddings ceremonies are held regularly; Malay-style martial arts (*silat*) classes take place every week for boys and girls; and members of the community, Muslim or not, are warmly invited by the caretakers. In the evening, if one pays attention, one can hear the gentle prayer sung by the muezzin. During festive days in the Muslim calendar, the sound of the *bedok* nestled in a small room on the second floor, resonates throughout the neighbourhood announcing the visit of worshippers dressed in their finest colourful clothes.

Heirloom Gold: The Matrilineal Minangkabau

By Naomi Wang

For centuries, travellers to Southeast Asia were "astonished at the way seemingly ordinary Southeast Asians presented themselves with hundreds of dollars' worth of gold on their persons".[1] Valued across all social strata, gold jewellery was in constant demand: it served as a display of wealth and status and as a practical means of portable savings. So great was this demand that royal capitals and wealthy individuals were able to establish "a tradition of gold working which survived the collapse of the royal court, subsequently sending itinerant smiths out to sell or do commission work in newer centres".[2] Immigrant Indian, Arab and Chinese artisans who settled throughout the region contributed to the tradition of metalworking, resulting in lively adaptations of many cultural influences.

Sumatra: An international trade emporium

The Minangkabau, who hail from the highlands of western Sumatra, exemplify a love for splendid ornamentation and dress. Western Sumatra had "abundant deposits of gold", which increased the supply of this precious metal.[3] As early as the first century CE, literature from India referred to Sumatra as Yavadvipa (golden island) and Suvarnadvipa (golden peninsula).[4]

Fig 1. Headdress, Western Sumatra, Solok, late 19th or early 20th century. Gold, silver, copper, cotton, coconut oil, resin, 73 x 48 cm. Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, gift of Mr Edmond Chin

Sumatra's rich natural resources and strategic maritime location, linking the Middle East and India with China, earned it great wealth. Trade brought the Minangkabau into contact with diverse peoples. Arab, Persian, Indian, Chinese, Javanese and later Portuguese, English and Dutch influences had an impact on the cultural fabric of Sumatra.[5]

From mother to daughter: Heirloom jewellery

Prehistoric Minangkabau society was guided by *adat* (traditional law and customs governing all behaviour), which made "lineage, property and inheritance the responsibility of senior women".[6] By the 16th century, the popular adoption of Islam, combined with indigenous *adat* beliefs made the Minangkabau people one of the world's most unique cultures: an Islamic, matrilineal society.

Fig 2. Back of headdress lined with European chintz and Indian brocade

Important ceremonial occasions such as weddings, for example, illustrate the Minangkabau's complex identity. The Minangkabau wedding involves an Islamic ceremony at the local mosque as well as a series of *adat*-related rituals, most of which take place at the bride's *rumah gadang* (great house), the Minangkabau *adat* house, owned by the maternal line. The full range of ceremonies may last over a week. Naturally, ceremonial jewellery features prominently during such occasions. According to *adat*, "jewellery and other valuables are often owned by the clan from the mother's lineage".[7] These valuables become family heirlooms passed down from mother to daughter. Generally, only family members of the same lineage, *saparuik* (literally, "from the same womb"), can wear or borrow jewels owned by their maternal line.[8]

The most spectacular part of a Minangkabau woman's ceremonial dress is the resplendent headdress. Depending on region or group, there are variations in the shape, design and form of headdresses. In the town of Solok, women have worn large, elaborate headdresses for centuries (fig 1).[9] Made from two panels hinged at the middle, the front panel is covered

1 Ried, Anthony. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680, Volume One: The Lands below the Winds*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988: 85.
2 Ibid.: 100.
3 Richter, Anne and Carpenter, Bruce. *Gold Jewellery in the Indonesian Archipelago*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2011: 265.
4 Summerfield, Anne and John. *Walk in Splendour: Ceremonial Dress and the Minangkabau*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1999: 29.
5 Ibid.: 31
6 Ibid.: 36
7 Ibid.: 275
8 Ibid.: 275
9 Seow, Marilyn ed. *The Asian Civilisations Museum: A-Z Guide*. Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006: 218.

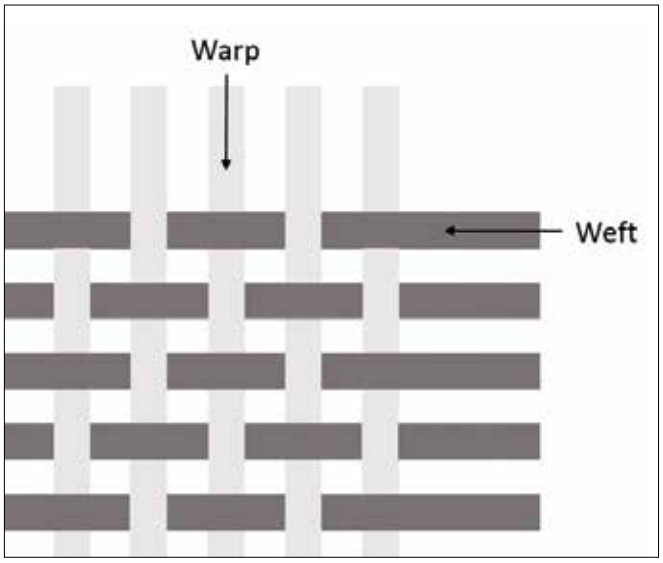


Fig 3. Diagram showing the plain-woven technique. Warp and weft threads cross at right angles

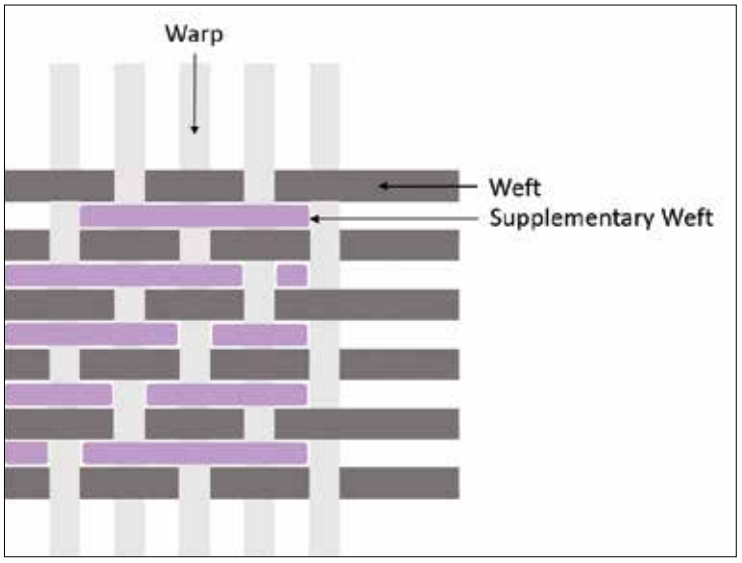


Fig 5. Diagram showing the supplementary weft technique. Extra weft threads are inserted within the weave to create raised patterns

with a profusion of floral sprigs made from gold and silver alloy foils. These foils are framed by copper wires, giving the petals their naturalistic shape. Relief patterns on these foils were made by imprinting with a stamp. When worn, the front panel rests on top of the wearer's head. The back panel with fringe of chains and cone-shaped embellishments falls to the back of the neck.

Fern tendrils and bamboo shoots: Motifs and meanings

Adat guides the Minangkabau way of life, across religious and secular domains. Hundreds of *adat*-related names and meanings govern the use of specific motifs, which make up the rich vocabulary of the complex and enduring Minangkabau system of knowledge (largely passed down through oral tradition). These motifs, seen in metalwork, woven textiles and wood carvings of the great house (*rumah gadang*), preserve and keep alive a centuries-old oral repository of wisdom and knowledge.

The gold repoussé work on the back panel of the headdress reveals the intricate workmanship for which Minangkabau jewellery is well-known. Nearly a hundred ornamental designs make up the rich vocabulary of *adat* motifs.[10] Each motif embodies *adat* teachings and has its own meaning. Meandering across the back panel is the beautiful intertwining *kaluak paku* (fern tendril) motif. Its curvilinear form takes after spirals of a young fern tendril. Symbolising kinship, these *kaluak paku* are a reminder of family ties and community.[11]

Fig 4. Close-up of copper-wrapped threads. Thin strips of copper foil are wrapped around cotton threads

Flanking each side of the back panel are curved, triangular shapes resembling the horns of the water buffalo and the popular bamboo shoot motif (*pucuak rabuang*). This motif echoes the striking, upward facing *gonjong* (horn-like roof structures) of the *rumah gadang*. The *pucuak rabuang* motif symbolises growth and looking upwards, and thus the belief in one god.[12] On this headdress, this upsweeping motif emphasises the important role of women as the building blocks of Minangkabau society.

Hidden textiles: Imported luxury cloths

Though not visible when worn, the inside of this headdress is lined with precious Indian and European trade textiles (fig 2). Imported cloths were symbols of prestige, earned from the profitable trade of gold, pepper, gambier and other natural resources found in Sumatra. The underside of the top panel is lined with a plain-woven, machine-printed European chintz (the warp and weft threads cross at right angles) (fig 3). The lower half is lined with an Indian brocade, where purple, green and copper-wrapped cotton threads were woven in a supplementary weft technique (fig 4). Extra weft threads were inserted into the brocade weave to create raised patterns (fig 5).[13]

This headdress, together with over 260 other objects, is on display in the newly opened jewellery gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Naomi Wang *is curator for Southeast Asia at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). She holds a BA in Art History from the University of Toronto. Her past exhibitions at the ACM include* Port-Cities: Multi-Cultural Emporiums in Asia, 1500 – 1900; Raffles in Southeast Asia: Revisiting the Scholar and Statesmen*; and the recently launched permanent gallery on Island Southeast Asian Jewellery.*

Unless otherwise noted, images courtesy of the Heritage Conservation Centre, Singapore

10 Summerfield, Anne and John. *Walk in Splendour: Ceremonial Dress and the Minangkabau.* Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1999: 171.
11 Ibid.: 176
12 Ibid.: 244
13 Scientific analysis completed by conservators at the Heritage Conservation Centre, Singapore.

Pulau Sekijang Pelepah: A Frontier Island in Malay History

By Dr Hamzah Muzaini

Singaporeans know Sentosa of course, but located farther south from the mainland is a cluster of islands that since the 2000s has been enlarged and merged via causeways. While many of us would have heard of one, St John's Island, Lazarus Island is less well-known.

Island Toponymics

Lazarus Island was previously known as *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah.* The earliest representation of the island was found on Mao Kun's map from the 1600s identified as *Pi-Pa-Hsu (Yu), Hsu* and *Yu* meaning island, while *Pi-pa* is likely a corruption of the original Malay name, *Pelepah*. *Sekijang* is made up of two Malay words, *seekor* (one) and *kijang* (deer). Together, they form *sekijang* (a deer), possibly in reference to the barking deer, then found widely in Singapore. Yet the word *sekijang* could also have been derived from a fruit known as *pauh kijang* (barking deer mango, its scientific name is *Irvingia Malayana*), or from a climbing plant known as a deer's root. It is hard to ascertain which is the correct version. The suffix *pelepah* (palm frond in Malay) refers to the abundance of coconut trees there.

