

**THE HAUNTING OF *FATIMAH ROCK*: HISTORY,
EMBODIMENT AND SPECTRAL URBANISM IN
SINGAPORE**

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NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2009

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EMBODIMENT AND SPECTRAL URBANISM IN
SINGAPORE**

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(B. Soc. Sci. (Hons.), NUS)

A THESIS SUBMITTED
**FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL
SCIENCES**
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2009

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work displays the traces of a few people to whom I am considerably indebted-

Professor Chua Beng Huat for his persistent “So what?”, “What do you mean?” questions that pushed me to revise and rewrite drafts leading to this present work.; Assoc. Professor Maribeth Erb, for her support with regards to the administrative nightmare of this thesis; My *guru*, Dr Suriani Suratman, who first taught me what it actually means to *be* Malay in Singapore and whose lessons I will remember for life. Small is indeed beautiful; Lee Kiat Jin for all the first-tier aspirations and satire. Your encouragement was invaluable during the writing up of this thesis.

My friends: Juliana June Rasul, for inviting me to press conferences masquerading as a journalist and allowing me the chance to insert my Pontianak here and there even when the subject was totally unrelated. Siti Nuraidah, for tolerating my early morning narcissisms - from which you might have already compiled an anthology on my life. Nadia Abdullah, because the jokes on me. Shafaa Yang Razali, who taught me friendship through the best drama of 2008.

My parents, Maulod and Noryati, for tolerating my curiosity and understanding my need to be free. Mutiyani, my *bibik*, who first imbued me with a strong sense of class consciousness and whose life story translates into great sociological anecdotes for the undergraduates I have so far taught. Alyani and Syamil, for being one of the best things in my life.

My informants for their stories and adventures and whose life experiences with the Pontianak form the structure of this thesis.

This thesis is especially dedicated to Nurhaizatul Jamil who believes that the Pontianak can haunt us even in Starbucks and who has over the years taught me the most valuable sociological knowledge: empathy. In you, my *semangat* lies.

To the Pontianak, maybe soon you'll be happy.

The Haunting of “Fatimah Rock”: History, Embodiment and Spectral Urbanism in Singapore


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ABSTRACT

The Pontianak, presently known as the Malay woman who died during childbirth, is a monstrous female figure whose identity and popularity has survived for centuries within the Malay Archipelago. This research focuses on the embodied experiences of “haunting” as an interactive method of social inquiry. Using the somatic framework and theories of embodiment, I seek to examine how the Pontianak, as an immaterial body survives the quotidian and how her existence, in turn, poses symbolic significance to the Malay community in contemporary Singapore. The continued survival and to a certain extent, the revival of the Pontianak in contemporary Malay communities makes it necessary to examine the possibility of recognizing the Pontianak as a legitimate and embodied social actor within the community. How does she feature in the everyday world? What is at stake for the Malays to continue to be haunted by the long haired lady-in-white?

As an immaterial body, the embodiment of the Pontianak is experienced through the embodied realities of individuals in the Malay community. Methodologically, her biography can be understood through oral narratives and images in Malay popular culture recording ‘real’ life encounters with her. In this manner, the body of the Pontianak may be regarded as the “flesh of memory”, materializing particular ways of being, at the same time, revealing contested notions of being Malay in Singapore. In order to understand how the Pontianak features in everyday life, there is a need to fashion such an inquiry into a form of archaeology of knowledge. Hence the Pontianak is both the habitual and discursive agent, memorializing the active residue of collective experiences, functioning from one historical epoch to another, interacting with the present, henceforth retaining a persistent sense of self over time. Through her haunting, forms of subjugated knowledge might reveal themselves. Her body becomes the material artifact of which narratives of the “other” may be reclaimed into history. In this manner, the presence of the Pontianak in Singapore’s urban spaces reveals a form of spectral urbanism where the specters of her existence invoke aspects of historicity that lie beyond description. The spectral Pontianak operates according to patterns that indicate representations of Malayness and to this effect signify creative possibilities towards the ‘rightful’ possession of place for Malays in Singapore.

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INTRODUCTION

The *Pontianak* must be defended



Figure 1: Image of A Pontianak
(source: Napie Photography from Flickr.com)

The *Pontianak* (Figure 1) is perceived by members of the Malay community of Singapore to be the ghost of a woman who died during childbirth. She is often characterized as having long, tangled black hair, and being clad in flowy white robe. As a monstrous female figure, her identity and popularity have survived for centuries throughout the Malay Archipelago. Within the local Malay community, she has been referred to by a multitude of monikers such as *Kakak* (“sister”), *Si Cantik* (“the pretty

one”), Kak Pon (Miss Pon) and *Fatimah Rock*. The Malays believe that the articulation of a tabooed subject such as the Pontianak would result in the materialization of her haunting. To prevent such unfortunate occurrences, it would be best to humanize her monstrosity through terms of endearment as mentioned above. The name *Fatimah Rock* is therefore chosen because of its promise of ambiguity - a reflection of her own ontology. However the use of *Fatimah Rock* as the title suggests, is not palimpsest to the name Pontianak. The moniker “Fatimah Rock” might have been circulated in the late 1980s as a nod to Malay popular culture of the time. A.Ramlie’s hit single “Oh Fatimah” for instance describes a beautiful and seductive girl named Fatimah, and was a popular radio hit of the 1970s. Meanwhile, Fatima’s long tangled hair bears strong resemblance to the 1980s Malay rock icons, a genre that was definitive of that particular era.

Nomenclature aside, the Pontianak exists as the empirical evidence (Gordon, 1997:8) of a social situation. Through this research, her haunting can be explored as an interactive method of social inquiry thus potentially revealing forms of subjugated knowledge. In the essay “Society Must be Defended”, Michel Foucault (2003) refers to subjugated knowledge as knowledge which have been repressed by official knowledge and are “disqualified”, marginalized and silenced from the boundaries of official knowledge production. Similarly, the neglect of ghostly bodies within studies of social reality highlights the cognitive bias of modern rationality. Experienced through the bodies of the dead and living, traversing the past and present, ghostly hauntings command the attention to that which needs to be resolved. In doing so however, they cause disruptions to social reality. The Pontianak herself ought to be dead but her persistent presence within the Malay community highlights that there is no intention of her leaving and being forgotten.

As an immaterial body, the embodiment of the pontianak is experienced through the embodied realities of individuals in the Malay community. In order to understand how the Pontianak features in everyday life, there is a need to fashion social inquiry according to Michel Foucault's concept of the 'archaeology of knowledge' (Foucault, 1972). Methodologically, her biography can be traced through a discursive analysis of the textual representation of her embodiment while her haunting can be examined through embodied oral narratives and images in Malay popular culture that pronounce 'real' life encounters with her material being. In this manner, the body of the pontianak is regarded as the "flesh of memory" (Young, 2002), materializing particular ways of being, at the same time, revealing contested notions of being Malay in Singapore. The Pontianak is both the habitual and discursive agent, memorializing the active residue of collective experiences, functioning from one historical epoch to another, interacting with the present, henceforth retaining a persistent sense of self over time. Her body becomes the material artifact in which narratives of the "other" may be reclaimed into history. Using the theories of embodiment and spatial urbanism, I seek to examine how the Pontianak, as an immaterial body survives the quotidian and how her existence, in turn, poses symbolic significance to the Malay community in contemporary Singapore. The continued survival and even the revival of the *Pontianak* in contemporary Malay communities make it necessary to examine the possibility of recognizing the Pontianak as a legitimate and embodied social actor within the community. Furthermore, the presence of the Pontianak in Singapore's urban spaces reveals a form of spectral urbanism where the specters of her existence invoke aspects of historicity that lie beyond description (Bishop, Phillips and Yeo, 2004: 8). The spectral Pontianak operates according to patterns that indicate representations of

Malayness and to this effect signify creative possibilities towards the ‘rightful’ possession of place for Malays in Singapore.

Searching for the *Pontianak* within the Discipline

The Pontianak first appeared in print in 1849, when Munshi Abdullah published his biography *Hikayat Abdullah* (The Story of Abdullah) as a written account of everyday life in Malaya. He described the Pontianak, along with other ghosts, as legacies that were believed by members of the local community whom he described as being ignorant and superstitious. Abdullah gave this account only after a British Missionary, Reverend Milne convinced him that his story would be written in English so that “white men shall know how misguided are those that put their faith in (ghosts).” Subjunctively, had Abdullah realized that his “white men” had their own versions of ghosts and spirits within their own cultural contexts he would not have been so quick to impose an inferiority complex onto the Malayan community. Perhaps both Milne and he could have considered how and why the creation of, or beliefs in, ghosts or spirits are particular and persistent to and within certain cultural contexts and not others.

Cultural ghosts stories which feature the haunting of a people by the ghosts of its own past, represent one way a group actively revises its relationship to the past (Brogan, 1998). Such ghost stories reflect the crises of a larger social group, or minority distress. Unsurprisingly, these stories tend to emerge in the aftermath of times of swift and often traumatic change, when old social bonds have been unhinged and new group identities must be formulated. The presence of ghostly haunting in many ways dramatizes the painful economic and social liminality caused by the

obliterating forces of modernization (Taussig, 1980; Zamora, 1995; Ong, 1987; Mills, 1990; Faucher, 2004). Ghostly haunting may be utilized as spaces of resistance to technocratic modernization (Ong, 1987, 1988; Sofia S., 2008). As such investigating society's "ghostly aspects" (Gordon, 1997:7) may reveal the complex negotiations of social reality where beliefs in ghosts may reflect everyday anxieties about the management of social relations in a particular societies (Ong, 2007).

Within the community, Malays as well as their ghosts and spirits have become quite accustomed to inquiries from English anthropologists interested in studying witchcraft, sorcery and spirit possession. The investigation of such "ghostly matters" led to the production of numerous texts on Malay Magic (Skeat, c1984; Gimlette, c1971; Endicott, 1970; Shaw, 1975) or shamanism and animism (Windstedt, c1982). Such texts sought to understand Malay eclecticism in the maintenance of animism, Hinduism and Islam over History. From these writings certain ideas are put forth: the Malay tolerance and reverence for Allah, gods and spirits of all forms, the preoccupation with public and private transcendental experiences, and an obsessive fascination for magic and magical interpretation of events and happenings (Wazir, 1990). From the mid 1940s, literature on the Malays have focused on social structuralism, with the emergence of works on Malay peasantry, politics, kinship, gender (Rosemary Firth, 1943; Raymond Firth, 1966; Gullick, 1958; Djamour, 1959; Swift, 1965; Al-Atas, 1977; Nagata, 1974, Wazir, 1990; Reid, 1988; Peletz, 1996; Ong, 1987) providing more information on the Malay value system, patterns of socialization, leadership and peasant economies. In these works, a common theme appears emphasizing the cultural and political tension between the pre-existing moral order (Malay *adat*) and the relentless march of religious Islamic revivalism.

In Singapore, the analysis of the *Pontianak* has been conducted through the theoretical trajectory of ‘spectral tropicality’ by Sofia Siddique (2008) who utilized the film *Return to Pontianak* to theorize the spatial ambivalence of Singapore. Spectral tropicality, with its ethnic specificity, is a form of haunting in which all that have been repressed within the “multiracial” and “air-conditioned” nation of Singapore return and haunt us in the form of both monstrous beings as well as uncanny spaces that terrorize the technocratic and urban landscape. While Sofia offers a compelling insight into the spatial psyche of urban Singapore, she argues that the present urban landscape is unable to host immaterial bodies like that of the Pontianak. However, as this thesis will go on to show, local narratives suggest that the Pontianak exists strongly in particular places of urban Singapore- her durability bearing testament to her adaptable nature.

In proceeding with the argument, it is pertinent to first and foremost outline the structure of the thesis. *The Haunting of ‘Fatimah Rock’* consists of eight chapters that have been arranged chronologically and thematically. Chapter one provides a historical and socio-cultural background of the Malays in Singapore. Chapter two traces the genealogy of the Pontianak from the beliefs of *Orang Melayu Asli* (Aboriginal Malays) to the present Malay community in Singapore. Chapter three traces how bodies are conceptualized within the Malay culture as early as the 15th century in order to appreciate how the *Pontianak* came to ‘be’ a legitimate social actor. Chapter four examines the monstrosity of the *Pontianak* through the analysis of three films produced in Malaya/Singapore from 1950-1970. Chapter five examines how the consumption of Pontianak films is an embodied process that organically anchors “meaning” within the life and flux of the Malay social world. This chapter also analyzes the embodiment and habitus of the Pontianak through experiences of

actresses who embody the role of the Pontianak in their films as well as that of a young Malay woman who claims to have been possessed by a Pontianak in contemporary Singapore. Chapter six delves into the midnightly local radio programme “Misteri Jam 12” (Midnight Mystery) as the ‘field’ to examine how Pontianak hauntings are being produced and consumed in the spatial landscape of Singapore. Chapters seven and eight contemplate the sociological significance of Malays being haunted by the Pontianak in contemporary Singapore. These chapters could be read separately as essays detailing a specific research question building up to these larger questions: How does she feature in the everyday world? What is at stake for the Malays to continue to be haunted by the long-haired lady-in-white?

CHAPTER 1

Malays in Singapore: “*Hanya Tukar Bilik dan Bukan Tukar Rumah*”

*Asli Melayu*¹

The Malays of Singapore share a ‘myth’ of common descent, similar cultural and historical linkages and linguistic structures with the more than 200 million indigenous inhabitants in the Malay Archipelago (Smith, 1988; Connor, 1992 in Lily, 1998: 13). Commonly referred to as the ‘Nusantara’ [Malay World], this region broadly includes countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Philippines and the southern provinces of Thailand. Based on archaeological and linguistic evidence, there was an outward migration of Malays from Taiwan between 2500-500 BCE to the Archipelago (Bellwood, 1997: 118). Within the Archipelago, extensive internal migration of Malays from one *rumpun* (group or territory) to

¹ Translated: Origin of Malays

another were prompted by trading opportunities, influence of dynastic powers, and a sense of an integrated regional identity (Collins, 1998: 5, Andaya and Andaya, 2002).

Bangsa Melayu

In the 19th century, the advent of Western colonialism brought about insecurities amongst the indigenous populace of the Archipelago whose weakened social standing and ‘native’ status was a major cause for concern (Reid, 2006; Kahn, 2006; Lily, 1998). In response, the fragmented subethnic *rumpun* (territorial) identity came to be increasingly overpowered by the presence of a homogenizing Pan-Malay [*Bangsa Melayu*] identity. Historically, the ‘Malay’ race was made official by colonial rulers as a way of legally enforcing the Sultan’s territorial power by differentiating his subjects from the non-Malay immigrants (Nagata, 1974). The Malays have been described as “a person belonging to any Malay race (from the Malay Archipelago origin) that habitually speaks the Malay language and professes the Muslim religion (Federated Malay States Enactment no 15, 1913 in Ong, 1995). In Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, this identification of *Bangsa Melayu* provided a sense of security against the surge of Chinese and Indian immigrants. In the 1920s and 30s, *Bangsa Melayu* became the primary locus of political passion fervently expressed in Malay newspapers such as *Utusan Melayu* and *Lembaga Melayu*. *Bangsa* represented some form of unity and solidarity that could increase the Malays’ bargaining power under colonial rule.

Decades after the Second World War, studies on Malay kinship in Singapore highlight a strong in-group solidarity amongst Singapore Malays despite different *rumpun* origins (Djamour, 1959). There was a strong ‘Nusantara’ identity amongst Malays in Singapore who perceived their community to be a microcosm of the larger

‘Nusantara’ rubric within the Archipelago (Bedlington, 1974). This strong in-group Singapore Malay solidarity was further magnified by their collective deference to Islam, their minority status in the ‘Nusantara’ as well as their marginal status within a Chinese dominated state. Studies have also observed that Singapore Malays possessed a strong indigenous and regional identity derived from their sharp awareness of Singapore’s position in the ‘Nusantara’ (Nurliza Yusuf, 1986: 5-6). Some Malays perceived the Malay Archipelago as a big house where the Malays in Singapore *hanya tukar bilik dan bukan tukar rumah* (are only changing rooms and not their houses). Furthermore, some members of the community felt it more advantageous to declare oneself ‘Malay’ instead of the other *rumpun* identities (Bawean, Bugis, Javanese, Batak) as the Constitution recognizes the special position of the Malays in Singapore. This process of subsuming the sub-Malay identity in favour of the larger *Bangsa Melayu* identity by Singapore Malays is reflected in the population census where the number of Singaporeans who identify as Malays has increased substantially between 1931-1980 (Lily, 1998).

Islamic Identity

Although Indian Muslim traders introduced Islam to the Archipelago in the 13th century (Wertheim, 1959; Fatimi, 1963 in Lily, 1998), it was only during the Malaccan Sultanate in the 15th century that the conversion of Malays into Islam occurred in large numbers. Since then, the Malay identity has been synonymous with the Muslim identity- with the conversion of Malay sultans and by extension their subjects, to Islam (Thompson, 2003). However, Hinduism had governed the everyday life and practices of the Malays for nearly a millennium prior to the expansion of Islam in the Archipelago. The Malays were therefore Hindus much longer than they

were Muslims. Unsurprisingly, the habitual remnants of Hinduism persist in traces of contemporary Malay cultural practices or *adat*. (Windstedt, 1961: 1-2). Until now, certain beliefs and practices of Malays are constructed by official discourse as being outmoded and contrary to Islamic practices. In both Malaysia and Singapore, this includes state-sponsored discourse on the idea of the “old Malay” who believes in animism and refuses the logic of science and rationality and inclined towards religious dogma or violates Islamic values (Alatas, 1972) as opposed to the “New Malay” as one who values the rational and empirical outlook, is critical towards adapting practices of Islam in modernity and possesses a critical spirit of inquiry. Furthermore, virtues exemplified in the “new malay” identity has been discussed by some writers as prescribing the “arabization” of the Malay world (Ong, 1987) or the “islamization of adat” (Wazir, 1992). Such processes became intensified and trickled down to the masses during the Islamic revivalism period of the 1970s and 80s because of the biographies of their proponents - the new batch of Malay leaders’ who had just attained a coveted university education. In that era, the global Islamic identity was posited by these Malay elites as an attractive and empowering identity against the impoverished image of Malay culture. Some of these graduates eventually rose to positions of Malay leadership and continue to espouse such notions. Since being “Malay” embodied ideas of the “lazy native” and being minority, the Islamic revivalism was a strategy to dilute “Malayness” by focusing on an increased visibility through Islam. Islam was seen as a positive force on the *Malay* identity as it connects them to larger communities on a global scale.

The demands of the Singapore constitution to “recognize the special position of the Malays” (*Constitution*, 1984) posit a challenge within the meritocratic and multiracial nation-state. Discursively, the Malay position will always be a racial

problematic. In 1965, Lee Kuan Yew contested the position of Malays as “indigenous people” by alleging that Malays were no more indigenous than the Chinese, Indians and other immigrant communities. His doubts towards the indigeneity of Malays led to Singapore’s expulsion from Malaysia. Singapore became a nation by default and the Malay problem continues to persist, permeating in various forms. From colonial rule to the present state, the Malay community remains on the socio-economic, educational and political margins of the community (see Lily, 1998; Li, 1995). Under the communitarian logic and system of meritocracy, the marginalization of Malays has been politicized as a ‘racial problem’.²

Within the community, the response towards community uplift was the inculcation of a specific identity rooted in the concept of change and adaptability by the Malay leaders. This identity was reinforced further in the aftermath of September 11 attacks and the arrest of *Jemaah Islamiah* members, which had cast doubts on the increasing religiosity amongst the Malay/Muslims. The “New Malay” therefore came to be constructed as the “ideal type” (Weber, 1968) for the burgeoning Malay middle class identity.³ Traits of both the “Old Malay” (animistic, traditional, religious dogma, insular) and “New Malay” (rational, scientific, moderate muslim, reflexive tradition, multiclural) are discoursed to be existing as opposing polarities (Yaacob Ibrahim, Speech, 18April 2002) have been evoked as a form of social ‘distinction’. In order to achieve excellence, Malays are therefore told to be “self-reliant”, “independent” and “not be satisfied with mediocrity” in order to strive towards community excellence. (MP Yaacob Ibrahim, ST, 3 May 2002). Additionally, in a

² Malay students’ inability to do well academically, for example, has been characterized by a ‘cultural deficit’ - that they are lazy compared to their Chinese counterparts who are naturally diligent (Lily, 1998).

³ 70.5% of the resident Malay workforce in 2008 attained secondary and higher qualifications, as compared to 19% in 1980. Median monthly household income for Malays has more than tripled from below \$800 in 1980 to \$3100 in 2005. This increased to \$3140 in 2006 and \$3310 in 2007.

recent article in the *Berita Harian* (13 March, 2008), prominent academic Farid Alatas was quoted as claiming that the Malays in Singapore possess a “modernist” orientation towards Islam, adopting and adapting certain Islamic precepts to suit their daily contexts. How does one situate the strong belief in the Pontianak within the community with such ideals?

Within such an orientation, supernatural beliefs- such as ghosts - possibly exist as a form of contestation against the official discourse on the “ideal [Malay] type”. The Pontianak and her material phenomenon, is one such example. Additionally, just recently, the Malay community was plagued by the supposed existence of a *Nenek Keropok*, an elderly woman who went door-to-door persuading members of the Malay community to purchase her snacks and tidbits. What was apparently most disturbing about *Nenek Keropok* was that she carried the Pontianak on her back and would unleash the monstrous spirit into the homes of HDB flat dwellers in order to induce fear and hypnotize them to purchase her snacks (*Keropok*). Her existence was made known when an unknown female called in to the local Malay radio programme *Misteri Jam 12* (which airs eerie tales from 12-2am weekdays). Her confession led to more calls being featured on the programme, especially regarding her existence in particular heartland towns such as Woodlands, Jurong, Bedok, Tampines and Simei. News of her existence also spread like wildfire through text messages and emails that updated people of her whereabouts. On 26 July 2009, her haunting made front-page news of the *Berita Minggu*⁴ when members of the Malay community tried to de-construct the truth behind the Pontianak’s (and *Nenek Keropok*) existence (*Betul ke ada si ‘Cantik’*). The debate that ensued centred around certain issues:

⁴ refer to Appendix (A1)

- The importance of denying the existence of ghosts since such beliefs are forbidden in Islam
- The Need to regard the existence of the Pontianak or *Nenek Keropok* as an ‘urban myth’ (to be more cautious when opening doors to strangers)
- The need for stories on the Pontianak and *Nenek Keropok* to be incorporated as a form of ‘cultural heritage’, as part of a ‘modern literature’ for contemporary Malay society
(*Berita Minggu*, 26 July 2009)

Meanwhile prominent public figure and cultural activist Asnidah Daud remarked that “*Melayu dan Hantu tidak mampu dipisahkan*” (“It is impossible to separate Malays and Ghosts”). Bearing these responses in mind, how would the persistent existence of ghosts such as the Pontianak affect the community’s emergent desire to be the contemporary and “progressive”? What is at stake for Malays to still be haunted by the Pontianak in Singapore? If the ‘Melayu’ bangsa and ghosts are so interlinked, and the Malay identity and culture have gone through several shifts, do we not need to contextualize the belief in the Pontianak in a similar manner?

In theorizing the ontological questions that surround the existence of the Pontianak, it is important to remind the reader from the start that I am in no way proposing for the essentialization of the Pontianak as a bounded representation of Malayness. The notion of Malayness, as I understand it, should be contested, and as such this thesis does not lay claim to the idea that the Pontianak is only experienced by the Malay community of Singapore (or by all Malays in Singapore). However, the main thrust of this thesis is to unravel why and how the Pontianak has come to be imagined as “Malay” and the implications of these forms of imaginations on the urban landscape of Singapore. It is also worthy to point out at this instance that the Pontianak has not received as much attention in the local mass media (English and other vernaculars) as compared to the local Malay media. The Pontianak has appeared as front page news of the Malay daily *Berita Harian* and narratives centered on her existence continue to be perpetuated nightly on the Malay radio station RIA 89.7FM.

Additionally, I am also more interested in the kinds of social and political debates that discourse the Malay community as suffering from a distinctive malaise vis-à-vis the economic success of other local ethnic groups. Underpinning such debates is the argument that Malays need to disregard some elements of their tradition and culture in order to be progressive. As I will later argue, the haunting of the Pontianak in present society reveals how attempts to keep the community disenchanted (disregarding superstition, ghosts and animistic practices) and formally rational requires the expenditure of political energy.

CHAPTER 2

Popular History of the Pontianak

Contested Genealogy

Historical evidences suggest that some of the present day Malays of the peninsular descended from the *Orang Asli* (Aboriginal Malays) through a long process of assimilation and adaptation. Within these processes, some beliefs prevailed over the others, while some became subjugated. The Pontianak may have been a victim of such processes. The monstrous and malevolent Pontianak that contemporary Malays identify with today was a healing spirit thousands of years ago. How did a benevolent spirit become identified as dangerous?

The embodiment of the Pontianak and the variations of her existence continue to haunt communities in countries such as Philippines [“Mati-anak”], Thailand [“Mae-nak”], Indonesia [“Kuntilanak”], Malaysia and Singapore. The origin of the Pontianak is at best, a contested interpretation of popular narratives. One such popular

representation exists within the Semelai tribe of Malaysia where elaborate rituals and *adat* are practiced in the same way as they have been for over thousand years, unfazed by modern rationality and Islamic revivalism in the region (Williams, 2002). According to practitioners, the Pontianak is a healing spirit conjured by the village *Puyang* (shaman) to help search for missing souls lost in the forest (Hood in Williams, 2002). Commonly known as the *Matianak* (death-of-a-child) amongst the Semelai, she is the spirit of the woman who died while giving birth. She swings from branches of trees, has long flowing black hair and wears a long white dress. Underneath the folds of her dress, a baby clings to her (Williams, 2002). This version of the Pontianak is vastly different from the monstrous Pontianak in Malay folklore understood by contemporary Malay communities. According to present Malay folklore, the Pontianak is the spirit of the Malay woman who died in childbirth and later resurrects to seek vengeance upon her believers. While her embodiment is similar to the Pontianak described by the Semelais, she does not carry a child with her.

In an interview with the National Geographic Channel, Hood Salleh, a Malaysian anthropologist who has been examining stories of Malay supernatural for over twenty years, claims that present Malay urban communities have “distorted the myth of the Pontianak because they do have intimate knowledge of the forest”. Having resettled in urban towns, urban Malays do not possess intimate knowledge about the forest from their “ancestors”. For these urban communities, the forest has become an ‘uncanny’ space both “alien and frightening”, and ghosts like the Pontianak have been “transformed to reflect this fear” (Hood in Williams, 2002). Although the origins of the Pontianak may not be conclusive, the modern understanding of the Pontianak as evil may have been the result of the mass conversion of Malay subjects

to Islam during the Malaccan Empire in the 15th century. In this period also, waves of Muslim migrants from neighbouring Archipelago regions such as Minangkabau and Java interacted and traded with the Aboriginal Malay groups. Most of these migrant men marry Aboriginal women and settle down in the several states across the Malay Peninsula. Although beliefs in the Pontianak as a healing spirit might have been pervasive amongst the *orang Asli*, the extensive spread of Islam within the region might have been the reason for her downfall. Conjuring up and worshipping the Pontianak as a healing spirit was considered a form of pagan practice that was contrary to Islamic practices. Such pagan idols needed to be deviantized in order to legitimize Islamic order (Windstedt, 1961: 59). Furthermore, the Pontianak's supposed ability to guide lost souls destabilized the Islamic patriarchal system. Her embodied existence needed to be made monstrous to maintain the sanctity of this patriarchal order. In the same manner her child disappeared from existence because Islamic beliefs maintain that the soul of a child who dies under the age of seven would immediately have a place in heaven. If the representation of the Pontianak as a healing spirit holds true, the pervasiveness of the modern Malay understanding towards an evil Pontianak highlight the amnesia towards the existence of Malay beliefs prior to Islam. The Pontianak's shift from benevolent to malevolent highlights this process of an "islamization of adat" adequately. The Pontianak's integral role for the aboriginal Malays had to be adapted to ensure her continued survival. In this process however, her original existence may have been displaced.

The colonial definition of the 'Malay race' referring to a person who speaks the Malay language and professes the Muslim religion has discursively reconstituted the *Orang Asli* out of the boundaries of being 'Malay'. However, since beliefs in the Pontianak have been practiced for centuries before the emergence of Islam, her

existence persists in the habitus of both the Peninsular and Singapore Malays⁵. This existence, despite its durability, is not permanent and constantly subjected to the ‘currents of social opinion’ of Malay collectives at particular contexts. The Pontianak, during the colonial period (1800s to 1950s), needed to *Masuk Melayu* or become ‘Malay’. Within the Islamization of adat, even native Malay beliefs on the *Semangat* or life-force become gendered, adhering to the binaries of “male” versus “female” (Wazir, 1992).

Colonial Interpretations of the Pontianak and Problems with Translation

While popular culture prescribes a distinctive difference between the healing Pontianak of *Orang Asli* communities and the evil Pontianak of present Malay communities, her embodiment remains relatively similar. However, colonial interpretations of the Pontianak throw images of her embodiment into a state of disarray.

