I had the chance to visit the site where the Malay Heritage Centre is now before it was develop. The building looked dilapidated (it was falling apart...) I was pleasantly surprised when I went to the place again. It was clean and aesthetically pleasing to the eyes, however, I felt that it had lost some of its "historical" feel to it.

As I explored MHC, I realised that it was "clean", sanitized not in the environmental sense but in terms of its exhibits and what they show. Nothing was presented on some of the many racial riots that happened in the 1960s. It seems that the MHC wanted to celebrate the better heritage and downplay the not so peaceful heritage they had. I was quite amused, when I saw the 2nd floor dedicated to pop culture.

Though I understand that the MHC was there mainly for the tourists and school children, I cannot help but wonder what kind of impressions those visitors had. Maybe, the MHC’s destiny as a NE location could do a little bit more in enhancing the pupils’ experiences on the Singaporean Malay culture.

Dawn Lee

I feel the same way as you. I visited it before it was developed and a few times after its reconstruction.

On the outside, the "istana" looked inviting. However, I can't help but feel that it looked kind of artificial. However, the facade plays an important role in ensuring that the Malay architecture is widely preserved.

In an earlier visit, I was briefed on the various programmes offered by the centre. I found them to be rather costly. With all good intentions, the programmes, if priced cheaper, could be opened to the general public to allow more people to be exposed to the Malay Heritage Centre.

As an NE location, the heritage does not offer as much information as I made it out to have. The museum is rather small, and I found the information and exhibits rather "sanitized”. It would be better if more information on the Malays, as in culture, languages and traditions, are made known to the average visitor who may not have any background information on the race. He/She will then be able to appreciate and understand the Malays and the Malay race better.

Suzanna

I would like to thank all for the invaluable insights you have shared on the Malay Heritage Centre [MHC] and Kampong Glam since I probably am the last to write my thoughts about what I thought of them.

Unlike the entire Chinatown area and the Heritage Centre located at the Pagoda street which I frequent, I have never set foot onto Kampong Glam nor visited the MHC till the day we went together as a class. Having looked at what was put up at the MHC, I left wondering whether that was all to Malay history, heritage and culture. I agree with Wei Boon and Kelvin who were of the view that the MHC was conceptualized and designed as an attempt to create links between the past and present generations of Malays, similar to that of the Chinese Heritage Centre. However, having conversed with Malay colleagues age between 20s and 40s, they felt too that the MHC lacks not only Malay History but to some extent, flavours of Malay heritage and culture which i can tell from their remarks like ‘so touch and go’, ‘bare’, ‘blend’ and 'lacking in depth’. One even commented on the lack of clarity in the transitional phases from the past to present, which would have allowed us to see the growth of the Malay community, supporting Kelvin’s point about the place being inadequate in helping one understand the ‘developmental process’ of the Malay Communities. When I asked them what can help enhance the richness of Malay heritage and culture at the MHC, they suggested more details in the form of folklores and legends about the different groups of Malays e.g. the Boyanese whom I have found out from them, used black magic; the Malaccan people, also called the Melayu and known for their fair skin and superb culinary skills. Interviews and even more commentaries which we get at the Singapore History Museum and the Chinese
Heritage Centre would further engage the visitors in addition to the Malay cultural performances which are put up at times at the MHC; unfortunately for us, we did not get to see any cultural shows the day we visited the MHC.

As we strolled the streets of Kampong Glam, only my sense of sight and smell were titillated by the food stalls and the goodies available. I was taken aback when I chanced upon the programme, ‘Get Real’ from Channel News Asia on one Wednesday night at 2030h around mid October, that these days, women of ‘low morality’, mainly from China have gone there to solicit ‘business’ in the evenings to the dismay of many shopkeepers. From the interviews, the shopkeepers put blame on the re-development efforts that have given the place a face-lift with the pubs and karaoke lounges now available, hence attracting these undesirable characters and tainting the Malay-ness of the place. Though I have yet to explore Gelang Serai, my Muslim colleagues have shared that Geylang Serai is alot more authentic in terms of Malay heritage and culture than Kampong Glam and they frequent the former most of the time, hardly the Kampong Glam. It is also evident to me from some of your sharing that many like Delphine, see Kampong Glam catering a lot more to foreign visitors from the items sold at shops not to mention, the pricing. One comment which Kelvin concurred with both Delphine and Dominic in his sharing, about Kampong Gelam lacking ‘Muslim-ness’ due to the restoration efforts is thought-provoking to me. I did cross-checks on this point with my Malay [Muslim] colleagues. Although they agreed that Kampong Gelam ‘lacked the rustic charm’ which was what Kelvin has said, they felt that the view about lacking ‘Muslim-ness’ is a little too extreme as the symbol of the Muslim identity is still strongly visible – the Masjid Sultan Mosque where some of us stood outside for at least an hour to converse with AP Blackburn. I also found out that prayers [5 times a day] said at this Mosque can be heard even publicly, i.e. from outside the mosque unlike many of the other mosques. Today, Muslims like the Arabs and the Bangladeshis are still drawn to this mosque daily and many Muslim shopkeepers and workers around it would stop what they are doing when the prayers are heard to pray. Yet another observation about the place is the several food joints opened by the different Malay communities such as Javanese, Boyanese, Bugis hardly available in Orchard Road which supports what Norani mentioned about Kampong Glam offering the ‘dining and shopping experience’, like a one-stop centre I supposed. Many significant Muslim events are still celebrated here at the Kampong Glam such as Hari Raya Haji and Prophet Mohammed’s birthday that turns the whole place alive.