Even more of a mystery, however, is how *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah* became Lazarus Island. While some may say this is reference to Lazarus of Bethany, or when there was a proposal made in the 1900s to rename the Southern Islands according to the biblical names of saints, the most probable explanation is that Lazarus got its name from the construction of a *lazaretto* (isolation hospital in Italian) for the quarantine station. While the quarantine station itself was on St John's, *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah* was where more serious cases were treated. The cemetery for those who died from their diseases while at St John's was also located here.

Early inhabitants

According to historical records, *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah* was historically inhabited by Malays and the *Orang Laut* (sea people) coming mainly from the Indonesian Riau Islands. They originally settled on another island nearby, *Pulau Seringat*, before moving to *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah* because of flooding. The settlers were followers of the *Temenggong* (police chief) of the Johor-Riau empire who settled on the mainland in the 1800s and depended on the *Orang Laut* for their fishing prowess and to make the waters safe for trade.

In 1819, failing to establish a port in the Karimun Islands owing to the Dutch presence there, Sir Stamford Raffles set his eyes on Singapore. Prior to landing on mainland Singapore's shores on 29 January 1819, Raffles and his fleet of eight ships anchored off the "fine sandy beach" of St John's Island. While no landing was made by the British, a group of islanders, most probably inhabitants of *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah* rather than St John's Island as previously thought, came on board to investigate. Upon hearing from the local inhabitants that no Dutchman had yet to set foot in Singapore, Raffles and William Farquhar, later to be Singapore's Resident, proceeded to Singapore the next day. Thus, the interaction between the British and the inhabitants of the frontier island of *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah* could be seen as a crucial start to Singapore's modern history.

***Pulau Sekijang Pelepah* over the years**

Not much more is known about the original inhabitants. By the 1970s, however, the northern shores of *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah* were jam-packed with houses, mostly on stilts. There were two villages, one of them known as *Kampong China* (or Chinese Village) despite there being only one Chinese family living there. In total, there were approximately 44 houses and 100 inhabitants between the two villages. There were also two cemeteries (one for the villagers and another for casualties of the quarantine station on St John's Island), a *surau* (small mosque), a community centre, a clinic (which a doctor visited only once a week) as well as the *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah* Malay School. One of the houses in the village facing St John's Island also served as a provision shop and was run by a Chinese owner.

Villages on Pulau Sekijang Pelepah *(source: Singapore Land Authority)*

Houses on stilts by the coast of Lazarus Island (source: R Ridwan)

Many of the Malay islanders there were fishermen, although some also worked as cleaners, maintenance workers, or groundskeepers, first for the British and later for local statutory boards stationed on the island over the years. The residents would also supplement their incomes by selling *nasi lemak*, Milo, *ais kacang* and ice lollies, or by taking tourists around the island and selling them souvenirs such as necklaces and bracelets made from shells. The boys were also known to provoke tourists into throwing coins into the water as they were

Some of the villagers at Pulau Sekijang Pelepah *(source: A Giman)*

Posing in from of the Pulau Sekijang Pelepah *Malay School (source: K Yaacob)*

leaving the island so that they could retrieve them in their mouths "like a sea lion". During the pilgrimage season, islanders would also sell food and souvenirs to pilgrims at Kusu Island.

Former residents of the island recall there being a strong sense of community solidarity and the kampong spirit (*gotong royong*) among all individuals regardless of ethnicity. Island diets consisted of sea catches and forest forage, vegetables grown by the islanders and chickens reared in situ. The environment also provided 'tools' such as the screw pine (or *mengkuang duri*) used as brushes to paint sampans, and bamboo as building materials. Other needs were sourced from the mainland on occasional visits using their own boats or via a ferry that took them to Clifford Pier. During times of illness, treatment was sought from the *bomoh*, who also provided midwifery and post-natal services. Serious cases required visits to the medical clinic on St John's, or the Singapore General Hospital on the mainland. Islanders also had traditional remedies to ameliorate everyday ills such as headaches and mild fevers.

One of the most popular recreational activities on the island was swimming, with many former residents claiming to have spent much of their free time in the water. Islanders would also play sports, with football being popular. There were sporting events such as *Pesta 5S* (Festival Night) or when participants would come from various Southern Islands to compete in diving, snorkelling or *kolek* (dinghy) and *jong* (boat) races. Some also remember playing other games such as *panjat pinang* (greasy pole) whereby competitors would climb up an oiled pole to attain a prize. The *Pesta 5S* is a good example of how even though the islands were physically separated by water from the others, there were still inter-island interactions. Occasionally, villagers would also come together and welcome dignitaries such as the late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew or our first head of state, President Yusof Bin Ishak.

Pulau Sekijang Pelepah *today where the villages used to be (photo by the author)*

President Yusof Bin Ishak visiting Pulau Sekijang Pelepah *(source: NAS)*

Moving back to the mainland

Soon after independence in 1965, when the decision was made to turn the islands into recreational spots following the loss of beaches to the development of Changi Airport, the residents of *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah* were forced to move to the mainland in the 1970s. Many of them were resettled in Telok Blangah. All the built structures were then torn down and the cemeteries exhumed and moved to Lim Chu Kang. In the 2000s, following the merger with St John's Island, a man-made beach was crafted on *Pulau Sekijang Pelepah*, now known as Eagle Bay, along with new public facilities.

Today, the islands still attract day trippers from Singapore, many seeking to escape the hustle of the urban mainland and appreciate the peaceful island settings. Even so, more could be done to highlight the heritage of the island not only as the location of a Malay village but also as a frontier in Singapore's early history.

Dr Hamzah Muzaini *is an Assistant Professor with the Southeast Asian Studies Department of the National University of Singapore.*

A Silver Malay Wadah Kueh for Queen Wilhelmina

By Khir Johari

This *wadah kueh* (cake receptacle) was a gift from Sultan Abdul Rahman Muazzam Shah II, (r 1885-1911), the last sultan of Riau-Lingga, to Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands on the occasion of her coronation in 1898. Used for special ceremonies to present cakes (*kueh*), it comprises two parts: the footed plate and the dome cover. The *wadah* has the appearance of a huge flower just opening up. The plate and foot have scalloped rims with chased flower motifs where the ornamentation showcased a blend of Malay, Bugis and European influences. On the dome cover, a circle of half-moon-shaped ornaments is filled with halved sunflowers, reminiscent of the ubiquitous crescent moon and star design seen in many Islamic lands. They quite closely resemble the jewel the Sultan wore on his headdress. The little chains hanging down from the rims give this large receptacle (diameter 58 cm) a sense of lightness with a very elegant appeal.

The wadah kueh *comprises two parts: a pedestal plate and a dome cover. Image courtesy of Jan Veenendaal's* Asian Art and Dutch Taste

Sultan Abdul Rahman Muazzam Shah II, the last ruler of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate

The gift was accompanied with his photograph and this felicitation note from the Sultan:

Bertambah tinggi pangkat keberasan,
Naik karadjaan dengan keboetoelan,
Menaäloeki sekalian Hindia-Nederland
Menjadi radja berkekalan

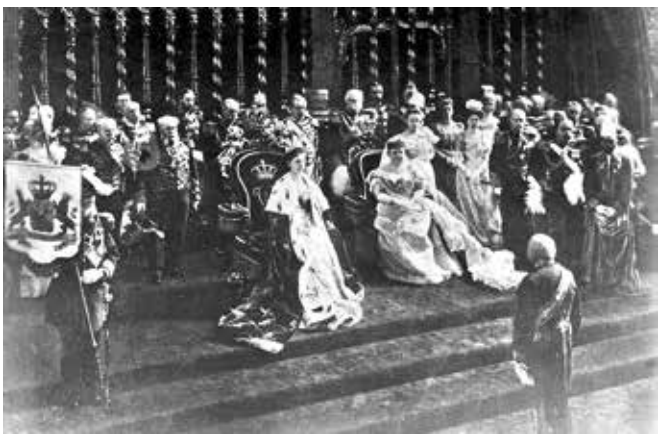
Moedah-moedahan di landjoetkan kiranja,
Oleh Allah akan oemoernja
Santijas dengan kebesarannja
Senang santausa sagala halnja

Rising to the stature of greatness
Ascended the kingdom as is meant to be
Ruling over the entire Dutch East Indies
To become an eternal sovereign
Long live the Queen
By God it will be granted
Befitting her paramountcy
Joy and peace in all matters

Together with other presents from the Sultan, the *wadah* was kept in the silver safe of Palace Het Loo Apeldoorn for many years. As the royal family always considered their presents to be private, that is, belonging to the House of Orange-Nassau and not the State, it was discreetly sold through a Dutch auction house around 1975 to a famous Dutch art collector, J H Beltman. Beltman bequeathed almost all of his enormous collection to form the Museum Nusantara in Delft. However, this *wadah kueh* was not part of that project; it remained in a private collection. In 2015, by sheer good fortune, the heirloom made its way back to Nusantara.

A close-up of the dome cover showcasing five bands, each with a different design produced using the repoussé, chasing and hand engraving techniques. Photo by Khir Johari

If you would like a close-up look, the *wadah kueh* is on loan to the Malay Heritage Centre for the current special exhibition *Seekor Singa, Seorang Putera & Sebingkai Cermin: Reflecting and Refracting Singapura.*



Coronation of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands in 1898. Royalty from the Dutch East Indies were present

Khir Johari *considers pots, pans, kitchen tools, moulds and serveware as instruments for a gastronomic symphony. His book 'The Food of Singapore Malays: Gastronomic Travels Through the Archipelago' will be released later this year.*

All photos courtesy of the author

From 'Lapangan Merdeka' to 'Jalan Karbela'

Retracing the Historical Footsteps of Tabut in Bengkulu

By Herman Lim Bin Adam Lim

The Bengkulunese memory of 1824

Ask Singaporeans today about Bencoolen and they might tell you about the MRT station located downtown. Conversely, ask most Bengkulunese today about Singapore, and they'll tell you about an island whose fortunes only skyrocketed after the British relinquished their other far-flung Sumatran outpost.

Visiting Bengkulu (colonial Bencoolen) in September 2019 for its biggest yearly event, I quickly learnt that the Bengkulunese do not share our historical amnesia: the memory of 1824 persists in their collective social consciousness. Of course, 1824 remains significant for all in the Nusantara – whenever we cross maritime borders, we relive the repercussions of the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty. However, mentioning my Singaporean identity to the Gojek driver or the *bakso* lady often triggered lamentations. For the Bengkulunese, 1824 is also remembered as the year the Dutch dropped claims over British-controlled Singapore, after the British relinquished their outposts in Sumatra including Bencoolen. At the heart of these local interactions appeared to be colonial nostalgia. Perhaps if Bengkulu had remained British, it would be as prosperous as Singapore today.

A common motif on tabuts *is the* Buraq, *the mythical winged horse with the head of a human, who was said to have taken the Prophet Muhammad on a night journey to the farthest mosque (associated with Jerusalem), from where he ascended to the heavens to commune with God*

Interestingly, this early cessation of British control might have partially contributed to the survival of Bengkulu's most cherished festival today: *Tabut*. And I've arrived precisely to witness the religious festival whose historical presence spanned numerous ports, including Penang – and even Singapore.