In Munshi Abdullah’s *Hikayat*, the Pontianak appears, rather interestingly, in the same chapter (“The Anglo Chinese College” 1990 [1849], 102-35) where he reveals his frustrations towards the Englishmen’s misappropriation of the Malay language. Having read a translated copy of the Bible (English to Malay), Abdullah describes:

“The letters and the form of the words were proper Malay but the style of writing was not. Furthermore, words were used in impossible places, or put together in impossible combinations” (p. 106).

⁵ Due to the close geographical proximity of Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia, the Malays in both communities share similarities in their cultural practices.

Unbeknownst to him, a similar form of confusion may have taken place in William W. Skeat's *Malay Magic* (c1984 [1906]). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, for example, Walter William Skeat in *Malay Magic* describes the Pontianak as the “stillborn child” of the *Langsuir* (refer to Text A). His interpretation disrupts the cultural embodiment of the Pontianak as she has been understood and remembered by present Malay communities who recognize her as the Malay woman who died while giving birth.

When closely examined, Skeat's interpretation of the Pontianak (Text A) as the ‘dead child’ is surrounded by linguistic contestations:

“The popular superstition about the Langsuir is thus described by Sir William Maxwell:-

‘If a woman dies in childbirth, either before delivery or after the birth of a child, and before the forty days of uncleanness have expired, she is popularly supposed to become a *langsuyar*, a flying demon of the nature of the ‘white lady’ or ‘banshee’. To prevent this, a quantity of glass beads are put in the mouth of the corpse, a hen's egg is put under each armpit, and the needles are placed in the palms of the hands. It is believed that if this is done the dead woman cannot become a *langsuyar*, as she cannot open her mouth to shriek (*ngilai*) or wave her arms as wings, or open and shut her hands to assist her flight.’

The superstitions about the Langsuir, however do not end here, for with regard to its origin the Selangor Malays tell the following story:-

‘The original Langsuir (whose embodiment is supposed to be a kind of night-owl) is described as being a woman of dazzling beauty, who died from the shock of hearing that her child was stillborn, and had taken the shape of the Pontianak. On hearing this terrible news, she ‘clapped her hands’ and without further warning ‘flew whinnying away to a tree, upon which she perched.’ She may be known by her robe of green, by her tapering nails of extraordinary length (a mark of beauty), and by the long jet black tresses which she allows to fall down to her ankles-only alas! (for the truth must be told) in order to conceal the hole in the back of the neck through which she sucks the blood of children!....’

...The Pontianak (or Mati-anak), as has already been said, is the stillborn child of the Langsuir, and its embodiment is like that of its mother, a kind of night owl*...

...To prevent a stillborn child from becoming a Pontianak the corpse is treated in the same way as that of the mother, *i.e.* a hen's egg is put under each armpit, a needle in the palm of each hand, and (probably) glass beads or some simple equivalent in its mouth."

*Skeat cites in a footnote- Clifford Hugh who wrote: "...that weird little white animal, the *mati-anak*, that makes beast noises round the graves of children..." (*In Court and Kampung*, 1989: 183)

Text A: Excerpt taken from *Malay Magic: Being an Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula* (c1984: 325-327)

Skeat explains further:

"Pontianak appears to be synonymous with "Mati-anak", which may perhaps be a shorter form of *Mati beranak* ("stillborn"); indeed, one of the charms against the Pontianak which I collected, commenced with the words, "*Pontianak mati beranak*".
-Skeat, 1984: 325

The phrase "Mati beranak" according to Malay grammar rules is commonly understood to be "death while giving birth". In *beranak*, the prefix "ber" added to the root word "anak" (child) changes the context of the root word into a verb, literally translated "to child". Within this language structure, "to child" is understood within the context of "giving birth". In addition, the noun ("Pontianak") that appears before *mati beranak* signifies the embodiment of a pregnant female. Skeat in interpreting "Mati-anak" used the direct Malay-English translation taking "mati" to be "dead" and "anak" to be "child" and putting them together as "dead child" hence "stillborn". This is a common grammatical error especially when one fails to consider that grammatical structures in the Malay language are different from that of the English language. In the English language, phrasal adjectives require the adjective ("dead") to be used before (to describe the quality) of the noun "child". However, for Malay phrasal adjectives, the noun "anak" is used before the adjective "mati". Translated loosely, "stillborn" in Malay would be appropriately used as "anak [yang] mati". By

removing the prefix “ber” in his translation, he has also changed the grammatical syntax of the phrase “mati beranak” from a phrasal verb to that of a phrasal noun. Within the Malay community, some phrases have been abbreviated for ease of pronunciation⁶. Their grammatical syntax, however, remains consistent. “Mati-anak” is an example of such abbreviation. The understanding of “mati-anak” must therefore be fixed to the original phrase “mati beranak”. This explanation, although possible, should remain speculative. There is no concrete data or evidence with regards to his methodology such as the profile of his informants, his sampling strategies in order to gauge the discrepancies that may have existed between the various accounts described by his informants.⁷

One could perhaps take this study further by analyzing the language used by the rural Malay community in the Kuala Langat district of Selangor in the 1900s, however such endeavors are not within the parameters of this thesis. One close possibility may be found where Skeat records that the Pontianak’s “embodiment is like that of its mother”. This could be re-interpreted as the child spirit sharing its mother’s embodiment. Since both mother and child’s embodiment are inseparable according to Aboriginal Malay beliefs of the Pontianak, to encounter the spirit of the child who died during birth would by default, result in an encounter with the Pontianak-Mother.

If we were to ignore Skeat’s description of the Pontianak, Maxwell’s *Langsuyar* with a highly similar embodiment as the “white lady” who shrieks and

⁷ R J Wilkinson wrote in his preface of the 1932 edition of the Malay-English dictionary that while he himself was working in Singapore, he sent lists of Malay words to Skeat in Selangor, so that Skeat might consult local Malay informants as to the meaning and the usage of the words. It is therefore hard to believe that someone who has passion and special interest in the Malay language the way Skeat does would do injustice to the meanings and expression of Malay linguistics. Another colleague, Laidlaw described Skeat’s meticulous methods of gathering field data by making careful notes and interviewing Malays at length on questions of traditional ceremonies. The discrepancies may therefore be the informant’s interpretation of events which might have been at best, sketchy while Skeat had attempted to piece information together into a coherent narrative (Gullick, “Introduction”, 2005)

flies, describes the modern Pontianak adequately. Amongst some members of contemporary Malay communities in both Malaysia and Singapore, the term Langsuir and Pontianak maybe used interchangeably. At this point in time, it may be rather impossible to derive a clearer understanding of what previous Malay communities formerly thought about the Pontianak. One could only suspect that there may have been notable variation in what different communities might have interpreted in the 19th century, but these discrepancies have never been investigated thoroughly or systematically. In the 20th century however, conceptions of the Pontianak, as I will later argue, have been radically unified by the influence of cinema.

Skeat's *Malay Magic* has been criticized by other scholars of Malay studies who were inclined to regard the bulk of his work as "constituting nothing more than 'orientalism' typical of scholars bent on 'butterfly collecting'" (Hood in Skeat, 1984: Introduction). I began this section by describing Abdullah's frustrations reading a translated Bible. In a way, Skeat's *Malay Magic* as "An introduction to the folklore and popular religion of the Malay Peninsular" has been regarded as the "bible" for readers interested in learning about early Malay cultures. His text should not be regarded as an authoritative source of knowledge but rather an introduction where the 'facts we interpret are made and remade" (Rabinow, 2007: 450). However, in order to be in the position to do so, the researcher needs to possess *verstehen* in the field.

Additionally, Pierre Bourdieu proposes, the notions of 'habitus' as practice and bodily knowledge provide useful concepts for looking simultaneously at how status difference is inscribed on the body and how we experience the world through our bodies that are ranked in terms of their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990). In this manner, the modern world can be conceptualized as a somatic society in which political and social problems are often expressed through, or manifest in terms of,

bodily acts. In the next three chapters, using the somatic framework and theories of embodiment, I seek to examine how bodily dispositions of supposedly immaterial beings such as the Pontianak, contribute to the understanding of a collective form of Malay representation. Subsequently, the Pontianak as a collective representation, and in the Malay experience of her haunting, marks public spaces as places of Malayness hence revealing the habitus of place.

CHAPTER 3

The Embodied *Semangat*: The Malay Body in Early Islam

***Verstehen* and the Social Actor**

If sociology has been described as a science of social action insofar as it attempts to analyze the meaning of and significance of social action and interaction, then sociology of the body posits that the social actor is embodied. However, in order to fulfill such theoretical positions, there needs to be a compelling narrative of the actor. The sociology of the body is therefore an attempt to offer a critical sociological reflection on the separation of the mind and body that has been characteristic of Western thought since the time of Rene Descartes (Turner, 2008). This Cartesian duality led to the privileging of the cognitive bias in theories of social action, privileging choice and rationality over simply being an embodied agent⁸. The Malays during the British colonization period for example, were considered as belonging to a “primitive culture” that was inferior to their European administrators because they had “not yet learned to draw scientific distinctions” and they found “nothing

⁸ See Weber’s *Economy and Society* and Parson’s *Action Theory and the Human Condition*

remarkable or unnatural in the idea of (non-human) souls” (Skeat, c1984)⁹. This exclusion of irrational, magical and superstitious knowledge from processes of rational inspection denied the efficacy of evil spirits, demons and even other forms of immaterial bodies from occupying positions within fields of consciousness.

On the other hand, the ability to recognize actions or imagine how actors may act, according to Weber, comes with *verstehen*, through the competence or empathy derived from sharing similar orientations with others in a social context (1968: 4-6). Therefore to deny the existence of immaterial bodies such as the Pontianak is to negate the existence of other subjectivities. Subjective meanings of action are derived from practical application or symbolic significance. Within such rhetoric, if the Pontianak is not a meaningful social actor, her presence would not have possibly survived for centuries within the Malay world. Furthermore, it is impossible to understand social action without first understanding how bodies are conceptualized within the Malay culture since there is no such thing as the generic, universal body.

Although the Cartesian duality prescribes a distinctive split between the mind and the body, such separation is not as clearly defined with regards to the conception of the Malay self during periods of early-Islamic influence. Even though traces of Islam arrived in the Malay Archipelago in the 13th century (Swettenham, 1984: 226), the body was still viewed as a source of magical potency in the 15th century due to prevalent animistic beliefs (Skeat, c1984). Accordingly, the Malay theory of the mind focuses on an ambiguous identity or force called *Semangat*. According to Laderman (1983: 2001), *semangat* is what makes a person integral and vital: “*Semangat* is the body’s gate, protecting the home against intruders’. *Semangat* can also be defined as the conception of the human soul, which possesses a rather material entity as a “thin,

⁹ Skeat (c1984) observed that notes on the subjects in *Primitive Culture* (E.B. Taylor) is “entirely applicable” to the Malays who “talk quite seriously to beasts alive or dead as they would to men alive or dead, offer them homage, ask pardon when it is their painful duty to hunt and kill them.”

unsubstantial human image or manikin, which is temporarily absent from the body in sleep, trance, disease and permanently absent (from the body) after death (Skeat, c1984: 44). Through the concept of *semangat*, the mind and soul in the Malay world are interchangeable entities. In Malay animistic beliefs, the *semangat* as both mind and soul is rampant with contradiction. It is thought to be “usually invisible” (Skeat, c1984) but yet described as being a manikin or a very small person, “supposed to be as big as the thumb”; at the same time a vaporous entity as it “corresponds exactly in shape, proportion and even in complexion to its embodiment or casing or the body in which it has its residence” (ibid.,). It moves by flying or in a flash, and is often addressed as if it were a bird, due to the prevalence of anthropomorphic beliefs where animals, birds and trees were once human beings but were turned into their present shapes due to some wrongful act which may not always be their own doing (Skeat, c1984).). *Semangat* in this manner may exist outside of human bodies and even in inanimate objects which were regarded as having life-giving properties in Malay animistic beliefs. The *semangat* as a manikin has quasi-human attributes and is the ‘cause of life and thought in the individual it animates’. It may be readily endowed with quasi human feelings and “independently possess personal consciousness and volition of its corporeal owner” (ibid.,47). With regards to a human body, a person’s identity is derived through his or her *semangat*.

It is therefore entirely possible to examine the habitus of immaterial bodies within the Malay community since the *semangat* as mind or soul has its own embodiment apart from the body. The soul may appear to men as a “phantom” separate from the body through which it “manifests physical power” and performing daily routines such as walking, sitting and sleeping (Skeat, c1984: 44). Both the body and *semangat* have life entities of their own, existing independently of each other yet

in mutual co-operation with one another. Although an abode, the body does not function like a fortress, instead the *semangat* is the protective layer of the Malay self. The diminution or loss of *semangat* leads to a state of disrepair in which the soul's house is described as deteriorating as in the case of ill person's body (Skeat, c1984; Laderman, 1983). Having mastery over the self and body means having to care for the soul or in this context the *semangat*. The body as an outer shell is subordinate to the *semangat* similar to Plato's conception of the body where the soul as a metaphysical representation of the mind governs the body (William and Bendelow, 1998). In death, it is believed that one's *semangat* leaves their 'outer shell' and continues to roam the Earth out of habit for a period of time until their soul is received by the underworld. However, for the person who has encountered an unnatural death (drowning, falling, murder), their *semangat* continues to linger on Earth indefinitely (Gianno, 1990: 47). In this manner, the materiality of the Malay *semangat* provides the basis from which the embodiment of immaterial beings such as the Pontianak may be examined and understood as a legitimate social actor within the Malay community.

Islamization of Semangat

Similarly, within the community, immaterial bodies providing some semblance of monstrosity are highly gendered and many of them are construed to be female such as the *pontianak*, *langsuir*, *nenek kebayan*, and *Hantu Tetek*¹⁰. Women and children for example, are believed to have less or weaker *semangat* than men (Resner, 1970: 377; Simons, c1985: 55; Wazir, 1990; Peletz, 1996) and are therefore more prone to mental deterioration, spirit possession, bodily disorder and even encounters with the supernatural. Similarly the uterus, womb and ovaries as

¹⁰ The Nenek kebayan is an elderly female spirit who lives in the forest and is inclined to kidnap children while the Hantu Tetek is the "Breastly ghost" her embodiment is that of a figure with huge and multiple breasts all over her body. She is known to kidnap children after dusk.

reproductive organs are understood within the Malay culture as the quintessential symbol both of women's passionate and excessive nature (Peletz, 1996).¹¹ Due to extensive Islamic socialization, the term “nafsu” is extensively used in contemporary Malay vocabulary, displacing the original local Malay idea of women as possessing a “weaker *semangat*”. The introduction of the concept “nafsu” has inevitably accentuated gender differences between men and women with regards to the notion of soul or *semangat*. The etiology of “nafsu” is derivative of the Arabic term “*Nafs*” which means spirit, soul or self. Within Malay Muslim spheres, the code of morality was often explained in terms of men’s greater self-control and ‘reason’ (*akal*), emphasizing the gender differences between men and women who were regarded as being more susceptible to animalistic lust (*nafsu*) or “passion” (Peletz, 1996; Ong, 1995). Furthermore, the risks and threats entailed in women's capacities to give birth symbolized through the ability to menstruate are ritually marked in predominantly negative terms. This is partly because of the devaluation of sexuality in such societies which informs thinking about menstruation that is related to pregnancy, birth and all things associated with the “baser,” uncontrollable side of things. In the Malay culture in particular, menstruation is a sign of women's awakened sexuality, and of the sexuality and “passion” in *all* humans (Peletz, 1996).

Furthermore, the Malay woman’s reproductive function through menstruation and pregnancy makes her susceptible to bodily disorders, a position that is also somewhat similar in Western patriarchal medicine. It has been said that following childbirth, the *semangat*’s “essential vitality” has been depleted, loosening its integrity as the body’s gate-keeper and spirits may take advantage to launch an attack

¹¹ Additionally, in Western medicine the ovaries came to be identified as the ‘control centers’ of reproduction and the essence of femininity (Laqueur, 1990). Likewise, the etiology of ‘hysteria’ is derivative of the Greek word ‘*hystera*’ or ‘womb’ since the cause of hysteria in classical medicine was thought to be under-employment of the womb (Turner, 1996: 116).

on the owner's body (Laderman, 1983: 2001). Fertility, evident through pregnancy as a life-giving act, is essential for social and cultural reproduction and is accorded pride and esteem within the Malay culture (Peletz, 1996). At the same time however, pregnancy is also fraught with the risks and threats to established norms as they carry the possibility of failures and even death¹². The Malays, like many other cultures, devised strategies of coping with such risks and threats by surrounding them with cultural prescriptions and prohibitions or *pantang larang*. Within this modern context, the Pontianak emerged as a monstrous birth spirit as a form of 'strategic control' over nubile bodies of Malay communities.

The (m)Other and her Abject Body within the Malay Kampung

The prospect of bodily demise and death varies amongst individuals as a consequence of the time and effort invested in their bodies as a source of symbolic capital. The exceptional reluctance of the soul in parting with its corporeal body, for example, highlights how the confrontation with death is likely to differ according to one's habitus and social system (Bourdieu, 1990). According to Malay animistic beliefs, death constitutes the separation of the body of the deceased from his or her *semangat* or soul, but in the context of death due to failed pregnancy however, the soul or *semangat* seems to remain in the corpse. The reluctance of the soul or *semangat* in parting with the body of the woman who dies during childbirth reflects the difficulty of coping with such forms of bodily demise. This dilemma is further exacerbated by the social and cultural obligation to be and become a good woman in the community. Some studies on Malay kampungs have observed that the Malay girl was often socialized and trained very early in age to be the loyal wife and competent

¹² Dangers surrounding pregnancy is largely attributed to the high incident of infant mortality rates. For example: In 1910, the infant mortality rate was 269 per 1000 live births, and in 1911, it was 270 per 1000 live birth in Singapore.

mother (RoZIAH, 1994, Peletz, 1996). Pregnancy is regarded as a form of bodily investment and the acquisition of symbolic capital thereby placing such females on a higher social hierarchy. Motherhood signifies a release from social pressures of becoming a competent woman and self. Death during pregnancy is therefore considered a premature exit from achieving such ideal aims hence marking such bodily failures as abject. In this manner, the Pontianak exists as the embodiment of the abject.

One such notion of abjection originated from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) and has been utilized by Barbara Creed in her analysis on visual horror in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993). The abject refers to the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between the self and other. An example of abjection is the confrontation with a corpse, which traumatically reminds us of our own mortality. Similarly the soul's reluctance to part with the non-living body signifies a reaction to the abject. The abject as the space between death and the soul's parting, is a place where symbolic order collapses (Kristeva, 1982). Since the abject is situated outside of the symbolic order, being forced to confront it is an inherently traumatic experience. Within the Malay culture, achieving motherhood is constituted as part of the productive body project. Failure to attain such symbolic status is a traumatic experience within members of the kampung collective. The "trauma" as part of social experience is naturalized onto departed souls - in this context the Malay woman who dies while giving birth and subsequently becomes the Pontianak. The reluctance of her soul to part with her non-living body is symbolic of her failure to be a competent mother.

Even in death, ‘failed’ souls like the Pontianak may never completely be separated from their social and bodily obligations as a competent mother. This case is made clearer when it was believed that a child and a mother would share the same spiritual bond (Peletz, 1996) or *semangat*. It is therefore unsurprising that the Pontianak preys on children, having not fulfilled her own reproductive role. The Pontianak who haunts children needs to suck on their blood for her own nourishment. The use of the mouth as a life sustaining device represents a form of role reversal. Had she not died from childbirth, her child would have been suckling at her lactating breasts. As a Pontianak and having crossed to the realm of after-life, she depends instead on children, sucking their blood for her own survival. If Kristeva points the origins of such horror towards the notion of the “horrific” mother as the impure, menstrual and lactating body with excessive nourishment which the infant struggles to separate him/herself from in order to forge his/her own ego identity; such an analysis needs to be further contextualized in order to accommodate certain cultural nuances. Within Malay popular history and in the context of the *Pontianak*, horror is derived not from maternal authority but rather the failure to be one. Preying on children is symptomatic of a desire to have children (in order to exercise maternal authority), a desire that has been naturalized onto Malay women. A Malay woman who is childless is stigmatized within the community as being useless, while it is shameful for a female to remain unmarried or be an *Anak Dara Tua* (Old virgin or Spinster). At the same time, having a child out of wedlock is considered a deviant act, which would be explained in later sections of the thesis. The use of children or youth as the Pontianak’s victims reveals the importance of children as a form of symbolic capital in allowing Malay women to survive socio-cultural norms within the community hence optimizing the productive functions of their bodies. In some sense, a Malay

woman is only given due recognition when she attains motherhood. Prior to which, her underemployed womb renders her “uncontrollable” passions a form of danger and monstrosity and hence, a threat to the community.

If the abject is the space or point of confrontation with symbolic order, the Pontianak embodies this notion adequately. Her living body, despite death, exposed the fragility of the patriarchal order by destroying productive male bodies and rupturing the family institution (taking away newborns, killing off virile men). At the same time such confrontations allow for the re-affirmation and re-enforcement of patriarchal boundaries in which, she, as the abject suffers recourse by way of punishment-having her body nailed or burnt to destroy her abject presence. Her abjection may be perceived as necessary to validate institutionalized meanings of patriarchy, family and the female body. Herein, her body emphasizes the duality of the community’s attraction to, and repulsion of, the horrific.

The Malay community might have privileged the narrative of the Pontianak to describe the dangers of childbearing as a form of cognitive dissonance (Kristeva, 1982). The abjection towards female bodies requires cognitive dissonance, whereby “failed” female bodies are discursively and materially produced as the Pontianak, cast away from the normative recognition of the female body as submissive, harmless, productive and maternal, to one that is horrifyingly monstrous, dangerous, predatory and violent. If we consider the Pontianak to have once been a healing spirit with an infant, such a dissonance creates a form of historical rupture, subjugating other forms of female subjectivity that seem to mock the symbolic order of the Malay and Muslim community. Moreover, the practices and beliefs that surround the Pontianak challenge Islamic practices and doctrines produced in the *hadith*. For example, the woman who dies during childbirth is thought to rise after death as the Pontianak in the Malay

culture. Within the Islamic beliefs however, the woman who dies during pregnancy shall be accorded the status of a martyr or *mati shahid*. The different consequences of death during childbirth pose an important dilemma: How does the Pontianak remain monstrous if she is considered a martyr? In order for the Pontianak to be relevant she needs to embody certain Islamic practices as strategy to maintain her locality within the Malay Muslim community of both Singapore and Malaysia. Perhaps this could be the reason why the identity of the Pontianak faced an ontological shift - from one who was child deprived in the pre-Islamic revivalism era to one who is hypersexualised in the post-Islamic revivalism period. It is pertinent to highlight the Pontianak as a sexually transgressive woman post-Islamic revivalism because if she conceives out of wedlock and dies during childbirth, she could not possibly attain martyr-dom due to the act of *zina* (non-marital sexual relations), hence necessitating the perpetuation of her monstrosity. This prevents any opportunities for empathizing with the Pontianak as the empathy undermines the sanctity of social structures capable of reclaiming the abject into the subject or object of social acceptability. The Pontianak is therefore relegated to an anti-historical being. It is only when the Pontianak is allowed awareness into her point of origin (as to how she became a Pontianak through a failed pregnancy or even as the good healing ghost), that her soul and body would be finally laid to rest. I would also assert that the Pontianak functioned effectively as a social actor invoking fear within the Malay community by ensuring that fellow members maintain a rigorously protective environment for the mother and child in the post-natal phase especially in an era where Malay infant mortality rates were high¹³. To the Malays living prior to Islamic resurgence in the 1970s, the presence of the Pontianak was not of an immaterial entity but one that was materially embodied. Changes in the

¹³ Refer to Appendix (A2)

way her embodiment is visually imagined can be observed through Malay films of the 1950s-70s.

CHAPTER 4

Fitnah¹⁴ Pontianak: Malay Horror Films in the 1950s to 1960s

Consumption and the Material Effect

In the 1950s and the aftermath of the second World War, images from Hollywood flooded cinema screens in Malaya through the backlog of films that had not been seen in occupied countries (White, ND). Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s therefore shaped Southeast Asia's filmmakers in the 1950s, as they were forming ideas about what films should be. For example, the success of Hollywood's horror film featuring the female vampire in *Dracula's Daughter* (Hillyer, 1936) sparked a succession of locally produced films featuring the *Pontianak* from 1956 to 1965.¹⁵ The former provided visual inspiration for whatever ideas and images of the female ghost that the Malay community had both imagined and experienced. When both Cathay-Keris and Shaw Brothers closed down their Singapore studio due to financial difficulties in sustaining the film industry in Singapore, it also marked the end of the *Pontianak* in films within the context of Singapore and Malaysia. Subsequently, the Islamic revivalism in the 1970s, which sought to suppress forms of superstitious knowledge as they were contrary to Islamic beliefs, ensured the absence

¹⁴ Translated: The Pontianak as the wrongly accused

¹⁵ The film's box office success spurred the production of subsequent films: *Dendam Pontianak* "Revenge of the *Pontianak*" (1957), *Sumpah Pontinak* "Curse of the *Pontianak*" (1958), *Pontianak Kembali* "Return of the *Pontianak*" (1963) and *Pontianak Gua Musang* "*Pontianak of the Civet-Cat Cave*" (1964). Although they produced other local Malay films, none were as commercially successful as their *Pontianak* films. Cathay-Keris found a rival in Shaw Brothers Malay Film Production, where Cathay-Keris's success with *Pontianak* (1956) prompted the production of *Anak Pontianak* (1958) and later *Pusaka Pontianak* (1965).

of filmic representations of the Pontianak for 30 years¹⁶. However, the intensity surrounding the Pontianak from 1956 to 1965 no doubt built a repertoire of images that has evidently shaped the way in which contemporary Malay society understands her existence. The films of that decade accorded materiality to the Pontianak, allowing her body to become the ‘flesh of memory’ for successive generations. Her vivid materiality thus left a tangible imprint on the present community, capable of displacing and disrupting past narratives surrounding her prior to her cinematic existence. What is of interest here is the consumption of her material body through spectatorship and the context that sustains the validity of her existence in the everyday lives of her consumers. What was particular about Singapore in the 1950s to 70s that made the consumption of female monstrosity so pleasurable - as reflected through extensive spectatorship - despite its propensity to incite terror?

Within this context, consumption is to be treated as a process by which artifacts are not simply bought and “consumed” but given meaning through their active incorporation into people’s lives (Chua, 2005: 5). The Pontianak, as an embodied material artifact in films, once manifest in the world, begins a career and accumulates a series of linkages and social embeddings (Appadurai, 1986), producing and embodying collective consciousness. If meanings can be produced through the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1982), studying the Pontianak’s bodily actions in films of the 1950s to 70s would aid in the understanding of how certain bodies come to be inscribed with particular social meanings; producing and reproducing ideas of the

¹⁶ There were films on female ghosts produced from Indonesia which were rather similar to the *Pontianak*, but they did not feature in local cinemas in Singapore. Since the Indonesia language is quite different from Malay language such films were rather obscure from the mass market. They were however available in video or video compact discs for rent or purchase, intended for private consumption. In Malaysia, horror films or films involving the supernatural were banned for public screening but there were not much restrictions for private consumption. Furthermore, the social context and culture (or *Adat*) of the Malay community in Indonesia is vastly different from Malay communities in Singapore and Malaysia where more commonalities are present. As such, much of the horror content in Indonesian films did not quite translate to the everyday experiences of both consumers in Malay Singapore and Malaysian communities.

ideal and normative body versus the transgressive, monstrous and abnormal body within that temporal and social frame.

How to be a Pontianak: ‘Social Facts’ of Female Monstrosity in 1950s to 70s

Durkheim defined sociology as the study of ‘social facts’ and developed this concept in order to explore the various patterns of ‘the social’ manifest within particular societies and religions. Social facts should be interpreted in a subjective manner as “ways of acting, thinking and feeling” or briefly, “beliefs and practices” ([1895] 1950:2) of a given society. They operate predominantly as a collective constraint on individuals, demonstrating power of the social and the moral over thoughts and actions of individual actors. In *Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim writes that the “actions and reactions” that create social organizations are completely emotionalized. They refer to the “special energy” that is created when individual consciences interact producing “collective sentiment” ([1895] 1950:9). Eventually ‘collective sentiments’ acquire a certain “rigidity” and develop a “body, a tangible form” that is more sharply differentiated from the individual psyches that first produced it. (ibid.: 7). Social order is derived out of relatively solidified “currents of opinion” that reflect the state of the collective “soul” or “spirit” of a society within particular contexts.

Using the framework above, I will attempt to explain the embodiment and cultural representation of monstrosity within the Malay culture through the analysis of three films *Pontianak* (1956), *Sumpah Pontianak* (1958) and *Pontianak Gua Musang* (1964) produced under the same director, Balakrishnan Narayan Rao for Cathay-Keris. The films, released a few years apart from each other allow us to trace the developments or ‘social facts’ of Malay female monstrosity from the 1950s to the

1960s. The Pontianak, in these films, provides a glimpse into the social order of the Malay community of the 1950s to 60s. Her performing body reveals the techniques by which social order has been inscribed onto her body and through which forms of social action and thought pertaining to female sensuality, gender roles and social relations may be analyzed.