I am heartened that in today’s Singapore, we have places like the Little India, Chinatown and the Kampong Glam for though gone is the feel of the old days and inevitably so as we have to move along with the changing times and needs, I see these places as platforms for us to find out more about ourselves - what we were like before, why we are here today and perhaps, what we can do in the future to ensure that we do not lose these little traces of the past that are still visible today,

Catherine Khoo

The main aim of having a Malay heritage in Singapore is to encourage the Malay community to establish its own cultural heritage point of reference. It is a cultural and historical showcase of the Malay community in Singapore. When it was firstly mooted years ago, I remember the various support and opposition that were echoed by many people who came from many walks of lives, both local and abroad (mainly from Malaysia). When it was finally opened to the public, I felt a deep sense of Singaporean Malay pride. Even though the Malays are the minority in the small but excellent country of Singapore, we have a strong and deep-rooted impact, historically and socially. I did not feel that the taking over of the old sultan's palace and the gedung kuning (yellow house) by the government was incorrect. The Malays of Singapore have for years, since the nation's independence, been striving for their own progress without any significant aid from the sultan's descendants. Many Malay leaders came from the commoners, who worked their way up through sheer hardwork and the belief to strive for excellence for the race and nation. To me, the present Malay community has the right to make use of the old palace to present its struggles to attain progress and retain its cultural values and heritage. The various exhibits showing the achievement of ordinary Malays in the centre are evidences of the progress and development that the Singaporean Malays have acquired. Looking at the exhibits and reading the explanations have made me see the connection that I have with my older generation and I could relate with their
achievement and conviction to strive for excellence. Having a heritage centre reminds me, who has some connection to it, of the past and to realise what I have to do constructively to value-add the achievement of the community. I realise also that the Malay community had always relied on their own ability to achieve success.

Although the place has been redeveloped, the feeling of being a Malay in the place is still retained and further enhanced. The centre is used for various Malay cultural events such as silat performances, dances, poetry recitals, plays, weddings etc. The centre is also used for religious events and celebrations such as the fasting month of Ramadhan, Hari Raya celebration etc. When the descendants of the sultan were living there, there was no such gathering for the Malay community. Although they might have lost their power to administer the Malay community, they could have initiated something on their own or spearheaded an activity to remind the Malay community of the once-respected sultanate that it had. We should be proud that we have turned a palace which was once the pride of the sultan living in it, to a 'palace' to showcase the best heritage the Singaporean Malay can show to the world and take pride in it.

Being a Malay, I know there exist several differences between Kampong Glam and Geylang as a Malay-Muslim centre in Singapore. Kampong Glam is portrayed as a cosmopolitan area within a Malay surrounding, whereas Geylang is seen as the 'kampong life' area of the Malay community. If you go to the two places, you will experience the difference glaringly. You have restaurants in Kampong Glam but you have a hawker centre in Geylang. You have shophouses selling fine and expensive fabrics in Kampong Glam but you will find baju kurongs being sold in the small shops in Geylang Malay Village. These two Malay centres depict serve different purposes for the Malay community, according to its needs. Kampong Glam is highlighted as a tourist destination more than Geylang. I think the present set-up between Kampong Glam and Geylang as a Malay-Muslim centre works well for the Malay community, as they do not replicate each other, rather, they complement.

In conclusion, the Malay Heritage Centre has shown to a certain extent, the preservation of the Malay cultural heritage within the context of the Singaporean Malay. The centre can serve to promote and enhance understanding among the races and religions in Singapore. It can be the focal point of the Malay cultural showcase to the world.

Nasrullah bin Jaffar

I find it really hard to talk about loss or change with reference to heritage sites because a loss or change presupposes knowledge of what was there in the first place. And that I really cannot claim to know much at all. To me, culture and heritage (or cultural heritage) seem important only for 2 reasons: education and leisure. Underlying both is economics, that upon which Singapore Inc is driven.