Remembering the Household of the Prophet: Contested origins

Bengkulu's Lapangan Merdeka ('Independence Square') is the nucleus of today's *Tabut* festivities, with all the trappings of a quintessential carnival: a food fair of fried finger foods and hipster craft coffee; vertigo-inducing children's rides; a modest flea market; and a performance stage. Such an animated atmosphere belies the sombre commemoration at hand.

The gathering for prayers and zikir *at Imam Senggolo's tomb, Jalan Karbela, on the Day of Ashura* (10 Muharram), *after the* tabut *procession ends*

In the Qur'an, the word *tabut* is used for box-like objects, including the Ark of the Covenant, and the basket cradling baby Moses down the Nile. In this festival's context, it references the makeshift decorative cenotaphs created by devotees to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn and Hassan, the two sons of Prophet Muhammad's cousin Ali ibn Abu Talib, during the 7th century battle of Karbala in today's Iraq. Observed during the first 10 days of Muharram, the first Islamic calendar month, this mournful act of remembrance for two members of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (Household of the Prophet) might be assumed to be a strictly Shi'a practice. However, most scholars would argue that such devotion for the Prophet's family was shared across Muslims of different affiliations, particularly prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran.

Entrance to the compound of the provincial governor, Bengkulu, with two permanent stone tabut *cenotaphs marking the entryway, reflecting the* tabut's *position as a celebrated part of Bengkulunese culture*

How and when *Tabut* came to be commemorated in Bengkulu remains contentious, particularly for the families still executing the intricate religious rituals. In his 2012 publication, the present family patriarch, Pak Syiafril, deflected accusations of *shirk* (idolatry) towards *Tabut* from reformist Muslims. As I walked Bengkulu's streets, sermons

from several mosques were broadcast into neighbourhoods where commemorations were the most intense warning them of *Tabut's* un-Islamic nature.

To combat such claims, Pak Syiafril insists that Bengkulu had received Muslim missionaries who made pit-stops in Persia, Punjab and Aceh, directly from Arabia from the 7th century. One missionary, Imam Senggolo, believed to have reached Bengkulu in the 14th century, is credited with introducing *Tabut* to the Bengkulunese as a medium for propagating Islam. The directive to build cenotaphs in memory of Hassan and Husayn, however, is argued to come straight from 7th century Karbala. In an oft-repeated apocryphal tale, the disfigured remains of Husayn were said to have risen on the battlefield, and a beautiful box appeared to cloak his body. A voice then descended upon the righteous warriors as this *tabut* ascended to heaven, "If you love Imam Husayn, then build a splendid *tabut* like so, to commemorate the Karbala martyrs."

On the night before the procession, all the tabuts *are gathered together in Lapangan Merdeka, with their lights ceremoniously displayed for all who are present – in memory of Hassan and Husayn for some, and as representations of indigenous Bengkulunese culture for others*

These holy stories are still imprinted on Bengkulu's topography. In the final processional route on Ashura, the participants parade their elaborate *tabuts* through the city's lanes in a grand spectacle. This physical pilgrimage ends at a street aptly named Jalan Karbela, where the body of Imam Senggolo rests. Returning to *Tabut's* roots, they honour their teacher of Islam. At the same time, each footstep that takes them closer to the end point of Jalan Karbela, represents yet another leap on their spiritual ascent to the more distant fields of 7th century Karbala, in an ethereal union with the martyrs.

Colonial connections and the network of South Asian migration

Ke tepi sungai sampailah tabut
Berlari kereta kelam nan kabut
Laksana turun taufan dan ribut
Fakir melihat berasa takut

The *tabut* reached the riverbank
Moving in a chaotic manner
Reminiscent of a stormy typhoon
The fakir looked on anxiously

Ke tepi sungai kudu diletakkan
Akan yang syahid Fatihah dibacakan
Demi tamat kudu ditolakkan
Demikianlah hal riyal dihabiskan

The *kudu*[1] was placed on the riverbank
The *Fatiha* was read for the Martyrs
As soon as it finished, the *kudu* was pushed
And this was the way the money was spent

In 1864, a man calling himself Encik Ali composed a first-hand account of the *Tabut* procession that year in a *syair*, or Malay quatrain poem. One could be forgiven for thinking his observations were made in Bengkulu, (the poet self-identifies as Bangkahulu, a son of Bengkulu), but the procession took place in Singapore. Recording place names such as Kampong Gelam and Telok Ayer, one gets a sense of the procession's exhilaration, emanating from the participants' collective effervescence. After drawing the ire of Europeans and a few unfortunate run-ins with the police, this would actually be the last year *Tabut* would ever take place across the Straits Settlements, for it was banned by the British colonial authorities in 1865.

The crowning of the tabut *of the Imam's family*

Most historians, contrary to Pak Syiafril's claims, agree that *Tabut's* presence in Southeast Asia is intimately tied to the British East India Company and the movement of South Asians under their command from the 17th century. During this early period, the British brought Sepoy soldiers to secure Bencoolen. Imam Senggolo was most likely one of these soldiers. Also around 1787, Bencoolen became a penal colony and saw new immigrant convicts from British India. Such movement was mirrored in subsequent British colonies, including Penang and Singapore, where South Asians also introduced *Tabut*. By the time Encik Ali recorded his *Tabut* observations in 1864, in Singapore, the procession would also involve Burmese, Siamese and Peranakans.

Yet European views of the procession at the time were far from favourable. Already in 1842, the Penang authorities prohibited *Tabut* processions, particularly to hit back at the *kling* (Indian) community for organising a strike that year. Following the 1857 Indian Rebellion in British India, anxieties

1 The etymology of the word *kudu* remains unclear. Based on contextual clues, however, it seems likely to be a local variant of the word 'tabut'. Barring some minor changes, the translation of these two quatrains 124 and 125 was taken from Julia Byl, Raja Iskandar bin Raja Halid, David Lunn, and Jenny McCallum, "The Syair Tabut of Encik Ali: A Malay Account of Muharram at Singapore, 1864," *Indonesia and the Malay World* (2017).

over large gatherings involving South Asian Muslims had plagued the Straits authorities too. Furthermore, historian Jenny McCallum argues that the friction between Europeans and other communities over crowd processions such as *Tabut* had been exacerbated by what she called "fundamentally different sonic ideologies" – incompatible understandings of what constitutes noise.

The definitive nail in the coffin came in 1865, when the governor of Singapore decided to permanently ban the procession. It was argued that secret societies had taken advantage of its boisterous atmosphere to initiate bloody fights. *Tabut* would therefore be prohibited in the colonies to prevent recurrences. Unfortunately, many of these clashes did happen, as attested by Encik Ali in his contemporary *syair*. Nevertheless, the poet's account sheds light on the questionable actions of the colonial police forces that year in ways that colonial sources do not. Officers entrusted to keep the peace were seen assaulting and egging devotees onto one another, thereby contributing to the violence.

Whatever the case, Bencoolen (now Benkoelen) had ceased to be a British outpost by this juncture and the eradication of *Tabut* from the British Straits Settlements had little to no effect on the Dutch-controlled city, which was largely left alone in an increasingly obsolete corner of an ever-expanding Dutch East Indies. Little is known about the numbers of *Tabut* devotees in Dutch Benkoelen in this time, but by 1914, the Dutch Orientalist Phillipus von Ronkel had pronounced the procession a dying tradition.

The Rebirth of *Tabut*: From Religious Procession to State-Sanctioned Festival

Walking around Bengkulu, I saw youth groups practising their *dhol* drum playing, not to rouse devotees, but as a performance for the music competition held on the grand stage. Many *tabuts* were in fact, built with government support, and were placed on display in Lapangan Merdeka, less as symbols of the martyrdom of Husayn and Hassan, but more as audacious backdrops for festival goers eager to post new selfies on Instagram.

This transformation of *Tabut* from a religious procession to a state-sanctioned festival had commenced under the New Order regime. With Suharto at the helm, the Ministry of Education and Culture had been tasked in the 1970s to document and promote key cultural traditions within each province. The aim was to catalogue Indonesia's rich cultural diversity at the local level, to be neatly subsumed under the national motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, or Unity in Diversity. Through this initiative, *Tabut* had been reinvented as a symbol of indigenous provincial culture, to be celebrated as a marker of Bengkulunese identity. Worthy of tourism potential, the procession had to be severed from its religious context.

Such a dissociation was further necessitated after 1979, when a Shi'a theocracy in the form of the Islamic Republic of Iran came into power. In a climate where Saudi Arabia and Iran increasingly vied for hegemony within the Middle East, the division between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims became starkly polarised and such identity markers were defined in opposition to one another. Devotion to the House of the Prophet, including *Tabut*, became associated exclusively with Shi'ism, which had grown to be the less tolerated 'Other' in majority Sunni Indonesia. According to state authorities, obscuring the religious substrate, a consistent feature of *Tabut* for centuries, was pertinent.

Yet, while the majority of Bengkulunese today remain estranged from *Tabut's* religious foundations, that substrate continues to exist through a few *Tabut* families, descendants of the intermarriage between Sepoy soldiers and locals. Largely left undisturbed, this small segment of Bengkulunese society is allowed to carry out their devotions in peace, separate from the secular activities under the provincial government's purview. At a time when accusations of idolatry threaten the existence of older traditions across Indonesia, the respect accorded to *Tabut* as officially sanctioned Bengkulunese culture, guarantees the survival of this community. Any attack on *Tabut* becomes an attack on general Bengkulunese identity.

The physical procession to Jalan Karbela

"Kalu bukan kito siapo lagi yang peduli kek budaya Bencoolen?"

Worlds collided on the festival's penultimate day, as descendant *Tabut* families gathered around a cordoned intersection in Bengkulu's centre to meet state representatives. The physical crowning of the two leading *Tabuts* would be witnessed by both parties, before the cenotaphs are sent off to lead the big procession the next day. All around, whole battalions of the provincial police department had been roped in to beat *dhol* drums in unison. Large banners featuring the chief of the Bengkulu police had been conspicuously placed nearby, marked with the question: "Who will care for Bengkulu's culture, if not us?".

I had been acquainted with a freelance photographer who was hoping his festival pictures would be featured in an airline travel magazine promoting regional Indonesian destinations. Turning to me, he whispered, "This really does look like Shi'ism, doesn't it?"

I smiled rather uncomfortably at his statement and my thoughts began to wander in a different direction. Needless to say, the meaning behind the *Tabut* festivities will continue to evolve with time. *Tabut* will continue to be viewed in a multiplicity of ways and it will persist in fulfilling different functions for separate segments of Bengkulunese society. As a Singaporean who can only reminisce about the existence of *Tabut* in his home country, I am perhaps reminded that none of these festivities might even have existed in our contemporary times had Bengkulu remained British.