Social Fact : *Beauty is always Suspect*

In “*Pontianak*”(Rao, 1956), the namesake was originally a girl named Comel, (“cute and adorable” one). Comel’s physical attributes however, differed vastly from her namesake as she grew up to be hunchbacked with a twisted body. Her physical appearance, ugly and deformed (ref to Fig 2.), made her the subject of ridicule amongst the Malay villagers who also physically and emotionally abused her. The sorcerer, her foster father, upon his death, instructed Comel to burn all his sorcery books and artifacts to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands. Comel defaulted on her promise and decided to cast a beauty spell transforming herself into a beautiful woman (ref to Fig 4). To sustain her beauty she must not consume blood or she would be cursed. The new Comel returned to her village, attracting the attention of both Malay men and women alike as she walked down the path, her gait slow and her gaze lowered, receiving nods of approval from the villagers.

Since no one from the village knew that the beautiful stranger was once the hunchbacked Comel, she was given a warm welcome. She was seen as the ideal embodiment of Malay girl- beautiful, gentle and polite in her appearance and mannerisms¹⁷. Here, beauty for females was portrayed as an ascribed quality that granted one immediate access to spaces of inclusion and belonging within the

¹⁷ See also Swettenham’s *The Malay Sketches* (1887).

community. The new Comel embodying female sensuality and Malay propriety (fig. 4) was inscribed into social rituals. She was married to a handsome husband and gave birth to a daughter, Maria. Marriage was therefore regarded as the legitimate solution to regulate and provide an outlet for ‘nafsu’ (sexual lust), and prolonged courtship was not encouraged as it could lead to *gila cinta* (excessive love) which would lead to madness and irrational acts (Wazir, 1990). The beautiful woman was seen as an ideal trait, but the sensuality she exudes was also dangerous to the moral fabric of the Malay society.



From Left to Right: Fig 2. Hunched Back Comel, Fig 3. Maria Menado as the Beautiful Comel before she transforms into the Pontianak in Fig 4
(Source: Rao, B.N.)

As much as Comel was a paragon of beauty, she was also engaged in the politics of deception. Comel deceived her husband by not revealing her “true” origins as a hunchback. Here it is important to note that concept of knowing one’s origin is central to the formation of the Malay identity. The lack of which renders one’s body suspect, and even monstrous as reflected in the orphaned and hunchbacked Comel (who was abandoned and later found by the sorcerer). Comel’s husband was bitten by a snake and needed her help in sucking the poison out from his blood system.

Consumed with love to save her husband, she sucks his blood without realizing the conditions of the beauty spell. She then developed thirst for blood and killed her husband in the process of saving him. As retribution for disobeying her father for her own selfish vanity reasons and for deceiving her husband, a curse fell upon her and transformed her into the monstrous Pontianak.

Similarly, Rohani, in *Pontianak Gua Musang* (1964) while being portrayed as innocent and nubile, was also capable of breaking down her boyfriend, Amran's moral guard. Halimah (her sister) reprimanded Rohani for meeting Amran without being chaperoned claiming her actions "*mendatangkan fitnah dan menjadi buah mulut orang dalam kampung* (might become the talk of the town and wrongful accusations towards her actions might be the outcome)". To make her point clearer, Halimah explained to Rohani: "*Masyarakat Kampung mengutamakan suci dan perbuatan kau mencemarkan nama baik kita* (Virginity and purity are the topmost concerns of our village folk and your actions will tarnish the good name of our family)." Rohani replied defiantly, "Selagi manusia jadi manusia, kita tidak boleh jadi malaikat. Apakah yang aku buat? (So long as we are human beings, we should not expect to live like angels. What have I done wrong?)." Believing in her right to express herself, Rohani went on a private date with Amran to Gua Musang, the cave. Rohani admitted that she desired to be happy without having to endure "fitnah" ("wrongful accusations"). Amran proposed to her but not without asking her to wait for a few months for the marriage ceremony. Amran gave her a necklace and the scene panned almost abruptly to a shot of Rohani running haphazardly through the trees, sobbing while Amran tailed after her with his shirt undone and his head cap (songkok) missing. Although the sexual act was not shown, viewers could easily interpret that they had sexual intercourse. In between her sobs, Rohani told him "*Tidak semestinya*

kita melakukan perbuatan ini. Rohani sekarang suri tidak mempunyai makhota.”

(Your proposal does not warrant this act. I am now a queen without her throne)”.

Amran comforted her by reassuring he would not break his promise to marry her.

Rohani ended up being pregnant, and although it is not mentioned explicitly, she embodied the behavior of *mengidam* (developing cravings for odd food) believed amongst Malays to be a symptom for being pregnant. Although Rohani could have been taken advantage of by Amran, Malay morality ensures that Rohani needed to be punished for her sins. Rohani’s sister, Halimah, overwhelmed by envy and malice, or the Malay expression *Busuk Hati* (‘malicious intent’ towards someone), decided to kill her. After finding out that Amran was the father of Rohani’s unborn child, Halimah hid her in the forest in the care of an elderly woman to protect the unwed Rohani from being an outcast in the kampung. Halimah’s ulterior motive was to keep Rohani away from Amran, whom she desired. Halimah proceeded to tell the villagers that Rohani had run away with another man. Amran on the other hand, was kept out of loop with regards to the pregnancy (he was out of town) and was portrayed as being free from the repercussions of his sexual act. Conversely, Rohani became a *pontianak* in Halimah’s dreams. It is also worthwhile to note that upon Rohani’s death, Halimah deceived Amran into marrying her. Within the logic of Malay morality and as punishment for her deceit and envy, she was not able to get pregnant and bear Amran’s children. Amran’s anger towards her infertility highlights the importance of pregnancy and childbirth as subscribing to rites of passage into becoming a respectable and competent woman within the Malay community as previously mentioned in the previous chapter of the thesis.

Despite her monstrosity, the Pontianak is not entirely foreign to the local Malay *adat*. She embodies locality or Malay ideas of “beauty” or vanity through her long hair and long nails. However such beauty (according to Malay morality) needs to be monstrous as it radiates from a self, which has been configured as possessing a cultural deficit (through the use of magic, deceit, sexual transgression, out-of-wedlock pregnancy). Similar to early Islam, the body is regarded as the exteriority of the self. When the self becomes “impure” - as reflected in Rohani’s articulation when she accused Amran of “stealing her throne” (a metaphor for robbing her virginity) - it appears differently. After having sex with Amran, Rohani got home to Halimah who noticed something different with regard to the way she looked: “*Rambut kau kusut baju kau runyuk, Kenapa?* (Your hair is entangled; your clothes are rumpled, what has happened?).” In *Gua Musang*, when news broke out of a *Pontianak* haunting the village, the villagers started becoming suspicious of meeting the “perempuan cantik” (beautiful woman), that the men had to bend their bodies and look through their legs to see if the beautiful woman had her feet on her ground, and was hence a human being.

The monstrous, feminized body of the Pontianak is also a reflection of the cultural history of gender and sexual relations within the Malay/Muslim community. The distinction between men and women (masculine/feminine, reason/passion, active, passive) was accentuated with the arrival of Islam. Prior to that, gender roles were regarded as complementary instead of hierarchical (Wazir, 1990; Peletz, 1996: 57) and female heads of states existed in various parts of the Malay Archipelago. The arrival of Islam however eradicated such complementarities by emphasizing the supposedly “Islamic model” of male supremacy as heads of states as well as within the distribution of domestic resources (Reid, 1988: 170 in Peletz, 1996). Such changes

in societal roles affected Malay/Muslim attitudes towards sexuality and gender, reflected in the social embodiment of the Pontianak. According to Anthony Reid, Portuguese accounts of the 16th century (early-Islamic period) claimed that the Malays regarded pre-marital sexual relations “indulgently” and that “virginity at marriage was not expected of either party” (1988: 153). By the mid-19th century, Islam had infiltrated the everyday lives of its Malay believers as evidenced by the code of morality enacted within the community. The code of morality was often explained in terms of men’s greater self-control and ‘reason’ (akal), emphasizing the gender differentiation with women who were regarded as being more susceptible to animalistic lust (nafsu) or “passion” (Peletz, 1996; Ong, 1995). Using this same logic, the beautiful and nubile woman was therefore always in danger of “fitnah”, of being wrongfully accused of transgressing because men desire her. Her unrestrained (unmarried) ‘passionate’ body may weaken men’s self control and faculties of reason, which may result in sinful and shameful acts such as sexual intercourse or rape.

Social Fact: *Malay patriarchy rules*

While the Pontianak is construed as the monstrous outsider impinging on the security and social order of the Malay village (*Pontianak*, 1956 and *Sumpah Pontianak*, 1958) she is allowed to co-exist if she shows fear and willingness to co-operate with patriarchal structures within the community. Outside of the film text and in the real society, Islamic revivalism meant a crackdown on animistic beliefs considered contrary to Islamic practices. The Pontianak as played by Rohani was allowed to exist in *Pontianak Gua Musang* only because she appeared in Halimah’s dream, hence taken to be an immaterial, psychological entity and non-threatening to

the Islamic faith. The *Pontianak* films that appear in the 1960s and after *Gua Musang* either suggested rational explanations for the horrors (in terms of psychological states as a form of depression or guilty conscience) or are produced as parody of previous Pontianak films. Onscreen, patriarchy as a 'social fact' is embodied in various characters in all three films.

In *Pontianak* (1956), Comel assumed many forms of embodiment switching from the ugly and deformed to the beautiful woman who later became hideously monstrous. The Pontianak's shifting embodiment portrayed Malay women as having multiple and manipulative personalities in line with their 'emotive' biology. The emotive woman, and her instability, was therefore in need of constant patriarchal surveillance. In order to subdue Comel, the village headman had to drive a nail down her neck in order to offset the curse and reveal her 'true origin' as the non-threatening hunchbacked self. The act of Comel forced to lower her neck in the hands of the village headman as he struck the nail down into her neck suggests the idea of bowing in submission to patriarchal structures as a way for the deviant to return to society. Furthermore, being nailed down seems to imply the presence of a strong restraint of females in the community. Such portrayals seem to suggest the 'akal' in Malay men as possessing the ability to cure and restrain women's inherent passions. A man's loss of self control (moment of 'passion') as embodied in Amran's ambiguous "date-rape" scene is forgivable because it is a moment of lapse and a result of being seduced and distracted by Rohani's alluring beauty. Islamic emphasis on female chastity from the 1950s imposed restrictions more zealously on unmarried women known as the *anak dara* (virgins) than unmarried men although promiscuity in either sex was still frowned upon.

In *Sumpah* (1958) the sequel, the repentant, hunchbacked Comel (with a nail in the back of her neck) decided to start anew and hence wandered around a new village (where no one would recognize her). She begged for a job at the marketplace (the social core of the village). However, due to her ugliness, the villagers rejected her. As she was sobbing in the forest, an old man took pity on her and brought her home to his wife. Note that this would be the second time an elder man ('pakcik') rescued her and brought her to the forest, the first being the sorcerer. In *Sumpah* (1958) Comel became the pakcik's house cleaner in exchange for shelter and food. Comel, as the female outsider, could gain access into the kampung community only if she could gain acceptance from any male member of the community. This may reflect the social order of the particular era where Malay women could become productive members of the community if patriarchal structures were to grant her the capacity to do so. But this access was not secured- it disappeared the moment there were signs of social disorder. This is evident in *Sumpah* (1958), when murders started happening within the kampung. Villagers suspected it was the work of the Pontianak who had escaped from a nearby kampung. Comel, the hunchback became the only suspect and was tied to a tree. As the stranger-outsider and orphan without a biological family and a paternal figure to vouch for her innocence - she was labeled as the murderer. This scene reveals the perceived importance of the role of the biological family in ascribing the individual membership to society, the lack of which renders the individual a constant outsider within the community. The family is perceived to be the social unit in which the proper socialization of the individual occurs- where the child is first taught rules and behavioral conduct that contributes to the overall solidarity of the community. Through the family, social order is inscribed onto bodies. Within this context, Comel as the abandoned child is already the abject body. Her

deformed, hunchbacked body thus embodies this abjection. Within the Malay patriarchal context, she therefore experiences multiple marginalities as a woman with a deformed body and without a biological family. This marginality has already been noted through the various shifts in her embodiment.

In the three films, men were given less appearances than women, but when they did appear, they took up substantial roles as heroes capable of protecting the village from harm. The film *Gua Musang* centered upon Rohani and Halimah while Amran played a minimal role onscreen (having been away due to his trading activities). However, when tragedy struck, Amran came onscreen (returns to town) to restore order and make everything safe again. In *Pontianak* the village headman appeared onscreen only to drive the nail into Comel's (as the Pontianak) neck. In *Sumpah*, Maria's (Comel's daughter) husband, Ali emerged onscreen to rescue and reclaim Comel's integrity for her as well as save his wife, Maria from a wild monster. Coincidentally, Ali, Amran and the Village Headman occupied high socio-economic positions within the community. The village headman typically owned most of the land within a village while Amran was involved in trading and had a housekeeper. Meanwhile Ali, the village satay vendor who was popular amongst his kampung folk, possessed high social capital. The portrayals of these 'heroes' reflect how masculinity, within the Malay culture, depended on a man's economic power and his moral authority over the women and female bodies in his household (Ong, 1995).

Nailing Down the “Gaze”

Bearing this in mind however, it is not to say that the monstrous female protagonists are to be regarded as passive objects under the patriarchal gaze¹⁸ of Malay spectators. To what extent are their characters victims? What is the position of such women within this pleasure of “nailing bodies” geared to a presumably sadistic patriarchal “gaze”? Linda Williams in her essays *When the Woman Looks* (1984) and *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess* (1991) highlights that often in horror, contrary to mainstream cinema, women do possess the ‘gaze’. Where the subject of the “gaze” is concerned, it is interesting to note the visual politics of the scene where Amran promised Rohani marriage to comfort her fears that she had “lost her throne”. As the two characters walked away from the scene, Rohani, in between her sobs, turned her gaze towards the viewer and with her eyes transfixed onto the viewer, smiled coyly. It was a split second shot which allows the discerning viewer to rethink and maybe even retract the imposition of the passive, innocent damsel onto her body. Rohani was in possession of the gaze now, surprising us, the voyeurs. In addition, Williams argues that women who possess the gaze in horror, and who like our female protagonists become the monsters, are typically shown to represent threats to patriarchy (Rohani’s false innocence) and hence require punishment. The presence of the Pontianak who seeks to haunt men and even the sexually aware nubile woman might create traumatic discomfort for her Malay spectators within a patriarchal cultural system. This discomfort disrupts the patriarchal gaze and hence requires the consolidation of norms. Such characters are punished, for example, by being “nailed down” in the case of the cinematic Pontianak or being killed off (Rohani) to restore a

¹⁸ The notion of the ‘Gaze’ was introduced by Laura Mulvey (1975) In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and later revised in her “Afterthoughts” (1999: 122-130).

masculine narrative order. There is a need to normalize the abject body back into a subject of patriarchal order.

Barbara Creed points out that almost all horror texts represent the monstrous-feminine in relation to Kristeva's notion of maternal authority and the depiction of the self's productive body (1993: 13). Particularly, Creed argues that horror texts serve to demonstrate the "work of abjection" (ibid: 10) in three ways. First, horror depicts images of abjection, such as corpses and bodily waste; second, horror is concerned with boundaries and things that threaten the stability of the social symbolic order; and third, horror constructs the maternal figure as abject (Freeland, 2004: 745). The case of the Malay horror films of the 1950s-70s is a particularly intriguing one. Prior to the 1950s, the *Pontianak* existed as an abject being from which there was evident cognitive dissociation. In all of the films, the "truth" about why a woman became a Pontianak was unraveled and was typically alluded to various reasons not completely brought about by herself (the notion of sex before marriage and defying elders are still inexcusable) such as pressures from the villagers to be beautiful in Comel's situation and being murdered by a jealous sister in Rohani's. Once empathy is established or once the "truth" is revealed, the confrontation of difference between the woman she was when alive and the monstrosity she embodies, the Pontianak in films willingly relinquishes her gaze, knowing that she no longer belongs to the wordly life and assumes her place as the abject body subjected to patriarchal order. In these films all the Pontianak desired was to reclaim her identity and a true representation of herself that had been tarnished by "fitnah" (wrongful accusations) of village folk and admonished from history.

The period 1950s to 70s was a tumultuous period of social change for Malay communities in both Malaysia and Singapore, in which historical events had an effect

on social identities. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the impact of modernization and capitalism on traditional kinship patterns re-defined patriarchal regulation on women. Women assumed the role of wage earners, and the patriarchy shifted from within the household or the village to the capitalist industry. This had the effect of inviting the re-assertion of masculinity by asserting moral authority over the female body in order to recover the sanctity of patriarchal dominance. Women in that era became more self-reflective towards their femaleness as their bodies became increasingly public. The bodies of such Malay women, re-inscribed under capitalism, and as wage-earners, were portrayed negatively within the Malay community as reflected in the production of monstrosity onto female bodies in various Pontianak feature films of the 1950s and 60s. Furthermore, with the Government's attempt to resettle Malay kampung communities into flats, the spatial regulation of bodies within the Kampung would no longer have a hold on Malay women. Where regulating the activities and sexuality of the 'anak dara' (virgin females) used to be defined as the "collective identity of kampong (village) men" (Ong, 1995), it has now become the collective responsibility of the Malay/Muslim community. With the impending threat that modernization brought to traditional and authoritative regulation in that era, the arrival of Pontianak films was timely. Around the same period also, local newspapers reported the fear of pregnant Malay mothers towards the Pontianak (ST, 4 October 1959) and the invention of the Pontianak as the "Perfumed glamour ghost" by Malay women to keep their "modern" (wage-earning) daughters home at night (ST, 23 March, 1956). As a material vision, the films reinforced her existence where her monstrosity invoked fear and as such produced a panoptic effect over members of the community. Furthermore, as the first visual representation of female horror and through the high frequency with which she appeared in cinemas across two decades,

the Pontianak has become a memorialized feature within the Malay community. What is it that is memorable about her monstrosity? Is the consumption of the Pontianak purely for entertainment's sake?

In the next chapter, I would argue that the notion of haunting is a form of “intimate technology” that arises out of the engagement of viewers/listeners as subjects and the cinematic and aural medium as objects. Here, “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological.” (Heidegger 1977: 35). Rather this notion of technology is already historically embedded within specific social political milieux and thus always both co-constitutes and expresses cultural values and consequently multiple forms of subjectivity. How technology or technicity links our subjectivities is through the way in which a meaning of *being* is being “sent” or within this context, transmitted to us (1977: 45) via various forms of media. By materializing the horrific representation of the Pontianak through televisual, cinematic and aural devices, technology makes the historical accessible as an artifact to study sociality. This allows us to experience perceptions and meanings of *being* even when the ontology of the *Pontianak* remains at most, ambivalent.

CHAPTER 5

The Phenomenal *Pontianak*

Understanding Technology: It's not *just* watching!

Malays in Singapore might not have a visual experience of the *Pontianak* if Maria Menado had rejected the opportunity to promote the *Kebaya* from Bandung to Singapore. In 1949, at the age of 17 she went to Singapore to model and emerged the

winner of a *Kebaya Queen* contest. Her victory prompted numerous offers to act in films. In the 1950s, her late first husband who was a scriptwriter suggested producing a horror movie about the *Pontianak*. Maria contributed some ideas based on stories she heard about the Pontianak while growing up in Indonesia and recalled how her screenwriter husband was himself afraid of her stories while he was writing the script for “*Pontianak*” (The Star Online, August 5, 2005). For Maria, “*Pontianak*” was the “first scary movie ever” because “everyone knew what a *Pontianak* was. Because of that everyone went to see it.” (Ibid.) Maria’s role as the cinematic *Pontianak* has undeniably influenced the way in which generations of Malays imagine and experience the Pontianak since the 1950s. Her *Pontianak*-body therefore functions as the “flesh of memory”¹⁹ (Young, 2002) materializing particular ways of embodying the Pontianak. Furthermore, as the first visual representation of female horror, the cinematic *Pontianak* provides her viewers a deeper sensory dimension to their experiences of horror. It was the film as Maria explained, that concretized whatever fragments of knowledge people knew about the Pontianak.

Felt Memory

The cinematic *Pontianak* did not exist merely as a representation for her viewers in the 1950s. Her image affected some of her viewers who apparently fainted at the shocking scenes (The Star Online, August 5, 2005). One of my respondents, Sri, a faculty member at a university, remembers being traumatized after watching the *Pontianak* films:

¹⁹ Katherine Young studies the psychosomatic scheme of family traditions by focusing on how symbolic bodies are passed down in families. Somatic psychology suggests that parents transmit knowledge to their children on how to be in the world through bodily attitudes. Young argues that the body shapes, imitates and resists at every stage of life arising out of past memory, present conditions and the projection of the memorial body towards the future. Her study premised upon the notion that the flesh remembers.

“I was staying with my grandparents at *Pulau Belakang Mati* and when the *Pontianak* films came out, the image *really* haunted us. My sister and I, we were just too afraid to walk home in the kampung, with the banana trees lining the pathway to our grandparents’ place. Every time I think about the films I can get scared. I can still feel the goose bumps when I remember those days”

Sri’s goosebumps²⁰ attest to the notion that the motion picture or other similar modes of technological representation are not merely “objective phenomena” (Sobchack, 2000) but rather as viewers, such objective encounters of viewing are more than capable of transforming us as subjects. Cinematic and electronic media are not just symbolic of a particular culture but they also constitute a radical extension of society’s past consciousness and our embodied sense of being-in-the-world. As audience in a movie theatre, before a television set, and as listeners of radio programmes, we are not only present as conscious beings, but also as embodied beings (Sobchack, 2000: 70). The experience of goosebumps as a form of reflex toward fearful narratives for example, is therefore not merely biological, but is also part of a process of perception, involving both the embodied body and mind.

Whether the *Pontianak* is fictitious, non-material or cinematic is not an issue, the importance lies in investigating the sensual and bodily perceptions that formulate our experiences of ideas, images, emotions, objects and other things that are perceived through consciousness. The audio, televisual and cinematic images of the *Pontianak* are not simply objects of representation. Her monstrous and materially embodied representations provide space to ground certain perceptions and experiences of haunting amongst some members of the Malay community of Singapore. Accordingly, one need not encounter a Pontianak to feel fear and can rely on cultural symbols as stocks of meaning. My Indonesian domestic helper, for example, started

²⁰ In medical textbooks, such a bodily reaction is recognized as a form of “reflex” during “fight or flight” circumstances as well as remembering intense experiences.

emotively associating banana trees with sentiments of fear and horror after she had heard, read and watched local narratives of the Pontianak lurking around them. Prior to her arrival to Singapore, the notion of banana trees as horrifying was remote to her sensual experience as such narratives did not exist in her village in Solo, Java. As in Sri's narrative, a banana tree was enough of a visual stimulation to induce fear. The idea of the Pontianak as fearful and haunting is derived precisely because of the lingering and residual effect of how some bodies perceive and at the same time experience the narrative Pontianak. Sri, for example, describes the visual impact of the cinematic *Pontianak* as "traumatizing" and remembers covering her eyes to shield herself from the potentiality of a shocking scene. What is sociologically at stake here is the study of the engagement with purportedly "trivial" bodies and beings that simultaneously produce rich meanings in social life.

Inasmuch as the discourse on the *Pontianak* shapes the way in which her believers or viewers perceive her haunting, her embodied representation is also shaped by the grounded perception and experience of her believers. In this manner the cinematic *Pontianak* is not merely a genre of "speculative fiction"²¹ as Muhd Amin²² pointed out:

"You might think [the supernatural] is not real, but if it is not then how do these stories come about? They must have had their *bahan-bahan* (foundations). We have to *fikir dengan akal* (think rationally). A human being can transform into an animal through the work of hexes and curses. If these stories are so untrue, how were they created in the first place? Things must have had happen which is why we come to know of such stories"
(*Oral History Recordings*, Acc No 001597 [30], National Archives Singapore.)

²¹ Jewelle Gomez (1993) uses the term "speculative fiction" to refer to a broad range of writing that includes science fiction, fantasy and the supernatural in her article "Speculative Fiction and Black Lesbians". What is distinctive about this genre is that writers speculate "a world that makes manifest a more than is currently accepted", including writings on ghosts, vampires, aliens, etc. These speculations represent a large part of our own understanding of our life-world.

²² Born 1920, in Kampung Beting Kusa, a Malay Kampung in Changi. His parents were originally from Riau Islands before they moved to Pulau Ubin and then eventually, Beting Kusa.

For Amin, imagination is not completely free from reality- they are derived from one's embodied experience. During his oral history interview, Amin described, with much pride and enthusiasm, his encounter with the Pontianak. His interviewer, Ro, tried to capitalize on his excitement but I could sense a note of skepticism in her voice²³. Interestingly, Amin brought up the topic of having met the Pontianak right after a conversation on deaths and childbirth in Kampung Beting Kusa with Ro. A separate oral history interview with Hashim highlights similar sequencing of events, where his interviewer introduced the Pontianak immediately after talking about midwifery and infant mortality rates (*Oral History Recordings*, Acc no. 000709[5], National Archives Singapore). Such similarities provide relevant examples of Malay 'social facts' as to how narratives of the Pontianak were almost always related to issues surrounding childbirth.

Amin encountered the Pontianak in his early teens while he was walking towards two *Pokok Kabu-kabu* (Java Cotton Trees) near his school at Beting Kusa. Approaching the massive trees, he saw a figure clad in white, wailing. He ran to his *Cikgu*'s (teacher) house to seek solace and was told by his *Cikgu* that the Pontianak was always seen around those particular trees. Prompted by his interviewer Ro, Amin further described the Pontianak as one who looked like "*manusia biasa*", a normal human being with extremely long tangled hair ("*rambut panjang berderai*") and whose attire resembled the long, white and shapeless *telekung*, commonly worn by women as their prayer attire. He emphasized that "a lot of people had seen her." Throughout the interview Amin had to interrupt his stories twice to tell Ro that he was feeling goose bumps and shivers on and along his body. Ro did not share the same

²³ The first time Amin said "I have seen the Pontianak" Ro replied with an obvious tone of disbelief "You have seen the Pontianak?!" which made Amin reiterate "yes I have seen the Pontianak." When Amin mentioned how the Pontianak preys on young virile men by biting their necks and sucking their blood, she immediately asks "Do you know of anyone who died because of the Pontianak?" When Amin replied, "No", Ro paused for a long time, unsure how to proceed with the next question.

effect. While collecting data for this thesis I noted with prevalent frequency the number of informants who mentioned feeling hair raising goose bumps (“*bulu roma kembang*”) as they were trying to recall events that involved the Pontianak. In a similar instance, Zainab, 47²⁴, recalled watching a theatre production entitled “Pontianak: A love Story”. The stage was the old *Kampung Wak Hassan*²⁵. Zainab recalled how the ambience was perfect for a play on horror. As she described how the Pontianak first appeared in the play she stopped the conversation mid-sentence to tell me how she was still haunted by the image and emphasized this sentiment by notifying me of the goose bumps she was experiencing as she was recounting the play. In this manner, the act of remembering should itself be recognized as a process of “felt memory”. Most pertinently, feelings of “goose bumps” and “shivers”, which serve as a bodily response to fear, emphasize the necessity of recognizing that people are not simply disembodied thinking minds, but rather bodies connected to the socio-material world.

From his oral history recordings, Amin’s visual description of the Pontianak closely resembles the cinematic image played by Maria Menado. However, Amin’s encounter took place in early 1930s, more than twenty years before the cinematic Pontianak came onscreen. This is not surprising since Maria Menado herself received inspiration for her *Pontianak* film based on stories she heard in her childhood. Her performance was therefore based on collective memory or specifically the “flesh of

²⁴ I was introduced to Zainab at a friend’s birthday party and we were mutually introduced as “into Pontianaks”. Zainab is a mother of three and a self-identified feminist who works for a local NGO. Her family has a longstanding history of Bomoh, Midwives as well as family members who possess “sixth sense” or the ability to “see things”. On our walk up to Old Changi Hospital, Zainab explains her newfound interest in the supernatural and mysticism as a way to reconcile the “gifts” of her mystic ancestry and cultural heritage as well as to understand the rich history of her ancestry which she had previously neglected. She did not want to follow us into the hospital grounds because she did not feel the courage to do so. Presently, she is working on writing a movie treatment on the Pontianak, where she intends to portray the Pontianak as a misunderstood character. She is interested in approaching her Pontianak through a feminist lens.

²⁵ *Kampung Wak Hassan* is an old Malay housing settlement in Sembawang, which has been marked for urban development in Singapore.

memory” of what the Pontianak is, of which her cinematic effect further corporealizes this haunting. The cinematic brings the Pontianak’s existential state into visibility allowing for her incorporation as a subject inscribed with social and bodily habits hence creating a situation in which her audience is able to imagine, experience and remember her habituation and engagement with the living world. Through these early films on the Pontianak, the phenomenology of the Pontianak becomes a more compelling feature that gathers depth and materiality through its repetition in terms of cinematic and narrative imagery and its actual resonance with the daily lives of Malays in that era. In some instances, the cinematic Pontianak of the 1950s-70s, as the representation of Malay collective memory, functions as a mnemonic device assisting one’s memory of her being. Over time, this narrative of the Pontianak is sedimented through collective mnemonic practices (formulas or “pantangs” prescribed to prevent her haunting, avoiding banana trees) to thus become ‘organically anchored’ (Halbwachs, 1992) within the life and flux of the Malay social world hence generating meaning that is ultimately contingent on the past, present and the future.

