The Singapore Malay Community
Enclaves and Cultural Domains

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Introduction

The history of the Malay community in Singapore is a complex one. For example, the question of “who is Malay” itself would elicit different responses from the Malay-Muslim community as well as from non-Malays. Unlike the Chinese and Indian dialectal divide, the people of the Malay stock do have different cultural heritage, places of origin, and in some cases, different originating nation states, but all bonded by a common religion and a similar language. The issue has, of course, been made more complex with the prevalent practice of cross marriages. Not all Malays are from the Malay Peninsula, and not all Muslims are Malays.
This lecture will not go into the intricacies of the Malay identity. It will, however, introduce the subject with a broad view to be inclusive, showing how today’s ethnic Malay communities evolved. It will also discuss the evolution, progress and transition of traditional the ethnic Malay enclaves in Singapore. Hence, a significant part of this lecture will also discuss the history of Kampong Glam. You might also consider the importance of Telok Blangah, not treated at length here, but nevertheless for a long time the location of the Temmenggong. To complete the discussion of the “Malay World” in Singapore, several aspects of Malay social life and communal practices will also be dealt within this lecture.

A. Early Records of Malays In Singapore

The *Malay Annals* records that the settlement of Temasek was founded by a Prince from Palembang, Sri Tri Buana, who gave Temasek its new name after seeing an animal resembling a lion. He then founded a settlement on the island and his line reigned over the island until the late 14th century. The last in that line of rulers, Iskandar Shah, corresponded to other events recorded in Portuguese sources: the flight of Parameswara to the island, his murder of the King of Singapura and the usurpation of his throne. This suggests that Iskandar Shah (or Parameswara). Subsequent to this, Portuguese sources records that Singapore was raided and sacked by Siamese or Siamese-controlled forces who sought to avenge the death of the rightful king. Singapore fell into relative obscurity thereafter.

What is pertinent here is that Singapore was, for a long time, considered a significant part of the Malay world. Parameswara, having fled Singapore, went on to found the Malaccan Empire which included Singapore and parts of modern day Indonesia. When the Portuguese brought an end to this empire, its sultanate fled south of the Peninsula to carry on resistance from there. It was thus that the Johore Sultanate was eventually founded. This new empire flourished but was plagued by the inter-factional rivalry which Stamford Raffles eventually exploited to enable the British to secure a foothold on Singapore.

The Orang Laut and Early Malay Settlements in Singapore
Munshi Abdullah’s account of Singapore tells us that Singapore was a pirates’ nest by the time Raffles arrived. He tells of the discovery of countless skulls on the banks of the Singapore river. These were supposedly the remains of the victims of pirates who were brought here to be slaughtered, as the island was the location where the spoils of plunder were brought to be divided amongst them (Hill, ‘Founding of Singapore described by Munshi Abdullah’ in Singapore 150 years, 1969, 98-99).

Prior to 1819, the rivers of Singapore were already inhabited by various groups of people living on boats. The Orang Laut were found mainly along the Singapore River, the Kallang River as well as other creeks and rivers. There was also a community of Orang Laut hidden in the bay at Telok Blangah (near the present World Trade Centre). The Orang Laut here were well-known in the 1830s for being pirates or having been actively helping pirates to prey on merchant shipping of the rapidly growing port.

After the founding of Singapore, the Orang Laut of the Singapore River remained in their boat-houses and made a good living ferrying people across the river and peddling fruits and sweetmeats to the crews of local vessels. However, their presence on both the banks of the increasingly busy river was soon taken to be a nuisance to the river traffic. Tamil lightermen who ferried goods from the ships anchored at the mouth of the river to the godowns along the river sometimes collided with them. The Orang Laut of the Singapore River were finally dispersed in 1842-1843, and re-settled in Tanjong Rhu, Telok Blangah, Selat Sinkeh, Pasir Panjang and the southern islands like Pulau Brani.

**Temenggong Lands**
When Raffles first landed at the north banks of the Singapore River, he would have seen the residence of the authority of the island, the Temenggong of Johore. This Kampong Temenggong was a settlement featuring about 150 Malays who followed the Temenggong from Malacca to Singapore. There were under a hundred small huts. The
larger house/hut (situated near the present Cricket Club) belonged to the Temenggong. (Buckley, *Anecdotal History*, pp 29-30; Makepeace, *One Hundred Years*, p. 342)
Singapore River and also to remove the Temenggong and his rowdy followers (pirates were purportedly sheltered there, there were fights, and the Temmenggong originally tried to collect traditional presents from ships).

At the same time, after the Treaty of 1819, Sultan Hussein set sail for Riau to fetch his family and household to the new settlement. Before his departure, he gave instructions to the Temmenggong to build him a palace at Kampong Glam. The Sultan was allocated 56 acres that extended outwards beyond his residence, in a wide area bounded from the Rochore River (presently Rochore canal).

**B. Kampong Glam: A Muslim Quarter**

**The Conception**

Kampong Glam began as a small village of a few families settled near the Rochor River mouth. It was this humble settlement, that was to evolve into Singapore’s main Muslim enclave. A year after Raffles’ arrival, Kampong Glam was so established that two opium shops were set up there and a year later 1800 yards of carriage road of 16 yards width was laid to Rochor and Kampong Glam (Kampong Glam: Spirit of a Community, p.13).
More changes were to come. When Raffles returned to Singapore in October 1822, he was dissatisfied with the haphazard way the settlement had grown during his three-year absence. He formed a Town Committee and spent the remaining year planning a new town according to ethnic groupings, e.g., European Town, Chinese, Chuliah, Arab and Bugis Kampongs. Raffles had a falling out with his first Resident, the popular and easy-going Colonel William Farquhar, over the future of Kampong Glam. Farquhar envisaged the business quarter to be centred there, but Raffles favoured the Singapore River’s south side, reasoning: “If Kampong Glam were to become a business area this side of the river would remain unimproved for as long as 100 years.” (Kampong Glam: Spirit of a Community, p.13)