Walking around Kampong Gelam, what struck me most are the Istana and Gedung Kuning. There was much fascinating discussion surrounding it; the physical condition of the place and the conspiracy plots behind it. I never thought the physical condition of the objects in question could ever be a topic of debate. I assumed if a place was supposedly important, steps would be taken to slow down, and sometimes reverse material deterioration. Yet it was not so, at least not at the beginning. Was there a failure to sufficiently understand the questions of values and significance? Or perhaps to finally resort to ‘economic’ considerations for conservation decisions, which probably means that the resources available are to be used efficiently to achieve maximum benefit (and whose shall that be?), just does not seem right somehow.

At the Malay Heritage Centre, somewhere in small print, the visitor is informed that in an agreement that was signed, Singapore was ceded to the East India Company. In so doing, the Malay Royal family relinquished all sovereign rights over Singapore to the British. On Hidayah Amin’s website, the reader is informed that in 1999, Gedung Kuning was acquired (for a contentious sum) by the Singapore government under the Land Acquisition Act – cessation, contract, economics. I am not sure how much things have changed over time.

Kampong Gelam was designated for the Sultan of Singapore (Sultan Hussain Shah) to be his enclave, an area which extended outward beyond his residence, bounded from the Rochor
river/Canal up to Jalan Sultan. It was a wide area of space. Over the years, much of this land was sold or leased or given for various use such as burial grounds, schools or madrasa, mosque or for cultivation. Today, clearly much of that has gone and only the walled palace area remains. Pilgrims’ village has become a tourist mall.

Nonetheless, I did enjoy the visit to Kampong Gelam and prefer it to the one to Chinatown. For one, my father claims there are food stalls that have been there for decades, so the taste is probably the same. It is still a place where people hunt for cheap and good food. The rustic look of some buildings remains although there are interruptions; modern fixtures like glaring road signs, touristry ware and gaudy buildings. Most importantly, religion no matter how rapidly the environment is changing, remains. Kampong Gelam was once a cosmopolitan settlement of Muslims from diverse ethnic backgrounds, brought together by a common faith and a way of life. I think I still see that today and I believe the presence of Sultan Mosque contributes to it.

Junice Chia

Personally I agree with Wei Boon’s comments that MHC is a focal point and a common hub for our new generations of Malay Singaporeans to find their roots. Its existence and function is to help young Malays in the nation to make connections with the past and how the Malay community has evolved over time.

However, by sheer reference to the ‘The Singapore Malay Community – Enclaves and Cultural Domains’ given by Dr. Blackburn, the intricate and socio-cultural processes of building up Malay groupings/cultures (mainly the Bugis, Minang, Baweanese, Javanese and Riau people) plus the establishment of ‘Istana Kampong Glam’ communities from kampongs and villages in the 1820s document detailed developmental processes which goes beyond a simple story and showcases of artifacts in the MHC.

Whilst we are keen to fabricate a ‘common past’ for the younger generations of Singapore, we have shortchanged history & its heritage when we gave little insights to the formation of Malay enclaves like Kampong Glam, Kampong Eunos and Geylang Serai which their ‘transitional stories’ should be clearly spelt out. Isn’t that the function of a historical museum which separates it from commercial entities that hard sell our heritage? It was then pretty ironic to see Patrick’s contribution that directs us to the STB site where Kampong Gelam is packaged in ‘plastic versions’ of clean cut facts and figures with significant landmarks such as the Sultan Mosque at Bussorah Street ‘advertised’ for its cultural significance to the foreign tourists. It is no wonder that Singaporeans are equally mesmerized by these depictions without thinking deeply the cultural/heritage values of ‘past traditional enclaves and cultural nodes’ as mentioned in the concluding statements of the document.

Our frenzy and focus over preservation of buildings than understanding the key developments and progress of the Malay communities in Singapore would have eroded the authentic experience one could have embraced when they visit Kampong Gelam District in today's context. Both Dominic and Delphine commented that the ‘Kampong Glam Heritage Centre has lost all its significance’ and Kampong Glam ‘is a very beautifully restored area...a cool place to hang out for working adults in general but this has nothing to do with its Muslim-ness...’. Inevitably the twin effects of URA efforts and STB media campaigns have removed the qualities and rustic charms of the district.

Building on Harbhajan’s contribution, these urbanization phases (bringing along new economic climate and changes) have transformed the ‘function and design’ of streets and buildings of Kampong Gelam nowadays. These profit-driven initiatives are not new as Kampong Glam in the late 1830s was already a commerce holding ground for trades and businesses that catered to varied immigrant groups and Malay communities. The evolution of Kampong Glam district henceforth seemingly centered on the needs of business growth and development where the sprout of specialized trades and trading in the past were replaced with ‘travel agents for those making the pilgrimage to Mecca...with Western Internet cafés and souvenir stalls making up the bulk of the shopfronts.’
Indeed, Kampong Glam has gone beyond just its cultural and political function. Its commercial value and business enterprise will soon be a distinctive spirit of its own.