Interviews with the Pontianak

The Expressive Body

Through the understanding that we live in the world through how our bodies experience the world, Merleau-Ponty’s approach therefore appeals to my analysis of role-playing in films. The study of how artistes adapt to their roles during filming processes foregrounds the notion of the expressive body where phenomenology provides the vocabulary to discuss experiential aspects of performance that would

otherwise be difficult to articulate. My informant, Aida Aris²⁶ who has acted as a Pontianak in several RTM tele-series, stated that acting as a Pontianak was “just a job” but when I asked if she was afraid of the Pontianak she looked at me as if I was asking such a ridiculous question. Her reply was a firm “Of course lah!’ When I asked what was most fearful about the Pontianak, she replied: “Her horrible face. And the worst part is we don’t see her. We only know her through stories. People always describe her until we can imagine her.” However, when Aida was first offered the role of the Pontianak for the tele-movie “Momok I” she found it a challenge to embody the role precisely because she did not have particular personal experiences related to the Pontianak. She emphasized the need to “appreciate” roles in order to act them out effectively. The process of “appreciation” requires the need to immerse oneself into required roles and may require the need to perform an embodied experience that might be completely different from their personal experiences. It was the black and white films on the Pontianak of the 1950s to 70s that provided Aida ideas on how to behave as the Pontianak especially in terms of bodily movements and facial expressions. Moreover, the use of costumes and attire aided by dramatic hair and facial make-up aided her role-demeanor further:

“We see how the *hantu* (ghost) acts, how they open their eyes, move their eyes. We need ideas for this especially if we’ve never experience or seen them before...
 ...When the make-up crew apply make up on your face, you just become a different person. From there you adapt your body to move according to the features you have now newly embody”
 (Aida, personal communication, 2009)

Knowing how to ‘adapt’ requires knowledge and a prior perception of how her newly unfamiliar monstrous body should conduct itself. While on one level it may appear ‘instinctive’ for Aida to act as the Pontianak, such instincts are however the outcome

²⁶ Aida Aris was born in Singapore but moved to Malaysia in her early teens. She is presently in her mid-30s and is one of the more popular television actresses in Malaysia and Singapore.

of successful incorporation and mediation of cultural images into her own personal experiences. Acting materializes the link between how the artiste in this context perceives her role and how she proceeds to embody and perform it effectively and convincingly for an audience. These perceiving or seemingly “instinctive” actions are culturally laden, requiring a priori knowledge of what the actions being performed mean and their position in time and space. For example the actress in question would know that she would have to conceal her feet because the Pontianak does not show feet since she floats above the ground, the Pontianak smiles in a sinister manner, she wails, looks sad, perpetually melancholic and angry. She speaks in an echo signifying a “haunting” voice or she remains silent.

Acting also constitutes a form of immanent mediation between the actress’s macro-perception (hermeneutic level of culture) of being the Pontianak and her micro-perception (immediate sense of being) in making the Pontianak convincingly scary for her viewers (Ihde, 1993: 75-76). Her acting is successful if there is no discrepancy between the two levels of macroperception and micro-perception. Such discrepancies threaten to undermine established socio-cultural meanings as seen in Aida’s situation:

“I was supposed to be the Pontianak who followed a man on his motorbike. From the technical side the scene seemed to have gone well but when I saw the distributed copies, I saw that my Pontianak body had slippers on! That mistake was just so glaring to me and I was very upset...because as actresses we want to portray the role as realistically as possible and we all know that Pontianaks do not show their feet. I had slippers! On the motorbike! I was just really upset.”

For the viewers, the sight of Aida’s slippers would invariably affect the way they perceive Aida’s Pontianak body. An intended horrifying scene could possibly end up as a parody. Hermeneutically, slippers are not part of the Pontianak’s perceived embodiment. Aida’s film was uploaded onto youtube.com²⁷ and although she did

²⁷ Momok I can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQXHnHS21Ns&feature=related>

mention the motorcycle scene, none of the comments featured for the scene seem to pick up on her embarrassing error, although there was one viewer who commented that it was weird to see the “hantu” (Aida as the Pontianak) with her feet on the ground. In another scene, which Aida may not have noticed or remembered, a viewer noted that Aida’s Pontianak was wearing heels and found the scene comedic, hence not as scary as the image intended to be.

The way in which the artiste experiences her performing body depends largely on how she engages her micro-perceptual senses. When I asked how she felt being in a Pontianak’s body, Aida replied that there had to be a distance between one’s embodied performance (“fiction”) and one’s embodied self (“reality”). Aida maintained that it was this strategic distance that protected her from being “disturbed” or “terbawa-bawa” (carried away) by the supernatural. To act as the Pontianak might place the actress in greater “danger” as she might be disturbed or be possessed by the said spirit. Unlike Aida Aris, fellow actress Umie Aida has had numerous experiences acting in horror films. In one particular interview with Singapore magazine *Manja* (Text B) she described her experiences of being a Pontianak in the horror film *Puaka Tebing Biru* (Dir, Osman Ali, 2007):

Interviewer: What about Puaka Tebing Biru, what is the story? We heard that you got possessed during one of the filming scenes in water.

Umie: Puaka (silence). I made a mistake. I was “over”, I “*terlebih-lebih*” (excessively) immerse myself playing my character [“bawak watak”]. In my excitement, I immersed myself too deep in the character that I found it hard to snap out of it. Due to my enthusiasm, I would read the script every night and at the same time play eerie melodies composed for the film set. They gave me goose bumps. While reading and listening to the melody I would comb my hair to get into the character and I would start crying. If possible I don’t even want to remember it.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Umie: I mean if we deal with such characters especially the ones with elements of fear [“berunsur macam gitu”], the [‘thing’] likes it...something will happen. I learnt from that mistake. When such situations happen we have to remember that we control it [“dia”] and not the other way round. It got to a point where I told Osman (director) I wanted to give up my role for *Puaka*...when I was [‘disturbed’] (shakes her head, with her head bowed down). There are things that are just difficult to say, but due to the pleas from various parties, I had to go on with the shooting. I had to play a sad ghost in *Puaka*. There were a lot of emotions needed. And yes there was the scene underwater and I was in green make-up...when I remember...(sentence trails off unfinished)

(*Manja*, February 2007, p 20.)

Text B: Excerpt of an Interview with Umie Aida

Umie was offered the role to act in *Puaka* after expressing her interest in playing roles related to horror. *Puaka* was her first horror film in which she had to play the role of a melancholic ghost yearning to be reunited with her living husband and her daughter. In the process of filming horror, both Aida and Umie’s efforts in performing reveal the construction of horror. Moreover acting is a process of re-embodiment and dis-embodiment. Failure to dis-embody oneself from her performing body or to distinguish between the performing body and the actual body/self would create confusing states of mind for the actress who is experiencing overlapping sense of embodied subjectivities. Being “overly” immersed in one’s performing role could affect one’s well-being as highlighted by Umie in her interview excerpt.

Eerie melodies are used as instrumental props to enhance Umie’s microperceptual senses, providing her greater access into the desired structures of feeling. Other bodily actions such as combing hair stimulates the necessary experience needed to understand the bodily features of the Pontianak who has been imagined and experienced as having excessively long hair. Umie’s crying occurred

probably out of habituation where the act itself reveals macroperceptual knowledge with regards to the association of the Pontianak and her melancholic disposition. Since remembering is an embodied experience, Umie's reluctance to remember ("if possible, I don't want to remember It.") is the outcome of a very traumatic experience acting as the Pontianak. Such trauma requires some form of selective amnesia in order to re-possess her sense of self. Her experience highlights that even in the realm of cinematic or fictitious performance, the presence of latent macro-perception and strong micro-perception seeks to tear down boundaries of the imagined and the real.

Umie perceived her case of spirit possession as a consequence of her inability to "control" herself. In my conversations with elder Malay relatives and using Malay vocabulary, Umie's experiences were described as a case of "*lemah semangat*" (weak *semangat*). Within this cultural framework, Umie's *semangat* might have been weakened unintentionally by assuming the role of the depressive melancholic woman too convincingly. Using Malay logic, the weakening of the *semangat* might have impacted her self-identity which led her to believe she had been possessed. At the core of such ideas of bodily transformation, possession and 'control' is the notion of the importance of having a strong sense of self. As Umie mentioned, "We have to remember that we control *dia* [it] and it is not the other way round."

The Possessive Body

The process of remembering traumatic events is such an embodied process that some individuals seek to expunge them. Before we met, my informant Haz²⁸ reminded me not to push her into remembering details about her possession by the Pontianak spirit. The incident happened in 2008, a year before our interview and the event was still “fresh in [her] memory”. She wanted to avoid remembering because she did not want to feel vulnerable and afraid. Remembering, she emphasized, might weaken her *semangat*. Her exorcists had advised her that she possessed a weaker *semangat* than most because she was capable of being sensitive to ‘presences’. Haz eventually agreed to share her experiences because she was intrigued as to why I chose to remain in school ‘just to study’ the Pontianak.

While running through a ‘litmus’ test to judge if Haz was possessed (refer to appendix B1), her exorcists noted that a Pontianak was sitting on her shoulders. This had provided an explanation as to why Haz had been suffering from shoulder aches for over a year. When asked if she had shown any changes in her mannerisms, Haz’s boyfriend, Hadi, mentioned that she showed violent tendencies during minor arguments. Some tendencies include scratching him till he had permanent scars, slapping him, shouting and crying out loudly. During such incidents, Haz recalled she was not aware of her actions until her mother pointed out that she was becoming rather violent. Unaware that she was being possessed, she attributed her behavior to stress or hormonal imbalances. She remembered being confused at some points during that period because she had never been the “neurotic” or “jealous-possessive type of girlfriend”. Furthermore, she was not experiencing any problems in her

²⁸ A 25 year old marketing executive with Singtel, a network service in Singapore. She claims to have been possessed by the Pontianak despite being skeptical of her existence. She avoids watching Malay horror films understanding that it would allow her to imagine horrors hence affecting her well-being.

relationship then. To her exorcists, her change in mannerisms was compelling evidence that the Pontianak was in her body because her disposition resembled the Pontianak's melancholic, vengeful and violent behavior. Further proof included unexplainable feelings of extreme insecurity towards her partner. Her exorcists explained that the Pontianak was haunting her and possessing her body because the Pontianak was interested in Hadi. To fulfill her interests, the Pontianak uses Haz's body as a medium. According to the exorcists, the Pontianak however, was not interested in sharing Hadi. She controlled Haz's bodily dispositions, making her behave in a violent manner in order to repulse Hadi. Haz explained that she was initially highly skeptical of her exorcists' rationale because she was not one to believe completely in the existence of ghosts. However she described that she could not be 'acting' possessed, as it would require the experience of knowing how the Pontianak behaves. Since she was not much of a believer when it comes to ghostly spirits, she claimed to not have the necessary cultural knowledge to enact precise bodily dispositions that the Pontianak embodies. Furthermore, as she was never a fan of hearing ghost stories or watching horror movies, it was highly unlikely that she had been influenced by narrative or visual images. Despite her lack of knowledge, she was still able to recognize the Pontianak when she saw one for the first time during her exorcism. She caught a glimpse of long black hair underneath a yellow cloth that was covering her face during the ritual. In her next encounter, she witnessed a translucent-like figure clad in white with black mass covering its face (she took it to be the Pontianak's hair) standing outside her bedroom window. Having experienced the Pontianak's presence, Haz has since found it difficult to dispute the Pontianak's materiality. She mentioned however, that exact descriptions about the Pontianak having fangs or red eyes could be exaggerations of her embodiment as influenced by

cinematic consumption because all she saw was an outline of a figure in white and black. In later chapters, Khai, an informant who is able to see spirits, provided a similar description that was consistent with Haz's description.

Exorcism rituals often highlight the specificity of the Pontianak's ethnicity. In Haz's first exorcism ritual, Malay objects such as the *Keris* (dagger) and yellow cloth were used to battle spirit forces. Such objects possess strong symbolic meanings in Malay cultural history. The Malay annals or the *Sejarah Melayu*, describes the cloth as an anthropomorphic object that has magical and mythical powers able to bestow vitality, well-being, and fertility; connecting the living to the spiritual or ancestral forces (Hall, 1996:92),²⁹ while the colour Yellow and the *Keris* signifies power. The cloth that covers Haz's face became the portal which allowed the spirit of the Pontianak to move out of her body. During the ritual, Quranic verses such as the *Ayatul Qursi* in which the first verse proclaims: "I seek refuge in Allah from the outcast Satan" (Holy Quran, 2: 255) were used to cast the Pontianak spirit out of Haz's body. Here the discursive shift in the Pontianak's identity may be noted. While she has been commonly regarded as "hantu" a Malay term for ghosts, she is now being understood also as a form of "syaitan" which bears an Islamic connotation to the evil spirit hence allowing her greater legitimacy to exist within the local community as discussed in Chapter 3. In addition, the ritual also highlights the process of Islamizing Malay cultural practices, where Quranic verses are used in conjunction with Malay rituals.

²⁹ Due to its 'life-giving' properties that were equivalent to a woman's child bearing role cloth was often considered to be "women's goods". As such, the manufacturing of textile was made exclusively by women. The act of spinning thread was seen as 'bonding the parts of the soul and creating the "thread of life"', bestowing protection and fertility on the wearer as well as the broader community (Gittinger, 1979: 28-30, Kooijman, 1963).

However the first exorcism did not work as it should have. Haz continued to experience disturbance in her room. It was apparent that the spirits familiarized their way back to her bedroom, which her first exorcists claimed to be their “port” (home base). Since the first exorcists failed, an Ustaz from their neighbourhood mosque was engaged to perform a second, and successful, exorcism. It was this Ustaz who claimed that the spirits, including the Pontianak, continued to linger because her ‘smell’ was on them. Since the first exorcism was not done in Haz’s house, the spirits could find their way to her house, where her scent of presence was strongest. Within the first and second rituals, the notion of scent played an important part. For example, in the first exorcism, a cinnamon stick was placed in between Haz’s toes to detect spirit possession. At the same time, those exorcists burnt incense using resin (from the barks of particular species of trees ie. *Kemenyan*) in order to officiate the exorcism. Instead of using the cinnamon stick, the Ustaz used white pepper. Haz would feel a tug at her toes if she had been possessed and the colour of the pepper would turn a darker colour. The use of such olfactory materials reveals the sensorial process of spirit possession, in which scented items creates embodied responses. In this manner the scented objects emit energies which were actively picked up by the spirits in Haz’s body.

Unlike her first exorcism, the Ustaz performed an exorcism without the use of Malay objects. Apart from the white pepper seeds, he relied only on Quranic verses. Haz was made to greet him in the Islamic manner (“Asalammualaikum” –peace be upon you) and had to recite any Islamic verses she knew. Haz admitted that she was not a religious person and hence the recitation did not come naturally. Her Ustaz remained firm and told her that if she considered herself a Muslim, she must be strong and recite something in remembrance of Allah. Haz recited the prayer one usually

performs before meals. The Ustaz took it as a sign that Haz still had *Iman* (Islamic faith) in her and that the Pontianak had not fully possessed her body. In this instance the Ustaz might have seen the use of Islamic practices as a way to separate Haz's (a muslim body) embodiment from that of the Pontianak ("syaitan"). Her Ustaz adhered strictly to the Islamic code of conduct, pertaining to modesty, where he would only touch her with a piece of cloth that separated skin-to-skin contact. Once he was through with her, he proceeded into the room with the intention of cleansing it spiritually. Haz claimed that she trusted the Ustaz because she felt that his position as an Ustaz legitimized greater Islamic authoritative power in exorcising unwanted spirits. Her first exorcists on the other hand seemed 'unprofessional' because they used objects that were un-Islamic such as the cloth and *Keris*. The success of Haz's second exorcism reinforces how Islamic practices are often viewed as more superior to Malay cultural practices and provide us with an understanding of the uneasy and often contested relationship between the Pontianak (cultural) and Islam especially within the context of Singapore, where being Malay and Muslim are considered inseparable identities.

In this chapter and earlier, I have discussed how Islamic beliefs (see Chapter 1 and 3) seek to marginalize the Pontianak's existence. In the following chapters, however, I will examine how some members of the Malay community push forth the existence of ghosts such as the Pontianak through popular culture. While Haz's story may be a compelling narrative, its meaning however is non-sustainable unless it is further disseminated, circulated and exchange among other members of the community. Popular culture therefore plays a largely important role in sustaining beliefs. In the mid 1950s-60s for example, the Pontianak attained a cult of popularity due to the repetitive imagery of her monstrosity. The narratives and images that were

consumed were then incorporated into the lives of her subscribers for whom her existence became meaningful. Such meanings were extensively incorporated in the lives of her audience where despite her absence in films post 1965, the memory of her haunting continues to linger amongst Malays in Singapore. However given the different context in which the present Singaporean Malays are situated, the meaning of her existence and the manner in which she haunts assume a different form. Beliefs in her modern existence need to be adapted to the present context. In this manner, contemporary radio programmes such as *Misteri Jam 12* serves as an adequate platform in which contemporary ghost stories may be circulated and as such inadvertently rejuvenate certain beliefs like the Pontianak. The narratives presented on air take the notion of listening to ghost stories to another level as it now involves mass participation. For this community, stories about Pontianak hauntings suggest the continued persistence of the Pontianak in surviving temporal and social changes, with the objective of remaining relevant to members of the present Malay community. In doing so, there is perhaps the desire to constitute the spirit of the Pontianak as part of a cultural identity of being Malay and in doing so signifies the reclamation of Malay spaces. The haunting of the Pontianak in the contemporary Malay setting, highlights micro-spatial practices of resistance to Islamization and in the larger context, the spatial politics of multiculturalism in Singapore.

CHAPTER 6

Fatimah Rock(ing) the Waves

At midnight, the sounds of a clock ticking, dogs howling and a woman shrieking and wailing loudly fill up the homes of some Singaporeans. This is not the case of a nation-wide witching phenomenon in urban Singapore but rather the craft of

Abdul Karim Sadali (“KC”), host of local Malay radio programme “Misteri Jam 12” (“Midnight Mystery”, MJ12) which airs every weekday from 12-2am inviting callers to contribute their ghostly experiences on radio station RIA 89.7FM. In KC’s interview with a local Malay magazine the tagline read “*KC succeeds in transporting listeners to the world of mystery and fear that can make the hairs on our back stand!*” ((March, 2009 p. 34). This summarizes adequately the transversal relationship between sound, time, space, bodies and our understanding of the built environment. How is the Pontianak represented and consumed through airwaves? Furthermore, sharing the same sound environments can promote a particular sense of ‘commonality’ (Simmel, 1997), where in this context, the callers’ contributions³⁰ highlight collective sentiments towards the experiences of the Pontianak. At the same time, narratives that appear on the airwaves contribute to a coherent and material idea of where and how the Pontianak exists.

Transmitting Sounds, Creating Spaces

The making of soundscapes³¹ and sonorities for MJ12 is of particular interest as it highlights how horror is constructed for, and consumed by, and perceived amongst listeners of the programme thus creating the sonic environment that “transport[s] listeners to the world of mystery and fear” (*Manja*, March 2009). In the same interview with *Manja*(ibid.) KC revealed his passion for recording and collecting sounds from empty houses, cemeteries, jungles as well as old and

³⁰ Refer to Appendix B for details on radio demographics.

³¹ Raymond Schafer distinguishes between *soundfields* and *soundscapes* where the center of the former is constituted by an undifferentiated emitting agent while the latter is described to be “fundamentally anthropocentric” with a center is constituted by the embodied human subject in their capacity as a receiver. In short, while soundfields stresses upon the production and emission of sonorities or sounds, soundscapes reveal the act of reception and appropriation hence capable of re-territorializing and specifying the undifferentiated acoustics of the soundfield (in Fortuna, 2001: 5).

dilapidated pools. He underlined the need to extract specific soundscapes to provide a realistic effect. In doing so he had extracted particular soundfields from their otherwise undifferentiated environments and re-territorialized them into a horror-scape. In this situation, the denotative and connotative meanings of the sounds KC collects are equally privileged; the sound biography of each specific space relates to his autobiographical memory of such places. The sound of a door creaking signifies an empty house and according to local Malay culture, abandoned spaces are a hothouse for the agglomeration of ghostly spirits each ready to mark claims onto such spaces. In addition, the sound of a door creaking has no horrifying meaning unless coupled with the sound of a woman crying as she is being dragged through the door. The collection and subsequent archiving of soundfields require a thorough auditory cultural understanding of what constitutes horror. The semantics of particular sonorities must adequately bridge the gaps between the signifier and the signified which have already been socialized into the everyday realities of listeners.

There is a literal creation of atmosphere for example, when he reads (readers' contribution) "someone was knocking on the door" and it would be accompanied with the sound effect of a door knock. Sometimes he would lower his voice to imitate and project the aural presence of a horrifying being, accompanied with eerie melody. The sound effects suggest a pre-conceived interpretation of the type of spirit that is involved in particular narratives. In one particular narrative involving a female janitor who found the body of a woman who had died after giving birth in a toilet, KC used a mid-range pitched tone to simulate the voice of the pregnant woman's spirit as she said "Tolong, tolong aku. Tolong tolong aku. Tolong jaga anak aku" ("help me, help take care of my child") and ended of this sentence with the loud wailing archetypal

shriek of the Pontianak³². As listeners, we are influenced to identify the spirit as a Pontianak due to the distinctive wailing effect. Through listening to MJ12, sound then becomes the effective means of transporting such horrifying sonic and physical environments into one's own private space. In some situations however, this access to horrifying environments may also be a 'hazardous' portal welcoming uninvited guests and spirit disturbances partly the result of confused spirits associating such soundscapes as their own territorial space. This was apparent in one of the SMS texts read on 7 May 2009 where a listener, A, commented that her family had not been following the programme for a week because their 10 year old son had encountered spirit disturbances.

A suspected the disturbance was related to their strong loyalty towards MJ12. A explained that once she woke up at 3 am and heard unfamiliar chants of verses. The voice came from her son's room but there was no one in the room. When she walked into the kitchen she saw her son, seated on a chair by the window shaking his head left and right reciting unfamiliar words. Her son stopped when she turned on the lights but spoke in a foreign, low and terse voice "*tutup lampu tutup lampu*" ("switch off the lights switch off the lights"). She obeyed and rushed to wake her husband up. Together they went into the kitchen and switched on the lights. Her son reacted in the same manner. When her husband reached out to hold their son, he found his son's body to be very warm. Clueless, the couple called the *guru mengaji* (a respected elder who is well versed with the Quran) who was coincidentally, a neighbour living on the floor above their flat. The *guru* responded immediately to their emergency and brought with him some holy water. The *guru* sprayed holy water and their son

³² I identified this as the "Pontianak" shriek as he has used this sound effect on numerous occasions for narratives involving the Pontianak.

regained consciousness.³³ When they asked the *guru* what was the cause of the disturbance, the *guru* asked if they had gone to any *tempat-tempat aneh* (“uncanny places”)³⁴ or watched any horror films recently. The couple replied that their family routine involved listening to horror stories at MJ12. The *guru* concluded firmly that MJ12 was the cause of their son’s disturbance because the soundscapes such as the loud wailing, shrieking and even the occasional possession sound bytes might have attracted spiritual entities to enter their home and haunt their son. The *guru* advised them to suspend this routine immediately to avoid the occurrence of such disturbances. The couple described suffering from withdrawal symptoms as a result of their absence from MJ12. They resorted to cordoning themselves in their room to listen to the programme without their son’s knowledge.

From A’s narrative, the symbolic soundscape produced on MJ12 had the capacity to evoke affective meanings and cognitive experiences that extended beyond the mere auditory stimuli emitted. The apparent polarity of perceived fear articulated by members of the audience exemplifies how deciphering a soundscape always entails an ascription of meaning (Rodaway, 1994). The meaning of a sound is always relative and subjected to one’s social and biographical experiences since it may reveal both a memory and a past, and thus a lived identity and it may equally express a state of fear and discomfort in relation to unknown (or “uncanny”) sonorities which one utilizes to decipher the sounds they hear and experience (Fortuna, 2001). This situation is described aptly in the *guru*’s suspicions towards the relation between the visitation

³³ Usually tap water that had been blessed with prayers or verses from the Quran such as Surah *Al-Fatihah*, Surah *Yasin*, the *Ayatul Kursi* or *Selawat* (chants) in the name of *Allah* and the prophet *Muhammad*. Once blessed, this holy water maybe stored in the same way as one would with drinking water.

³⁴ It is understood that within the Malay culture, “unusual places” may not be a literal description of a place. However it usually represents, paths or routes taken by the individual that are usually out of their norm. It is a common believe amongst some members of the community that if one takes an unusual route or a route unfamiliar to them, they might have trespassed an area guarded by spirits (“*Penunggu*”). As consequence for invading such territories, the individual would encounter spirits who might be interested to “follow” them back home.

and experiences of uncanny places and A's disturbing encounter. In this particular context, the *guru* accorded subjective meanings towards what was considered "uncanny" and his consequent diagnosis of A's son's disturbance. Possibly understanding the position of the *guru* as a legitimate authority in matters relating to Islam and spirit disturbances, KC maintained that A's episode could be a mere coincidence of events. He also implied irresponsibility on A's part by commenting that her son should have slept at 9pm since he had school the next morning.

Importantly, KC's constant reiteration for listeners to turn down the volume of their radios if they were afraid ("lemah semangat"), reveals the sociological implications of sound and our sense of hearing. According to Georg Simmel (1997), the sense of hearing is a passive sense, with no autonomy of its own. For Simmel, scholarly emphasis on vision (see Goffman, 1971 and Urry, 1990) and of the look or gaze presumes the marginality of hearing. The human sense of hearing as Simmel describes, is condemned as it is, contrary to seeing, to indiscriminately absorb all the stimuli it is offered without the possibility of being deliberately interrupted or withdrawn from whatever is monotonous or unpleasurable (ibid; 109-120). A Simmelian interpretation of MJ12 involves the understanding that listeners are not privy to the level of fear that they might encounter throughout the programme. The present choice is an absolute one: that one either avoids tuning in to the programme or continues listening (with or without the volume turned down) at the expense of their own comfort. KC often attempts to negate the passivity of the human sense of hearing by advising his listeners to lower down the volume of their radio so the intended horrifying effects would be significantly less effective. However there is a trade-off to KC's suggestion, some of my informants complained that the programme would lose

its thrill factor and a lower volume meant straining their sense of hearing which would defeat the purpose of enjoying MJ12.

Hearing the End for the Pontianak?

There were times when I perceived KC's dis-interest in certain narratives. More than once, he had commented rather blandly, "It's always the same stories, aren't there any other new stories?" These "same stories" refers to stories about Pontianak sightings, which interestingly, listeners found to be engaging and exciting and which KC found to be repetitive. He explained that it was impossible that there was a dominant ghost, chiefly the Pontianak, haunting the Malay community ("*Masyarakat kita*"). On 5th May 2009 for example, he expressed interest in hearing other stories apart from the Pontianak much to the dismay of his listeners:

"Are there any callers out there with stories other than that of the "Kakak cantik" ("pretty lady"), "Fatimah Rock" or "cik pon" ("Miss Pon") please write or call in to tell your stories. Because we keep hearing stories on kakak cantik or cik pon and not many stories on other spirits like the *Pocong*, *Polong*, *Langsuir*, *Toyol* and such."

His listeners responded swiftly by texting MJ12 describing that they enjoyed listening to encounters with the Pontianak because they found her to be the most frightening compared to other Malay ghosts. If only KC considered asking his audience why they found the Pontianak most fascinating. I tried calling in to stir up response but the line was busy. By then a listener had called in to share his experiences about the *Pocong*. It seems that by default, haunting experiences usually involve the Pontianak and it is only through a desperate intervention by KC that callers began contributing stories on other ghostly spirits. After his request to hear stories on other ghosts, the number of callers decreased that night and I suspected that either KC had sifted out stories related to the Pontianak or his listeners were too embarrassed to share their encounters

with the Pontianak which they now knew bored KC. Furthermore I found it rather perplexing that for someone who now found the subject of the Pontianak banal, KC continued airing sound effects that were characteristic of the Pontianak, for example her high-pitched laughter and cries. An informant Cherie, a 31 year old Administrative Officer once mentioned that the MJ12 was “scary” precisely because of the sound effects, especially when it came to stories involving the Pontianak. Another informant Aya, a 58 year old clerk, articulated further that the fear factor was not as exciting for stories on spirits such as the *toyol* or *Pocong*³⁵ because such spirits do not usually emit sounds and as such when callers narrated their experiences with such beings, they failed to stir her imagination. She admitted that hearing encounters on the Pontianak being aired “affected” her as from the piercing screams that accompanied the narrative, she could easily imagine and experience the embodied image of the Pontianak.