It was only in 1824, when the final treaty was signed to cede the entire island to the British that the Sultan built his Istana and mosque at his compound at Kampong Glam. (The current “Istana” building at Kampong Glam was actually erected only in the 1840s, and the current

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Do You Know?  
Kampong Glam

The word “kampong” literally means “village or settlement” and “Glam” is the name of a particular tree, which grew in abundance here during the early period of Singapore. The “Glam” specie or Kayu Puteh (Melaleuca leucadendron) is a botany member of the jambu family. The Glam offered a variety of uses: the hard, durable timber was used in ship repairs to replace rotted hull planks, it was used as a slow-burning firewood in places where mangrove was difficult to harvest, the bark was a traditional weaving material and used for caulking the seams of boats and the fruit was dried and ground as a type of black pepper (*mercha bolong*). Furthermore, the leaves were boiled and distilled as Cajeput oil which was used to cure rheumatism and cramps (Perkins, Kampong Glam, 1984, p.12).
Sultan’s Mosque structure was built in 1924-1926).

The Sultan’s compound was thus developed, bordered by the Arab and Bugis kampongs. Together, the whole area formed today’s Kampong Glam. As such, Kampong Glam was not just an area assigned for the Malay royalty, it became one of Singapore’s earliest Muslim Quarters, hosting a cosmopolitan settlement of Muslims from diverse ethnic backgrounds, fused by a common faith and a way of life. Raffles’ Town Plan had allotted Kampong Glam to Muslim merchants from the Malay Peninsula, Java, Arabia and Hadramaut as their enclave, based on ethnic and economic status. (Kampong Glam, A Community, p.8)

When road building was to commence in Kampong Glam, it was found that the road would pass through the middle of the Sultan’s domain. Mr Crawford directed that the Sultan should be told of their intention to make a road through the centre of his district on the instructions of the East India Company. The Sultan was enraged when he heard this and tried to oppose it, but Crawford’s attitude was further hardened when in 1824, 27 female slaves escaped from the Istana at Sultan Gate and complained to police of gross mistreatment. Crawford, already irritated by the Sultan’s debts to the East India Company (a yearly allowance of $3000 had been agreed with Raffles) and frequent demands for higher allowances, freed the slave girls and ordered his men to break down the Sultan’s wall by force. The Company’s convict labourers smashed down the wall, levelled it to the ground and proceeded to build the road. (The road, North Bridge Road, lay approximately on the alignment of the present Victoria Street, and was at first called Rochore Road.) The result was that the Sultan’s domain was cut in two, part of it on one side and part on the other, with the road running through the middle (Kampong Glam: Spirit of a Community, p.18).

The Istana Kampong Glam

Sultan Hussien’s Istana was built within a protective walled perimeter. The property encompassed all of the land between Jalan Sultan and Arab Street and stretched from North Bridge Road to the sea. The naturalist George Bennett described the building as a “poor-looking bungalow, surrounded by high walls, exhibiting the effects of age and climate. Over the large gateway which opened into the enclosure surrounding this
dwelling were watch-towers.” On Bennet’s second visit in 1833 he described the house as “the old thatched residence,” supporting George Windsor Earl’s claim in *The Eastern Seas* (London: 1937) that in 1835 the house was an “old thatched residence,” and observed:

The buildings of His Highness and followers were now in some degree improved, being surrounded by a neat chunamed wall, and the entrance was by a gateway of brick, which had been only recently completed. Since my last visit His Highness had caused a house to be constructed after the style of the European residents at Singapore, and it was situated exterior to the old boundary of his domain... Besides the new residence and wall, he was erecting a residence and wall for himself, neat and extensive in construction, and in something of a Chinese style of architecture. This building was certainly wanting, for the old thatched palace near it seemed ready to fall about his ears.

It is believed that George Coleman – Singapore’s first European architect, designed this new Istana. The Istana was commissioned by Sultan Hussein’s son, Sultan Ali Iskander Shah, in about 1840-1843 (Boey, Kampong Glam: A Community, 1974, p.20).

During early 20th century, Kampong Glam underwent substantial physical development in both shop houses and residential buildings. Trades here were highly specialised as they catered to specific immigrants groups and to Muslim religious needs. Such physical and demographic expansions led to overcrowding in the area. By the turn of the century, the wealthier Arab families moved to other parts of the island. The Malay population in the area also moved out en-mass in the early 1920s to Geylang Serai and Kampong Eunos. However, a significant Muslim population remain concentrated in a few streets, even till today, particularly at Bussorah Street. The Muslim traders also remain side by side with the Chinese and Indian retailers on Arab Street.
In the early 1960s, parts of Kampong Glam around Crawford Street and Beach Road were demolished to make way for public housing development. Today, the area is a centre of Muslim activities and the Sultan Mosque, the beacon for all Muslims in Singapore. In retrospect, the population shifts across the decades have transformed Kampong Glam from a Muslim enclave, where the density of the Muslim community would be high, into a “cultural domain” for the Muslim community who would gather here during festive and religious occasions. Perhaps, this is also true as far as Chinatown and Little India are concerned.

Up till recent times, the royal descendants still lived in the Istana. Being the historic seat of Singapore Malay royalty, the government has began the process of restoring the Istana Kampong Glam and converting it into a museum and workshop showing the many traditional Malay cultural and handicrafts within the heritage area. Kampong Glam itself was already gazetted a heritage conservation area in 1989.

Islamic Religious Spaces in the District
There three major places of Islamic worship within Kampong Glam, all reflecting the diverse and colourful character of this cultural centre.

Masjid Sultan
The present Sultan Mosque is a familiar landmark in Arab Street. It was built in 1924-28 on the site of the original mosque which was constructed in 1824-26. It is a testimony to Sultan Hussein Shah, who signed a treaty with Sir Stamford Raffles on 6 February 1819. The mosque features the Islam Saracenic style with domes, minarets and balustrades. This edifice was gazetted a National Monument on 14 March 1975.