Herman Lim Bin Adam Lim *is currently a research assistant at the Middle East Institute, NUS, studying the ways in which Southeast Asian Muslims have perceived themselves and their identities in relation to the Middle East throughout history.*

All photos by the author

An Artist's Odyssey to Forge a Southeast Asian Consciousness in Art

Latiff Mohidin's Pago Pago

By Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

Oasis
In Latiff's terrace house in Lembah Keramat
there are many marvellous alcoves and arches.
Even the TV there's no common TV;
bats and butterflies dance out of the box.
A train's always arriving in his backyard,
the strumming of a gypsy strikes the suburb out.
Webs of light quiver lightly in the corners;
tigers prance, colours roar in the corridors;
and white horses, winged and wanton, whirl
in the dark secret attic of his world.
Amidst the dull labyrinth of this desert,
he creates his own oasis of the sacred.
Holding on to the clew, gift of Ariadne,
He paints his way towards epiphanies.
– Salleh Ben Joned, Kuala Lumpur, October 1986

Reading it for the first time, this passage from the poet Salleh Ben Joned may well appear fantastical. But it does convey some of the aura surrounding Latiff Mohidin or Pak Latiff, as he is affectionately called by friends and younger colleagues. There is a magic in Latiff Mohidin's mode of working as he moves seamlessly between two very distinct art forms – painting and poetry, the image and verbal. In this essay, I will navigate through the diverse geographies Latiff Mohidin adventured through from 1949-1969, resulting in an awareness he came to evoke as *Pago Pago.*

Half Craft, Half Art: Singapore 1949

Latiff Mohidin arrived in Singapore from Kampong Lenggeng, a remote village in Negeri Sembilan, with his mother Hajjah Noor in 1949. Until then, he had been raised by his Minangkabau grandparents, immigrants to British Malaya from West Sumatra. Singapore was a stark contrast to Kampong Lenggeng. A cosmopolitan centre for trade and cultural exchange, it was also a major transit point to Mecca for pilgrims from across the Malay world. Latiff Mohidin lived in the Kampong Gelam area where his father, Haji Mohidin, owned and operated a lodging house for Hajj pilgrims.

Kampong Gelam became a playground and also an informal school. The neighbourhood was the city's centre for Malay literary and cultural activity. The most prominent Malay literature bookshop in Singapore at the time was the legendary Toko Haji Hashim, at 134 Arab Street. It was a favourite spot frequented by writers, journalists and intellectuals from the Malay world. It was also in Kampong Gelam that he experienced his first *kuda kepang*, *ketoprak* and *wayang orang* performances. Every weekend, he would visit the beachfront along Alhambra to observe a tall and elderly Chinese man in shorts and a loose singlet standing on a short bamboo stool, animatedly telling stories from the *Tripitaka*.

It was in this urban climate that Latiff Mohidin was discovered as an artistic prodigy. At Kota Raja Malay School where he had been enrolled, his drawing of two *brinjals* (eggplants) with a stalk and leaves caught the eye of the art teacher. Soon after, the headmaster informed Latiff Mohidin's father that his son's hands possessed a gift. Not knowing much about art, his father contacted Abdul Ghani Hamid, at the time a young journalist, poet and painter who became the prime initiator for Latiff Mohidin's early art activities. Hamid introduced the young Latiff to Suri Mohyani and Liu Kang, the leading painters of the period. He became an instant sensation in the press, which hailed him as the "wonder boy." In 1951, at the age of 11, he held his first solo exhibition at Kota Raja Malay School featuring paintings such as *Kampung 1* and "half craft half art" objects, which he had made using pieces of tin, plywood, cartons, textiles and straws scavenged from around Kampong Gelam.

These formative childhood experiences geared him for a life of travel and art in the decades to follow. Indeed, one of the key approaches that Latiff Mohidin adopted during

Kampung I, *1951, oil on board. Gift of Binjai Tree in memory of Chia Yew Kay and Tan Kim Siew. Collection of the National Gallery Singapore*

the *Pago Pago* years of the 1960s was *merantau*, a sensibility instilled in him through his Minangkabau upbringing, one that encourages members of the community to leave the familiar and seek knowledge from the world.

My Fever is Getting Worse: Berlin, 1961

In 1960, Latiff Mohidin was awarded the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) scholarship to study at the *Hochschule für Bildende Künste* (Academy of Fine Art) in West Berlin. In school, he focused on still lifes, landscapes and figures, along with studying the German language. But beyond the school's walls, he was initiated into the raging debates within Germany at the time, especially the tensions that had emerged from the division of Berlin into East and West. The city also gave him access to the worlds of drama, music, experimental film, cabaret and jazz, along with the progressive ethos of modern movements such as Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism and Surrealism.

He also bought his first German language books here, from Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*, an incisive commentary on Nazi Germany, to Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), which is set in the working class neighbourhoods of central Berlin. At the same time, Berlin enabled him to examine links between his own ancestral imagery and these progressive ideas. In his writing at the time, the artist evoked the experience of being between these two worlds as a "fever" he carried from British Malaya to Europe, which became increasingly intense as European modernism and Asian thought clashed in his art and thoughts.

Latiff Mohidin's mode of working transitioned significantly during his Berlin years. In 1961, he encountered Thai and Khmer relics in the city's extensive ethnological museums, which led to the horns and serrated edges typical of his Pago Pago paintings. In a recent conversation, the artist observed, "I must have seen fragments of the reliefs of the apsaras, crafts and colonial photographs. All I can recall is feeling very excited upon returning home. Pagoda in German may be called *pagoden*, and the word stuck. Later, I took out the suffix *den*; Pago remained. To evoke it colloquially in the Malay language, I began to repeat the word for rhythmic effect, Pago Pago. I also began to recall that the traditional Minangkabau and Batak homes in western Sumatra have shamanic carvings within their four-cornered roofs and fences, called *Pagar Pagar*. In my ancestral village in east Sumatra, *Pagar Pagar* is pronounced Pago Pago."

Pagoden, 1961, *ink on paper, collection of the artist*

Often in A Trance? Bangkok, 1964

Latiff Mohidin returned to Southeast Asia in 1964 with the hope of reengaging with a region that had been relegated to the reservoir of his imaginings. He had been in Europe for four years, during which time various nationalist movements had emerged in this region. 1965 was both a formative and disruptive year; Singapore separated from the Malaysian Federation, while *Konfrantasi* raged. The communists in Vietnam were perceived to be expanding, which led to the establishment of ASEAN two years later. While he acknowledges the potency of Cold War ideologies, having witnessed first-hand the rise of the Berlin Wall, he felt it was important to resist such rigid doctrines and saw *Pago Pago* as a site of that.

Activating *merantau*, Latiff Mohidin decided to travel to Bangkok, where he met the artists Thawan Duchanee and Damrong Wong Uparaj. He explored the city, observing the pagodas and infinite forms that lined the banks of Chao Phraya River. Duchanee organised the first *Pago Pago* exhibition at Bangkapi Gallery, a space he ran out of his studio.

Pago Pago II, *1965, oil on canvas, private collection*

From 1964-1969, Latiff Mohidin travelled extensively across Indochina and the Malay world with the hope of uniting two continents, Asia and Europe, through words and images. Along the way, he connected with painters and writers of his generation, from Goenawan Mohamad to Usman Awang and Mochtar Apin. Constantly evoking the phrase "Pago Pago", his aim was to manoeuvre Southeast Asia into an active position as a source of new ideas for modern art.

Latiff Mohidin's poetry, often written as he moved from place to place, is in free verse and consciously breaks from the rhyme scheme of the Malay *pantun*. His sketches construct an intricate cosmology of seeing the world, as he encountered distinctive regional phenomena from the temples of Angkor, Balinese dance, and the bamboo rhizome. Latiff Mohidin queried about his aesthetic responses to these encounters as "often in a trance?"

The Pago Pago paintings of this period are composed of jagged and curvilinear shapes with thick outlines, rendered in controlled brushstrokes. Each Pago Pago painting maintains a monochromatic colour scheme, constructed with a black contour. Whether on canvas or paper, each Pago Pago emerges from the ground like a biomorphic object. In some works, these singular entities lose their cohesion and blend into one another, highlighting how all forms carry an element of interdependence.

Visit *Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago* at the National Gallery Singapore from 27 March to 27 September 2020.

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa *is Senior Curator at the National Gallery Singapore, where he oversees* Between Declarations and Dreams, *the long-term displays that survey Southeast Asian art from the 19th century to the present. He writes often.*

On the Shores of a Starry Sea: Notes on Malay Astronomy

By Faris Joraimi

Kalau tidak karena bintang
Masakan bulan terbit tinggi
Jika tidak karena abang
Masakan saya datang ke-mari

If not for lofty stars in the sky
The moon would never rise so high
If not for the sake of you, my dear
Would I have ever come so near?

The sky above the Malay Archipelago is full of stars (*bintang*). As twilight descends, Venus, the brightest twinkle in the lavender firmament, appears. Known most commonly to Malays as *bintang kejora*, she inaugurates the nightly pageant of celestial bodies. But Venus herself has many names in the Malay language. As the morning star, she is the eastern star (*bintang timur*); in the evening, she is known also as the western star (*bintang barat*); and because she appears when there is still light in the heavens, Venus is also the day star (*bintang siang*).

There is no evidence that the Malays systematically mapped out the cosmos to the extent achieved by Arab, Persian, Chinese or Indian astronomers. As the British orientalist Richard James Wilkinson pointed out, the cloudy equatorial skyscape prevented Malays from having a clear view of the night sky most of the time. Nevertheless, they relied on knowledge of planetary and stellar positions as orientation for navigational purposes, the reckoning of time and for divination.

Wilkinson records the stars and planets as falling under different categories. Fixed stars are *bintang tetap*. Planets are referred to as circulating stars (*bintang beredar* or *bintang sayarat*). Comets are known as smoky stars (*bintang berasap*), tailed stars (*bintang berekor*), stars with posteriors (*bintang berbontot* or *bintang berkotek*). Double-stars are known as stars

Planospheric astrolabe, signed "Abd al-A'imma", Irahan, circa 1700, copper alloy

Divination manual (primbon)*, Java, Semarang, 1824, ink on paper*

in pairs (*bintang berapit*). Shooting stars are not to be outdone in the colourful description given to them, stars' droppings, (*bintang gugur, tahi bintang* and *ceret bintang*).

Ursa Major (the Great Bear) is known as *bintang biduk* or *bintang jong*, for it assumes the likeness of a sailing craft. The Southern Cross is identified as the fairy star *(bintang pari)* or *bintang tohok*, because of its resemblance to a harpoon *(tohok)*. Orion, shaped somewhat like the spring-gun that Malays used to trap animals, is named *bintang belantek*. The three stars that make up its asterism or 'belt', are known as the three brothers (*bintang tiga beradik*). The seven stars of the Pleiades are known as *bintang tujuh*, and also as *bintang kertika*.