On the other hand, KC’s boredom towards narratives of the Pontianak was largely his own doing, as it was through the sound effects he produced to depict the Pontianak that made stories on the Pontianak popular amongst his listeners. Subsequently, his listeners participated by calling in to MJ12 to share their encounters with the Pontianak to contribute to and sustain the excitement level of the programme. Furthermore, KC’s attempts to distract his contributors from the Pontianak reflect a desire that perhaps did not reflect the interests of his audience. In fact, in early February, KC did an informal poll on MJ12’s blog to gather feedback on the types of spirits that his listeners and blog followers were most interested in. Results showed

³⁵ The *toyol* is a child-imp like spirit invoke by Malay mediums from a dead human foetus using black magic. The spirit is bought and subsequently owned by some members of the community to help them achieve their desires (get rich). The *Pocong* has been said to be the ghost of the dead person who is trapped in its burial clothes (white cloth wrapped above the head and feet).

that almost 90% of the participants were interested in the Pontianak³⁶. If narratives of other Malay spirits are unpopular amongst segments of the Malay community, it is therefore significant to note the possibility that such spirits, unlike the Pontianak, do not feature in the everyday lives of Malays in Singapore.

Following his first declaration on 5th May 2009, KC started hinting on subsequent days that he was tired of the audience's obsession with the Pontianak and perhaps it was time for MJ12 to take a temporary break. He described plans to change MJ12's focus to include "more bizarre mysteries because *surely* there are more mysteries out there than the Pontianak". Prior to his waning interest he had added on MJ12's official blog:

"I have asked several parties about the appearance of *Kakak Cantik* aka *Cik Pon* aka *Ponti-ponti* and there seems to be the consensus that *Cik Pon* has long hair, wears white, has fangs and is easily seen in forest-like surroundings. There are opinions that *Cik Pon* originally resides in trees."
(KisahMJ12.blogspot.com, February 3, 2009)

However swamped daily by texts, calls and emails with a majority of callers relating to personal encounters with the Pontianak, KC found the consensus extremely monotonous and boring. The Pontianak from a mysterious subject was now relegated by KC into the realm of the mundane and profane. Her narratives had reached saturation point in MJ12. The sentiments from the ground however, differed. Texts and emails from members of the audience poured in expressing continued disapproval towards his desired change in direction and most importantly the break in transmission. The audience response reveals an underlying passion towards preserving the narrative of what is evidently still considered the most fearful ghost in the Malay community. Engaging in the fervent enthusiasm of some members of the Malay community in preserving the ghostly Pontianak, KC asked such listeners why

³⁶ KC featured the results of his informal poll on his blog at www.kisahmj12.blogspot.com but replaced it with another poll a few days after. Although I read the data, I was not able to print screen an image of the poll in time.

the Pontianak continues to be present in urban Singapore. Most responses pointed to reasons from popular history and claimed that community has to believe in the existence of ghosts and spirits because it is part of Islamic practice to do so (but not to be obsessed with it) but no clear answers were provided to account for her continued existence. Perhaps the notion of the Pontianak had been so materialized and taken-for-granted that believers did not consciously consider her existence or that the fear of the Pontianak had been so successfully incorporated with the habitus of such believers that it escaped discourse.

Perhaps what was most intriguing about KC's boredom towards the Pontianak was the notion of situational context. For KC, his everyday dealing involving the Pontianak was part of his job requirement in which even the monstrosity of her character did not escape the banality of a day-to-day paid occupation. For some of his audience however, listening to narratives on the Pontianak or other ghostly encounters and being spooked might be attempts at 'making strange' (Highmore, 2002: 12-16) familiar spaces³⁷ and receive temporary respite from the mundane everydayness. A listener who wrote on his fan page captured this sentiment adequately when he admitted to feeling rather sad since MJ12 airs only on weeknights and as such he would have nothing to look forward to over the weekends. In retrospect, while the repetition of Pontianak narratives produced alienating effects for KC, this repetition for his listeners however was consumed with much pleasure. Repetition in their context brings about a pleasurable performative capacity precisely because with each repetition, the immaterial presence of the Pontianak becomes more embodied and congeals into a realistic feature (Butler, 1999) of social life.

³⁷ Most of the narratives involve hauntings in the most familiar of public spaces such as void decks of HDB flats, public parks and lifts.

A further analysis of 42 narratives contributed by the listeners of MJ12 reveals a consensus with respect to the embodiment of the Pontianak. All descriptions pointed to a silhouette of a woman with long, tangled black hair dressed in a white garment. Some narratives were very specific, describing her eyes as horrific and red (Contributor “Noi”), her fingernails long and blackened (Contributor “Mama Monster”) her garb torn and dirty (Contributors “Mama Monster”, “Iz” and her face as burnt or hidden by her long hair (Contributor “Siti Ahmad-Rudebaugh”). In one narrative, her face was described as beautiful but later transformed into one that was hideous and burnt (Contributor “Akid”). Despite the Pontianak’s supposed monstrous features, some contributors preferred to confer her terms of endearment by referring to her as “Si cantik” or “Kakak cantik” which translates to “the beautiful one and beautiful sister” respectively. Other terms of endearment included “Cik Pon” or “Kak Pon”, where “cik” and “kak” are Malay terms used to connote deference to a female elder within a social circle and “Pon” is the abbreviation of Pontianak. In some instances she was also referred to as “Fatimah Rock/ Rocker”. These terms normalized her monstrosity and accordingly, positively affirmed her presence.

A Sound Community of Spirits and People

Unsurprisingly, with regards to MJ12, the porosity of both the public and the private space reveals several contestations. There were some listeners who disapproved the airing of horror stories and soundscapes³⁸ which they felt threatened the comforts of their private space and demanded KC to terminate his programme. The intimate nature of radio transmission (example: using the terms “you” to address a large community) had evidently deceived such receivers into thinking that they had

³⁸ Apparently soundscapes that bothered some listeners were sound clips of incantations as well as a programmed soundbyte that involves the low raspy voice of a man asking “who is behind you...who is behind you...” followed by the heinous laughter of what the audience have recognized to be the Pontianak.

individual ownership towards the programme, hence neglecting the presence of a distant and larger community. In response to such complaints, another listener, Lin wrote:

“MJ12 is not the property of any individual but the property of the general public so let’s just be neutral. I advise those who are weak-hearted (*Lemah semangat*) to change their radio stations or listen to Islamic chants or Quranic recitals. If all of us cooperate, there won’t be pandemonium and hate-mongering amongst ourselves. There’s just too much negativity don’t you all agree?”

Lin’s comment highlights the desire to reduce conflict within a community of listeners as well as her interest in building up a supportive network amongst themselves. Sensing the enthusiasm of his listeners, KC has also organized several activities such as Night walks to places such as Pulau Ubin to forge a sense of camaraderie amongst otherwise distant listeners. Furthermore as some of his listeners were too afraid to tune in to his programme but were interested in hearing or sharing their ghostly encounters, KC used his blog site to invite contributions. There was also a strong sense of community observed through the blog as contributors addressed their stories to KC and to fellow listeners or followers of MJ12 using terms such as “Listeners, what do you think?” or “Imagine readers, how would you feel?” Besides his blog, KC has an online fan club where he conducts polls to gather public opinions, posts incoming events as well as provide a viable space for his listeners to comment on MJ12. One of the recent polls required followers to exercise their vote on whether MJ12 should take a temporary break. Out of the 129 voters polled (as of 1 July 2009), 83.7% vetoed the idea while another 13.2% agreed that MJ12 was in need of fresh ideas. Meanwhile only 3.1% of voters wanted a total programme overhaul because they were too afraid to listen at present.³⁹ The majority vote against the disruption of

³⁹ Source: www.fanclubsg.com/DJKC

the programme highlights the strong presence of a community of followers who has incorporated the horror segment as part of their daily routine.

The strong presence of MJ12 followers is evidence of the degree in which stories about particular ghosts get disseminated within the Malay community. Recently, the pandemonium with regards to *Nenek Keropok* began with a story that was aired live on MJ12. The story became popular because it involved the Pontianak. As mentioned in Chapter 1, it eventually found its way to the front page of the local Malay newspaper. Several comments featured in the article blamed MJ12 for encouraging the creation of urban myths that caused unnecessary fear amongst members of the community. Some callers expressed their fear each time there was a knock on their door, thinking it could be the *Nenek Keropok*. A mother however, called in to congratulate KC because her teenage daughter had started coming home right after school because she was afraid of being haunted by the *Nenek*. Within the blogosphere, entire essays were written by Malay youths who wrote about the *Nenek*. *Nenek* and her companion, the Pontianak, had made her rounds across Singapore- in Bedok, Jurong, Tampines, Clementi, Woodlands and Pasir Ris amongst others. The question that follows should be: Why do such beings haunt the specific places? What does the presence of the Pontianak reflect of contemporary urban Singapore? In the next chapter, I will examine how this community of believers, through their narratives and participation, has unknowingly created a spectral landscape that reflects a particular sense of the Malayness in Singapore.

CHAPTER 7

Spectral Urbanism

Enchantment in Urban Spaces

In *The Ghosts of Place*, Michael Bell (1997) points out how the word ‘ghosts’ is frequently used as nomenclature to refer to horrific and unsettled spirits of the dead that resurrect to life and haunt our beings. He suggests expanding the term ‘ghost’ to include a sense of a felt presence- an “anima, geist, or genius” that possesses and radiates a sense of marvel and social aliveness to a place (p. 815). Places in this context, are endlessly made not just by bureaucratic planning and concept plans, but more importantly when ordinary people extract from abstract space a bounded, identified, meaningful, named and significant place (De Certeau, 1984; Etlin, 1997). This “locality” produced is as much phenomenological as it is spatial accomplished against the backdrop of globalization or nationalization (Appadurai, 1996; Harvey, 1990; Koptiuch, 1997; Lippard, 1997). Any exploration of place as a phenomenon of direct experience must be experienced with the entire register of experience through which we all know and make places (Relph, 1976). Meanings that individuals and communities ascribe to places are relatively embodied in historically dependent and shared cultural interpretations of the terrain- sustained by the varied imageries through which the city-scape is seen and remembered (Boyer, 1994). The notion of place is therefore non-monolithic, contested, ever changing and even precarious- contingent upon the diverse biographies reflecting the multitude of habitus of the people in particular lived environments. Habitus is defined as a “system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations” (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). These ‘dispositions’ as mentioned in earlier

chapters of my thesis, refer to the value internalized and embodied by individual agents, through the process of socialization and are absorbed into everyday doxa. In this manner, the concept of ‘habitus’ is especially useful in exploring notions of the lived space, where habitus can be understood as a sense of one’s place and role in the world of one’s lived environment.

Bearing in mind the above theoretical propositions, the study of ghosts of and in urban spaces reveals a unique ensemble of traits that merits this study in its own right. Ghosts are an ubiquitous feature of the phenomenology of place- we constitute a place through the ghosts that we sense inhabit and possess it (Bell, 1997). However, the cultural logic of modern rationality impedes us from speaking about the presence of spirits, ghosts and demons because we claim such expressive energies as part of our mental experience (Zizek, 1997: 119). An image, fantasy or memory -even without the material existence of a ghost or demon, nevertheless triggers feelings, thoughts and subsequently, action. We are aware of the existence of ghosts because it has the power to affect us. In Roman mythology, to depict the character of a place, the Romans imagined a spirit or magical power who owned it, known as the *genius loci* (Walter, 1988: 15). In contemporary usage, this concept of the *genius loci* has been adapted into architectural jargon to refer to a location’s distinctive atmosphere or “spirit of place” rather than necessarily a guardian spirit. In this sense, searching for ‘place’ in Singapore requires the specificity of feeling the spirit, energies and finding the magic of particular urban spaces. Within the context of this thesis and as I have stated in my introduction, the study of Pontianak encounters in urban spaces reveals the existence of ‘haunted’ places where this form of spectral urbanism unearths the materialized and habitual reflections of individual actors experiencing such spaces.

For the purpose of this study, 42 narratives of Pontianak encounters in Singapore were collated from the MJ12 blog between February to June 2009, while other data were drawn from my own “ghostly” experiences and interviews with informants who have the capability to “possess” ghosts or exorcise them. The particularity of ‘place’ suggests no better source than to speak to the people with such lived experiences or like myself, occupy the methodological position of being the “native informant” (Spivak, 1988).⁴⁰ By examining these data, the patterns that emerge out of ghostly encounters in urban Singapore gives the “betweenness” of place its due. Pontianak encounters in Singapore reveal the imagination of a coherent ethnic-based haunting which seems to affect segments of the Malay population in Singapore. The ability to experience the Pontianak in such spaces highlights the possible existence of a bounded sociality where encounters correlate strongly to sentiments and experiences of transgressing moral, spatial and even temporal boundaries familiar to the Malay community. However, the emerging patterns that will be described in this thesis should not be regarded as a bounded structure, but rather one that is constantly shifting, dynamic and open to contestations. The objective of this thesis is to uncover possible implications of why such patterns exist instead of suggesting that such patterns of haunting reflect a fixed and homogenous structure or that the Malay community is homogenous.⁴¹

⁴⁰ It may be argued that my rather small sampling size may impact the level of analysis I am prescribing in this thesis. While I have noted these concerns, I am confident that my membership of the community in which I am studying, accords me with the ability to understand manifest and latent cultural symbols that go beyond structured interview spaces. While I have singled out a few people to speak to for the purpose of this thesis, much of the data that contribute to the formation of this thesis have been informed largely by my own personal experiences. This thesis has also been inspired by incidental observations and snippets of random conversations about the Pontianak that I chanced upon in spaces of commonality such as the toilet cubicles, public commutes and public spaces. Thus while it may lack sociological rigour, my account should nevertheless contribute to the study of Malay popular culture and help to relate events in this part of the community to larger socio-political process that are occurring elsewhere.

⁴¹ While I understand that the notion of Malayness needs to be problematized further, the findings of this thesis contribute mainly to the observation of patterns amongst a community of Malay believers.

In spite of this, her haunting does represent an interesting insight related to Singapore. Within this multicultural/racial/religious state that adopts a strong communitarian ideology (Chua, 2005), the ghosts that exist within the state are similarly assigned and experienced according to present ethnic lines. Although there may be separate embodiments of ghosts mainly for the Chinese, the Malay and the Indian communities of Singapore, the experiences of these ghosts may transcend ethnic boundaries. However, what is more significant to note is that the remedies and cures to treat ghostly encounters differ according to one's ethnic beliefs and practices. In accordance with the structuration theory, each community of believers prescribe varying contextual rules upon which particular human action (dealing with ghostly encounters) may occur. Within the multicultural discourse of Singapore, the presence of ethnic ghosts such as the Pontianak may emphasize the performance of distinct ethnic identities onto public spaces- marking such spaces as places of belonging or otherwise. In light of Singapore's most recent branding efforts to promote the city as a distinctively "unique" (STB, 2005) city to "Live, Work and Play" (URA, 2009), the study of Pontianak encounters in urban spaces could not have been more timely. Furthermore the presence of lingering ghosts has shown that not all gritty souls⁴² have been successfully exorcised from the city-state. What are therefore the implications of these presences especially towards the Malay community of Singapore?

⁴² Singapore was emblematic of much of the rest of Asian urbanity before 1960, characterized by urban grit, filth, teeming and hustling street life. After 1960, under the leadership of then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the city has undergone a drastic and successful make-over to recreate itself as a modern efficient and clean city. Renowned architect Rem Koolhaas critic Singapore as a highly regulated space of pure intention where chaos is authored.

‘’ marks the Pontianak

At about 3 am one particular Thursday night, as I was walking home to my HDB flat, I happened to look up in the trees and saw a white cloth upon a branch. My first instinct was to ask “Is that the Pontianak?” It turned out to be a bed sheet that might have been blown off a laundry pole and landed on a tree branch. Nevertheless, a friend suggested I took a snapshot of the cloth and submits it to MJ12’s blog captioning it “Pontianak?” Had I done so, my submission would no doubt become part of the already burgeoning archives of “Pontianak” images in urban Singapore, each claiming some form of truth with regard to her sighting. The map in Plate 1 highlights the spatial distribution of the Pontianak that I have drawn up according to the 42 narratives. These 42 narratives were selected out of the 292 narratives on the blog, as they centered upon Pontianak encounters, adventures and documented sightings in contemporary Singapore. My aim in mapping out spatial encounters is to analyse certain distributive patterns that may emerge as a result of ghostly encounters using the narratives as parameters for this study. The results of this study should not be regarded as conclusive but could perhaps serve as a discursive outline as to why certain hauntings and sightings are imagined and documented more in some places and not other. Additionally, the spatial map that I have conceptualized in response to believers’ narratives highlights what people perceive of the material forms they inhabit (Tuan 1974, 1977). The notion of ‘place’ reflects not just the demographic statistics of who lives where and their ethnic or income distribution but a reflection of the social experience of the physical environment embodying otherwise intangible cultural norms that have been transmitted through generations. Mapping out the Pontianak therefore highlights how ordinary individuals interpret, narrate, perceive,

feel, understand and imagine certain physical locations and invest them with meaning and value (Soja, 1996 in Gieryn, 2000).

Although ghosts of place may seem uncanny, they are nevertheless familiar, affirming and a rooted part of our lives. This evidently is seen through the terms of endearment endorsed upon the Pontianak (*cik Pon*, *Si Cantik*). In this manner, the recognition of a widespread sense of a presence in objects provides the discursive outlet towards recognizing ghosts of place. By experiencing spirits in particular places we give space social meaning and thereby marking it with a sense of place. Moreover, the Pontianak as a spirited body - as examined through the analysis of horror sonorities and the implication towards creation of a community of believers in the previous chapter - becomes a portable entity that provides a stable sense of placement. Regardless, ghostly presences reflect upon the habitual residue of lived experiences that continue to linger and affect bodies. Such strong presences provide spaces with a *semangat* which may be adequately described as the vitality of our network of social relations and power.

The spatial map presented therefore reveals a spectral landscape conveying enchantment, secret meaning and a culturally select geography. The use of the term enchantment in this chapter is strategic as it connotes the state of being bewitched, held captive under a spell and also of being in awe. This sense of enchantment can be interpreted from the narratives, where encounters with the Pontianak usually evoke strong bodily responses such as feeling faint, goosebumps, shocked, having a fever and the inability to move one's limbs. Because it is only people who can experience or imagine ghosts, this puts constraints on the kinds of ghosts that are likely to emerge out of particular places. In this sense, the ghost as a form of embodied discourse, is

not a “free-for-all” (Bell, 1997) and is therefore a culturally select phenomenon. In a similar vein, the spectral landscape examined through encounters with the Pontianak presents itself as a secret meaning felt, imagined, talked about and understood by members of a particular cultural circle (Halbwachs, 1992).

Dissecting the Political Anatomy of Haunting

Based on the 42 narratives, sightings occur in places such as public housing estates and parks, work places (usually in manufacturing plants or government buildings such as hospitals and prisons), schools, chalets, abandoned buildings, forested areas, cemeteries and deserted roads. Presence or absence of particular ghosts provides us knowledge with regards to the specificity of sites, revealing spaces of belonging as well as the historical and socio-political impermanence of such sites. They point strongly to the presence of a culturally select geography, where sightings imply the underlying notion of cultural access to spaces. What do Pontianak sightings tell us about the habitus of the place?

From the map (Plate 1), the eastern part of Singapore consisting of Pasir Ris, Changi, Bedok, Tampines and East Coast Park is the most ‘haunted’ region with higher concentrations of Pontianak encounters compared to other parts of Singapore. A majority 9 out of 13 spots recorded sightings at designated recreational zones such as corporate and government chalets in Pasir Ris (3) and Changi (3) as well as public beaches at East Coast Park (3). Meanwhile an abandoned hospital known as the Old Changi Hospital recorded 2 sightings while Bedok recorded 3 sightings, the highest within a public housing precinct. Across the map, there is a reasonably widespread incidence of haunting within public housing areas provisioned by the Housing Development Board. Spatial patterns that emerge out of these incidences, in some

instances, correlate to national historical and geographic patterns of ethnic groups across district zones (refer to table 2) and can be conceptualized according to the details in following paragraphs.

Four main elements were established theorizing why some areas are more prone to the Pontianak than others. Chiefly, the Pontianak is more likely to haunt in areas that have a larger concentration of Malay residents; used to be original Malay settlements; used to be spaces where Malays were historically or presently buried and have a larger population of residents who are mono-literate in the Malay language.

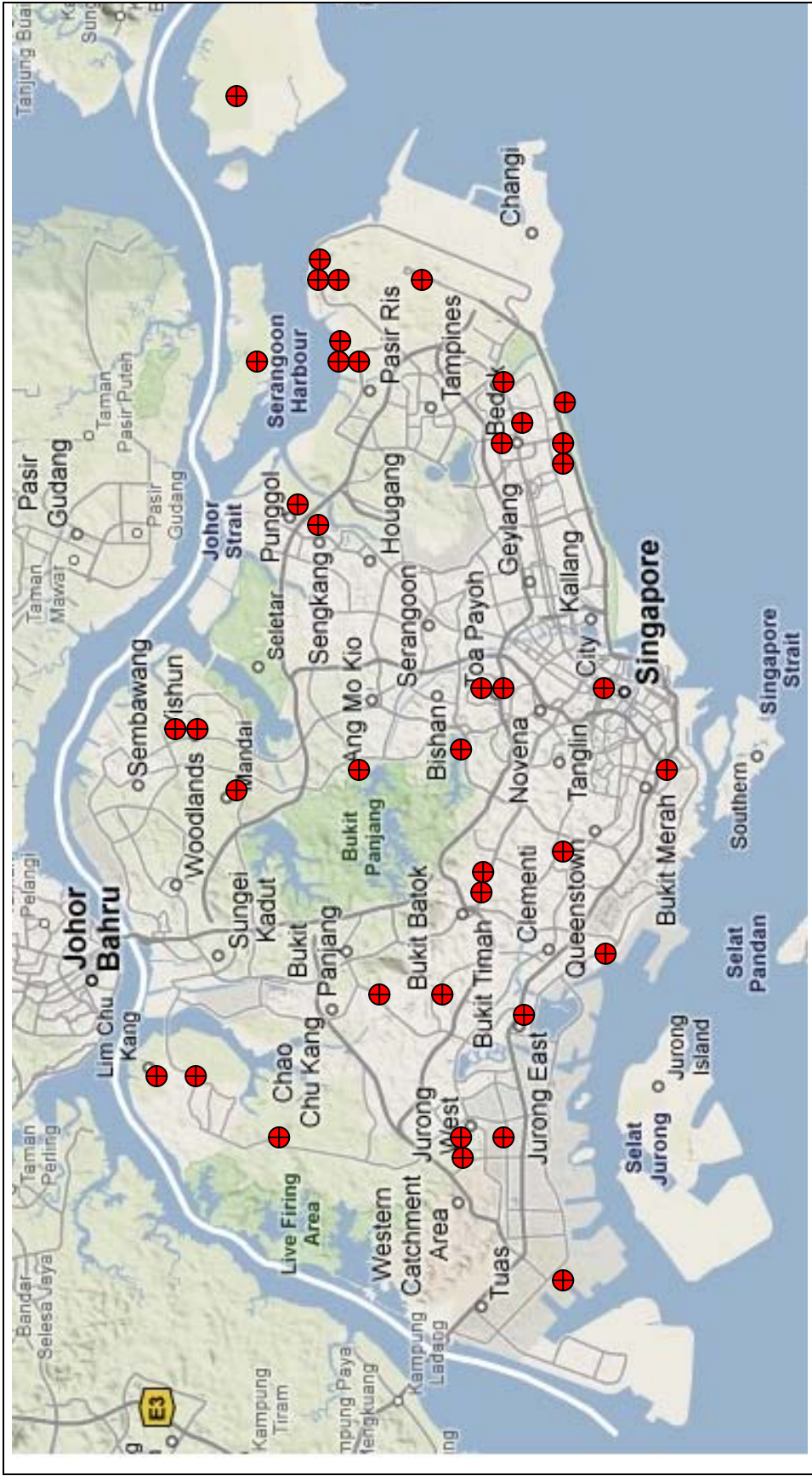


Plate 1: Spatial Distribution of Pontianak Encounters in Singapore (source: Google Maps and MJ12, retrieved 3rd July 2009 from www.kisahmj12.blogspot.com)

Numerical Representation:

The Pontianak is more likely to appear in places where there are larger concentrations of Malays .

DGP Zone	% total Malay population	% of total population	No. of Sightings
Bedok	10.9	1.5	3
Bukit Batok	4.7	0.7	1
Clementi	2.8	0.4	1
Jurong East	3.3	0.5	1
Jurong West	8.8	1.2	2
Punggol	No statistics available	N.A.	1
Queenstown	2.3	0.3	1
Sengkang	1.7	0.2	1
Yishun	6.3	0.9	2

Table 2: List of Public Housing Areas with Reported Sightings within a DGP Zone. Source: *Census of Population 2000*, Singapore Department of Statistics⁴³)

There is a possibility that a larger number of Malays residing over an area increases the chances for spatial hauntings. Based on the spatial map and Table 2, there is a direct co-relation between areas with two or more reported sightings and areas with higher percentages of Malays living in a particular Development Guide Plan (DGP) zones. Bedok, with the highest reported sightings (3), has also the highest percentage of Malays living in an area (10.9%), followed by Jurong West (2) with a percentage of 8.8% and Yishun (2) with a percentage of 6.3%.

Original Settlement:

There is a higher possibility of the Pontianak existing in places historically identified as Malay Settlements and Racial Enclaves⁴⁴

⁴³ Population census for this category (Resident Population by DGP Zone, Ethnic Group and Sex) is conducted once every decade. At the time this research was conducted, the most recent data dates back to 2000. Furthermore, since Punggol is a relatively new estate, data sets for this DGP could not be carried out for that duration.

⁴⁴ Refer to Appendix C1 and C2

Location of Original Settlement	Relocation to DGP based on 'nearest locality' principle (1960s-80s)
Eastern Coast: Kampong Siglap, Kampong Bedok, Kampong Amber, Kampong Padang Terbakar, Kampong Tanah Merah Kecil, Telok Mata Ikan, Kampong Beting Kusa, Ayer Gemuroh, Kampong Darat Nanas, Geylang Serai, Kampong Ubi, Kampong Eunos, Kampong Wak Tanjong, Kembangan	Bedok, Eunos, Tampines, Marine Parade
Western Coast: Kampong Tanjong Kling, Kampong Damar Barat, Kampong Java Teban, Kampong Sungai Pandan, Kampong Tanjong Penjuru, Kampong Ulu Pandan, Kampong Tebing Terjun	Clementi, Jurong East, Jurong West
Northern Coast: Kampong Wak Hassan, Kampong Tanjong Irau, Kampong Kitin, Kampong Pengkalan Kundor, Kampong Pengkalan Petai	Yishun, Woodlands, Sembawang
Southern Coast: Kampong Sultan, Kampong Bukit Belayar, Kampong Telok Saga, Kampong Kopit, Kampong Radin Mas	Telok Belangah, Queenstown, Bukit Merah

Table 2: Relocation of original Malay Settlements from 1960s to 80s. Source: *Kampong Days: Village Life and Times in Singapore Revisited*. National Archives

The areas such as Bedok, Jurong West and Yishun with higher concentrations of sightings are situated near zones that were officially demarcated as Malay settlements (1920s and 1960s) and Malay Enclaves (1980s)⁴⁵. Redevelopment programs by the Housing Development Board (HDB) and the Urban Development Authority (URA) in the 1960s and 70s displaced Kampong communities by resettling them in sites of public housing estates. For these Malays, their original settlements either vanished from the urban landscape or were redeveloped into public housing estates. On the basis of convenience and locational familiarity, most of these Malays moved into the new estates that were nearest to their respective settlements (shown in Table 2). Furthermore, by relocating within the same neighbourhood or district, Malays had the opportunity to maintain community and familial bonds with fellow residents and family members from their original settlements.

⁴⁵ For more details on resettlement patterns and policies refer to Ooi, Siddique and Soh (1993) and Lai (1995).

This logic of “nearest locality” (Lai, 1995: 127) created racial enclaves, much to the government’s despair. In the 1980s, areas such as Teban Gardens, Ayer Rajah, Bedok, Tampines, Marine Parade (Ooi, Siddique and Soh, 1993: 5) were identified as Malay enclaves. Although areas such as Jurong West, Clementi, Queenstown and Sembawang were not officially marked as Malay enclaves, they had a considerable proportion (20-40%) of Malays living within a district in the 1980s- figures of which were above the 14.1%⁴⁶ of Malays in Singapore.