Kelvin Yew

I shall dispense with an introduction of Kampong Glam since we've all been there for the trip.

I agree with Dr Blackburn that the place seems to convey Singapore as the hub of the Malay community. While the intent is questionable, it is not difficult to see why MHC has to tell such a story. If I were to visit a MHC in Singapore, I most probably wouldn't want to read much on another country's significance in the history of the Malay community in Singapore. A sign stating 'Please visit the museum in KL for the full story' will do more justice to the progress of the Malay community in Southeast Asia.

I see the MHC's intention from the exhibits displayed. As a heritage centre, MHC seems to focus on a common past shared by the Malay community in Singapore only. The ground floor traces historical development of the sultanates and chooses to emphasize on Johor-Riau Lingga Sultanate. After that, the rest of the exhibits focus on the lifestyle of the Malay community such as pilgrimage, kampong life, education, movies and housing. It's more of an attempt to connect the new generation of Malays with their ancestors than anything else.

As a heritage centre, the MHC serves its function. As a museum, the MHC is definitely inadequate.

Chua Wei Boon

In my opinion the redevelopment in Kampung Glam was a positive initiative made by the government. Although the older businesses and Malay Kampungs are all gone, the area has undergone a great change and for the younger generation of Malays (like myself), it has become a hip place to just gather and hangout with friends. For example, Turkish shops like "Samar" offers alfresco and indoor dining in a Mediterranean ambience. Shops that made Kampung Glam popular among the local Malay population like "Aladdin" (selling clothing material for baju kurung) and "Zam Zam" the famous briyani stall remains in the past ten years or so. Hence in my opinion, although the Kampung Glam has undergone vast redevelopment and the shophouses have changed hands, the area is authentic in offering that "dining" and "shopping" experience that you can't possibly find in Orchard Road or Geylang Serai. Although one may say that the charms of the Malay Kampung is all gone, the government is just being practical in its redevelopment practice to make the area popular again amongst the Malays because as far as I can remember about 15 years ago, not many would consider Kampung Glam when they want to do their Hari Raya shopping because of the state the shops were in (run-down and dilapidated). Today, however, with redevelopment I feel that the area has become more "Alive" and most importantly utilised.

As for the Malay Heritage Centre, I feel that it is a good initiative to introduce the Malay background, history and culture to the general public and tourists. Once I brought my students to the centre and the performances really enchanted the students. Even the session in which they learnt how to wear an tie a sarong and play the kompong was "something new" to the students.

An insight on the families that were asked to move away from the Istana, I feel that it was rather highly publicised that they were unwilling to move. I have a friend who was a descendant of the Sultan and actually stayed at the Istana until he was five years of age. According to him there were many families (around 80 descendants) staying together (communal living). He was the descendant of Tengku Sharif bin Tengku Abdullah. For his family, it was a self-made decision to move out because the area had become too crowded with too many families. They got their monetary compensation and was a willing party. Perhaps the idea of acquisition was a good one in order to prevent such an important piece of history be left abandoned and dilapidated?

Noraini Binte Abdul Gani
My first impression of Kampong Gelam District is the same as what I would have perceived Chinatown and Little India -- they are heritage sites for us to learn and re-learn our ethnic identities not just from the Singaporean perspective but also a personal account of our collective memories. Though we know heritage and its influences can be much fabricated along different timelines and people, these districts serve as a reminder for me especially to appreciate one’s heritage and ethnic diversity in a nation like ours.

I came across this book ‘Rediscovering the Malay Legacy JOURNEYS’ (2006) published by SMU Malay Language & Cultural Club (SMUMLCC) with eager Malay students writing accounts of their heritage trying to rediscover their ethnicity and culture. Mr. Zainul Abidin Rasheed, Chairman of the Malay Heritage Centre wrote in the preface that it is commendable for young intellectuals like SMUMLCC to take up the challenge to see ‘heritage as ‘a living entity and a collection of human experience’ where the ‘ethnic heritage has a lot to offer’ (p.7).

While we are debating the authenticity and account for the heritage worth of Kampong Gelam, let us not forget the critical function of one’s experience with the heritage and its assets. In the New Economy, these new generation Malay Singaporeans are trying to re-define what Malay Heritage is all about in their very own eyes. The President of SMUMLCC (2004), Mr. Syed Hassan Bin Syed Nashir Alsagoff, shared the joys of this journey of rediscovering, providing self-reflections, seeking answers to the following: ‘What is Malay culture? How do we identify ourselves as Malays? What about Malay culture should we be proud of?’ (p.13).