Modern designations reflect the influx of Arabic words. In courtly Malay language, the sun is *shamsu*, while the moon is *qamar*; then there are the planets: Mercury (*utarid*), Venus (*zuhra*, hence *bintang juara* or *kejora*), Mars (*marikh*), Jupiter (*mushtari*) and Saturn (*zuhal)*. The 12 signs of the zodiac (*bintang dua-belas*), are also identified by their Arabic names:

Akrab: Scorpio
Asad: Leo
Delu: Aquarius
Hamal: Aries
Hut: Pisces
Jauza: Gemini
Jadi: Capricorn
Kaus: Sagittarius
Mizan: Libra
Sartan: Cancer
Sunbulat: Virgo
Thaur: Taurus

A significant portion of Malay writings on stars and planets was produced by scholars of Islam, and thus reflect their familiarity with the Arab scientific tradition. The epic tale called *The Garden of Kings* (*Bustan al-Salatin*), written at the court of Aceh, recounts the creation of the universe with accompanying notes on geography and astronomy. The text tells of the stars, which are made of "various kinds of gems resembling lamps" (*daripada jenis manikam seperti kandil*) and they are as large as "the greatest mountains of the earth" (*besarnya seperti bukit yang maha besar dalam dunia*). They also come under three categories: those that are always visible, those that rise and set, and those that are mobile, which are planets.

Quadrant, Turkey, possibly 19th or 20th century, wood

With religious conversion, Malays adopted an Islamic vision of the cosmos and the Islamic lunar calendar. The *Hikayat Mi'raj Nabi Muhammad*, chronicling the Prophet's sacred night journey to the seat of the Divine, maps out a seven-layered sky (*tujuh petala langit*). Curiously, the word for each firmament – *petala* – is drawn from an earlier Indic term, the Sanskrit *pathala:* subterranean realms beneath one's feet. Therefore, the lasting legacy of Indic spiritual and mythic traditions should not be discounted. To this day, the Malay name for the Milky Way galaxy is still *Bima Sakti*, the most powerful of the five Pandava brothers (*Pandawa lima*) in the *Mahabharata*.

Knowledge of the stars was crucial for time-reckoning, which agricultural Malays relied on to schedule their planting and harvest seasons. In the northern Malay peninsula between Kelantan and Patani, divination charts determined the location of the star of ill-fortune (*bintang celaka*), which was consulted to determine when to begin sowing rice-seedlings (Farouk Yahya, 2016).

Divination manuscript (powukon), *Central Java, Solo, 1842, ink on paper*

Indigenous Malay calendrical systems such as the *kutika* calendar (based on five-day weeks), and the octaval calendar (based on eight-year cycles) did not rely on observing the stars or moon. Nevertheless, the Pleiades (*bintang tujuh*) were associated with the circular movement of the heavens and the passing of time. As Proudfoot (Brill, 2006) wrote, "The deep sense that time revolves is encapsulated in the Malay notion of the revolutions of nature (*peredaran dunia*), which brings momentous events in their wake."

Planetary events were sometimes explained in mythological terms, such as solar eclipses. Walter Skeat (1900) recorded that Malays believed these occurred when a celestial serpent (*Rahu*) swallowed the moon, and so occasioned the beating of pots and pans to drive him away.

It is likely that pre-colonial Malay sultanates had court astronomers, too. Their role, however, would have been divinatory rather than scientific. The *ahli nujum* (Arabic: person well-versed in stars) was a recurring figure in Malay court romances. Often he reads the stars to determine a ruler's success in battle, predicts the birth of a great prince, and foretells their lot in life, as is the case in the *Hikayat Inderaputera*. In 19th century Malay polities, there was an official position for the *pawang diraja* (court shaman) whose role involved astrological divination.

The stars and skies are prominent in Malay conceptions of beauty. The phrase 'like a star-encircled moon' (*bagai bulan dipagar bintang*) is a simile for a glorious sight. The *Syair Burung Pungguk* narrates the longing of the hawk-owl for his moon-bride, an analogy for an impossible romance between two people of different social statuses. Often the moon and stars appear as a backdrop for settings that evoke melancholy, solitude or wistful longing. This is most evident in Malay *pantun* (poetry). These notes conclude with a modest selection of *pantun*.

Terang bulan condong ke paya
Buah rambai di dalam dulang
Tiada orang semacam saya
Duduk ramai bercinta seorang

Across the wetland slants moonshine
Rambai fruits upon a tray
No-one shares this fate of mine
To sit alone 'midst crowds all day

Sungguhpun banyak bintang di langit
Bulan juga yang bercahaya
Sungguhpun banyak muda yang manis
Tuan juga di mata saya

Though myriad stars in the sky there be
None compares with the radiant moon
Though myriad sweet-faced youths there be
You alone could make me swoon

Bintang tujuh tinggal enam
Jatuh sebiji ke Majapahit
Hilang sepuh nampak senam
Baru tahu tuan tak baik

Of seven stars now six are left
On Majapahit one did fall
Once you were of gilt bereft
Your wicked self was known to all

Tinggi sungguh bulan satu
Mana lawan bintang seribu
Kalau adik rasa rindu
Dalam mimpi kita bertemu

The lonesome moon sits high above
A thousand stars cannot compete
If you should long for me, my love
In nightly dreams be sure to meet

Faris Joraimi *is an undergraduate at the Yale-NUS College. An enthusiast of the pre-modern narrative traditions and history of the Malay world, Faris is also an amateur collector of vintage textiles, antiquarian books and vinyl records.*

All images Collection of and courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

Preserving a Traditional Way of Life: The Baduy of Indonesia

By Rossman Ithnain

The reclusive Baduy people (*Orang Kanekes*) in the province of Banten are one of Indonesia's hidden communities. The Baduy, made up of the *Baduy Luar* (Outer Baduy) and the *Baduy Dalam* (Inner Baduy), eschew modern technology. Their religion, *Agama Sunda Wiwitan*, revolves around respect for the land as its primary philosophy and living in harmony with the environment. Ancestor worship is also part of the Baduys' tradition *(adat)*.

Baduy women pounding the harvested paddy

I spent a short weekend at Babakan Gajeboh, a Baduy Luar village located near the Kendeng Mountains in Banten province. I was hosted by Pak Musung, a Baduy Luar. At the time of my visit, Baduy Dalam was closed to visitors for three months. Just a 120 kilometre drive of three and a half hours from Jakarta, I arrived at the Bantenese town of Ciboleger, the gateway to Baduy land. This is where you will have your first encounter with the Baduy Dalam and Baduy Luar folks. It is easy to tell them apart. The Baduy Dalam are dressed in white while the Baduy Luar are typically dressed in black outfits and distinctive blue-coloured batik headgear. All clothes are made from cotton and hand sewn. Even though the Baduy Dalam reject modernity, they do travel out of their remote villages on foot to sell their produce and to buy basic necessities.

The Baduy are believed to have descended from those fleeing into the remote highlands following the fall and destruction of the 16th century Sundanese Pajajaran kingdom at the hands of the Islamic Sultanate of Banten. They escaped into the highlands to continue their traditional belief system called *Agama Sunda Wiwitan*. This is central to the identity of a Baduy. The sanction for *melanggar adat* (breaking customary rules) is to be temporarily exiled and in serious cases, expulsion from the community. The Baduy Dalam in particular are averse to having contact with outsiders.

Traditional Life versus Modernity

Whilst the Baduy Dalam community remains closed to modern technology, the Baduy Luar are more open.

Given their proximity to the outside world, the Baduy Luar have seen aspects of modern life creeping into their traditional ways. Tourism has brought modern influences. As a result, the Baduy Luar's adherence to the old ways is not as inflexible as the Baduy Dalam's. A number of them have begun to use footwear when the norm is to be barefoot. They allow photography by visitors in their villages and their attire has begun to include modern dress such as T-shirts. Nonetheless, the Baduy Luar retain their traditional lifestyle. There are no electricity or telephone networks in the villages. At Babakan Gajeboh, I was enveloped in darkness at 6:30 pm. My eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness and in the dark stillness, I could hear the conversations around

A Baduy Dalam man

Weaving is a Baduy woman's job

me. Neither are there any modern forms of conveyance such as motorcycles. My host, Pak Musung, recalled that once a fellow Baduy Luar villager bought a motorcycle only to have it burned by other villagers almost immediately as he had committed *melanggar adat*.

The Baduy travel to the nearest towns, Ciboleger and Rangkasbitung, to sell their produce and handicrafts and the money earned is used to buy their basic necessities. The previous practice of barter trading has been replaced by cash transactions. The Baduy typically marry young, in their late teens to early twenties and from within their communities. There are only Baduys in the village. They would have to leave the village should they choose to marry a non-Baduy or if they convert to Islam.

Baduy Life

Baduy men hunt, fish and farm. They also harvest wild honey and fruits such as *petai* (stinkbeans) and durian from the forest and collect the sap from the aren palm to make *gula aren* (a type of palm sugar). Bananas are also cultivated. Unlike rice, this produce is permitted to be sold. The men also make *golok* (a machete) mainly for their own use. The *golok* and the woven *koja* bag are part of the Baduy men's usual accessories.

The bamboo bridge over the Ciujung River

The key crop is rice and it is grown solely for consumption. It is not for sale. As rice is life-giving, the Baduy view it as a sin to sell it. The rice cultivated by the Baduy is the hill variety. No irrigation or ploughing is required for the dry cultivation of the rice on the steep hill slopes. Rice is harvested only once a year in the belief that the land should not be overtaxed. No fertilisers or pesticides are permitted. The harvested rice is stored in individual hut-like granaries (known as *Leuit* in Baduy). One harvest a year is sufficient for the needs of the villagers. The harvested paddies are processed manually in the traditional way, as and when needed. This is the job of the Baduy women.

All Baduy women can weave. In fact weaving is exclusively a woman's domain, with the women of each household spending several hours of each day weaving. The cloths are woven from 100% cotton threads. The weaving process

The writer standing on the main thoroughfare of Babakan Gajeboh

Women in traditional garb walking through the village

starts with the spinning of the cotton into yarn. I came across a 103-year-old Baduy woman spinning cotton into yarn on the front porch of her house. Baduy girls learn to weave from childhood. The ability to weave is an important requirement for marriage. The woven cloths are made into items such as sarongs, scarves and blouses to fulfil their daily needs as well as for use during special ceremonies. The rest are sold. The sale of woven cloths supplements the family's income and allows the Baduy to buy what they do not produce or make. The patterns of Baduy cloths are simple and the range of colours used is limited. Each pattern has a specific name and reflects the Baduy's closeness to their environment.

The Baduy walk barefoot everywhere. Their villages are connected by well-maintained paths on uneven, hilly and rocky terrain. These paths are their only access to the outside world. The hilly and rocky terrain make it impossible for vehicles to get through. There are numerous bamboo bridges on the main path to the town of Ciboleger. These bamboo bridges are constructed without nails. The longest bamboo bridge, at Babakan Gajeboh, anchored by two trees across the Ciujung River, has become the icon for this village. The Baduy are trim and fit given the physical activities required of them as they go about their daily chores. The men and the boys take on porterage jobs. When I asked Pak Musung where the Baduy went for medical help, he laughed and told me that there were only two occasions when medical intervention is needed, namely a fall from a tree and snake bites.

Cleanliness is another characteristic of the Baduy. The rivers, waterways and environment are kept clean. Specially made woven baskets that serve as litter bins are found throughout the village to maintain its cleanliness. The swift-flowing Ciujung that runs by the village is a natural toilet. It is also the spot for bathing and doing the laundry.

The Baduy's way of life, its simplicity, cleanliness and respect for the environment are lessons for us. There is a need to maintain a delicate balance between preserving the Baduy traditional way of life and encouraging tourism in the area.