‘Sacred’ Spaces:

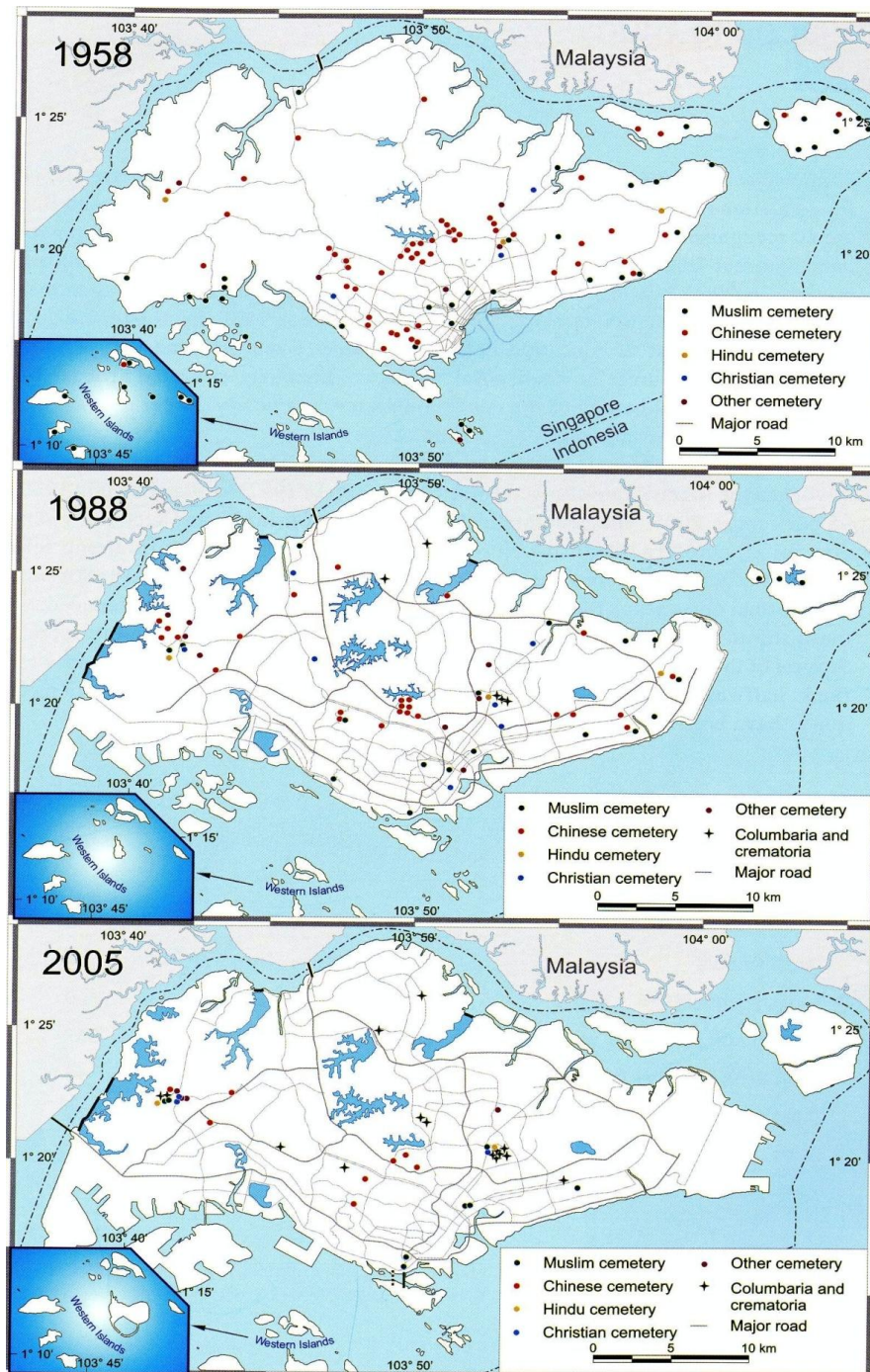
The Pontianak may be found in places where Malays were historically or presently buried.

Since the Pontianak has been referred to as the spirit of the Malay woman who died while giving birth, it would be pertinent to analyze the relationship between Malay burial spaces and incidences of Pontianak sightings. Burial spaces are considered cultural ‘sacred’ spaces because they involve cultural membership and elaborate funeral rites and rituals and are, in the case of Singapore, ethnically marked. In addition to being sacred, they are also culturally regarded as ‘uncanny’ or ‘unclean’ spaces, familiarly known as *tempat keras* amongst members of the Malay community. Burial grounds are considered to be sites that mark the boundary between life and death, where such liminal grounds are most conducive for unsettled spirits⁴⁷. A trespass could possibly warrant unwanted consequences on the part of the individual. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this involves spirit possession, disturbance, illnesses such as fever and hysterics. In this manner, Malay burial grounds are to be considered as places of Malayness. Historically, they were located in areas that were

⁴⁶ 1990 census figures

⁴⁷ See also Ong (1995).

originally Malay Settlements. From the spatial map of Pontianak sightings in Plate 1 and Malay burial places in Plate 2, it should be noted that sightings have occurred in places that were once places of burial (refer to Table 3).



Source: *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation* (2008)

PLATE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF BURIAL SPACES OVER TIME

Areas with Reported Sightings (2009) that corresponds with Malay Burial Spaces (1958)	
-Pulau Tekong (1)	-Pasir Ris Chalet (3)
-Pulau Ubin (1)	-Clementi/Queenstown (1)
-Tuas Oil Refinery (Pioneer) (1)	-Sengkang (1)
-Bedok (3)	-Changi Chalet (3), Old Changi Hospital (1)
-Punggol (1)	

Table 3: Spaces of Pontianak Haunting that corresponds with Malay Burial Spaces

From Table 3, Changi with 4 sightings is the most ‘haunted’ while Pasir Ris and Bedok are next with 3 sightings. Changi and Pasir Ris recorded 3 sightings each in one single locality and both spaces were recreational chalets. In comparison Changi’s additional sighting was recorded at the Old Changi Hospital, which was relatively close to an old Malay burial ground. Apart from areas in Pulau Ubin, Pulau Tekong and Bedok South- where the presence of tombstones provide clear evidence of Malay burial spaces, other burial spaces have been redeveloped into industrial and residential precincts. Since most of the Malay burial grounds in 1958 have been exhumed by the authorities for development purposes, and much of the urban landscape has transformed since then, awareness of these burial spaces may have been lost in the process.

Language Literacy:

There are higher incidences of Pontianak sightings in residential areas where there is a larger concentration of residents whose language literacy is only Malay.

DGP Zone	% Malay Language Literacy Only	No. of Sightings
Bedok	12.5	3
Bukit Batok	6.1	1
Clementi	3.7	1
Jurong East	3.8	1
Jurong West	8.8	2
Punggol	No data available	1
Queenstown	3.5	1
Sengkang	0.9	1
Yishun	6.0	2

Table 4: Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Over with Only Malay Language Literacy by selected DGP Zone and Frequency of Sightings (source: Census Population 2000)

Language forms an important component in analyzing habitus. The process of socialization occurs through the language of culture, which in turn, generates and organizes social practices, representations and dispositions of members of the particular community (Bourdieu, 1990; see also Labov, 1966, 1972; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). According to the Singapore Population Census 2005, the Malay language is the predominant language spoken at home for 86.8% of the Malays in Singapore aged five years and above. This means that for most Malay children, the language of socialization is Malay- as the medium in which particular cultural habitus and ‘structuring structures’ are being transmitted.

The relationship between language and culture is also one that is complex. While culture provides the array of symbols that scaffold any language, language too concretizes culture by articulating these symbols within a specific framework that sustains its emergence. To relate this within the specific context of this thesis, I suggest that there is a co-relation between the assumption of particular stocks of knowledge (as mediated by language), and particular cultural beliefs such as the Pontianak.

More significantly, given that the English language is the language of instruction in all government institutions while Mandarin is the language of the majority Chinese population, residents who demonstrate literacy in only the Malay language⁴⁸ are inevitably a marginalized population. The demography of this population would include a significant number of aged residents and residents who did not receive formal education. As the Government has made bilingual education (English and Mother Tongue) compulsory for all residents since 1966, a larger percentage of a Malay-literate-only population over an area might result in higher durability of cultural norms. From Table 4 and based on the 42 narratives, it is noted that areas such as Bedok and Jurong West with distinctively higher percentages of residents who are mono-literate in Malay, experience the highest number of Pontianak sightings. While there is an assumed correlation between the belief in the Pontianak and class (monoliterate Malays), the biodata of my respondents also illustrates that the enchantment with the Pontianak is more complex and is not in any means exclusive to a specific socio-economic class of Malays, and hence not an indication of an inferior, unprogressive or outmoded Malay identity.

⁴⁸ Although Indians are a significantly smaller minority, Tamil language is used less frequently at home, at 38.8% compared to the Malays.

CHAPTER 8

Unraveling the Geo-politics of Pontianak Haunting

No Pontianak in Shenton Way

“Our sense of rightful possession of places depends in part upon our sense of the ghosts that possess it, and the connections of different people to these ghosts. Ghosts make claims about the territories of social life. Ghosts are political. The possession of a place by a ghost thus is not an immaterial phenomenon.”

-Michael M. Bell (1997)

Utilizing the notion of “ghosts as political” as proposed by Bell, the Pontianak that appears in particular heartlands reveals political undertones that need to be contextualized within Singapore’s urban renewal project from the 1960s. The financial district for instance, which comprises a cluster of banking corporations, financial institutions and high end hotels represents a highly rationalized bureaucratic space with barriers-to-entry. The economics of belonging to such space undoubtedly limits access to certain segments of the population, whose income and education levels do not qualify them for active participation in the social life of such areas. Furthermore, the financial district, as a space of technocratic reason, is a tour de force of Singapore’s ‘baroque ecology’ (Ong, 2004: 178 in Sofia, 2008: 25). ‘Baroque ecology’ is defined as a socio-economic ecosystem where certain forms of employment, knowledge, people, capital and industries are favored by the state in advocating its knowledge-based economy (ibid.). The Pontianak, as the representation or ‘flesh of Malayness’ has not yet been represented within the discourse of this baroque ecology. Interestingly, there have been videos circulating on Youtube reporting ghost sightings at Raffles City, located within the local business district. One video in particular shows what seems to be a surveillance video taken in a lift capturing the ghost of an elderly woman. Her entity has not been marked by any

ethnic categories. This therefore begs the question if neutrality is easily performed within highly rationalized spaces, whereas bodies and spirits are distinctively and ethnically marked within the ‘heartlands’ of Singapore. While, such sightings challenge the notion that highly rationalized spaces are inhospitable to ghostly haunting, it has to be noted that only certain ghosts are given visibility.

Furthermore, if ghosts reveal spaces of belonging and if the Malays have been described as an economically depressed ethnic community, could the inability to imagine or conjure up the Pontianak in the financial district area be symbolic of the marginalization of Malay participation within such spaces⁴⁸?

The Heartland Pontianak and the Monstrosity of the ‘Kampung’

In Singapore, the term “heartland” has been used frequently to describe public housing estates across the island where 90% of the population resides. In the public imagination however, the notion “heartlander” is used not only to describe the demographics of the population but also represents a banal mode for thinking about politics in Singapore. The “heartlander” represents an ideology of the “conservative majority” which has been systematically constructed and summoned to reinforce loyalty towards the ruling PAP government and their policies. Through this ideology the rhetoric of fear towards the nation’s potential downfall has been consistently played out in order to retain majority votes for the party⁵⁰. The government, for example, has taken credit for their meticulous management and regulation of race and ethnic relations by suggesting that the racial harmony Singapore enjoys is “not accidental” but the result of “40 years of serious policies in place” (Khaw Boon Wan, ST 22 Jan 2006). In addition, interventions such as enforcing ethnic racial quotas

⁴⁹See also Lily Zubaidah Rahim (1998) on the marginalization of Malays in Singapore

⁵⁰For a comprehensive discussion on ‘old’ and ‘new’ politics in Singapore, refer to Tan (2007).

within public housing estates were necessary especially in “what could easily be an explosive multi-racial and multi-religious society” (ST, 9 Aug 1981). Given this context of interference, the presence of ghosts in particular places is not an act of randomness but one that is laden with socio-historical specificity. The reasons behind the haunting of the Pontianak in Singapore derive ultimately from lived social experiences as mediated by the landscape upon which such experiences unfold. This social experience of nature, through ghostly sightings allows us to re-encounter the habitus of social life in the habitus of place. According to de Certeau, “haunted places are places we live in” because they embody the collective energies of our identities and sentiments invested in and subsequently tie our memory to a particular place (2007). The presence of the Pontianak therefore connects us across time and space to the network of social life.

From the onset of Singapore’s urbanization process, the Malays have been singled out by the government for various reasons pertaining to Singapore’s nation building process. Some of these factors coincide with the lack of Malay support for the PAP at electoral events from 1968 to 1988. In the early 1960s, the eviction of residents from a Malay Kampung in neighbouring Geylang Serai to make way for residential and commercial buildings proved to be a catalyst for a series of racial riots and violence. The memory of such violence continues to haunt urban Singapore providing reasons for the government to accelerate their slum-clearance plans in line with their vision towards creating economic progress for Singapore. In all actuality, kampungs and rural villages represent forms of administrative monstrosities where the haphazard spatial organization (Chua, 1995) made regulation difficult and hygiene standards difficult to maintain. Furthermore, the various ethnic enclaves preceding colonial administration created divided ethnic loyalties that were seen as obstacles to

nation building. The lack of Malay support for the PAP government in the 1968 elections was highlighted as an example of preference for ethnic loyalties over national interest. The strain of resettling from Malay kampungs to HDB flats in the 1960s was cited as a reason for poor Malay support. Subsequently, the kampung became discursively associated with a cultural deficit. In the early 1970s, the government accused the Malays of being “backward” as their strong attachment to kampung life created difficulties in accepting high rise living in housing estates—symbolic of the nation’s desire towards progress (Lee Kuan Yew, *BH*, 17 July 1990). Loss of identity, feeling of reduced minority presence scattered all over the island (as compared with their apparent majority presence in small kampungs) and lack of religious and cultural facilities in new housing estates were common fears held by the Malays against urbanization during that period of time (ST, 9 Aug 1981).

Towards the end of the 1970s, Malay support for the PAP strengthened and at the same time, Malays were credited for being cooperative and sociable while other Singaporeans had become more individualistic (ST, 4 Jan 1979). For a brief period of time, the kampung, which was a marker of “backwardness” became a positive aspect towards community building through its *gotong royong* (sharing and cooperation) concept of living. A Malay government official even urged residents to treat each block of flats as “miniature kampungs” as a plan to keep HDB flats crime-free (ST, 8 July 1979). Malays were praised for their adaptability to new surroundings, where traditional kampung sociality had been incorporated into high-rise living. This can be seen through various associations and social gatherings organized amongst Malay residents to overcome the loneliness of living in HDB flats (ST, 4 Jan 1979). However, in the 1988 General Elections, the PAP did not fare well in areas with a relatively high percentage of Malay voters. The issue of Malays adapting to HDB

flats no longer became a national obsession. In its place, the government became concerned with the presence of Malay ethnic enclaves across the Island. The ‘monstrosity’ of the kampung was replaced with the monstrosity of over representation of Malays in public housing neighbourhoods such as Bedok. Spaces of excessive Malayness were presented to the public as ‘dangerous’ to the political stability and racial harmony of the nation- both impediments to Singapore’s progress. In 1989, racial limits and quotas were imposed in the allocation of new public housing flats and the regulation of resale of flats to contain the problem of ethnic enclaves. This would mean that while Malays in a Malay enclave can still sell their flats to Malays, a Chinese or an Indian in a Malay enclave could not sell to Malays. To a certain extent, the housing policies introduced by the government enacts a ‘disciplinary space’ over individuals but this does not necessarily entail the lack of initiative and creativity in reclaiming such spaces on the micro-level. While I have charted out macro-details of managing ethnic relations through Singapore’s public housing system, it is also important to include how residents living in such highly planned and managed environment negotiate such structures in their everyday life⁵¹.

“Kampung Spirit Alive in Estates”: The Pontianak as Affirmative Space of Malayness

The Pontianak with her rural origins is the memory-ed and imagined body of the “kampung spirit” that exists in public spaces. According to the narratives, she roams along the corridors, car parks, void decks and staircases of public housing flats. The standardized nature of public housing makes it pertinent for her to make her mark on places. The very notion of sighting ‘I saw a Pontianak there...’ differentiates that

⁵¹ For a detailed study on the interaction macro-economic factors and Malay social life refer to Tania Li (1989)

space from others. She is selective of the houses she chooses to haunt. She possesses the stock of knowledge to enter houses Malays own and to avoid those that are not. She is aware of racial quotas: with regards to resale flats in ethnic enclaves, the ghost of a Malay flat is passed on to the next Malay owner (Haz) while the Pontianak, already existing in flats of Chinese or Indian occupants but lying dormant, (Izad) symbolizes the lingering residue of previous Malay occupants and anticipative desire for potential ones to make her presence known. The spatial patterns with regards to how she occupies the urban space highlight how the extensive degree of spatial control and power relations have been incorporated into the habitus of Malays as reflected in the way they imagine the built environment.

Lai Ah Eng, in studying meanings of multi-ethnicity in the public housing of Singapore demonstrates this effect by highlighting how the highly standardized design of public housing further provokes residents to personalize their home (1995). Given the persuasive circumstances of multi-ethnic living in Singapore, residents would find it necessary to establish territories of self through identity markers. Due to the intrusiveness of state policies, private spaces become the most controllable part of residents' living environment. For the Malays who are at the margins of Singapore's foray into the 'brave new world', Pontianak sightings represent such forms of 'strategic control' and spatial autonomy (Giddens, 1986: 288) over, as well as a creative strategy to resist the limitations of, the environment. The presence of the Pontianak in certain areas of public housing that are prone to her haunting represent a symbolic and creative form of 'rightful possession' for the Malays of places where such rights have been politically denied and dissociated through redevelopment programs and housing policies.

The Pontianak is the embodiment of expressive energies of the Malay Kampung collective and her continued presence highlights the existence of a durable habitus of place through her continued presence in urban Singapore. This durability is of concern to the State for whom the supposed existence of a ‘tightly knit’ (Lee Hsien Loong, ST, May 2 2009) Malay community often bears negative connotations and consequences. In 1979, Abdullah Tarmugi issued a statement that the Malays brought with them most of their neighbourly attitudes from the kampung when moving to HDB flats (ST, 4 Jan 1979). Almost thirty years later, in June 2005, the Straits Times ran the headline “Kampung Spirit Alive in Estates” to highlight the findings of the HDB Sample Household Survey 2005. The findings showed that the Chinese were the least neighbourly and had a weaker sense of belonging and community involvement than other ethnic groups such as Malays and Indians (ST, 22 June 2005). In a survey conducted the previous year by the Straits Times, Malays were also found to be the most neighbourly compared to other ethnic groups (ST, 14 December 2004). In July 2005, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew professed how racial integration in neighbourhoods has “not been completely successful because the rate of intermingling and acceptance is faster among certain groups than in others”. He singled out the Malay community as an example of such a ‘failure’: “They’ve centered around the mosque more than the other social centres we’ve got...not quite what we’d hoped for...” (TNP, 3 July 2005). Lee’s statement reveals the discursive formation of the “kampung spirit” as a space of Malayness that was to be regarded a less than complete space of successful assimilation into a multicultural society. This was said, despite the presence of a distinctive sense of belonging of Malays to their lived environments.

Nevertheless, Lee's observation that Malay collective effervescence centres around Mosques reveals the pivotal role of mosques and implicitly, the centrality of Islam in governing the Malay population. The social organization of the Kampung, with its small population of a few hundred households and open door policy, was conducive in enacting a sense of a moral space. Such socio-spatial practices resulted in very high levels of unintended public surveillance in the kampung (Chua, 1995). In a typical kampung and as shown in the Pontianak films of the 1950s-70s, the high levels of familiarity amongst residents extended the family network to include that of neighbours. Moral policing, which presently occurs through the family nucleus, occurred through the collective efforts of the kampung folk. This is the kind of mechanical solidarity (Durkheim, 1984 [1893]) that allows for the easy regulation of bodies and behaviors within the lived environment. In the days of the kampung, when dealing with an errant individual it was rather common to evoke the presence of the collective: "nanti, apa kata orang kampung?" (What would the other villagers say?). Due to the logic of *gotong royong*, the individual who privileged him or herself over the collective would have been ostracized. One would think the absence of the physical kampung might create the loss of collective and moral space amongst the Malays from respective kampung communities, but rather this displacement necessitated the reconfiguration of the physical kampung into that of a symbolic sense of the 'kampung' that continues to watch over the Malay community.

The symbolic sense of the 'kampung' is manifested through various means, and on a structural and material level involve the local daily Malay newspaper *Berita Harian*, community Mosques and Malay self-help organizations. Islam as an identity synonymous with being Malay in Singapore, enhances the operation of maintaining the Malay collective consciousness through the continued policing of social

boundaries. Evidence of such ‘technical mechanisms’ is present through the reinforcement of *Halal* and *Haram* (“permissible” and “forbidden”) categories onto behaviors pertaining to sexuality such as pre-marital sex and female *aurat* (“modesty”). At times, such internal community mechanisms run in opposition to secular practices as noted in the Malay/Muslim community’s reluctance to advocate the use of condoms as prevention against the contraction of HIV/AIDS and the ‘tudung’ or headscarf controversy in 2001. In the wake of the September 11 attacks and the arrest of *Jemaah Islamiah* members in Singapore, mosques around the island-state came under heightened scrutiny- labeled by State representatives as potential spaces for terrorism and political dissent. Malay and Muslim spaces therefore represent two forms of the potential ‘problematic’: a hindrance to the economic progress and a threat to the security of the nation respectively. Spaces such as the kampung and in the present context, the Mosque, Media, Mendaki and MUIS, in their materiality, provide easier grounds for government surveillance.

“Hantu Melayu tak kacau orang Cina”

In contrast, the immaterial ‘kampung spirit’ that exists in the everyday life of the Malays in Singapore is a space that ‘escapes’ (Blanchot, 1987) state scrutiny. As the residual aura of habitual relations derived from the extinct physical kampung, a sense of collectivity and the internalization of a panoptic gaze exist even in its absence. Similarly, within the discursive parameters of my thesis, the Pontianak is the embodied manifestation of the “tightly-knit” community capable of producing a disciplinary gaze onto members of the Malay community.

Despite her immaterial body, the Pontianak as a ‘kampung spirit’ constitutes a material phenomenon in which spaces of her presence allows for the articulation of

racial anxieties of some members of the Malay community without the ‘danger’ of upsetting the status-quo of the secular nation. These anxieties reveal the contested identities and particularities of being Malay and Muslim in Singapore and are especially peculiar to their temporal contexts. The Pontianak in Abdullah Munshi’s era in the late 1800s was not just particular to the Malays, she had the ability to affect members of the Chinese community as well as colonial officers- both of which experienced her disturbance. Post-war and during periods of the merger between Singapore and Malaysia, she held her sway with both her Malay and Chinese audience through her representation in black and white films. Post-independence, the Pontianak seems to be engaging the use of racialized discretion by profiling Malay members only to haunt them, as pointed out by an informant, “*Hantu Melayu tak kacau orang Cina*” (“Malay ghosts do not disturb the Chinese”). This selectivity, as imagined by some members of the Malay community, that she possesses in haunting her victims is a reflection of sociopolitical and economic changes that affected Singapore. Post-independence, the state’s intolerance towards overt Malayness highlights the insecurities of being an isolated Chinese majority nation within a Malay archipelago. Such insecurities, coupled with a sense of retaliatory Chinese ethnic pride against the expulsion from Malaysia and Confucianist mentality, necessitate the emphasis for a ‘nation’ with a ‘national interest’. Values of ‘national interest’ have been framed within a communitarian ideology in which Singapore’s survival and subsequent success hinge upon responsibilities of cohesive communal structures racialized in terms of the Chinese, Malay, Indians and Others.

The communitarian ideology serves to prevent excessive individualism, which would threaten the organic solidarity (Durkheim, c1984) of the nation-state. In Singapore for example, the cost of membership within the communitarian logic is the

suppression of individual freedoms and desires for the well-being of the ‘community’ (Chua, 2005). The idea that the Pontianak affects only Malays reflects the practice of the communitarian logic. She is also a vehicle in which anxieties with regards to ‘rightful possession of places’ or participation within the larger economy may be expressed. Within the communitarian logic, the Pontianak appears in areas where there is a substantiated representation of Malayness to remind members of their obligation to the community. Spaces of Malay concentration are ‘scary’ or ‘dangerous’ precisely because of the strong presence of disciplinary gaze within such areas- both the political gaze of the government (in curbing Malay growth in areas previously identified as ‘racial enclaves’) and the cultural gaze of the Malay community. Within this logic, the mechanical solidarity that exists within the Malay community needs to be adapted to suit the needs of the larger secular, rationalized and technocratic Singapore. Furthermore, since Malay patriarchal power that exists within the Kampung collective became emasculated and feminized under the larger patriarchal surveillance of the PAP government (Tan, 2001), the Pontianak represents a form of re-assertion of communal boundaries to compensate for such loss of power. At the same time the presence of the Pontianak as a seductive, hyper-feminized and monstrous representation reveals the power dynamics of the patriarchal state and its interaction with the Malay community.⁵² In addition, not only has Malay participation in the political sphere been emasculated, the community’s role within the public sphere has been feminized further. State discourse has, over the years, implicitly

⁵² In 2000, The Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) proposed to form a structure of “collective leadership” comprising Malay PAP Members of Parliament and a “non-political” pillar comprising of “true Malay leaders” elected only by the Malays to look into the cultural and socio-economic issues facing the community. Such overt forms of attempting to regain control of the Malay community was met with harsh criticisms by the government who felt that the “seductive” communal arguments could “ruin Singapore” as it may produce a fragmented nation and political system typified by ethnic-based parties, communalism and chauvinism, which might disadvantage the Malays in the long run (Tan, 2001: 116).

described Malays in Singapore to be irrational and emotional ('Malays in Army' controversy, "Tudung Issue", "Jemaah Islamiyah"), weak (low academic performance, under-representation of Malays in key economic positions, over-representation of Malays in the low income group) and dysfunctional (High teenage pregnancy and marriage rates, prior drug abuse, high divorce rates). The combination of these traits places the community in a feminized space in need of "hand-holding" (Mayor Zainudin Nordin, ST, 19 December 2007) from state organizations. The immaterial occupation of the Pontianak in public spaces reveals the presence of a 'secret meaning' of micro-regulation at the same time unconsciously internalizing the communitarian logic and patriarchal governance of Singapore. In retrospect, the Pontianak represents a source of pleasurable power through the creative means in which she has been collectively imagined to exert and regain socio-spatial control over the Malay population. The presence of a monstrous-feminine form of collective imagination however, reveals an inner melancholia that is being imposed upon, and currently plaguing, the community. Despite the possibility that the Pontianak's existence hints upon sentiments of alienation, the spaces of her existence should be regarded as a space of inclusion and belonging for the Malays in Singapore

The Stress of Seeing the Pontianak

Experiencing the Pontianak may reveal the presence of micro-resistance as a form of Malays' "defensive" and "protective" control over their personal environment against the logic of capitalist domination. Within such strategies of control, there exist internal social boundaries familiar to most members of the Malay community. The contributors of the narratives, for example, were inclined to imply that their sightings or experiences of the Pontianak occurred because they might have transgressed

temporal taboos. This sentiment was dominant in their narratives where the Pontianak usually appeared after *Maghrib*, as the forth daily prayer in Islam offered at sunset. This period signals the onset of a brand new day in the Muslim calendar, where the notion of liminal time is usually fraught with cultural prohibitions. Within traditional Malay communities, several *pantang larang* or taboos associate the hours after *maghrib* and before dawn with presences of ghosts. For example one should not laugh during *maghrib* because it may attract ghosts, eating during *maghrib* means eating with ghosts or one might be disturbed by ghosts if one is out during *maghrib*. Within the context of the *kampung* where such taboos originated from, such prohibitions were necessary to ensure the safety of residents (especially youths) in the night considering that poorly lit surroundings and lack of sanctioned pedestrian walkways were common features of that environment. Furthermore, these cultural sanctions were strictly imposed onto unmarried, nubile youths whose sexuality was considered potentially dangerous to the moral and social fabric of the Malay community. The difficulty in controlling movements in the dark led to the prescription of cultural ghosts such as the dangerous Pontianak in which the moral desires of the community were vested onto her spirit-ed body. In contemporary situations, the habitual beliefs of the Pontianak remain but without much transactional value. Most of the experiences with the Pontianak are usually sightings without any evidence that her haunting poses any dangerous threat to the individual. Occasionally, spiritual possession of the Pontianak spirit may occur, but this is however rare. And even in its rarity, as seen through my informant, Haz, the event of spirit possession does not have a transformative capacity towards one's life. She continues to lead her life as usual: coming home late with friends or from work without much concern for the cultural taboo associated with nighttime. She continues going out with her boy friend till late

in the morning altering only the places they go to (avoiding dark, deserted places). Given the urbanized setting of Singapore, with well-lit environment, supposedly safe environments and constant reassurances from the state that “common spaces must remain secular” (Wong Kan Seng, ST 2 August 2009), the existence of the Pontianak requires collective efforts in order to maintain her legitimacy. Furthermore, the possibility of being home before *maghrib* to avoid encountering the Pontianak seems rather irrational amongst youths for whom their participation in Singapore’s economy (work and school) requires the usage of such time. It is worthwhile to note that a bulk of the narratives that describe encounters with the Pontianak also profess sentiments such as “I might have been tired from work” or “I had to stay in school till late/ came back from work late ”. Interestingly, in some of the narratives, contributors also described feeling feverish and ill after encountering the Pontianak. Such symptoms of illness warrant a day off from school or work to cope with the trauma of their frightening encounters. Such latent imagery of being exhausted from school or work coupled with experiences with the Pontianak may describe the anxieties of being in a stressful environment- a common experience amongst Singaporeans. Moreover, the visibility of the Pontianak in areas of high Malay numerical representation and inevitably, middle to low-income housing areas, exacerbates anxieties to survive in a competitive capitalist economy.