The Mosque was originally part of the Sultan’s compound. As early as in 1823, Raffles himself had already made provisions for Sultan Hussein to build a ‘respectable’ mosque near his palace. Other than the $3,000 given by the East India Company, the local Muslim communities had also contributed to this project.

In 1879, Tunku Alam Sultan Alauddin Shah, grandson of Sultan Hussein, handed over the administration of the mosque to a committee of trustees consisting of 5 Muslim leaders. During this time, part of the land was also conveyed to the trustees.
In 1914, the colonial government established a Board of twelve Trustees for the Mosque. The lease of the land was extended by the Straits Settlements government for a further 999 years. In 1924, the building of new mosque commenced. The estimated cost of the proposed building project was $200,000. A campaign was launched to raise the funds. Construction took four years and was carried out in stages. Half of the old mosque was first demolished and the other half was retained for daily prayers and the Friday jummah prayers during the construction period.

The new Masjid Sultan (1924-28) was supported by Muslims of all communities – Malays, Bugis, Arabs and Indians. Tunku Alam was commemorated in the new mosque. His grave was given an honoured place in the front portion of the new mosque.

**Malabar Muslim Jama-Ath Mosque**

The Malabar Muslim Jama-Ath Mosque situated at the junction of Victoria Street and Jalan Sultan. The main prayer hall is elevated by 1 storey and the flight of steps which leads to it are orientated towards Mecca. Beneath the prayer hall is a large space for the study of the Koran and other pursuits. Except for a few areas left unpainted, the whole building has been redecorated in garish green and blue. To the rear there is a now small, partly disused cemetery, dated c. 1819, which is for the Malabar Indians. As with the Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sangh Sabha in Wilkinson Road, this mosque was designed and built by A.H. Siddique, an immigrant from northern India in the 1920s, who after completing a correspondence course in building, became responsible for both the construction and design of many buildings in Singapore. Apparently, he would never take a design fee for a religious building of any denomination.

**Hajjah Fatimah Mosque**

This mosque was built in 1845-46 by Hajjah Fatimah, a Malacca-born Malay lady. It is the first, and one of the few mosques in Singapore named after a female benefactor. Featuring a single, Malaccan-style minaret, the mosque's "tower and spire" is tilting by about six degrees. This is Singapore's own "leaning tower".
Hajjah Fatimah was a wealthy Malaccan Malay lady who married a Bugis prince from the Celebes. Her daughter married Syed Ahmed Alsagoff, the son of Syed Abdul Rahman Alsagoff, who was one of the most prominent Arab traders in Singapore during his time. Her house was originally situated on the site of the current mosque. This house was twice attacked by robbers and set on fire in late 1830s. After the second attack, Hajji Fatimah built another house for her family and erected the mosque on the old site. The Mosque was built by French contractors using Malay labour from 1845 to 1846. In the 1930s, the main Mosque was re-built to the designs of architects Chung & Wong by French contractor Bossard Mopin.

The mosque is a combination of various styles. The traditional architecture of the Mosque can be seen in its squared walled enclosure, with domed main prayer hall, there is a bathing area for the ritual washing and a school. The mosque is also European in style, having a central minaret and the two flanking houses. The Minaret resembles design of a church steeple. There is also a little Chinese element in the shape of the windows and the surrounding woodwork.

Along Java Road, several houses built for the poor by the Alsagoff family are evidence of their philanthropy in the early days. Twice yearly large feasts are held there and thousands attended including Muslims of all ranks and classes. One of these feasts is the anniversary of the death of Hajjah Fatimah.

Hajjah Fatimah died at a ripe old age of 98 years old. The mosque survives her as one of Singapore’s longest lasting monuments. Hajjah Fatimah, her daughter, Rajjah Sitti and son-in-law, Syed Ahamed are all buried in the private burial ground behind the mosque. The mosque was gazetted a National Monument on 6 July 1973.

C. Streets and Trades at Kampong Glam

Traces of unique traditional trade are still evident in Kampong Glam. Some of the trades found in Kampong Glam were highly specialized, partly because they were specific to particular immigrant groups, and partly because they catered to Muslim religious needs. For example, Bussorah Street was a centre for sandal-making and copper craftwork and came to be known as “Kampong Tembaya”, meaning “copper village”. Yet, like the other ethnic enclaves, Kampong Glam had also become cosmopolitan in time. One could also find Chinese stone masons and tomb carvers were concentrated along Baghdad and Pahang Streets (URA, Kampong Glam: Historic District, 1995, p.19).
Arab Street
Around the Sultan’s palace at Kampong Glam, the Bugis, Arabs and Javanese settled in their respective kampons. Shops were built on land generously leased from Sultan Ali. The stretch of shops along Arab Street are particularly noted for the heady smells – sweet perfumes, spices, ripe dates stuffed with almonds, and wax still impregnated in the cotton of real batik sarong. One of the local names for Arab Street is the street of the flower shops – or pukadei sadakku in Tamil. In its trading heyday, the Arab Street area was an ideal location for moneychangers as transactions were held only in cash (Hussein, The Conservation of Kampong Glam, 86/87, p. 27).

Other prominent trades in this area include pawnshops, textile dealing, shops selling rattan ware and Murtabak. Many merchants in the area remember Arab Street as Singapore’s liveliest centre for trade and the five-foot ways thronged with merchants of all races.

Jalan Sultan
Known in dialect as “Ji Chap Keng” (The 20 houses), the street runs from Beach Road to Rochor Canal Road (JMBRAS, 42:1, 1905, p.97).