Government agencies, social networks and schools can only do so much to educate. The personal experience and journey to heritage discovery will better serve its purpose to ascertain one’s view on its meanings and impressions of being a truly Malay Singaporean in today’s modern world.

Kelvin Yew

Taking on Kelvin’s last point, I can’t help but agree that most museums and heritage centres are somewhat like samplers? For us to have some ideas about a certain heritage or history and should we be interested, the onus is on us to pursue it further on our own?

We would also have to remember that what is in the museums and heritage centres cater to a large spectrum of audience and perhaps, we should be more accepting and forgiving that the information and experience created might appeal to some and not others for various reasons. Perhaps we have to bear in mind the idea of perspectives in the presentation of heritage and history - is there ever a right or wrong? Is it more a case of looking at it and appreciating it from that particular perspective or viewpoint and realising that there are multiple perspectives even on the issue of heritage?

Esther Wong

Remembering to Forget, Forgetting to Remember

Upon entering the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) in Kampong Glam, one is immediately struck by how it presentation stands in stark contrast with that of the Chinatown Heritage Centre (CHC). Whereas the CHC promises an experience of a specific episode or instance of the past by taking the visitor on a sensory tour that saturates him with the sights, smells and sounds of the past, the MHC’s approach is markedly more sterile and the visitor is taken through a more conventional museological set up of artefacts in glass cases, narrative story boards, dioramas and mock-ups. It is evident therefore that the MHC’s mission is to provide a past that is based on fact and artefact and it is more interested in “telling the story as it is”, thus providing a definitive account of Malay history.

This attempt at providing a definitive account of the Malay past premises on several assumptions.
First, the Malay past in Singapore, however it is narrated, is subsumed into and integrated with the national past. Second, Malay-ness in Singapore is assumed to be different and distinct from Malay-ness in the larger Southeast Asian Malay world. Third, the position of Singapore as a nexus, a hub or Antioch, or its positional significance and geographical exceptionalism confers on it a privileged status.

From these assumptions, the narratives unfold themselves in what appears to be a seamless manner. From Gallery One to Gallery Nine, the events and happenings of the Malay world take place in lockstep with what happens in Singapore. This is especially so in the post-1819 colonial era as the evolution and material achievement of the Malay community is perceived as one that is catalysed by the colonial experience. In contrast to other post-colonial narratives, there is no attempt at revisioning the colonial past. The founding of Singapore by Raffles and the whole Sultan Hussein saga (which led to the whole Istana Kampong Glam saga in 1998) is seen as a neutral and benign, even beneficial event. In one of the galleries, the score of the Majulah Singapura, the National Anthem and a bust of its composer, Zubir Said, take pride of place. This foregrounding of the nation and one of its symbols makes a strong impression on the visitor.

There is an absence of the narratives of subjugation, loss, marginalisation and dispossession that so often characterises the history of post-colonial societies such as India. This approach however is in line with the official view that the history of modern Singapore began in 1819 (as K.G. Tregonning once famously declared, and in one stroke confining Singapore’s pre-1819 past to antiquity) and that the colonial experience has been a benign and beneficial one for Singapore for it conferred rule of law, property rights and other institutions of modernity.

It is also evident that the exceptionalism of the Singapore Malay is underscored repeatedly throughout the galleries. The Singapore Malay is presented as urbane and sophisticated, a product of an open and cosmopolitan society, conscious of his identity and aware of his place in colonial/post-colonial society. This is reinforced by evidence of the proliferation of publishing houses that produce literary materials ranging from novels to poems (hikayats) to textbooks and newspapers.

The material achievement and accomplishment of the Singapore Malay is traced and showcased in the mock ups of a kampong house and a Housing and Development Board flat. What is ironic is that the HDB flat, though ostensibly a Malay home, is devoid of any trace of Malay-ness save for the Quranic verses on the wall. Modernity appears to have stripped the Singapore Malay of some of its identity; even his dwelling is indistinguishable from that of other communities in Singapore. Modernity’s blandness has overshadowed ethnic flavour here. The traditional corner news stand and kampong house have been replaced with a bland modernity as the community looks towards a future of hope and progress (as echoed in Gallery Nine). The progressivist angle is not lost of the visitor at all.

This sense of Singaporean Malay-ness which is characterised by modernity is what distinguishes itself from the Malay-ness of the larger Southeast Asian Malay world. Conversely, the agrarian and subsistence aspect of Malay life is largely silenced in this narrative.

The advent of modernity into the Malay world is seen to have taken place in Singapore – all the hallmarks of a modern society such as social consciousness, a nascent literati and an attendant literary scene, urban living are present at Kampong Glam. This modernity is tempered by a strong Islamic consciousness that forms the core of collective memories that individuals have of the area.