On the other hand, the government’s ‘politicization’ of stress makes it difficult for Singaporeans to articulate problems of stress without being labeled as incapable. ‘Stress’ has been justified as a necessity for the people to stay on the competitive edge in order for the nation to survive in a ‘brave new world’. In doing so, the government attempts to ‘personalize’ the problem of stress as individual failure and to ‘culturalize’ it in terms of people’s declining ‘cultural capacity’ to manage stress

(Chua, 1995: 238). In this manner, the Pontianak may exist as a vehicle for the Malay individual to express his or her anxieties in a common space but private and secret enough that it escapes the scrutiny of the State. Any news of Malays publicly complaining of Singapore's highly stressed environment may, almost certainly, invite criticisms from the State that the Malays possess some forms of 'cultural deficit' ('easily contented lot', 'lazy') in their supposed inability to stay competitive. In this way, the Pontianak embodies individual negotiations towards how "Malays can make it- the Singapore way" (Lee Hsien Loong, ST 3 September 2007).

Looking for the Pontianak in the 'Brave New World'

"In the past, the moment a horror story is circulated, kids would not go to school for three days because they are afraid. You tell the kids now that in this area [there are ghosts] the kids would go to the places themselves to investigate."

-hashim oral history, national archives

Hashim's observation that people are interested in investigating places where ghostly experiences occur highlights the community's recent fascination towards exploring abandoned buildings with the intention of creating narratives about such experiences. The task of searching for ghosts ("cari hantu") has become a form of 'collective recreation' (Durkheim, c2001: 282) within the community, particularly amongst Malay youths. I have noted during my fieldwork that amongst such youths, ghost hunting has become a social 'rite' with the intention of accumulating a desired social capital. The ability to see ghosts, for example, and to regale fellow members with narratives of such experiences increases one's position within his or her social network. From personal experiences, exchanging of ghost stories usually occurs during social gatherings amongst friends and family members. Stories are typically

from indirect experiences introduced as “I know of a friend who has experienced...” or “I heard that [a certain place] is haunted...” while members with direct experiences are usually celebrated as possessing credentials or “ghost-cred” (Siti⁵³, personal communication, 2009). Having ‘ghost-cred’ increases one’s popularity, as his/her experiences would be circulated among other social networks hence increasing their social capital. This was seen in the case of my secondary school (one of the top secular girls’ school in Singapore) and amongst my Malay friends, where a rather unpopular girl (Hana) was suspected of stealing our assignments and passing them off as her own. Around the same period, she started having hysterical outbursts in class and fainting spells. Apparently, she had seen a Pontianak had seen emerged from the class blackboard. Her theft was forgotten and Malay girls rallied around her to provide support. Soon, two other girls started experiencing similar disturbances and our Malay male teacher had to intervene. He gathered us (the Malay girls that were within her social network) in a classroom and advised us to pray for her and on our part, to be more religious (by praying 5 times a day and reading Quranic verses [Al-Fatihah, Ayatul Qursi, Yasin]) in order to increase our *iman* “spiritual strength” which may counter ghostly disturbances. The school is a secular and rational common space but within that room, our participation was governed by another form of logic. My “Malayness” was doubted by these girls- because my initial reluctance to participate in the praying session was seen as a lack of sympathy and ignorance pertaining to spirit disturbances. Hana gained popularity and the Malay girls were almost proud to be associated with her. Some of the girls referred to her as “[my] good friend” when

⁵³ Possesses a Master degree in Social Sciences and is in her late twenties. She cites herself as an example of the upper middle class Malay who firmly believes in the existence of the Pontianak despite her class and education level. Siti claims that one need not be poor or uneducated to be affected by the Pontianak’s presence. Although she has not seen the Pontianak, she says the idea of the Pontianak is enough to make her fear certain places in Singapore, hence avoiding it. She provided the example of Old Changi Hospital to prove her point.

recounting her experiences to an outsider despite the absence of prior friendship. Meanwhile, my distance from this incident made me an outcast within that circle of Malay girls. Hana's 'ghost-cred' recognized as a form of symbolic capital has, in this incident, enhanced her social capital- where there is a desire amongst some of the Malay girls in the school to be part of her network. In another example, my informant Zainab revealed that within her family, members who possess the "hypersensitivity" to see ghosts were regarded as "gifted" (*'punya kebolehan'*). This "special" gift of sight is an ascribed feature passed down within her family from her grandparents to their grandchildren. Zainab thought it was unfortunate that she was not blessed with such abilities but considered her nephew, Khai lucky "*untung*" to have been born with it. Khai is special because he has the 'credentials' to prove the real existence of ghosts including the Pontianak. Since the existence of ghosts or the Pontianak, as "social facts" (Durkheim, 1950:2), is constantly held in doubt within the context of a rational society, the knowledge of true experiences serves to reinforce the social order of these 'facts'. The ability to see and experience the Pontianak in contemporary Singapore therefore gives the otherwise uncrystallised emotion of the Pontianak "rigidity" hence a reconciliation of Malay social order or "currents of social opinion" (ibid., 7) with the logic of technocratic capitalism.

The desire for some Malay youths of today to "investigate" and to some extent interrogate (by validating truths of ghost narratives) past beliefs by entering supposedly haunted areas, reflects upon the need to confront their fears of spirits like the Pontianak. For these youths being part of the 'brave new world' meant challenging spatial taboos of *tempat keras* (uncanny spaces) associated with abandoned buildings, forest areas, parks, beach and cemeteries despite being warned not to search for trouble ("*jangan pandai-pandai cari nahas*", Ali, personal

communication, 2009). However it is also important to note that for these youths, failure to encounter spirits during their adventures does not mean a disruption of beliefs. Ali, who had participated in ghost-hunting adventures before, claimed that: “When I search for ghosts, I am interested in confirming their existence so I can tell people about it...that the Pontianak, for example is true. But this is just a confirmation. [It] Doesn’t mean that if I don’t see her at scary places she doesn’t exist. It’s just not my luck, but it is still possible for me to fear her presence.” For working class and ‘disenchanted’ youths like Khai and Faizal⁵⁴, ghost hunting is a recreational activity. But even in this form of ‘recreation’ there are cultural rituals to abide to. Being in ‘enchanted’ places provides them an alternative to affirm their sense of belonging to a privileged identity (the ability to experience ghosts) whose membership requires the performance of specific rites and rituals. In Singapore, the imposition of Islamic religiosity amongst members of the Malay community means that ghost beliefs and its associated rituals are often official categorized as blasphemy. Ghost hunting, amongst some Malay youths, may symbolize the ambition of reclaiming such spaces into the larger project of ‘being and becoming’ Malay in Singapore. The Pontianak as a spectral feature, yet embodied through the way she is being experienced by her believers, represents a space of inclusion allowing for the possibilities of diverse meanings inscribed onto her body. Even to the most skeptical Malay, who seeks to regard her existence as derived out of irrational beliefs, that desire is, in itself already an acknowledgement of her presence.

⁵⁴ Both Khai, 24 and Fala, 22 are brothers whose parents are both divorced and do not have the capacity to care for them. They are currently living separately, with different relatives. At the time of the interview, they were looking for jobs.

“We have to end where we started”

Zainab, understanding my research interest in the Pontianak, persuaded Khai to take me on a midnight tour of the Old Changi Hospital (refer to Appendix B2). Khai is able to see ghosts and is used to dealing with the shock of seeing one. When I asked what he got out of visiting abandoned buildings in search for ghosts, his reply was nonchalant: “for fun and adventure.” For a ‘fun’ activity, there were several ‘rituals’ we had to follow. Firstly, Khai made his brother, Faizal come along as an added measure. His logic was consistent with that of the Malay culture where as a woman, I was thought to have a ‘weaker semangat’. This meant I had lower defense against spirit disturbance. I tried telling him I was a different kind of woman and I was not weak but he insisted that since I have not seen a Pontianak or any ghosts before my emotions may react differently. Secondly, any comments, suspicions or sightings should not be articulated while in the compound as it may offend the spirits of place. Thirdly, we should not run or show any strong reaction when confronted by the presence of a ghost, this might allow the spirit to possess our body- which Khai regarded as “totally dangerous”. I did not consider myself a practicing Muslim but Khai’s advice emphasized the gravity of the situation so much that I found myself reciting whatever little Quranic verses I knew- something I had not done in a long time.

Inside the hospital grounds, Khai appeared disturbed at some points- murmuring at some places “*tempat ni boleh rasa*” (“I can feel something here”). Following the protocol, no one dared to ask him what he felt or saw until we were out of the vicinity. At the entrance of the Accident & Emergency building, there were styrofoam boxes of joss sticks and offering. Khai walked over them nonchalantly prompting me to ask if we were violating a sacred space. He replied: “Don’t worry

it's not our culture, won't affect us." We passed through several wards and then an open area that used to be a staff canteen. We were on our way to the mortuary, which was a significant distance away. He was looking through a large broken window when he stopped dead in his tracks. I heard a loud gasp and a sharp intake of breath. He suddenly looked away and asked if I saw anything. Without waiting for my answer he motioned for Faizal and me to retreat and head out of the building. We saw a gate that could lead us out to the main road where we came from but Khai anticipated another 'problem': "This is not how we came in. We have to end where we started if not *Langgar pantang* (violation of taboo). That won't be good...it's as if we didn't complete this trail properly". Frankly, I was more frightened by the profound awareness of this ritual than the possibility of meeting a ghost. The moment we got out Khai asked if his pupils were enlarged and if his eyes appeared to be glazed. I saw that his pupils were enlarged but they were also focused. Glazed eyes would be a concern because it is a symptom of a potential spirit possession. He kept shrugging his shoulders and breathing deeply. When Faizal and I asked him to describe what he saw, Khai replied that he saw quite a few 'things', a "headless apparition" at a fire hose reel and "waxed-like faces" at some corners of the hospital and stairway. He was most shocked at seeing the Pontianak, described as a fleeting apparition in white, because he did not expect her to appear. He was also surprised that I did not see her since she was moving past our bodies. For a while, he sat on a curb and let out a slight shiver. He was not "affected" but needed "some time to get the image out of [his] head". Khai justified our exit/entrance ritual by explaining that upon entering any *tempat keras* spirits that reside there are as curious of their trespassers as they are of spirits. As we move along such areas, some spirits would attach their "presences" onto our bodies hence marking their trail onto our paths. 'Problems' (spirit

disturbances) usually occur to unknowing individuals who leave the grounds without retracing their pathways back to their original entrance. By exiting where we enter, we are also sending spirit ‘presences’ back to where they rightfully belong. In doing so, we are also informing the spirits of place that we are only ‘passing’ through. Khai explained that as we left he saw some apparitions following us but they disappeared perhaps realizing that we have completed our ‘journey’. When I came back home, I performed the ablution- a familiar ritual amongst members of the Malay community, to cleanse any lingering spirits.

Ghost hunting also represents an interactive inquiry into remembering history. Being in the abandoned hospital was like being in a warped time zone, with its remaining vestiges of colonial architecture and hospital ambience. Signage such as “Accident & Emergency entrance”, “Ambulatory”, “nurses club lounge” and office equipment such as open drawers, shelves, cabinets and old computers create a strong habitus of place, reminding us of a once busy hospital. I thought of my grandfather who died there and felt a chill. Perhaps youths seek abandoned buildings to reconnect with the past histories of place, a challenge in Singapore considering that numerous government intervention schemes disrupt the presence of an organic environment where meanings of place may accumulate over time. Popular ghost haunts such as Tyersall Mansion (near Botanical Gardens), Matilda House (Punggol), Red House (Pasir Ris) and even the Old Changi Hospital were mostly built during the pre-war period. Most youths prefer researching on these sites before entering them in order to compare past history of the place with its present state of disrepair. The method of ghost hunting in this sense, reveals a kind of archaeology at work, that requires the excavation and capturing of ‘evidence’ (of ghosts of place) and tracing it back to the past archives. The Old Changi Hospital, for example, had a torture chamber used to

brutalize Prisoners of War during the Japanese occupation. In any case, the idea of tracing history is similar to Khai's explanation of "ending where we started", where in this context, remembering allows us to excavate fragments of history that would otherwise be neglected or forgotten.

On the other hand, graffiti on the walls, burnt candles on the floor and pentagram images on both walls and floor highlight another kind of interest towards abandoned spaces. The public had been prevented from entering hospital grounds after it closed down in 1997, but that did not stop individuals from entering the premises. The evidence of occult worshipping and drug abuse in early 2000, prompted the government to increase the security level of the area by fencing the perimeters, barricading all entries, enforcing regular police patrol, hiring a security guard and several guard dogs to ward off trespassing youths. When I entered with Khai and Faizal in early 2009, there were no more guards or dogs but there were traces of barricades. There were holes in fences where previous groups had cut in order to gain access to the area. Some scrawls provided clues to the identities of previous trespassers- "airport kia", suggested the presence of local Malay secret society gang members while "minah ♥ mat rep" suggested the presence of Malay youth subculture. Marking spaces within the search for ghosts reflects upon the desire to resist technocratic domination in spaces of everyday life. Abandoned buildings, in their isolation, become spaces of resistance for Singaporean youths to express themselves out of the confines of larger disciplinary spaces in Singapore.

CONCLUSION

P is for Pontianak, P is for Persistence, P is for Possibilities

In his introduction to his book *The Malays: A Cultural History*, Richard Winstedt (1961) wrote: “A faculty that has always been made for the Malay’s progress has been his power to accept the new and adjust it to the old.” The Pontianak, as the matter of this thesis, has precisely reflected such progression, adapting her embodiment and representation to cater to the ‘currents of social opinion’ of Malays in particular spatial and temporal contexts. She has been conjured up as a healing spirit in pre-modern times but through processes of Islamization and at the same time high infant mortality rates, has been conjured as the monstrous abject. Now, the Pontianak exists as the ‘detail’ of Malay representation. Through the consumption and experiences of her haunting, her embodiment reveals ideas of Malay propriety, patriarchy and especially in the context of Singapore, as an expressive site of asserting Malayness in public and secular spaces. By all means, with the State’s systematic exorcism of ‘gritty souls’ through urban renewal processes from the 60s to the 80s and the forces of Islam denying her existence, the Pontianak should have disappeared as the ghost of Singapore past. Her persistence as a material phenomenon forces us to reconsider that she is not simply an object of consumption or a folktale but rather a legitimate social actor within the Malay community. Her embodiment-the trademark long black hair and white flowy robe - is a durable feature that has remained unchanged over centuries. In her durability, the Pontianak is also the habit body, featuring an inventory of Malay collective representation.

Meanwhile, her contribution to a spectral landscape highlights the existence of strong Malay cultural spaces- spaces which might be considered threatening to the nation-state. In the context of the Pontianak however, her immateriality escapes

rational discourse thus allowing for such spaces to flourish. Furthermore, Malay spirits have been found to be the most feared amongst Singaporeans while organized paranormal tours⁵⁵ tend to avoid places haunted by the Pontianak (Faucher, 2004: 194). If the ghosts of place represent a form of power, the Pontianak as the monstrous Malay icon opens up possibilities for Malays to assert their rightful possession of place as the ‘indigenous people of the Island’. While Singapore’s physical space is disciplined through the enactment of racial quotas, in the non-rational space, Malay spirits dominate Singapore’s underworld. In the recent local play ‘H is for Hantu’ (Jonathan Lim, 2009) for example, the five Malay ghosts featured outnumbered one Chinese girl-ghost. During the play, the Pontianak and Penanggalan passed racial comments such as “All Chinese ghosts look the same”, and laughed at Chinese ghosts wondering why they tended to assume an under-developed form; that of little girls. The Pontianak expressed her disgust when one of her members suggested for her to possess a Chinese lady, implying that the Chinese was dirty (“jijik”). Similarly, the Malay youths I interviewed were possessive of their ghosts as evident in the articulation “*Hantu Melayu tak kacau orang Cina*” and were rather callous towards the ghost of other races interpreting them as “kental” (non-convincing, or lacking in street credibility) and “bedek” (inauthentic). In all the examples above, the existence of Malay ghosts provides a ‘safe’ site for the expression of racial anxieties and to some extent, overturn the power dynamics between the Chinese majority and Malay minority race.

Importantly, the haunting of the Pontianak reveals the cultural inferiority complex of Malay leaders in Singapore. Within their eminent desire for the Malay community to forge a ‘new’ identity, the Pontianak, is, with all due respect, a misfit.

⁵⁵ Possibly managed by non-Malays since the main attraction for night tours organized by Malay groups is the opportunity to encounter the Pontianak.

However her recent phenomenon through the *Nenek Keropok* fiasco highlights how the desire to be the “new” Malay is not well-received amongst the bulk of the Malay population. Leaders may view this incident as an example of the failure of some Malays living in Housing Board Flats to improve themselves in terms of ridding themselves of animistic, traditional and insular qualities of the ‘old Malay’. However, newspaper interviews with cultural activists show that such phenomenon is reflective of a rich cultural heritage that should not be suppressed or denied in urban Singapore. In this manner, the desire for a “new” Malay identity seems to require a form of selective amnesia. The need to emphasise the ‘new’ highlights that there is a problem with the present Malay identity. Ironically, the Pontianak that exists in this hyper modernized city embodies the ‘new’ Malay identity in her resilience to survive various social contexts. Since we conjure up the ghost we believe in, the haunting of the Pontianak reveals the reflexivity of members of the Malay community in adapting old tradition and reconciling it with a completely different social environment.

Beyond the study of the Pontianak in the Malay community, it is perhaps rather significant to explore why some Chinese youths are increasingly interested in looking for the Pontianak in urban Singapore. Amongst other races, particularly the Chinese, preserving collective memory becomes an arduous task especially when oral transmission between generations has been diminishing (Faucher, 2004: 195). This could perhaps explain why “All Chinese ghosts look the same”. What is the significance of this desire to participate in the expressive energies of places marked by the presence of the Pontianak? How do members of other ethnic groups perceive the Pontianak and what is at stake for them to be haunted by a ghost that has been imagined to be specifically Malay? Such a research would contribute to a more

nuanced understanding of multiculturalism in Singapore using the embodied representation of the Pontianak.

In the pre-independent kampung, the Chinese feared the Pontianak during a time when they could speak Malay. In the colonial era, the British officers encountered the Pontianak while they were in the region learning Malay. In urban Singapore, the Pontianak thrives in areas of strong representation of Malayness. In recent times however, amongst members of the Malay community, the importance of being fluent in Mandarin has been recognized as one of the means to survive Singapore's 'baroque ecology'. This can be seen as part of the project of embodying a "new" Malay identity. What then would be the future for the Pontianak within a Mandarin-speaking Malay community? Perhaps, as evident in Malay cultural history, even when the 'new' Malay forgets, *Fatimah Rock* remembers.

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SPEKTRA kisah misteri

Betul ke ada
si 'Cantik'?

LOCENG pintu rumahnya berbunyi sejujur selepas azan maghrib bergema.

Di dalam hati Cik Ita (bukan nama sebenar), 28 tahun, seorang guru, berkata-kata:

"Beliau yang datang minggu-bahagia ni?"

Beliau yang datang dari kawasan Bedok, tergesa-gesa ke pintu rumahnya.

Apabila ditalat menerusi lubang pintunya, Cik Ita terlihat seorang wanita tua bertudung hitam.

Wanita itu seketika berbalik dan berkata: "Cantik! Itu seorang-akam memundukkan mukanya."

Yang menghairankan Cik Ita, mengapa payah melihat wajah wanita itu sedangkan lampu di koridor rumahnya terang-terangan?

"Selama ini saya datang malam-malam, saya boleh nampak. Hairan juga. Saya tahu dia mesti nak jual barang. Tapi kenapa maghrib?"

cik Ita kepada *Berita Minggu* (BM).

Cik Ita itu berketuk-muk sebelum masuk ke dalam an ringkas (SMS) mengenai 'mak cik keropok'.

Yang membawa bersama pontianak, atau digelar si Cantik, tersebar luas, sehingga menimbulkan rasa takut. Mitosnya dalam diri kanak-kanak.

Menurutnya, wanita tua itu tidak putus asa. Selama lima minit beliau berdiri di situ dan menanti.

"Saya nak masuk rumah dia, tapi dia tak mengajuk tak buka pintu. Saya kata, tok naklah. Lagi pun, suara mak cik itu menyebarkan ketika beri salam 'Assalamualaikum' dengan getaran yang kuat."

"Saya agak ni mesti orang tua. Tak lama gitu dia beredar. Saya nampaklah dia jalan terbongkok-bongkok dan menuju ke lif. Dia pakai kain batik dan membina beg plastik merah. Entah apa itu."

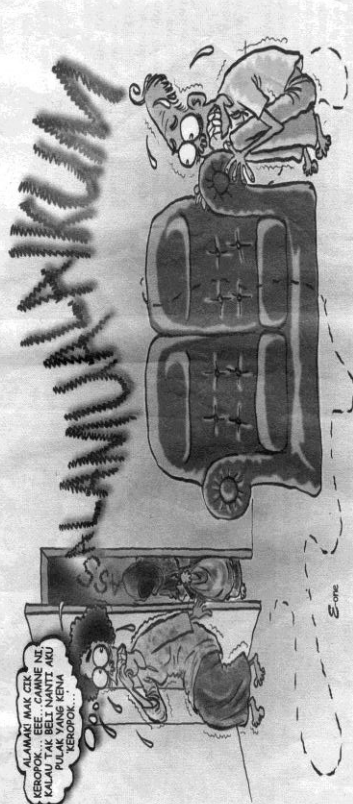
Beliau kemudian berkongsi cerita itu dengan ibu.

"Ibu saya pula kata, sekiranya dia pakai purdah hitam, sebab itu saya tak nampak. Bapa saya pula kata, agaknya dia nak tumpang solat sebab tu dia datang waktu maghrib. Wallahuakum."

Sementara itu, tinjauan rambang BM ke ruang Internet menunjukkan kisah 'mak cik keropok' ini turut mendapat liputan luas dalam blog-blogger, beberapa peminat Melayu. Hampir 300 orang berbalik-balik ke laman ini dengan catatan perbincangan si penulis blog.

Salah seorang penulis blog itu mendakwa abangnya didatangi seorang penjual keropok bute Abangnya kemudian seakan-akan sempat sehingga porli diubah secara tradisional selepas mendengar mak cik itu mengilang dan pontianak pula menjelma di balik tidurnya.

Kecoh-kecoh 'mak cik keropok'

Oleh HARVANI ISMAIL
harvani@nph.com.sg

USAHI buka pintu jika didatangi 'mak cik keropok'.

Kalau pintu itu dibuka secara tidak sengaja, belilah sahajalah keropoknya kalau enggan di-hantui pontianak yang digendong mak cik yang sudah dimamah usia itu.

Ini bukan satu lagi ringkasan plot filem pengarah Abang Mamat Khalid, *Belahang Congkak*, dan *Jangan Pandang Belahang Congkak*.

Sebaliknya, ia merupakan sekilas pesanan daripada keratan e-mel atau pesanan ringkas (SMS) yang tersebar luas di serata Singapura sejak awal bulan ini.

Namun, sejauh mana sahnya kisah 'mak cik keropok' ini? Apakah ia sekadar mitos atau ramalan penduduk setempat apabila berkaitan tarung e-mel dan SMS mereka dihujani kisah sebegini.

Tinjauan rambang *Berita Minggu* ke atas 30 orang dan beberapa laman blog serta laman Facebook, menunjukkan bahawa kisah 'mak cik keropok' pada 1980-an dan 1990-an.

Apabila si mangsa membuka pintu, si 'Cantik' akan memasuki rumah mangsa dan mangsa akan berasa takut dan terpaksa untuk membeli keropoknya.

Guru Sekolah Tinggi Matematik Universiti Nasional Singapura (NUS), Cik Rohaida Ismail, berkata:

Setelah membeli keropoknya, si 'Cantik' akan keluar dari rumah mangsa dan meneruskan jaluannya dari rumah ke rumah. Keropoknya dikatakan tengik dan tajam. Pada masa sama pelbagai e-mel dan SMS dengan versi tambahannya.

BACA MANTERA

Ada yang menyatakan mak cik ini akan membaca mantera yang mengerikan jika mangsanya tidak membeli keropoknya. Kemudian, ada lembaga hitam di sebelah-tangan mereka ke dalam rumah untuk menakutkan-rakannya mangsa.

Jika mangsa tampak ketakutan, mak cik itu akan menawarkan dirinya untuk mengubatinya. Mak cik itu tidak meminta bayaran, tetapi akan mendesak agar mangsa membeli keropoknya berharga \$30.

tak kemudian, ada beberapa SMS lucu yang mungkin-sekitar mak cik keropok' ini sudah *conquer* Tampines dan wujud dalam khidmat bas 168.

Ada pula yang menyatakan mak cik berpakaian lusuh itu akan meluru ke dapur dan tumpang makan.

Bahkan, timbul pula kisah 'mak cik keropok' tidak lagi keropok, tetapi jualan banyak wanggi.

Bagaimanapun, mak cik keropok' ini berubah-ubah, bagi ramai yang dihubungi, mereka berkata tidak percaya dan berpesan kepada anak-anak agar tidak mengambil kisah ini secara serius.

Cik Ruzana Awalludin, seorang guru, berkata:

"Saya dengar cerita ini daripada anak-anak yang mendengar mak cik keropok' ini. Pada mulanya mak cik keropok' sebab yang bercerita tu usang, tetapi selepas itu, saya berfikir tentang implikasi cerita ini kepada anak-anak kita."

"Berita ini memang hebat tetapi saya dan rakan-rakan guru mengambil peluang ini untuk memberitahu pelajar bahawa mak cik keropok' ini sebenarnya bukan benar-benar ada. Sekali mendengar dan jadikan sebagai langkah keselamatan, tak mengapa."

Mungkin ini semua hanya permainan kata untuk hiburan semata. Bak kata penggiat seni dan guru, Cik Asnida Daud, berkata:

"Melayu dan hantu tidak mampu dipisahkan."

Secara berseloroh, Enik Muih Azzah, 35 tahun, berkata:

"Jangan nak percaya cerita begini. Saya baru bertemu teman-teman saya di Facebook. Dari *Misteri Jam 12*, kisah ini dah tersebar dari satu pemanggil ke pemanggil yang lain. Saya swamca orang yang juma 'makcik keropok' tu, bilang 'detection'!"

Saya akan bawa alat pengesan penipuan (*the detector*)!"

PERMAINAN KATA?

Mungkin ini semua hanya permainan kata untuk hiburan semata. Bak kata penggiat seni dan guru, Cik Asnida Daud, berkata:

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Saya akan bawa alat pengesan penipuan (*the detector*)!"

Asyik hantu 'K' saja... jangan layan sudah...

INI SEMUA SALAH PEMANGGIL 'MISTERI JAM 12'

"Semua ni salah pemanggil program radio *Misteri Jam 12*. Selepas itu, bertali-arus kedengaran di stesen radio atau tersebar menerusi SMS dan e-mel tanpa hentinya sampai timbul bermacam versi.

"Saya pula rasa ia setakat dogeng atau *urban myth*. Macam 'hantu kum-kum' dan 'mak cik siput'. Saya atau keluarga tak pernah jumpalah."

– *Natasha Shikin Ali*,
21 tahun, mahasiswa

MACAM SASTERA RAKYAT MODEN PULA...

"Seperti yang dimaklumi, orang Melayu ni, dari zaman nenek-moyang kita memang banyak pantang larang. Misalnya, untuk elakkan anak-anak main di luar rumah waktu maghrib, timbul pula kisah nanti disembunyikan hantu tetek.

"Saya kira, kisah 'mak cik keropok' ni satu lagi cara memberitahu anak-anak agar jangan buka pintu rumah jika yang datang itu tidak dikenali.

"Kisah ini dah jadi macam satu coretan sastra rakyat moden pula. E-mel yang datang bermacam-macam versi, sama seperti sebaran dari mulut ke mulut dan di-tokok-tambah."

– *Cik Noor Hasnah Adam*,
33 tahun, guru dan penulis
tamu ruangan 'Warisan' Berita
Harian

YANG MUNCUL ASYIK HANTU 'K' SAJA...

"Dulu, ada 'hantu kum-kum', sekarang 'mak cik keropok'. Semuanya bermula dengan huruf 'K'. Kum-Kum, Keropok... Entah hantu 'K' apa pula akan muncul pada era akan datang.

"Selalunya, si penyampai kata 'kawan saya kata...', atau 'saudara kawan saya cerita...' atau 'kakak dia kata'.

"Semua ini membuat saya meragui kesahihan kisahnya.

"Jika si pencerita itu alami sendiri peristiwa itu, saya mungkin percaya."