In the earlier times, Jalan Sultan was dotted with shops trading a variety of goods. Among these was a sauce factory, which was built in around 1905. In the pre-war years, people apprenticed to electricians in the engineering works located there. The Shan Hin Tobacco (1929) and Malay Seaman’s Union & Co (1950) also had their quarters at Jalan Sultan. Eating houses and coffee shops were also a common sight. One of a few old buildings along this street which is still around today is the Al-Ahmadiah Press built in 1912. The Press belonged to Raja Haji Ali, and the workers were mainly relatives and family members. Books printed were mainly in Jawi and Arabic and a compositor earned about $2 a week. A person with an illustrious background who worked at the press was Mohammad Shafik bin Raja Haji Omar. He was of Bugis descent and was related to the Sultan of Riau, Abdul Rahman. The Press was also licensed to deal in import-export trade. Goods imported were solely copra from Indonesia to be sold locally. Publishers from
Palembang were the main customers for printing. The imposing and colourful building, painted in chocolate and yellow, still serves customers who need books, newsletters and invitation cards printed in Arabic script.

Figure 17 Shophouses at Jalan Sultan

Another historical building along Jalan Sultan is the Alsagoff Arab School, built also in 1912. It is a simple 2-storey design using semicircular arches: all in all, a good piece of street architecture. The old Malay cemetery and the Malabar Muslim Jama-Ath also help to remind us of the origins of this area.

Figure 16 A Chinese shop at Jalan Sultan

Figure 18 Street Hawker at Jana Sultan

Jalan Pinang
In 1911, a Chinese merchant, Wong Man, erected a sauce-manufacturing factory in Jalan Pinang. Other trades that settled into Jalan Pinang were grocery stores, zinc manufacturing and goldsmiths.

Jalan Pisang
Shops that inherited embrocation recipes from their forefathers can be found on Victoria Street and Jalan Pisang. The recipe came to Singapore in 1889 via Malacca. The main ingredients today include oils, although certain raw materials must still be used. Boxing
Ring Brand has established customers world-wide – including the Harlem Globetrotters. Electric companies (e.g. KDK Electric Fan Co., Majestic Electric Co. Pte Ltd) and dealers in fishing equipment are also evident in Jalan Pisang.

Jalan Kledek
Machinery and motor craft can be found easily in Jalan Kledek. However, we can also find non-hardware trades in this area, such as textile dealers and jewellers.

Jalan Kubor
In the early days, Benzine supply stations (1920s) and petrol kiosks were mainly situated at Jalan Kubor in Kampong Glam. In the 1970s, hardware companies dealing in diesel engines and generating sets were set up in the area.

Jalan Klapa
Shops of various varieties can be found along this street. Although its name suggests a Malay nature, it is in fact filled with Chinese traces, as can be seen from the shops that line the streets, such as Chinese medicine shops. The Loo Clan Association is also based there.

Pahang and Baghdad Street
Along Pahang Street and Baghdad Street, tombstone carvers are still in operation. In the early days, granite blocks used for tombstones were amongst the goods off-loaded at Kampong Glam. With the existence of a nearby cemetery at Jalan Kubor and Victoria Street, regular demand for tombstones were assured and this trade had become the trademark of this place (Hussein, The Conservation of Kampong Glam, 86/87, p. 28).

Sultan Gate
There used to be an old well in the middle of the road at Sultan’s Gate which inspired its Chinese name, Twa Che Kha (The foot of the big well); other Chinese names given to Sultan Gate are Ong Hu Khau (The mouth of the Palace) and Puah This Koi (The street of the iron smiths). The Tamil name is Raja Kottee (Rajah’s Palace). As early as 1824, we have an account of Bengali dairymen milking their cows near Sultan Gate, and until the 1950’s, it was still a relatively common sight to see a doe-eyed Brahmin cow being milked at a customer’s doorstep. As for the Chinese, G.W.Earl tells us that in 1824 he saw Chinese merchants busy forging ironwork around Sultan Gate and the same trade is still plied today in the same location. The blacksmith trade is carried on by the younger generation, making ship paraphernalia such as anchors, hooks, pulleys and other hardware.
Bussorah Street
Walking down Bussorah Street is a stroll back in time. The modest two-storey homes are all intact and in their original 19th century state. The street itself is named after a prominent Arab businessman. Every year at Hari Raya Puasa the youths of Arab, Baghdad and Bussorah Streets and their friends pose for a group portrait in their best holiday finery – and always under the same sign \textit{(Kampong Glam Radio Co.)} at the corner of Bussorah Street.

The northern part of Bussorah Street was also known locally as Kampong Haji while the Southern part was known as Kampong Tembaga (copper village), after the copper workers who used to be found there (Hussein, The Conservation of Kampong Glam, 86/87, p. 28).

Changing Landscape
In the early 20th century, due to the expansion of commercial activities and the increase in the number of immigrants who settled in the area, Kampong Glam underwent substantial physical changes with the construction of new shophouses and residential buildings. There was overcrowding and the wealthier Arab families began moving out to other parts of the island, particularly Tanglin, Bukit Taunggal and Joo Chiat. Due to the keen competition for land, the Malay population at Kampong Glam moved out en-mass in the early 1920s to the \textit{Geylang Serai} and \textit{Kampong Eunos} areas.
By the 1920s, the Kampong Glam as we know it today was in place. Today the Muslim population remains a significant presence, particularly in Bussorah Street. On Arab Street, Muslim traders remain side by side with Chinese and Indian retailers. Substantial road infrastructure improvements were undertaken in the early 1980s. Two Mass Rapid Transit stations, Bugis station and Kallang Station, were constructed adjacent to the Kampong Glam Conservation Area (URA, Kampong Glam: Historic District, 1995, p.19).

D. Kampong Glam: National Heritage and Communal Estate

Kampong Glam has also become the site of much controversy over issues of restoration and redevelopment of the area by the government. In 1990, a $500 million dollar development plan was proposed by Tengku Abdul Aziz, a descendant of Sultan Hussain, after a series of discussions with developers from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Europe. The proposal included a 400-500 room hotel as well as offices and shopping complexes (Straits Times, Plans for Istana Kampong Glam, 23 Aug 1990).

Nothing else substantial was heard of the plans subsequently but in 1999, plans were mooted by the government for a Malay Heritage Centre to be housed at the Istana Kampong Glam and the adjacent Bendahara house (Straits Times, New Centre for Malay Heritage, 13 Mar 1999).