Being situated in Kampong Glam, it is perhaps natural that the MHC narrative deals largely with its social memories. Kampong Glam is seen as an Antioch from which pilgrims from the region and Singapore embark on what would be the most significant and important journey of their lives. It is because of this role that Kampong Glam acquired much of its credence as the center of Islamic heritage in Singapore and Southeast Asia. This Antiochian role is conferred upon Kampong Glam by two factors – one, Singapore’s geographical exceptionalism and two, colonisation that transformed a backwater into a booming emporium of the East. To cement this role, evidence of the existence of travel agents, pilgrim boarding houses and pilgrim artefacts are given prominence in the MHC.
Yet, with the focus on Kampong Glam, the other nexus of Malay life in Singapore, Geylang Serai, is excluded from the narrative.

So much has been said but yet, so much was left unsaid in the MHC. For one, the entire unhappy episode of Singapore’s interlude in Malaysia was left unmentioned and only hinted at in one of the display panels. There is also silence on the Malay experience in the other red letter event of Singapore history, the fall of Singapore and the Japanese Occupation. The curator(s) have also chosen not to focus on the political development and experience of the Malay community and more crucially, the post-independence policies undertaken by the government towards the community.

It appears that the eschewing of the political for the social was a conscious decision taken by the curator(s). Yet, this is problematic for the social can at times be intensely political. This can be seen in the treatment of organisations such as the Kesatuan Muda Melayu (Young Malays’ Union). The MHC presents the KMM and its cadres as individuals who represented the increased awareness of social issues and identity within the community. Yet, the KMM has traditionally been viewed as a nationalist organisation that had Pan-Malayan links and interests. This view is presented in the seminal work by William Roff, The Origins of Malay Nationalism. The exclusion of the pan-Malayan connection (or as Tay Kheng Soon would put it, the Malayan narrative) is another aspect element that permeates the MHC’s narrative. This exclusion permeates the presentation of Malay culture and art, especially in the post-war era.

There also appears to be some tension between the MHC’s intentions. Does it seek to document collective memories of Kampong Glam, its immediate locale? Or does it seek to tell the story of Singapore Malays? This bifurcation comes across very obviously as the narrative swings from one angle to another as one goes through the galleries. This also forces one to ask the question of who the intended audience is. For the CHC, it is clear that the tourist is its intended audience. For the MHC then, who is it?

In the absence of sources, one can only speculate on the intentions and assumptions of the scripting of the MHC. Yet, these problems reflect perhaps a desire of the community to move forward as a progressive partner of this nation while at the same time, remembering to forget the troubled connections that this nation once had with its immediate neighbours.

Alvin Tan
29 September 2007

Despite being a Singaporean and a history teacher, I have never really been to Kg Glam until that day when we went there as our field trip. Oh I have been to that area alright but not to that specific spot known as Kg Glam. My trip to that area usually covers the Golden Landmark Shopping, the surrounding textile shops and of course the famous murtabak and other food stalls. Actually I have never really felt any attraction towards the place though although as a history teacher I am fully aware of the ‘significance’ of the place.

I wonder how many Singaporeans, malays especially are like me? If there are many, then that should reflect something about the place and the ‘value’ that malays like me place upon it, right? One of the reasons I feel nothing special about the place, I suppose, is that there is not much there that I as a malay would need that could not be found any where else. Although history tells us that the area was among the first place the malays settled at, I do not feel anything malay about this place. Now this is definitely different from Geylang /Serai.

Even as a child, I remember the numerous trips to Geylang Serai, especially nearing festivals like Hari Raya. My mum would then dragged me to the wet market to get all things necessary for the day; something which I truly dreaded not just because of the environment but also the long bus ride to get to the place. I don't remember ever going to Kg Glam except perhaps to the nearby Arab Streets to get some new clothes. And this is true even until today. It is common to hear
people making the remark that unless you go to Geylang Serai, even if once, you would not be in the real mood to celebrate Hari Raya.

In my opinion, Kg Glam area is really more for tourists rather than the locals. The shops in the area sell things that would appeal more to tourists than locals. This is especially so when one look at the prices of these goods. Hajjah Maimunah Restaurant is a case in point. Here you can really find good old Malay food, from desserts to main dishes, but their prices!!!

In conclusion, I feel that Geylang Serai is more deserving in being recognised as a a Malay icon. What I say next may not be politically correct, but it is my opinion that the government's decision to develop the place as a Malay heritage centre is purely for political reasons. And what I mean is that the government may be just trying to 'appease' the unhappiness of the Malay royalty from Malaysia. The government's action of taking back that area was something that the Malay royal was truly unhappy about. If this area was then turned into a government or ministry building, that would be like adding salt to the wound. This would be worst when one considers the fact of how our government has also been 'repossessing other areas/lands which should belong to Malaysia. (The attempt to take over Tanjong Pagar and the KTM building?) Hence, the decision to turn the Kg Glam palace into a Malay heritage centre is a decision to somehow soften the blow and we can now proudly say that we have spent lots of money to renovate the place and now the larger Malay community will benefit from it.