Rossman Ithnain *is a civil servant with a passion for collecting things from the Malay world. He is currently based in Jakarta.*

All photos courtesy of the author

The Subjective Curator: Curating Malay World Perspectives

By Suhaili Osman

One of the main challenges in curating the exhibition *Seekor Singa, Seorang Putera dan Sebingkai Cermin: Reflecting and Refracting Singapura* marking Singapore's Bicentennial, is mediating the complexities of selecting and presenting what are considered indigenous or local counterpoints to dominant narratives, especially in the context of national histories. An ideological issue that arises from the curation of documents, objects and images related to the history of Singapore over the long durée, is the notion of authenticity – the quality of being genuine, true, honest, accurate or reliable – and whether or not the selected material culture are genuine, accurate, reliable or even emotionally appropriate representations of the histories and experiences which have not made it into the hegemonic historical narrative of Singapore's past as it developed into a modern nation-state.

My Bawean-Bugis-Arab paternal family, c. 1989. My father is seated to the right of my late grandmother in an extended family photo at Changi Airport before departing for the Hajj that year. Courtesy of Osman Jonet

An issue of perspective

In this regard, a curator plays a crucial role in creating an intellectual framework and selecting appropriate material culture and narratives that can reveal the distinctions between how various Eastern and Western civilisations have conceptualised and organised human society, cultures and their physical environments. More specifically, how would a curator produce a state-funded public exhibition which is part of a national campaign that marks a nation's coming-of-age 200 years after its 'founding' by a colonialist credited with changing the course of modern Singapore's history? Further, to what extent would a curator at the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) who is ethnically Malay, culturally Singapore-Malay and informed by Western European traditions in history, literature and museology, help or hinder the process?

My Javanese-Dutch, Malay-Portuguese maternal family, c. 1956-57. My mother is seated in my late grandmother's lap. My grandparents went on to have three more children over the next decade. Courtesy of Sulastri Osman

The exercise in self-reflexivity is necessary to guide the curator in articulating in text, medium and object, the complex and highly wrought notion of an 'authentically Malay' perspective. This is because the ideas, definitions and areas which both terms respectively encompass, continue to be subject to spirited debate by academics, museum professionals, peoples who identify as part of the Malay linguistic-cultural group and even the non-Malay public. One's own cultural heritage, education and individual experiences can subconsciously steer the curator in one narrative direction over another and influence other curatorial choices.

Curating as an extension of the curator's (cultural) identity

On the one hand, MHC curators select sources and artefacts that present indigenous, local and/or regional perspectives of Singapore's political, socio-cultural and economic history and ties within the Malay Archipelago and with the rest of the world to serve as counterpoints to the dominant 'exceptional-colony-to-nation-state' narrative. On the other hand, the curators also want visitors to consider the material culture related to the Malay world on its own merits as a means to understanding and husbanding local environments and human society as well as giving meaning and order to both physical and supernatural phenomena. Hence, macro-concepts such as time, government, industry, human and spirit worlds, should be understood from indigenous and non-Western sources. The question then is, given the cross-civilisational influences in Southeast Asia's history and the gaps in the national collection (itself a legacy of colonial thinking), which of these sources do we present?

In my own approach, researching and curating the *Seekor Singa, Seorang Putera dan Sebingkai Cermin: Reflecting and Refracting Singapura* exhibition was also an exercise in putting up multiple mirrors to 'reflect and refract' my personal history, cultural and socio-economic background and experiences as a Singaporean-Malay woman. I would argue that family stories, though often disparate, inconsistent and not always complete, can be considered 'embodied' culture and heritage and hence are as important a mode of transmitting knowledge histories as artefacts and texts. This is especially so in the context of communities in the Malay Archipelago where many types of knowledge are usually passed down from one generation to the next within the nuclear family or across extended family networks.

Multiple worlds, histories and narratives: Curating multi-perspectives in an exhibition

In the exhibition are two pages from a handwritten copy of the *Sulalatus Al-Salatin* (Genealogy of Kings), popularly referred to as *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals). One describes the sighting of the fabled *singha* by the Palembang prince Sang Nila Utama, while the other tells the story of how Singapore was attacked by swarms of garfish because of a curse on an unjust ruler. While it is unlikely today that the lay reader would have read the entire manuscript, most Singaporeans would know of Sang Nila Utama-Sri Tri Buana, the legendary founder of Singapura, from their history textbooks. Thanks to the 1961 film, *Singapura Dilanggar Todak*, Malay speakers of a certain age are also likely to be familiar with the tale of the ill-fated youth killed by his king despite having saved his countrymen from being maimed by frenzied garfish.

My own early experience of these two legends, however, was from stories narrated every Friday night by my late maternal grandmother as part of my bedtime ritual, when I would lie next to her in her high bed. I was also thrilled by the exploits of Laksamana Hang Tuah and his four warrior friends and captivated by the beauty and outlandish demands of the mythical princess of Gunung Ledang of her suitor, Sultan Mahmud Shah of Melaka. Only later in the course of my career as curator at MHC did I learn that these tales or *hikayat* are part of Malay literary and cultural heritage. These stories were also known to several Western sources, including Tomé Pires who mentions the princess in his *Suma Oriental* (c 1512-1515) and in Godinho de Eredia's *Description of Malacca* (1613).

Pages from the Hikayat Pelanduk Jenaka, *dated 1219, Hijrah of the Islamic calendar, c 1804-05 CE, Kedah or Penang, John Leyden Collection, British Library*

The presentation of these manuscripts alongside reproductions of other classical Malay texts aims to highlight the difference between the functions of historical narratives circulating in the Malay world of the 15th – 17th centuries and those written in the modern Western tradition. Whereas history in this tradition emphasises the importance of factual accuracy in the recording of events, many classical Malay manuscripts consider the continuity between past and current persons as well as events more important in the documenting of a kingdom's history. Further, this apparent cyclical approach to history allows for dynamic historical narratives which can address more contemporary socio-political contexts and concerns. Hence, the founding of Singapura and Melaka are couched in a pattern of flights by maverick princes from old kingdoms and their founding of new ones, or how nature or a supernatural force delivers comeuppance to unsavoury

Sumatran mousedeer drawing by a Chinese artist in Bengkulu as published in Willam Marsden's A History of Sumatra, *(third edition), 1811, courtesy of the British Library*

sultans or disloyal subjects such as in the legendary aquatic attack on Singapura. In this regard, history from the perspective of the Malay world is chronicle, and just as importantly, allegorical.

My familiarity with the fables of Sang Kancil, the wily mousedeer in the animal kingdom, made me consider how colonialists viewed the wildlife in this region's forests. In the 19th century, scientists and historians collected and studied specimens of flora and fauna across the Malay Archipelago to develop taxonomies of species and theories on evolution, while colonial administrators and technocrats calculated their potential economic value. Hence the reproduction of a sketch of the Sumatran mousedeer from Marsden's *A History of Sumatra* (1811) is set against a reproduction of the *Hikayat Pelanduk Jenaka* (c 1804-05). Likewise, the garfish and tiger specimens on loan from the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum are respective Western counterpoints to the *todak* which attacked Singapura and the *harimau jadi-jadian* or were-tigers guarding the enchanted Puteri Gunung Ledang. These artefacts taken together illustrate how the Malay literati considered animals native to their environment beyond their physicality, also employing them as allegories to safely critique poor kingship.

Ultimately, the Bicentennial commemoration of Raffles' arrival in Singapore provided an opportunity for the MHC to re-examine ways in which Singapore's history has been written and presented over the course of the country's nationhood. *Seekor Singa, Seorang Putera dan Sebingkai Cermin: Reflecting and Refracting Singapura* aims to serve as an intervening platform for visitors to think more deeply about the various functions of historical narratives, investigate why some sources have been privileged over others and reconsider ways in which indigenous and non-Western perspectives can be incorporated to provide a more inclusive approach to writing a national history of Singapore.

Owing to the recent Circuit Breaker measures, the exhibition has now been extended to 26 July 2020 to allow for visitors once the Circuit Breaker has been lifted.

Suhaili Osman *is a curator at the Malay Heritage Centre. Her research interests include indigenous cosmologies as multiple modes of knowing. For leisure, Suhaili hunts down iconic fragrances to build her scent-library.*

Istana Woodneuk - Our Grand Old Dame

By Dahlia Osman

I used to try and not think about this old dame. Then in 2006, I was unexpectedly reminded of Istana Woodneuk when a student showed me photographs of "this big mansion off Holland Road". However, it wasn't the palace itself that interested her; she was more excited about her paranormal experience there. What I saw in those photos greatly saddened me. Such brutal damage had been done; the former palace was dilapidated; the ceiling had collapsed; the wooden staircase was damaged; and the building had been defaced. There was graffiti on the walls and damage caused by arsonists.

L to R: Mom and my Aunt with Grandma behind them at Tyersall Park, 1961

I want to preserve my memories of Istana Woodneuk, as I remember it from when I was growing up; before its manicured lawns and tidy paths were covered by the aggressive tropical jungle; before the vegetation came too close and creepers invaded the building; before intruders disrespected such a beautiful historical building; before Grandpa Handair passed away and before Grandma Armidah had to leave.

Sultan Ibrahim of Johor, Lady Marcella and Tunku Miriam, 1950s

For me, Istana Woodneuk was a beauty, a treasure so special that I want to keep my memory of the house as it should be, just sitting there still in time, like a secret. I'd like to keep it that way, to protect it from Singapore's rapid urbanisation and the ever-expanding development of the land. I'd always hoped that the thick foliage surrounding Istana Woodneuk would work as a safe barrier against public knowledge and intrusion, except from a few photography and paranormal enthusiasts.

Perched higher uphill on this land was a larger palace called Istana Tyersall, which was demolished in 1935. On a smaller hill stood Istana Woodneuk, which was built in the 1800s and burned down in 1925. In its stead, Istana Wooden York was erected, referred to fondly amongst its occupants as Istana Woodneuk. This was bequeathed to Sultana Siti Khadijah, the fourth wife of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor. Sultan Abu Bakar's son, Sultan Ibrahim and his Scottish wife, Sultana Helen, lived here. On this 60 acres of land there was a park, a lush garden and also an orchard of tropical fruit, enough to provide for the sultan's household and the many servants who took care of the palace and estate. The sultan also had his own horse jumping arena where after his death, residents claimed to have seen an apparition of him riding his horse.

Grandma and her family moved to Tyersall Park when her father, Great-grandpa Ahmad, got a job as a gardener at Istana Woodneuk in 1951. My mother was three years old. She and her younger sister grew up there and at times played with Tunku (Princess) Miriam. My grandfather, Handair bin Haji Sidek was Sultan Ibrahim's chief servant. He was promoted when the previous one was caught trying to sell a truckload of fruit grown here. The sultan had made it clear that all the fruit from the estate's orchard was free for everyone there, but was not for sale. He was summarily dismissed.