The controversy ensued when the government decided to resettle the inhabitants of the Istana to develop the heritage centre and increase in the amount of the state’s annual payment to the descendants of Sultan Hussain. A petition was soon penned to the Prime Minister and the President to appeal against the eviction (Straits Times, Descendants of Sultan Petition PM, 3 May 1999).

Figure 21 Kampong Glam in the days badly needing repair
There were also plans to enlist the support of Malaysian royalty in the cause (Straits Times, Family Members in bid to regain Kampong Glam Palace, 2 Dec 2002).

The issues involved are not simple, and not just ones faced by the residents of Kampong Glam and the wider Malay community. While sites designated Conservation areas or gazetted National Monuments are considered of great cultural-heritage importance to the nation, many of these places, are also functioning institutions, eg. churches, clans and temples. As such, these institutions lose a little discretion as to what physical modifications they can make to their properties. And this includes future sale and types of activities permitted in these places. Hence, the dilemma between national honour (and protection of heritage) and communal and private ownership. While in most cases no major issues have been raised, the case is not so at Kampong Glam.

E. A Tale of Two Enclaves

There were many Malay villages scattered all around Singapore. All of them, in their own right, were Malay enclaves. However, unlike the major centres like Kampong Glam, most of them were not cultural domains where Malays from all around the island would congregate during religious and festive seasons. There are two other recognized major Malay domains in Singapore that have grown quite prominent with the local Malays - Geylang Serai and Jalan Eunos.

However, each have taken different developmental paths.
Geylang Serai

The history of the Malay settlement at Geylang Serai began in the 1840s with the resettlement of the Orang Lauts from the Singapore River to this area.

The new settlement was initially known as Geylang Kelapa (coconuts) which suggests the existence of coconut plantations in the area. However, since the beginning of the 20th century, the area came gradually to be known as Geylang Serai (lemon grass) as a result of the cultivation of lemon grass in that area (Abadi, Geylang Serai, 1986, p.16).

Arab families featured prominently in Geylang Serai. The Alkaffs, the Aljunieds and especially the Alsagoffs, all owned large estates at Geylang Serai. Jalan Alsagoff was named in 1932 after the Alsagoff family who owned the ‘Perseverance Estate’ located in that area. An English estate manager was hired by the family during the later half of the 19th century to develop the Perseverance Estate for the cultivation of lemon grass, which was in great demand in Europe and America for the manufacture of soap and scent (Abadi, Geylang Serai, 1986, p.19).

When the demand for lemon grass fell in the 1890s, the Alsagoff family’s citronella factory ceased to function and the site was converted into an eastern terminal for Singapore’s first tramline service. The Malay and Chinese farmers, however, remained on the Alsagoff estate after the failure of the lemon grass industry and turned their attention to the cultivation of coconuts, rubber, vegetables and the rearing of poultry (Abadi, Geylang Serai, 1986, p.20-21).

During the Japanese Occupation, Geylang Serai suffered serious damage when the Japanese descended on the Geylang area from Tekong and Changi. Malays from Geylang Serai were among the POWs and Asian workers sent by the Japanese to construct the Death Railway. Subsequently, due to food shortages, an area of rubber and coconut plantations were replaced by tapioca (Ubi Kayu). That part of Geylang, thereafter, became known as Kampong Ubi (Abadi, Geylang Serai, 1986, p.23).

After the war, uninhabited areas of Geylang Serai were gradually occupied and congestion began to set in. In the 1950s, many of the better off Chinese moved out of the area and more Malays moved in. Thus, the population of the area became predominantly Malay from then (Abadi, Geylang Serai, 1986, p. 25).
Efforts were made in the 1960s to make Geylang Serai as well as other parts of the island part of the modern landscape. The Geylang Serai project included a modern housing estate with shopping centre and recreational areas. During the 1960s and 1970s, residents of Geylang Serai were resettled in HDB flats on other parts of the Island (Abadi, Geylang Serai, 1986, p. 27). During the Confrontation in 1964, a bomb exploded at a block of flats at Geylang Serai and killed 2 men (Abadi, Geylang Serai, 1986, p. 31).

The resettlement of the residents at Geylang Serai was not without problems. The rapid pace with which the flats were being built in the area was seen by the Malays living in the area as a threat to their established way of life. This culminated in the Geylang Serai Riots of 1964.
In the late 1980s, plans were introduced for a one acre Malay kampong showcase in Geylang Serai. The plan attempts to showcase all things Malay including traditional arts and craft, costumes, spinning tops, kites and food to preserve the cultural heritage of the Malay community. The Geylang Serai Malay Village, however, got off to an inauspicious start after its completion in 1989. In 1991, the government invited tenders to operate the $17 million facility but all three bids failed as the amount bid was far below the developmental cost of the village (Straits Times, Bigger area, longer lease to make Malay Village more attractive, 14 Feb 1991).

The Village improved its image subsequently with all 62 of its shop units occupied and 20 would be tenants on its waiting list in 1997. It was also visited by 250 000 visitors in the same year (Straits Times, Ghost Town No More, 27 Aug 1997). Since then, it has drawn crowds of Malay shoppers during the Hari Raya season and played host to the annual Hari Raya light-up. It remains a popular destination with more than 600 000
visitors in 2001 and more than 1.2 million shoppers during the Hari Raya season that year. (Straits Times, Malay Village shrugs off 'ghost town' tag, 10 Aug 2002).

**Jalan Eunos Malay Settlement**
In 1927, Muhammad Eunos Abdullah, chairman of the Singapore Malay Union and a member of the Legislative Council, appealed to the government for a piece of land to be reserved for a Malay Kampong. A grant of $700 000 dollars was given to launch the project. The Singapore Malay Union purchased 600 acres of land which later became known as Jalan Eunos or Kampong Melayu (Abadi, Geylang Serai, 1986, p. 48). The land was formerly a rubber estate, enclosed by a hilly landscape that was covered by vegetable farms and coconut plantations. It was, in true sense, very rural.