By the way, ‘for the sake of the larger community ’ and ‘the place was not taken from the Malays, rather it was renovated for the sake of the Malays' were the reasons I gave to my brother-in-law, an UMNO activist in Melaka, when I felt compelled to protect my government. ;) 

Radiah Bte Baba

Two Saturdays ago was my first visit to the Malay Heritage Centre. While I thought the information displayed in the centre was interesting and informative, I am not too sure if that is indeed the best way to present the heritage and history of the Malays.

The loads of information was mind-boggling and I felt ‘detached’ from the experience in the heritage gallery and I guess, if it had not been this assignment, I would have breezed through the gallery like the other ten or so visitors that went into the gallery and left before I completed the visit.

Also, reading the information on Malay heritage, it felt very much a “their” history than a “history of the people”. There was a lot of information on the different Malay “houses of royalty” and the fighting. I am not certain why the information was presented, due to my shallowness perhaps. But perhaps, the information was to situate why the shift of power in the Malay world and the movement of the people? Nonetheless, while I cannot say that part of the gallery offered an authentic experience, it was informative, but only if one reads the information carefully.

What I enjoyed most about visits to museums or heritage centers these days are the interactive and more “alive” exhibits and the more visual and audio displays – like the “kampung house” and “HDB flat” that was on display on the second storey. I remembered how I got rather excited seeing them, especially the HDB flat, and exclaimed that all that looked so familiar. The decoration in the HDB flat got me reminiscing about the few times I visited my father’s Malay colleagues’ place during Hari Raya and felt that what I saw was “just so like the home of a Malay”. I am certain I have been over-generalizing here. But I cannot help but think perhaps what authenticity means then would be “the created experience would be as close to the real as possible when the person witnessing it feels that indeed he had a somewhat similar experience in real-life”. Having so said, I think for those who have not experienced what “being Malay” is, they would not be able to tell truly what is authentic? Perhaps I am wrong, again?

The other part of the heritage centre which I found interesting was the short clip where Malays from all walks of life discusses a little on different aspects of life – work, friends etc by looking at them from the past, to the present and into the future. I thought that was more interesting and authentic as we are hearing “real” people speak but then away, are their
voices reflective of the views of most Malays? Have their views been censored to achieve certain objectives?

While there were moments when I felt the visit offered an authentic experience, there were moments when I was a little cynical and doubtful, like the idea of Singapore as "the centre of the Malay world"? Is that a common acceptance by the Malays or a Singapore-construed notion?

Esther Wong

Like Esther, I'm puzzled by the portrayal of Singapore as "the Centre of the Malay World". If any place might be considered as the centre of the malay world, I would think that it might be any other muslim-dominated country like Malaysia or Indonesia, rather than Singapore. Is this portrayal a geographical one or a political one? If it is geographical, then it makes more sense because Singapore is in the middle of the "malay world", if the "malay world" refers to Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. However, politically, I feel that Singapore cannot be regarded as the "centre of the malay world". Singapore's malay population is not as high as our muslim neighbours in the region and therefore the other places would have strength in numbers. Also, I feel that the "malayness" of the other places are stronger than in Singapore. Singapore is a highly globalised city influenced by diverse cultures and therefore in comparison to our neighbours, Singapore seems less "malay".

During my visit to the Malay Heritage Centre, I couldn't relate much to the exhibits at the first level. However I enjoyed the exhibits at the second level more. This is probably because the exhibits in the second level are on popular culture such as film and social issues rather than political. This may also be due to my stronger background in Geography rather than History. However the visit to the Malay Heritage Centre did enrich my knowledge of the Malays' political, social, cultural and economic situations in the past and in the present.

Walking through the streets of Kampong Glam, I did not have a sense of place in that malay space in Singapore. I did not have much personal experiences and interactions with the space in my life and therefore unable to feel much for it. Having said this, I cannot deny that Kampong Glam has its "exotic-ness" especially during Ramadan where there are more people and more businesses running. However after gathering the comments and views of our malay classmates about the higher popularity of Geylang Serai than Kampong Glam among the malays, it draws me back to pondering about the portrayal of Singapore as "the center of the malay world" again. Is Singapore "malay" enough in relation to our muslim neighbours?