Grandpa Handair (on the right), at Istana Woodneuk

Mom and dad at their wedding, 1968

L to R front row: Grandma, mom and me at Istana Woodneuk, 2002

There was a whole community living on the estate. Old photographs reveal happy events and smiling faces. In 1968, my parents held their wedding celebration in the grounds, attended by the whole community. They moved out of Tyersall a year later. Sometime in the early 80s, I remember going to a wedding celebration there, with a traditional Javanese performance called *Kuda Kepang* or *Kuda Lumping* included in the event. Men danced in a trance while 'riding' on decorated cardboard horses. It went quite crazy as some of them were swallowing glass and stripping coconut husks off with their teeth. They could easily be alarmed into charging when they saw the colour red. My mother must have forgotten that little detail because I was wearing red.

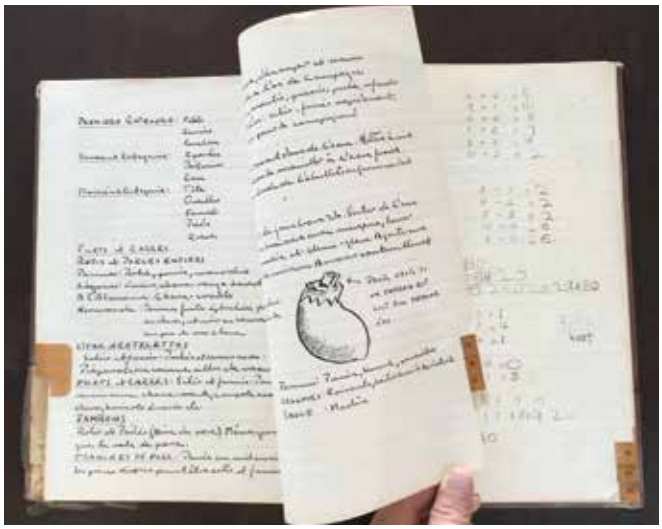
When I was growing up, we would visit our grandparents every Hari Raya and enter the grounds from a gap along Holland Road, almost opposite the road leading up to Dempsey Hill; a spot only former occupants and the postmen knew about. A relic of a letter box stood by a tiny crooked entrance, not obvious from the level of the main road. There used to be a rickety wooden bridge. Walking straight on could fill your senses with the rich scents of nature. On the right stood a very long house on stilts, where several families lived. I remember it clearly because I was amazed by the colour of the wood, black but unpainted. Our grandparents' house was at the far end, past a grass patch large enough for children and chickens to run about in and for hanging out laundry. They lived in this house the whole time. It was at the foot of the hill where Istana Woodneuk stands. An inscription on a kitchen step states that their house was erected in 1952.

My brother and I would run uphill and venture into the jungle or sneak into the empty istana through the wooden louvres. We marvelled at the grand staircase and the kitchen's saloon-like swing doors. Upstairs we found bathtubs, each leg a unique design, and fancy faucets. While standing in the grand, wood-panelled main room, the smell of the timber filled the air. I could imagine the clinking of glasses and people twirling and dancing the night away.

Sometime in the mid-90s, when I was already a young adult, my late Grandpa and I were walking through, opening windows and doors and airing the istana, when he asked if I wanted a Philco fridge and a New World Radiation stove. He also asked about the star-shaped pendant light dangling over the porch and the two light fixtures guarding the main doors because he knew that I loved old furniture and objects. I would usually grab such treasures, but not this time. It seemed too much like desecration of this beautiful old dame. As we left the kitchen, I saw an old recipe book, handwritten in French. What attracted me was the childish handwriting on its blank pages. It was my cousin's scribbles of basic counting and spelling. I kept only that.

When Grandpa passed away in the late 90s, we wrote to inform the Sultan of Johor that we would be unable to continue maintaining the property. Not too long after that, I went back to visit. Like vultures, thieves had stripped the palace bare. Unfortunately, that was only the start of the abuse. With Grandpa gone, I was worried for Istana Woodneuk.

Grandma continued living at Tyersall for a couple more years. However, it gradually became dangerous for an old lady to live alone at the foot of the hill, with squatters and thieves hiding out in the many acres of unguarded jungle. It was hard for her to leave her home of half a century, but in 2001, she finally did. Grandma gave me what looked like a refectory dining table and two armchairs, which she said were from the istana. I am still trying to date this unique table, which is currently in my kitchen.



French cookbook with scribbles found late 1990s at Istana Woodneuk

I took Grandma and mum to visit Istana Woodneuk one last time in 2002. I have not been there since. Every time I pass by Tyersall Avenue, I try to sense our grand dame's presence, but there is only silence. Another piece of history is fading away.

Dahlia Osman *has been an art educator and curriculum specialist for over 25 years. A multidisciplinary artist, she examines neuroplasticity and the mapping of the human experience.*

All photos courtesy of the author

The Hidden Secrets of Queen's Own Hill

By Sally McHale

If you have joined one of our Art & History or History & Heritage Tours (at 4:00 pm and 5:00 pm on Saturdays), you will be familiar with Gillman Barracks as a tranquil haven set within lush greenery where you can browse the art galleries or enjoy some refreshments in the 14 buildings that are all that remain of the much larger site the British Army originally had there. The meeting point for our tours (Block 9) is the biggest remaining building and is similar in design to eight other blocks that once stood on the hill overlooking the current site. I've always been curious to explore the pristine hill shown in photographs, but now reclaimed by the jungle. Just a few weeks ago, along with fellow FOM docents and the talented visual artist Robert Zhou Renhui, we did just that.

I've been a fan of Robert's work since seeing his *A Very Old Tree* exhibition at NMS. This photographic exhibition juxtaposes iconic trees in Singapore's landscape together with individuals who have a story to tell about them. They are important reminders of how we need to treasure the natural landscape. Robert has been visiting the secondary jungle behind Gillman Barracks for many years, tracking its changes from its original state as primary jungle to its partial cultivation as pepper, gambier and then rubber plantation, before being cleared to form part of the British Army's grand plan for Gillman Barracks. In later years, it hid several illegal squatter camps, but finally nature has taken it over again and a secondary jungle has flourished. Many of the items he uncovered have been on display in an exhibition entitled *Queen's Own Hill and Its Environs* as part of Singapore's Biennale 2019. In earlier days *Queen's Own Hill* was the hill's name, once used by Sir General Webb Gillman, a distinguished veteran of the British Army, who came to Singapore in the 1920s to review its defences in the face of the threat of Japanese aggression and after whom the Barracks are named.

A brick from the Hock Ann Brickworks survives in the tangled roots on Queen's Hill

As we left the still pristine roads and buildings and entered the jungle, we saw the skeleton leaves of rubber trees lying around us, evidence of the plantations marked on old maps of the area and a reminder of the importance

Gillman Barracks docents with artist Robert Zhao in front of the Regimental Crests

this crop played in Singapore's history. We passed the remains of old brick buildings and found decades old bricks from the Hock Ann Brickworks tangled around tree roots and the wall of the assembly yard of the Bourne School. It was poignant to stand on a spot that would have thronged with life in the days when up to 1,700 children were enrolled at the British Forces School.

As we tramped through the jungle, it was hard to believe we were in Singapore. Bird calls and the hum of insects had replaced the usual city sounds and it would have been easy to get lost without a guide. But as we approached civilisation again and the vestiges of the stone steps that used to lead up to the barracks on the hill, we came to a spot very special to those of us who guide at Gillman. Two large stone plaques bearing the regimental crests of the first two battalions based at Gillman Barracks are clearly visible. These were the Middlesex Regiment (stationed here from 1936-38), known as the "die-hards" after a bloody battle at Albuera in the Peninsular War, and the 2nd Battalion Loyal Regiment, who fought hand to hand against the Japanese troops in the final days before Singapore surrendered in February 1942 in this very area. The Loyals did not have such an auspicious nickname. Theirs was "the cauliflowers" because the red rose on their crest was thought to resemble a cauliflower rather than the red rose of Lancashire, their home in the UK. These logos could be clearly made out despite the cracks caused by the tree roots.

The regimental crests may be hidden but they are not forgotten. For an area that has links to the darkest period in Singapore's history, it is reassuring to see how nature wins in the end.

Sally McHale *is originally from Wales and is a docent who has been guiding at Gillman Barracks and the National Museum of Singapore for over five years.*

Photos by Moni Pang

FOM on Route 66!

By Michelle Foo and Millie Phuah

When the idea to advertise FOM and our Public Information Morning (PIM) was floated, we asked ourselves "why not?" and wouldn't it be a blast to see FOM on the back of a bus! Millie, who was in charge of creating the artwork for our event wrote, "The artwork we created for the PIM flyer had to be re-worked to fit the specific requirements of a bus ad. It was fascinating as we had to navigate the back of the bus using a template, for example ensuring that important elements didn't get cut out for where the bus lights were. How do we place the FOM logo so it can be seen boldly? How do we make our website address large and clearly visible since it was essentially marketing not just for our PIM but for FOM as a whole? Fortunately, the bold colours used for this year's design matched the back of bus #66 very well" Millie said. "So we were very pleased with how everything turned out."

Bus #66 at the bus depot having the FOM poster pasted on. Photo by Media Taurus

Little did we realise that life at FOM would be turned upside down with the threat of the COVID-19 virus forcing us to cancel guided tours, limiting social contact and events. As we write, the PIM might be hanging in the balance. As everything was in motion, we pressed on with this valuable piece of FOM marketing. And it was quite an adventure.

Once our PIM artwork was installed on the back of the bus, we wanted to record it for posterity, so it was picture-taking time. I stalked almost every bus 66 that passed my residence. There are no less than 20 #66 buses that ply this route. To chance upon it and be fast enough to take a picture of the bus, and a selfie too was a miracle on its own. Then I started to wonder, "won't it be easier if I get the bus schedule from the agency?" With the bus schedule it became easier, though not without some stalking, loitering and looking very suspicious at the Bedok bus interchange. Day 1 Friday, 20 March, proved unsuccessful.

Finally, on Wednesday 25 March, Samantha from Media Taurus kept me company while we waited by the side of the road. We shouted like kids as the bus arrived and we readied our cameras and phones. That did not end my work for the day. I wanted to get on the bus for a joyride. That ride on bus #66 with our PIM ad made me a grin during the entire journey back home. When I alighted from the bus, with my fastest move I took out my phone and snapped a last selfie as the bus left the designated stop. Alas, my job here was done for the day.

Michelle's selfie with the bus #66

With all the worrying concerns and heightened safety measures due to COVID-19, you may chance upon this particular bus #66. If you do, get your phone or camera ready and click! Please note, the PIM has been postponed to 31 August 2020.

We would like to give special thanks to Diana, Wini and Samantha of Media Taurus and William of Boldink, for helping in the placement of our advertisement.

Michelle Foo *is the FOM Council's Marketing Representative. She also guides at TPM and MHC.* **Millie Phuah** *served as Co-Overall Head of Training 2018-2020.*

Explore Singapore!

Exploring Balestier Road – A Heritage Trail off the Beaten Track

Date: To be announced
10:00 am – 12:00 noon
Fee: $25

Few people have heard of Balestier Road or know that it is part of a heritage trail. Singaporeans shop here for lighting, bathroom equipment, as well as good food. Balestier has a rich history with links to the first American Consul to Singapore and Dr Sun Yat Sen. It is also home to one of the earliest Malay film studios and various temples including one with a permanent *wayang* (opera) stage. Join us on this heritage walk and discover another facet of Singapore and its history.