![Figure 31 The Alkaff Mosque at Eunos](image)

![Figure 32 Kampong Boys having fun at Enous](image)

When completed, Kampong Melayu was a huge village of about six hectares in size. It was a self-contained area with amenities catering to the Malay villagers. The original Alkaff Mosque was built in Jalan Abdul Manam, and a smaller mosque, Surau Kaki Bukit, was built in Jalan Perwira. There were also Malay schools there, including Sekolah Perempuan Melayu in Jalan Eunos, Sekolah Lelaki Kampong Melayu in jalan Abdul Manam, Sekolah Rendah Kaki Bukit in Jalan Tabah, Sekolah Menengah Kaki Bukit in Jalan Tabah, Sekolah menengah kaki Bukit in Jalan Muori and Sekolah Ugama Perempuan in Jalan Madrasah.

The Malay Youth Literary Association, or the Persatuan Persurat an Pemuda Pemudi Melayu (more popularly known as the 4PM), was born in Kampong Melayu. As sports was a favourite past-time of the villagers, several sports associations were also started in Kampong Melayu. These included the Persatuan Sepak Takraw Amateur Singapura and the Kaki Bukit Sports Club, which later helped nurture the talents of Fandi Ahmad. ([http://eunos.paym.org.sg/story.html](http://eunos.paym.org.sg/story.html))

In the early 1930s, the development of Jalan Eunos Malay Settlement was intensified when the Government decided to resettle Malays from the Kallang village to make way for the construction of Kallang Airport. Jalan Eunos Malay Settlement was extended to include the Kaki Bukit area in 1960. By the 1960s, there were more than 300 houses in the kampong. There was only a sprinkling of Chinese and Indians in the area, mostly
shopkeepers. *Kenangan Abadi, Geylang Serai Down Memory Lane, p. 48*) Then, Eunos was extended to include the Kaki Bukit area. In 1963, a fire broke out in Kampong Eunos and many people were made homeless.

Eunos remained very much a rural village going into 1980s. But the tide of change had caught up. By the mid 1980s, most of the village houses had been brought down and new HDB flats built. Most of this “urban renewed” have become today’s housing estate around the Bedok Reservoir area. The Malay trappings of the district are almost gone today, with the exception of communal institutions like the Alkaff Kampung Melayu Mosque which is still in the district. Although Bedok itself has a large concentration of Malay residents, one could hardly call this estate a Malay enclave, and certainly not a Malay cultural domain, unlike Geylang Serai.

**F. Education and the Community**

In the Malay world, a system of patronage has been the key to the development of numerous communal institutions. Like the mosques (eg Sultan Mosque, Alkaff Mosque, Hajjah Fatimah Mosque, etc), settlements (Geylang Serai, Jalan Eunos, etc) and schools had always been dependent on funding from communal patrons.

**Community-Language based Schools**

**Malay Schools at Kampong Glam**

The Abdullah School at Kampong Glam was established in 1856 when the Temenggong of Johore and Blundell, the Governor of Singapore, each contributed $1,500 for imparting education to the Malay youth in 1855. *Doraisamy, pp104-105* In 1861, the
Abdullah’s School, which was described as “a thatched building”, was pulled down under the orders of the Municipal Commissioners and a new school was erected. (Makepeace, p462) Abdullah’s School gradually degenerated into a Koran school and was reorganized in the 1870’s by Mr. Skinner, the Inspector of Schools. (Chelliah, p59) This school, however, was transferred in the 1870s to Telok Saga.

Another school, the Kampong Glam Malay School, was set up in the same compound. An experiment of teaching Malay and English together was carried out at the Kampong Glam Malay school in 1884. By 1894, it was reported that the boys in the English class at the school, then the largest school in Singapore, could acquire a knowledge of English up to Standard VII, while at the same time they continued their Malay studies. This was the only school in the Colony at which pupils were taught both the languages. The experiment was considered to have been successful, and it was recommended that it should be tried in other Malay schools also situated in important centres. (Chelliah, p68)

The two branches of the school, the English and Malay, were united into one larger school in 1897, called Victoria Bridge School, today’s Victoria School. (Makepeace, p468)

**Malay Schools at Telok Blangah/Telok Saga**

The Malay Day School at Telok Blangah was established in 1856 when the Temenggong of Johore and Blundell, the Governor of Singapore, each contributed $1,500 for imparting education to the Malay youth in 1855.

Other institutions included Keasberry’s private vocational school for Malay boys at River Valley Road and the Abdullah’s School at Kampong Glam. (Doraisamy, pp104-105).

The demand for Malay teachers throughout the Settlements moved the Education Department to the decision to convert the Malay High School into a **Malay Training College**, implemented 1st March 1878, closed in 1882, only to be reopened 1901 at Malacca.

**The Religious Schools – the Madrasahs**

(The information presented in this section has been generously contributed by Ms Chee Min Fui)

Madrasahs were introduced in Singapore in the early twentieth century. The first madrasah, **Madrasah As-Sibyan** was established in 1905 close to the Sultan Mosque.
The history of the school could be traced back to 1901 to an Indonesian religious teacher who taught in his home in Bussorah Street.

Madrasahs were a result of the Islamic reformist movement in Singapore which was influenced by developments in the Middle East at the turn of the century. The reformists “encouraged religious schools of a more ambitious and elaborate kind than had hitherto existed and in the formulation of a system of education which ideally would take into account of the need not only for a purified Islam but for modern secular knowledge as well.” In Singapore, these ideas were eventually manifested in Madrasah Al-Iqbal which the reformists established.

**Madrasah Al-Iqbal**
The school was opened in 1908 at No.107, Selegie Road. Its founders brought together ideas borrowed from Egypt as well as the West. The school became the “forerunner of many similar schools established throughout the peninsular in the next few years”. Starting with four teachers recruited directly from Egypt, it offered a wide range of subjects. They included the art of reciting the Holy Quran, Composition and Essay, Reading and Writing, Ethics, Worship and Rituals, Arabic Grammar, Geography, History, Mathematics, Town Planning, Arabic Linguistics and English.