Annie Tan

In The New Paper on Sunday (today – 21 October 2007, p. 27), columnist Leong Ching raises an apposite point to our board discussion on culture and heritage, specifically on the vanishing or soon to vanish landmarks of our island republic. She laments on the alienation that she feels "when I pass Tulip Garden and Farrer Court, I think about how these familiar landmarks will soon be gone." To her, alienation is "when you are cut off, and your memories don't match the world you see around you. It is when you feel you are a stranger in your own place."

She continues, "Memories die a bit each year, their passing hastened by the erasing of physical landmarks. If we were not in such a hurry to demolish our past, we might have a country which feels more alive. More together. More like we were writing a story together. Instead, there is a sense of alienation – at least for me. ... That there is nothing to weigh you down, because you cannot remember what this place was, what it meant to you, and so you can just fly away like an unbearable lightness of being. What holds the fraying pieces together is the collective memory we hold in our minds." [emphasis mine]

My reading of her article is that familiar physical landmarks form the link between a person and his interaction with the space which gives meaning, a sort of ballast to give one a sense of belonging and comfort to him. Thus for those who once had experienced the Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam, Geylang or Ama Keng, or any other parts of Singapore of the fifties to the eighties, these places no longer provide that link as landmarks or pivots of our collective memories.
Postcript: Annie is “puzzled by the portrayal of Singapore as “the Centre of the Malay World” in her posting. As mentioned in my earlier posting, Singapore was the hub of Malay literature, publishing of books and newspapers, the arena for the discussion and spread of ‘modernist’ Islamic ideas as characterised by the Kaum Muda or Young Faction which originated from the Middle East in the early part of the twentieth century. Singapore became ‘the sniping post’ (to quote Roff) for the Kaum Muda to take potshots at the conservation faction or the Kaum Tua, simply because the sultan’s authority and jurisdiction did not extend to the Straits Settlements unlike in the Malay States. In addition, exiled sultans or dethroned sultans were most likely found in Singapore to petition the British governor for reinstatement or compensation. All in all, Singapore became the centre of the Malay World in the late 19th century to the 1950s.

The Malay World is generally considered to encapsulate the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian Archipelago, Borneo and parts of the Philippines, especially in the Sulu islands. Interestingly, there are Malays in the Seychelles (remnants of the descendants of exiled Perak nobility and royalty after the infamous killing of James Birch, Resident of Perak), in South Africa they are known as the Cape Malays, in Vietnam – the Champa Malays, in Kampuchea and even in the Pacific Islands of Polynesia, Tahiti, Cocos Keeling Islands, etc. Academic scholarship tells us that the Malays are from the Malayo-Polynesian stock who had spread far and wide. And there are Malays who are not Muslims, so it would be erroneous to regard Malay as a religion. It is a race, a culture and a language. Islam is the religion of most of the Malays.

Shahril Bin Mohd Shah

My apologies for the delayed posting. Here are my views on the Malay Heritage Centre. I am inclined to agree with Dr Blackburn on the centre's disregard of certain parts of history. The “expunging of Malacca Sultanate” from the MHC is certainly a misrepresentation of the Malay heritage within the Malay archipelago. While Singapore may be an important centre of Malay trade and commerce in the later centuries, the entire historical development ought to be put in place to warrant any credibility and fair representation. I am sure learned visitors or history students would likely find its glossing over the MHC somewhat baffling.

I’m also keen to extend on Shahril’s point of a national agenda. Since the MHC is funded by the government, it is in his words “perfectly understandable” that a national agenda is promoted. My question is, shouldn’t there be a balance between fair historical representation and the promoting of a national agenda? Isn’t it possible to achieve both? Why should “Malaysia be written out” as what Dr Blackburn puts it, when the development of Malay heritage in both countries are cultural-bound and intertwined? Would Singapore Malays feel more proud of the fact that their heritage is a Singapore derived one rather than a part of a shared ethnic heritage between Malays in Malaysia and Indonesia?

To be fair, I’m sure that the MHC isn’t unique in this aspect since the promotion of political agenda and the marking of nationalistic boundaries are equally evident in other heritage centres. It’s true that of interest here is after all the “Singapore” version, which perhaps is what visitors are after.

Compared to Geylang serai, Kampung Glam does seem more touristy. This is perhaps due to the fact that it has fewer “malay-centric” businesses, therefore taking out some of its “authenticity” which it had previously. At closer look however, I still consider Kampung Glam a “living” heritage centre despite its more touristy image. The mosque, which serves as the epicenter of the whole Kampung Glam area is still a “living” heritage place. While some businesses along the streets have changed, there are still businesses (particularly those selling clothing) which have been around since the area's development. I feel this mirrors Chinatown as well. While some shops there have capitalized on the area's tourist appeal, (selling tourist trinkets and souvenirs), you can still find traditional businesses which have remained till this day. Would that still be considered a “living” heritage site?

Danny Tan