An Introduction to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

Date: To be announced
11:00 am – 1:00 pm
Fee: $25

For more than 2,000 years the Chinese have used a system of medicine known as Traditional Chinese Medicine or TCM. The underlying concepts and theories of TCM treat the body, mind and emotions (or spirit) as a single entity and its practices take a holistic approach to prevention and cure. TCM often includes nutritional therapies, treatments such as acupuncture, cupping, massage or *tuina*, and exercises such as *taiqi*. Join us and learn about TCM's basic principles and practices, followed by a visit to a traditional Chinese medical shop.

Kampongs in the Sky

Date: To be announced
10:00 am – 12:00 noon
Fee: $30

Singapore's government housing programme is one of the nation's great success stories. Housing Development Board (HDB) estates are all around us, but we know very little about them. How did the population of Singapore go from living in rural villages (*kampongs*) to high-rise apartments while still keeping the community spirit intact? We will tour one of the earliest town centres on foot, Toa Payoh, built in 1966. You will see what makes this a lively, self- contained hub, the nucleus of every HDB estate. An optional local lunch will follow.

Little India Heritage Walk

Date: To be announced
10:00 am – 12:00 noon
Fee: $25

Join us on a guided walking tour of Little India; wander along its shophouse-lined streets and experience the hustle and bustle of an organic, evolving neighbourhood. Among colourful stores and landmarks, learn about its rich history. We will walk its vibrant streets, stopping at points of interest, including commercial establishments, places of worship and the Indian Heritage Centre. This will give you fascinating glimpses into early and contemporary Singapore and help you gain new insights into our island state's diverse Indian communities

The Joy and Fun of Gamelan – a Workshop

Date: To be announced
10:00 am – 12:30 pm
Fee: $30

Those who have travelled to Indonesia must have heard melodic tinkling music welcoming guests to hotels and restaurants. It is often played live, so you may have seen the musicians with their instruments – the gamelan. This is a unique opportunity to learn about the differences between Javanese and Balinese gamelan orchestras, about the instruments and also how to play them. You will learn about its history, traditions and related cultural activities such as *wayang kulit* (Indonesian shadow puppetry) and Javanese dance.

Ethnobotany Garden Tour

Date: To be announced
Time: 10 am – 12 pm
Fee: $30

Tucked away into a corner of the Botanic Gardens is a special Ethnobotany Garden, featuring a large variety of ordinary, as well as unusual plants, most of which are native to Southeast Asia and have been used for centuries in this part of the world, and other regions, for food, medicine, cultural practices and material crafts. Within the garden is the Centre for Ethnobotany, which highlights the role plants have played in shaping the world we know today and aims to preserve indigenous knowledge. Join us on this specially organised tour and gain an understanding of another aspect of the history of this region – its plants – their historical, economic and anthropological roles.

Thaipusam

By Darly Furlong

Many of you will have heard of this wonderful festival celebrated by the Hindu community. It's called *Thaipusam* and is dedicated to Lord Murugan, the vanquisher of evil and granter of wishes and is celebrated on the full moon of the tenth month.

This year, it was celebrated on Saturday 8 February. A statue of Lord Murugan, adorned with jewels was paraded in a procession between two temples. Devotees carried pots of milk or colourful *kavadi* (metal structures), adorned with flowers and peacock feathers on their shoulders. Some devotees had pierced their tongues, cheeks or skin with *vel* (spear-like needles or hooks) as an act of penance. But this was no sombre occasion. Relatives and friends, dressed in their finest, provided support to the penitents and added cheer to the celebrations.

Darly Furlong *is a passionate volunteer for museum-based learning for children and for causes that facilitate social justice. She is also interested in the myths and legends of the ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilisations.*

Photos courtesy Paula Stacey

Japanese Docents

The Raffles exhibition was held at the ACM from January to April 2019. The mysterious history and artefacts fascinated me, and I really wanted to see them for myself. My wish soon came true. Last year I made a trip to Java with my husband. It takes only about a two-hour flight from Singapore to Yogyakarta.

Both the Borobudur and Prambanan temples were built over 1,000 years ago, with Borobudur being one of the largest Buddhist sites in the world. At the sites, numerous stone statues are positioned where they should be, and can be seen and touched as they were. I was deeply impressed that they were soaking in the sunlight and the soothing breeze and blended into the natural background.

The museum makes it easy for those of us who live in the city to see these treasures from all over the world. You can see various Southeast Asian artefacts that are over 1,000 years old even on your way home from shopping or work. Both were great experiences for me. Thanks to the fact that I am living in Singapore and a member of the JDs, I can now enjoy the museum and trips around Southeast Asia.

I have heard that "Knowledge creates happiness and increases our pleasure and interest." After the trip, my iPhone became a lovely photo album full of Buddhas and stupas. I would like to continue participating in the docent activities to broaden my interest and knowledge. I am wondering where I should go next time, after the COVID-19 crisis has passed.

Atsuko Kuriki, Japanese Docent

STPI Graduates

Back row L to R: Manisha Sanadhya, Swapna Mirashi, Angie Ng, Jen Wilson, Darlene Kasten, Deena Goh, Nupur Agarwala Bahadur, Tenzin Dolkar, Erika Cisneros.
Front row L to R: Chong Yit Peng, Clara Chan, Cagil Yurdakul Toker, Anna Watson, Sabine Gebele-Pham.
Missing from picture: Jane Ong, Nishtha Pathak, Patricia Ugarte.

Right at the start of our STPI Creative Workshop & Gallery docent training, we were asked to read a short book called *Who's Afraid of Contemporary Art?* The title says it all – a perfectly reasonable question, very aptly suited for many of us museum goers. History seems more factual and linear, whereas art, especially contemporary art, was (at least for me!) more baffling. Yet slowly but surely, the programme unfolded with amazing lectures, discussions, activities, hands-on demonstrations and workshops from master printmakers and papermakers who gave us the knowledge and confidence to form our own interpretations, hold our own in conversations about art, and even impart it to the public, kids and adults alike. A special thanks to all our dedicated group leaders, multiple guest lecturers and overall coordinators, Sam and Seema, for guiding us through it all. Interesting, intense, invaluable – this docent training has been a wonderful experience. *(Angie Ng)*

Coordinators Contact List

ACM – Michelle Hertz & Susann Geerdink
acmcoordinators@gmail.com

GB – Magdalene Ho & Alka Kapoor
gb.outreach@gmail.com

IHC – Priya Sheshadri
coordinator.ihc@gmail.com

MHC – Sadiah Shahal
fom.mhc.coordinator@gmail.com

NMS – Alison Kennedy-Cooke
nmscoordinator@gmail.com

TPM – Angela Kek
angelakek@yahoo.com.sg

SAM – Maisy Koh
sam.coordinator2021@gmail.com

STPI – Samantha Carle & Jen Wilson
stpicoordinators@yahoo.com

SYSNMH – Karen Ng
sysnmhcoordinator@yahoo.com

URA/FOM Heritage Trails – Lisa O'Beirne & Heather Muirhead
URAcoordinators@gmail.com

MHF/FOM Heritage Trails – Susan Chong & Heather Muirhead
Kgcoordinators@gmail.com

JDs
jdcoordinator1@yahoo.co.jp and jdcoordinator2@yahoo.co.jp

Museum Information and Exhibitions

All museums are closed until 1 June 2020 and all guided tours by FOM docents are suspended till 31 July 2020

Asian Civilisations Museum

1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555
Tel: 6332 7798
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 11:00 am, 2:00 pm and 3:30 pm, Fri 7:00 pm (English)
Mon to Fri 10:30 am and every second Saturday 1:30 pm (Japanese)
First Wed of the month 11.30am (Korean)
Second Thursday of the month 11:30 (Spanish)
Third Thursday of the month 11:30 (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.

New Gallery: Material and Design
Visit the museum's newest galleries which mark the completion of the museum's multi-year refresh as Singapore's museum of Asian antiquities and decorative art. The third-floor galleries are focused on decorative art, and are collectively themed Materials and Design. The two new galleries, Fashion and Textiles, and Jewellery, together with the refreshed Ceramics gallery, comprise a display of over 300 precious and finely crafted masterpieces, telling stories of Asian identities, histories, and cultures.

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

NTU CCA

Non-Aligned
(through 21 June)
The various colonial territories of the British Empire gained their sovereignty and independence at different times, in processes of decolonization that played out in the histories of nations, but also determined the lives of individuals. Non-Aligned brings together three moving-image works by artists, filmmakers, and writers that inquire into the challenging transition periods from colonial rule to the independence of nations.

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) 11:30 am 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.

From the Coromandel Coast to the Straits - Revisiting Our Tamil Heritage
(through 30 June)
The exhibition presents a compendium of narratives that recount the experiences of Tamil diasporas in Southeast Asia and Singapore from pre-modern to contemporary times. It is presented in two parts: part one enumerates the odyssey of pre-modern Tamil diasporas in Southeast Asia while part two offers glimpses of lesser known 19th century pioneers and some of the oldest Tamil families in Singapore. It also includes digital showcases featuring holograms of artefacts in the collections of other museums and institutions

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.

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 and 2:00 pm (English)
Mon to Fri 10:30 am and every first Saturday 1:30 pm (Japanese)

The Singapore History Gallery
In celebration of 50 years of independence, this gallery has been refreshed with updated stories and content on Singapore's history, capturing the nation's defining moments, challenges and achievements from its earliest beginnings 700 years ago to the independent, modern city-state it is today.

Museum Information and Exhibitions

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.

Wartime Artists of Vietnam: Drawings and Posters from the Ambassador Dato' N Parameswaran Collection
(through 27 June)
Wartime Artists of Vietnam is the fourth in a series of shows drawing from the remarkable collection of the Ambassador which consists of 1,208 wartime artworks and is one of the largest known private collection of its kind outside of Vietnam.

The exhibition takes as its preamble a line from the poem A Soldier Speaks of His Generation (1973): "…our generation has never slept". Expressing the profundity of war experience and its enduring effects on the human psyche, the phrase is an entry point from which the presentation can be read and accessed. Included alongside these artworks are supporting texts and excerpts of poems and memoirs.

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, 10am;
Self-Guided Visits: Every Sat, 1.30pm/2.15pm/3.15pm/4.00pm
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.

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.

Printmakers' Assembly 2020
(through 14 June)
The inaugural edition of the exhibition Printmakers' Assembly presents 20 selected participating artists and collectives of Southeast Asia to celebrate the strength, richness and variability of printmaking in the region. This initiative expands on STPI's commitment to champion printmaking practices and emerges as a new platform to showcasing the works of independent printmakers and print enthusiast based in the region. Starting off from the four fundamental printmaking categories such as relief, intaglio, lithography and screen print the exhibition shows how printmaking is revitalized and expanded in contemporary art.

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: Tues to Fri 2:00 pm (English)
FOM Special exhibition guided tours: 10:30 am 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.

Friends of the Museums Singapore

Friends of the Museums

Museum Docent Training

New Date!

31 08 2020

Monday - 10am

Find out more at our:

Public Information Meeting
Asian Civilisations Museum
1 Empress Place
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