The school’s legal owner was an Egyptian, Othman Affandi Ra’fat and Raja Ali al-Ahmad of Riau was a patron of the school. It very quickly ran into financial difficulties which forced its move to Riau, where it eventually fell under the the government of Riau.

**Madrasah Alsagoff**
Madrasah Alsagoff was established at Jalan Sultan in 1912 by the late Syed Mohamed bin Ahmed bin Abdul Rahman Alsagoff. The land and the funds for the development of the Madrasah came from his endowments also known as the Syed Mohamed Ahmed Wakaf Fund. (“wakaf” is a form of charity whereby the land donated can only be use for that purpose) The school had its beginnings in classes conducted in the Alsagoff home in Java Road. When the number of students increased, a new school was built. It was also intended to provide educational opportunities for the large number of Arabs and Muslims coming into Singapore from Arabia. There was also at that point no formal school for the Muslim children in the vicinity. English, Malay reading and writing was included in the instructional programme and no fees were charged. By the 1940s, the school had a total
of 500 students made up of both boys and girls. There were seven classes in the morning session and seven classes in the afternoon session.

**Madrasah Aljunied**

Madrasah Aljunied was set up by Syed Abdul Rahman bin Junied bin Aljunied in 1927 on wakaf land which was originally intended as a burial ground. The British had refused permission for the wakaf land to be used as a cemetery so a school was built instead.

It began with 56 students from Singapore, Malaya, Indonesia and various other countries in its first year. No fees were charged and teachers were paid from the endowment. The Malay language was not taught and students were not allowed to even speak the language. It was perhaps due to this that Madrasah Aljunied became famous for its high standard of Arabic not just in Singapore but in Southeast Asia as well. The school became a huge success. In 1936, a special class was started to prepare students to become lecturers and missionaries. Two years later, religious lessons were conducted in the afternoons especially for students from government schools.

On the eve of the second world war, Madrasah Aljunied had firmly established itself as the premier Islamic school in Southeast Asia. It had also contributed to the growth of a group of Muslim intellectuals who would eventually play significant roles in the lives of the community in Singapore and beyond.

**Madrasah Al-Khariah**

In 1932, Madrasah Al-Khariah was co-founded by the first principal of the Aljunied School - Syed Abu Bakar Taha Alsagoff. Syed Abu Bakar had considered the building of a madrasah in the eastern part of Singapore extremely important as most madrasahs were centred in town. Unlike most other similar schools, the funds for operating the school did not come from the donations of a rich patron but from contributions of a community. The school moved to Still Road in 1937. It provided religious education only at the elementary level.

**Madrasah Al-Maarif**

In 1936, Madrasah Al-Maarif School was established by As-Syeikh Muhammad Fadlullah Suhaime a renowned educator and theologian with his own funds. It started at 14 Tanjong Katong Road with sixty local students. A few years later, As-Syeikh Suhaime obtained assistance from an Arab philanthropist, Syeikh Omar Bamadhaj who bought a piece of land in Ipoh Lane to rebuild the madrasah. Unlike the other madrasahs it admitted girls. In the school curriculum were English, Malay, Domestic Science and Mathematics which was taught in English.
Do You Know?
Malay Burial Grounds

Old Malay Cemetery
The old Malay cemetery at Victoria Street is the oldest recorded Malay cemetery in Singapore. J.B. Tassin’s map of 1836 labels this area as the ‘Tombs of the Malayan Princes’. Opposite, across Jalan Kubor, is an even bigger Muslim Cemetery with a somewhat less deserted air than its neighbour is. The gravestones set amongst the Frangipani trees are fascinating architecturally and in the manner of their arrangement.

Bidadari
The allocation of the Bidadari estate as a burial ground was approved by the Municipal council in 1903. The land was subsequently acquired and initially only used for Christian burial. More land was acquired in 1905 in the same area in 1905 from the Datu Mentri of Johore for the inclusion of Muslim burial grounds.

A Plural Malay Community: Considering the Arabs and the Boyanese

One of the biggest question in the study of social history, and also a question for every individual, is the matter of personal and social identity. Just as a Eurasian or a Straits Chinese may ask about their “Europeaness” or “Chineseness”, respectively, the question of “who is a Malay” has also concerned the Muslim community. It was perhaps less of an issue in the nineteenth century, when most Muslims, be it Boyanese, Javanese, Arab or Malayan descend, being mostly migrants to Singapore, are still tied to their cultural identity. In the modern day, with the advent of nation states and identity, increased intermarriages and mixed offspring, place of ethnic and cultural origins need not be the sole determiners of ethnic identity. This is especially so when there are cross ethnic marriages. Furthermore, in the history of the Malays in Southeast Asia, ethnicity has always been intertwined with religious affiliation. The issue is thus, a highly complex one. On one hand, perhaps the individual should decide, but on the other hand, individual communities and the nation state, for the purpose of categorization, tend to simplify matters by using overarching categories like “Chinese”, “Indians”, “Malay”, “Eurasian”, and “Others”. It was not so long ago that even the Eurasians had to be classified under “Others”. Of course, in recent years, more categories have been permitted. But it still does not change the fact that cultural identity is a matter of perception, by the individual, by society and by the state. Nevertheless, it would be helpful to trace the origins of the plurality of some of the local ethnic Malay and Muslim community.

The Arab Community
The small but successful and influential community of Arab traders was distinctly visible in nineteenth century Singapore. The desirability of the Arabs as settlers was duly noted
by Raffles himself who explicitly designated in his Town Plan “the vicinity of the Sultan’s residence” as the most appropriate area for Arabs to reside. The Arab population was never large, numbering less than one thousand in 1900. However, they were to achieve enormous financial success in both trade and property development. They were also held in considerable religious esteem and some became religious teachers and Imams serving Kampong Glam’s Muslim Community. Wealthy Arab families established and managed several Muslim charitable endowments for mosques and religious schools. The most notable of these was the Alsagoff Arab School and the Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah School (URA, Kampong Glam: Historic District, 1995, p.15).

The most significant trade of the people here in the early days was to act as agents for the Haj pilgrims. During those steamship days, Singapore was the most important port of departure for pilgrims from around East Asia destined for Mecca. These agents would then house the “Hajis” in their homes temporarily. The sheer number of these “Hajis” added colour to the community, and the area along Bussorah Street transformed into a miniature pilgrim’s village. This was the reason why many of the streets around this area have such Middle-Eastern flavour – Bussorah (Basra) Street, Kandahar Street, Muscat Street, Baghdad Street (Both Muscat Street and Baghdad Street are named after places in Arabia), and Arab Street, to name a few (URA, Kampong Glam: Historic District, 1995, p.15).

The Boyanese Community
By early 1860, there were 3000 Javanese and Baweanese in Singapore. Pulau Bawean is a small island north of Java and south of Kalimantan. It is estimated that about 20% of Singaporean Malay population are of Baweanese origin. The Baweanese had a tradition of migrating to other lands to seek a better livelihood although their island was not poverty-stricken (Singapore Heritage p54; Tanjung Pagar: Singapore’s Cradle of Development). The Boyanese were generally employed as plantation workers, drivers and gardeners during the late 19th and early 20th century.

Kampong Boyan
A Boyanese Kampong existed during the 1900s on the Rochor River between Jalan Besar and Syed Alwi Road. It formed the nucleus of the Boyanese settlers in the early days of their migration (Abadi, Geylang Serai, 1986, p. 15).

Living in Pondoks
Traditionally, the Boyanese had organized themselves in pondoks. A pondok was more than just a communal space. It was also a communal structure. Each pondok was headed by a pak lurah (headman). The pak lurah and the committee that was responsible for the welfare of the pondok were nominated through a yearly election and held office for a one-year term. The pak lurah settled differences, enforced the rules of the pondok and determined the punishment to be meted out. He could also be called upon to settled
differences between occupants of different pondoks with his counterpart. The pak lurah also made arrangements for new migrants who were interested in coming to Singapore for work. The pondok is a social-mutual aid institution that was most invaluable to new arriving Bewanese. (Singapore Heritage p54; Tanjung Pagar: Singapore’s Cradle of Development)

Occupants of the pondok paid monthly fees which were collected by the pak lurah with the help of the assistant pak lurah and the secretary. Government fines imposed on individuals were settled by the pondok as a community. At times when a pondok was in need of money, the funds could come from a neighbouring pondok. (Tanjung Pagar: Singapore’s Cradle of Development)

There was a system which physically separated the single and married occupants. Married couples occupied the rooms upstairs while children and singles slept on the ground floor. The rooms upstairs were partitioned by curtains to form smaller “rooms” for the couples. Each couple owned a stove which was placed in the communal kitchen. (Tanjung Pagar: Singapore’s Cradle of Development)

Many of Singapore’s early pondoks were found mainly around Blair Road, Everton Road, Spottiswood Park, Duxton Hill, Serangoon Road and Jalan Besar. Today, there are still several of these pondoks still in existence in these places. (Singapore Heritage, p54) Very few pondoks have survived as most occupants have moved into Housing Board flats. Despite having left the physical confines of the lodging house, some occupants still see themselves as members of the same pondok and gather to render assistance during wedding ceremonies. (Tanjung Pagar: Singapore’s Cradle of Development)
The pondok house at Club Street, founded in 1932 by settlers from Pulau Bawean, is today, considered a heritage site. (Singapore Heritage, p.54). A search of for the building plans of 64 Club Street turned up a plan that records the owner and builder of the pondok to be a Chinese man, Lau Chong. Apparently, the house was erected in 1923. It is probable the pondok was set up here in 1932 on a rental basis. (Building Plans, CBS 99, BP165). In the pre-war days, it was a common sight to see the Boyanese of this pondok seated all along Club Street weaving rattan baskets.

**Conclusion**

The Malays of Singapore have more than one recognized major enclave, and all of them have similar and yet very different developmental processes from the other cultural spaces in Singapore. While Chinatown was planned and Little India evolved, and both were recognizably “ethnic as well as cosmopolitan”, the history of the Malay enclaves is more marked by their transitional stories. Unlike the Chinatown and Little India, most major Malay enclaves, like Kampong Glam, Kampong Eunos and Geylang Serai (and the Temmenggong’s centre at Telok blangah) were founded upon the patronage and actions of key leaders of the Muslim communities. And when their patron faded into history, the progress of these communities and their institutions, like schools, also faltered. Hence, new agencies, government linked or otherwise, have stepped in to re-invent the social-cultural relevance of this traditional enclaves and cultural nodes. This resulted in the revival of Malay institutions like the madrasahs and the creation of more pronounced cultural resource centres like the Geylang Serai Malay Village and the soon to open Malay Heritage Centre at Kampong Glam.

It must also be noted that the major Malay cultural centres and enclaves were pushed along in their transition by the forces of urbanism. This is perhaps also true of Chinatown and Little India, but it remains a point that is lost amidst the strong cultural elements of these districts that occupy much of the discussion surrounding them. The Malay communal experience and encounter with urban development were perhaps more highly marked because the original enclaves were more residential-kampong style areas than commercial spaces. The development of New Towns from the 1960s, besides proving housing for the masses, also resulted in the breaking up of the traditional Malay enclaves. Hence, urban development necessarily meant that drastic change would have been inevitable and would amount to great displacements of the original populations. This is perhaps more evident in Geylang Serai and Kampong Eunos than at Kampong Glam. However, by examining the brief profiling of the Kampong Glam district (see Appendix), it can be seen that not only were the Chinese making their presence felt in the area over time, it started before the Occupation years.