– *Cik Nimi Yusof*,
31 tahun, penterjemah

KASIHAN 'MAK CIK KEROPOK'

"Kasihani 'mak cik keropok' yang betul jujur mencari rezeki dari rumah ke rumah. Tak laku pula jualan mereka dengan tersebar-nya e-mel dan SMS seperti ini."

– *Abdul Rauf Maskhazin*,
18 tahun, pelajar madrasah

JANGAN LAYAN, HABIS CERITA

"Rantaian SMS 'mak cik keropok' ini tersebar luas dan diyakini sebab ia mempermain-mainkan rasa takut orang. Kerana sindrom 'berjaga-jaga sahajalah', maka ramai orang rasa tiada salahnya jika mereka mengirim SMS kepada teman dan saudara-mara untuk memberi peringatan.

"Saya kira ia hanya berita yang diada-adakan sebab keaslian sumber kisah ini tidak diketahui. Untuk menghentikan kisah ini, diamkan sahaja SMS dan e-mel yang diterima. Usah dilayan dan sebar-sebarkan lagi."

– *Encik Radin Rashul Jumahat*,
33 tahun, pengendali laman
kisah seram, 'SFOGSzeRO.com'

APA KATA USTAZ

Usah terbawa-bawa dengan kisah tahayul

USAH terbawa-bawa dengan kisah 'mak cik keropok' yang dikatakan membawa 'hantu' dari rumah ke rumah ini, hingga ia menimbulkan pemikiran negatif seperti khurafat, percaya kepada tahayul dan takut kepada sesuatu yang tiada, sedangkan kita belum tahu betul tidaknya kisah itu.

Ustaz Jalaluddin Hassan, melalui e-melnya, berkata perkara seperti ini dilarang agama, bahkan boleh menyebabkan dosa.

Kepada mereka yang menyebarkan, ia juga tidak digalakkan, misalnya, menerusi rancangan radio yang membicarakan topik-topik seram pada tengah malam kerana ia boleh mempengaruhi minda dan perasaan pendengar, walau niatnya baik – sekadar menghibur.

Sehubungan itu, ulas Ustaz Jalaluddin, umat Islam harus berpandu kepada pesanan Imam Syafie yang pernah berkata: "Melihat lebih baik daripada mendengar."

Cerita-cerita begini juga akan menjejaskan rezeki mereka yang be-

nar-benar menjual dari rumah ke rumah untuk menyara hidup, tam-bahnya.

Bagaimanapun, kata Ustaz Jalaluddin, 'benda-benda' seperti ini memang wujud dan berlaku.

Ia boleh dikenali pertama, sebagai saka atau dalam erti kata lain, mewariskan makhluk peliharaan yang dikenali sebagai jin, kepada keluarga (keturunan) atau orang lain.

Kedua, ia juga boleh dikategorikan dalam kelompok sihir iaitu menyantau seseorang dengan menggunakan makhluk seperti jembalang, polong, toyol, tuju-tuju atau sebagainya yang semuanya itu adalah daripada bangsa jin.

Jadi, apakah yang harus dilakukan oleh seorang yang beriman jika berdepan dengan makhluk yang diragui? Kepada persoalan ini, Ustaz Jalaluddin menjawab:

"Pertama, dalam agama Islam, terdapat ajaran yang sarat dengan panduan bagi melindungi diri dan keluarga daripada gangguan jin dan syaitan.

"Ini boleh kita dapati daripada kitab suci al-Quran seperti ayat-ayat *Ruqyah* (ayat-ayat pelindung) dan hadis Rasulullah *saw* (doa-doa yang diajarkan Nabi) apabila berhadapan dengan gangguan makhluk halus.

"Kedua, kita boleh memelihara diri dengan memperbanyak ibadah dan melazimkan diri membaca Quran, berzikir dan menjaga wuduk pada waktu solat atau sesudah kerana syaitan tidak akan mampu mengganggu orang berwuduk.

"Dan seringlah melaungkan azan di dalam rumah kerana syaitan akan bubar apabila azan dilaungkan.

"Paling penting, banyakkkan berdoa agar kita dilindungi Allah daripada gangguan dan belajar mengawal hati agar jangan terlalu terbawa-bawa dengan perasan takut kepada benda-benda seperti ini.

"Tanamkan dalam diri kita bahawa itu semua makhluk Allah yang lemah dan yang berkuasa hanya Allah." – **Oleh DEWANI ABBAS.**

26 JULAI 2009 (4 SYABAN 1430)

SOLAT

Subuh	5.45
Syuruq	7.06
Zuhur	1.13
Asar	4.35
Maghrib	7.17
Iyak	8.30

Wak Cantik

Flu dan haji

WABAK flu H1N1 nampaknya akan jejas rancangan sesetengah orang untuk tuna urrah dan haji tahun ini.

Sebab Kerajaan Arab Saudi membatalkan semua lawatan ke atas beberapa golongan daripada memamikan ibadah itu untuk kekang flu itu dari memular.

Kalau lawatan itu jadi dikenakan, Wak dapat gambarkan betapa kecewanya mereka yang bakal terjejas tahun ini.

Sebab itu, mungkin ada baiknya kalau dari sekarang lagi kita ingatkan bakal jemaah kita supaya bersiap sedia untuk hadapi kemungkinan itu.

Minis, umpamanya, perlu sentiasa bersiap untuk dapatkan berita terbaru dari Saudi, dan jangan lupa untuk memastikan beritahu kepada semua jemaah kita.

Dan para jemaah pulak tak perlulah bersusah payah buat kenduri-kendara untuk saudara mara. Sebab kalau tak dapat pergi nanti, taklah terasa malu sangat...

KHABARNYA Angkutan Karyawan Hani (AMT)

Konvensyen lagi?

26 JULAI 2009 (4 SYABAN 1430)

SOLAT

Subuh	5.45
Syuruq	7.06
Zuhur	1.13
Asar	4.35
Maghrib	7.17
Iyak	8.30

Wak Cantik

Flu dan haji

WABAK flu H1N1 nampaknya akan jejas rancangan sesetengah orang untuk tuna urrah dan haji tahun ini.

Sebab Kerajaan Arab Saudi membatalkan semua lawatan ke atas beberapa golongan daripada memamikan ibadah itu untuk kekang flu itu dari memular.

Kalau lawatan itu jadi dikenakan, Wak dapat gambarkan betapa kecewanya mereka yang bakal terjejas tahun ini.

Sebab itu, mungkin ada baiknya kalau dari sekarang lagi kita ingatkan bakal jemaah kita supaya bersiap sedia untuk hadapi kemungkinan itu.

Minis, umpamanya, perlu sentiasa bersiap untuk dapatkan berita terbaru dari Saudi, dan jangan lupa untuk memastikan beritahu kepada semua jemaah kita.

Dan para jemaah pulak tak perlulah bersusah payah buat kenduri-kendara untuk saudara mara. Sebab kalau tak dapat pergi nanti, taklah terasa malu sangat...

KHABARNYA Angkutan Karyawan Hani (AMT)

Konvensyen lagi?

26 JULAI 2009 (4 SYABAN 1430)

SOLAT

Subuh	5.45
Syuruq	7.06
Zuhur	1.13
Asar	4.35
Maghrib	7.17
Iyak	8.30

Wak Cantik

Flu dan haji

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KHABARNYA Angkutan Karyawan Hani (AMT)

Konvensyen lagi?

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BETULKAH INI?

"Bilang keluargamu semua, kalau ada seorang mak cik tua menjual keropok atau kuih, mengetuk pintu rumahmu, jangan buka kerana mak cik itu ada menggondong atau mengengang 'kak pon' bersamanya."

Beliau akan menjual kita untuk membeli keropoknya. Kalau kita tak beli, 'kak pon' itu akan masuk ke rumah kita. Keropok beliau tak sedap dan juga bau busuk. Tengok dari lubang pintu dulu sebelum buka. Mak cik itu sudah 'conquer' Woodlands dan sekarang beliau sudah pergi ke daerah Tampines."

Adakah anda antara mereka yang menerima e-mel atau SMS seperti di atas ini? Kisah 'mak cik keropok' ini kelihatan sudah tersebar luas. Betulkah kejadian ini atau ia setakat permainan?

Muka 7

Biasiswa PSC untuk dua anak Melayu dari keluarga berpendapatan rendah

Pengorbanan ibu bapa kedua-dua pelajar untuk mencapai yang terbaik demi membalas jasa.

OLIA SYAFIEZ UGMAH



The Straits Times, 12 February 1956, Page 5

[Go back to the article view](#)[Print this article \(\\$1.00/page\)](#)

Young Malay wives shocked at high death rate



'Home' hospitality plea for visiting

WOMEN ARE NOT PREPARED TO TAKE UP THE RESPONSIBILITIES, SAYS A WELFARE WORKER

MALAY women in Singapore are perturbed at the high infant mortality rate among Malays, which was revealed in the Annual Medical Report last week.

The Director of Medical Services, Dr. R. H. Bland, said that in 1954 the Malays had the highest infant mortality rate of 106.71 per thousand against 56.10 for all races.

One cause for this was the increase of mothers between the 12 and 20 age group, Dr. Bland said in his report.

Most of the Malay women interviewed last week agreed with Dr. Bland that they marry very young.

Salma binte Ibrahim, 17, a housewife said: "If we do not marry before the age of 20, it is hard for us to get a good husband."

Another housewife, 19, and mother of four children said: "Our men consider a woman old, after she is 20 years old."

Three other women agreed that they marry young.

But none believed there was such a high rate of infant mortality in their community.

Report confirmed

Che Zara binte Noor Mohamed, President of the Malay Women's Welfare Association confirmed Dr. Bland's report. Due to early motherhood, the women were not prepared to take up the responsibilities of a mother, she said.

"Most of the women are uneducated. But poverty is the root cause of infant mortality," she said.

The women cannot afford to maintain their health before and after childbirth, with the result, the children are affected she said.

The Straits Times, 20 November 1968, Page 1

[Go back to the article view](#)

[Print this article \(\\$1.00/page\)](#)

More Malay mothers die in childbirth

SINGAPORE, Tues.—The number of Malay women who die at childbirth (1.56 per thousand) is three times higher than that among the rest of the other races in Singapore.

Dr. S. P. Wong, of the Kandang Kerbau Hospital, disclosed this in a paper submitted at the fourth Asian Congress of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the Conference Hall.

Dr. Wong suggested that health education with a special emphasis on the importance of family planning and pre-birth care should be given to Malay women.

He also proposed an emergency obstetric service which "will further help to reduce the maternal mortality in Malay mothers."

Mothers with child still fear the Pontianak

SUPERSTITION

has always played a big part in the lives of people all over the world. Their beliefs on matters of life and death often make weird and fascinating reading.

None more weird than those prevalent in Malaya, and none more fascinating than those governing childbirth among the Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Perhaps the most well-known superstition is that concerning the Pontianak (Vampire), which is still widely believed even in these days of sputniks and moon rockets.

<http://newspapers.nl.sg/Issue/PrintPreview.aspx?articleid=straitsimes19591004.2.61>

4/6/2009

Newspapers - Mothers with child still fear the Pontianak

Page 3 of 6

thorny leaves placed beneath the house in the hope that the vampire "will impale its entrails thereon, and nets are hung in the house to bewilder it," says the report.

Palm leaves are plaited and dressed as dolls, so as to draw the attention of the spirit away from the baby.

The report says the husband also takes precautions, by returning home after work by a round-about route to mislead the evil spirit that may be trailing him.

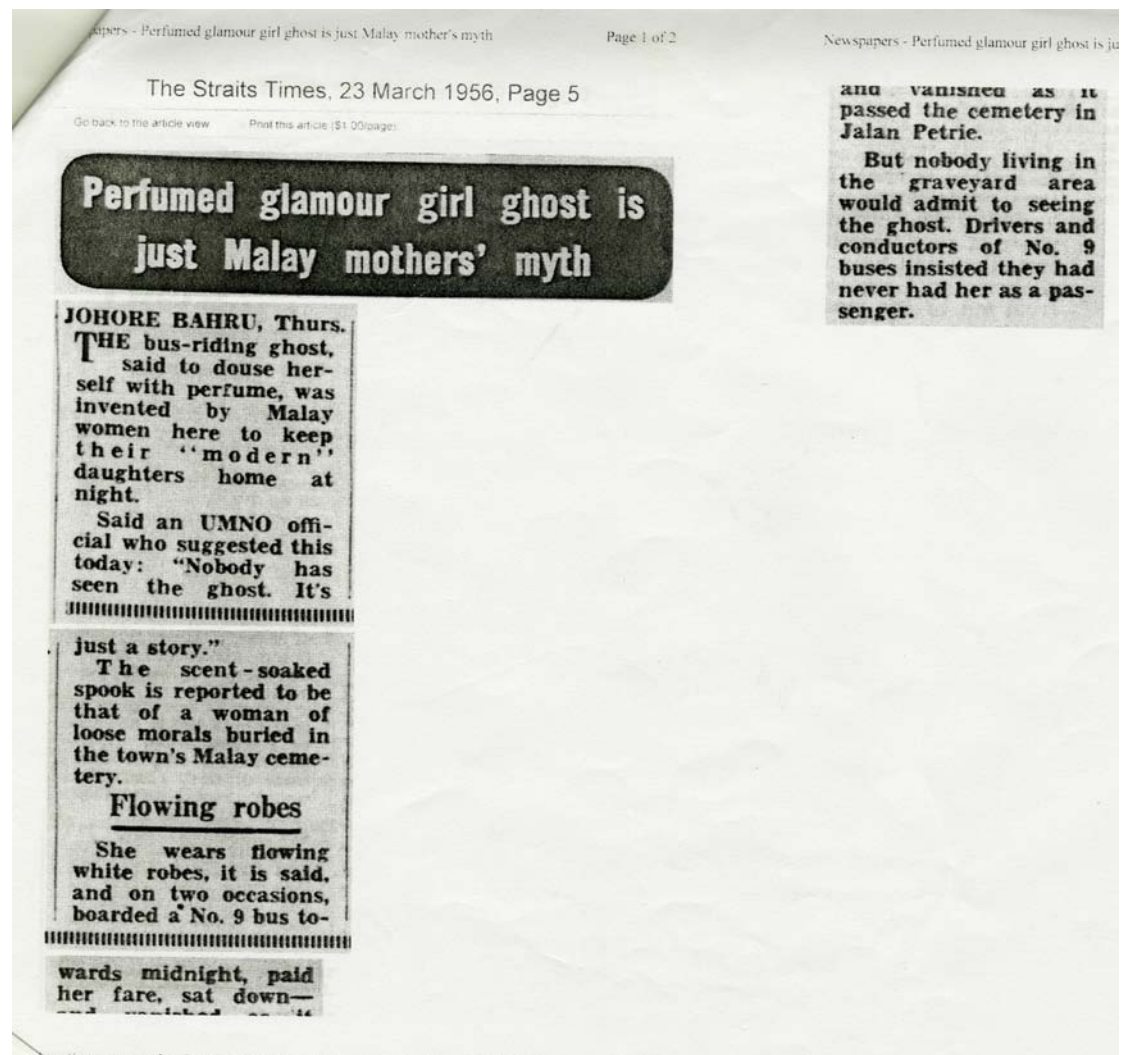
Malays strongly believe abortions are caused by evil spirits, who take the baby away for themselves.

Every Friday expectant mothers anoint themselves with lime juice which they believe is particularly repugnant to evil spirits.

The Malay mother does not venture out in hot rain, yellow sunset or in hill, river and plain because they believe evil spirits are most active under these conditions.

During an eclipse of the sun, a pregnant Malay mother bathes beneath the house so that her baby will not be half black and half white.

Appendix A5



Appendix A5b

The Straits Times, 26 October 1949, Page 7

[Go back to the article view](#) [Print this article \(\\$1.00/page\)](#)

The Ghost Who Wasn't There.....

NEE Soon Village in Singapore has been "cleared" of a ghost woman—by the police.

For days, the village was buzzing with a story that a Malay woman had returned from her grave and had gone back to her husband. Except that she had been struck dumb, the story went on the woman was perfectly normal.

The tale of this ghost woman soon reached Malay villagers in Changi and Kampong Batak. It even spread to Johore.

Village 'Invaded'

The result was that scores of Malays began an "invasion" of Nee Soon, and the police station was inundated with inquiries for the address of the ghost.

To satisfy the ghost-hunters—as well as themselves—policemen from the station conducted their own investigations. They went to the spot where the woman and her husband were reported to reside.

But no ghost woman—nor her husband—was to be found. There were still some inquiries yesterday, and last night, a C.I.D. spokesman officially closed the "case" as far as the police were concerned with a statement that the story was "fantastic and untrue."

Malay flat-dwellers still mingle: Sociologists

MALAYS in high-rise flats still maintain their traditional life styles by socialising among themselves unlike other ethnic groups who are influenced by an individualistic kind of life.

This kampung concept of living in which the Malays cooperate and involve themselves in informal gatherings like the kenduri, weddings and in times of grief, is missing among the non-Malays.

This was the view expressed by two sociologists, Dr Peter Chen, head of the Department of Sociology at the University

'Kampung concept missing among others'

of Singapore and Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, in interviews with Berita Harian yesterday.

They were commenting on a call by Dr Ahmad Mattar, Acting Minister for Social Affairs, who says in an addendum to the Presidential address that planned and organised activities will have to be undertaken to get flat dwellers out of their cocoons.

Dr Chen agreed that the effect of rapid urbanisation in Singapore had brought about individualistic, selfish and materialistic attitudes among Singaporeans.

Dr Chen said that there was still a lack of collective involvement among Singaporeans and even if there were such groupings of various races, these were merely informal and normally involving their own friends.

He said his department had done many surveys on the social structure of the Singaporean and the conclusion was that the Singaporean had become more individualistic.

Compared with findings among other races, the Malays took the credit for being cooperative and sociable, he added.

Initially, there might be a feeling of loneliness but this would soon have changed after they had socialised among themselves as they had been doing in kampungs.

Weddings

As in kampungs, some Malays had formed associations to overcome their loneliness of living in HDB flats, he said adding that Malays should include and socialise with non-Malays in their associations or groups.

This was proven in weddings in which Malays preferred to hold the ceremonies in their homes as a way to group with friends, and relatives. At the same time, relations would be strengthened among themselves, said Dr Chen.

Mr Tarmugi said Malays still brought with them most of their neighbourly attitudes when moving to HDB flats.

Grass-cutting by hospital servants is frowned on

EVERY time a hospital servant is made to cut grass in hospital compounds, the government spends more money, wasting manpower in a labour shortage situation.

And if this is not bad enough, the grass is also being cut at irregular intervals, says the Auditor-General, Mr Chee Keng Soon, in his financial report for 1977/78.

According to Mr Chee, x hospitals, which he did not name, made use of medical and health servants to cut grass. his practice continued

ing practice of not insuring itself against loss. Following Audit's suggestion and after consulting the Finance Ministry, the insurance was discontinued."

Among the irregularities uncovered by the auditors were:

DISCOVERY at the

Appendix B1

Haz and Possession

The process of remembering traumatic events is such an embodied process that some individuals seek to expunge them. Before we met, my informant Haz reminded me not to push her into remembering details about her possession by the Pontianak spirit. The incident happened in 2008, a year before our interview and the event is still “fresh in [her] memory”. She wanted to avoid remembering because she did not want to feel vulnerable and afraid. Remembering, she emphasized, might weaken her *semangat*. Haz eventually agreed to share her experiences because she was intrigued as to why I chose to remain in school ‘just to study’ the Pontianak. Haz’s experiences would highlight how the process of being possessed is not merely cognitive but rather a highly embodied process. Through this understanding, the Pontianak who comes to possess Haz becomes materially embodied.

For Haz the incident began when she felt a tug at her foot and woke up to see a black mass standing in front of her. She downplayed the incident as a dream and went back to bed. The next few days, she visited her ex-fiance, Hadi’s, house and was introduced to 2 Malay male relatives who apparently possessed some form of *ilmu* with regards to Malay medicine (*berubat*). They have been staring at her which made her feel uneasy. She asked to leave the house but was persuaded to stay because the two relatives felt that something was not right with her. Relatives brought up her ankle problem (she was feeling soreness at her ankles for some period) and asked her to seek help from the two medicine men. She obliged and the men assembled a few items in front of her. There was a *keris*, Cinnamon sticks, incense and a yellow cloth. The men held out her foot and place the Cinnamon stick at the space in between her toes, starting with the space between her large toe and her index toe. They wanted to see if Haz would produce a reaction- they would repeat the procedure until all the spaces between her toes have been ‘checked’. Usually, a normal person would not be able to detect pain when such acts are performed onto them. A person who is possessed however would be able to feel intense pain and heat where their skin comes into contact with the Cinnamon stick. Haz felt a burning sensation at the first space of her toes. The men noted it and asked her if she had encountered any black figure pulling her leg before. Surprised that the men knew about the black figure, she said yes. They informed her that he is the spirit that was disturbing her. At the next space, the men suddenly exclaimed “Ni. Ada susah sedikit” (This is a little tricky.) Suddenly, she felt this sense of burning anger, as if she wanted to punch the faces of both men. Haz reiterated that this would have been unlike her because she is not known to have violent anger outbursts. The medicine men asked if she had been having any shoulder aches. Haz replied she has had shoulder aches for the past few months. Calmly, the medicine men told her that there is a *kakak*- a ‘cover’ word to describe the Pontianak sitting on her shoulders and they would have to exorcise the spirit. At the third space, Haz felt another heat-like sensation. At the same time she heard the voices of children whispering in her ears. The two men asked if she has seen the spirits of two little children. To this, Haz replied she did not but remembered that her mother complained that the stuffed toys in her room had been rearranged without anyone touching it. Furthermore, she remembered her father hearing the rustling sounds of plastic (where some of her dolls are wrapped) while he was praying in her

room. When Haz and her parents reflect on this incident concluded that their experiences in her room must have been the work of child spirits.

The men also asked Hadi if he noted any behavioral changes in Haz. Hadi admitted that Haz has been acting rather out of character-citing her tendency to scratch him when she is upset as one of the example. He also told the men that she had become high-strung and when they fight would assert violence by slapping him, shouting and crying out loudly. Haz interrupted her story to inform me at this point, that she has never acted violently towards Hadi. She did not even realized her tendency to scratch him and cry out loud until her mother who witnessed their argument commented that she seem to be getting rather violent. Haz, however did not think much about changes in her behavioral pattern, attributing it to 'normal factors' such as stress or hormonal changes. While recounting the incident, Haz emphasized that she was never the neurotic or the jealous-possessive type of girlfriend. Her friend who was present during the interview and seated beside her nodded in agreement. Haz revealed that there was, however, a period of time when she felt extremely insecure and felt that she could not let Hadi out of her sight. She explained that the men told Hadi and his family that the Pontianak was disturbing her and possessing her body because the Pontianak is interested in Hadi. To get to Hadi, the Pontianak uses Haz's body as a medium. The Pontianak however, was not interested in sharing Hadi with Haz. She controlled Haz's bodily dispositions, making her behave in a violent manner in order to repulse Hadi.

In order to exorcise all spirits, Haz had to undergo a ritual. After the cinnamon treatment she remembered feeling rather disoriented- streaming in and out of consciousness. She saw the men rubbing lime on a keris and placing it over burning incense. They took a white cloth and proceeded to cover the left side of her face. They told her not to look in order to not get affected. They read some verses of the Quran- (Ayatul Qursi) and blew the smoke of burning incense to the cloth. Haz, as reflex, turned her head slightly and was shocked to see trailing black hair underneath the cloth. She did not remember much of the events that happened after- all she remembered was thanking Hadi's family members and leaving his house to return home.

A few days later she found herself jolted up from sleep and immobilized. As she tried shouting for help she happened to glance to the side of her bed and saw an outline of a figure in white behind her curtains. Haz explained that it might have been a Pontianak. When her mother rushed into her room, Haz asked why her mother took so long to arrive when she had been shouting for what seem like several minutes. Her mother said she came the moment she heard Haz shouting. Worried, her parents called an Ustaz who was rather prominent at their neighbourhood mosque. The Ustaz came and immediately went to her room to recite some verses of the Quran. Haz explained that it was as if he knew her room had the most negative energy-as the source of spirit disturbance in the house. He did a similar ritual with the two medicine men, but without the keris and yellow cloth. All he had were coarse white pepper seed that he sprinkled at the spaces between her toes. If there was something possessing Haz's body, not only will she feel a sharp tug at her toe, but the white pepper seeds would turn into a darker colour. The white pepper seeds were used only to conduct

the litmus test for possession. To cure her, the Ustaz made use of only Quranic methods. Haz claimed that although she was not religious, her emotions did not react as adversely as they did when she encountered the medicine men. The Ustaz started the ceremony with “Asalammualaikum Haz” and Haz had to respond in a similar manner. Next the Ustaz asked if she could recite any Islamic verses she knew. Haz replied she’s not religious so she wouldn’t know much. Ustaz replied: “But you are muslim right, I’m sure you know some doas or verses. Just say them.” As an instinctive response, Haz recited the doa meant to be read before eating—that doa being the most familiar to her consciousness. The ustaz saw her recital as a positive sign. He placed the pepper seeds at the spaces in between her toes. The colour darkened slightly at the first space, and then grew significantly darker at the second space, by the third space it was a very dark shade of grey. To Haz’s surprise, the Ustaz made the same discovery as the previous medicine men. This meant that the previous ‘exorcism’ did not work. He noted the presence of the black spirit (Orang hitam), the Pontianak and the two child spirits, at the exact same spaces.

Haz asked the ustaz why do they use the toes for the detection of spiritual intrusion. The Ustaz explained that the spirits usually enter from the toes, and likewise, our spirit departs from our toes as well. Haz elaborates further that this is the reason why we have been advised to wash our feet when we come home, to cleanse the spirit ‘entrance’ of our bodies. Ustaz made it clear that the spirits had to be exorcised to ensure her well-being. Ustaz went into the room, Haz was not allowed to see what was happening. But her father told her he basically recited Quranic verses and then told the spirits to go back where they belong and to not disturb her. Haz remembered that when the ustaz left, there was just so much calmness. Haz felt a weight lifted off her shoulders. But the ustaz did say that because she has already experience spirit disturbance, the ‘spirits’ would never completely go away because ‘her smell’ is on them. However, they would stop disturbing her. 2 weeks later the Ustaz passed away. Haz refuses to think that her exorcism might have anything to do with it. 3 days before his death he had called Haz and asked if she was alright and if she had encountered any disturbances. Before he left the house, the ustaz told Haz to be more careful because the moment one has been possessed before the chances of returning to “normal” life is rather impossible. From time to time, Haz would be visited again or followed because “her scent” is still onto them. They will however linger in terms of presence but would not dare to disturb or haunt her because her house has been cleansed.

Haz did encounter a spirit a few weeks after her exorcism with the Pontianak. She saw a vague outline, rather ‘transparent’ feature of a woman’s body, with hair covering her face and shoulders shrouded in white. She took it to be the Pontianak. She told herself she had to be brave so she decided to confront the Pontianak in her thoughts: “What do you want from me? Why are you here? Do you want to linger here or is there something specific that you need from me?” When she opened her eyes the Pontianak left. Haz felt that the best way to chase spirits is to confront them.

Both the men claimed that Haz was affected by the spirit because she possesses a “weaker semangat” and as such her body was more vulnerable to spirit intrusions. Haz’s recent experiences with spirit disturbance reveal that she might have crossed the path of a wandering spirit. She admitted that she might have been affected at Changi Village where she went to have dinner with her boyfriend. The dark isolated car park areas might have been rather conducive for spirits and perhaps when

she was walking along such places, a spirit might have followed her home. As for the Pontianak, she rationalized that her case was not the first encounter within her estate. Her flat at Yishun faces a forested area and her room faces the dumpster. Her brother's friend who lived across their flat once told them that she should close her windows at night because there are 'birds' nearby the area and they might just appear in her room. They were both puzzled as to why birds would fly at night and asked the friend if he meant 'bats'. His reply: "No, not that kind of bird, the other one. The one with long hair". They realized he meant the Pontianak. Another incident, a pregnant relative came by their house for hari raya and left 30 minutes. Her husband later admitted to Haz's family that when they were about to enter Haz's flat, his wife saw the image of a Pontianak at the end of the common corridor. In another instance, her mother was washing the dishes and felt as if someone was looking at her from the kitchen window. From the corner of her eyes, she saw a pontianak-like figure, described as a blur image of black and white looking at her. She spoke to it loudly telling the spirit to not disturb and to go back where it belongs. I asked her if her neighbours were experiencing similar disturbances. She replied that their house was the only Malay house along the corridor stretch and emphasized further that Malay ghost would not disturb the Chinese (Hantu Melayu tak kacau orang Cina). She provided the example of her brother's friend who was aware of Pontianak sightings around her area.

Haz recalled that the previous owners, a Malay husband and wife with two children were strangely quick to sell the house. They sold it to her parents at a very cheap rate and did not mind that her parents were going to move in only a few months after because they had not packed yet. Haz described her house as a 4 bedroom flat. She remembered when she first entered her new house she was instinctively driven to her current bedroom. It was the smallest room but she felt as if it was meant for her. She posits a strange coincidence- the previous owner and his wife and children slept in the smallest room despite the existence of a larger master bedroom. She postulated that the previous owner might have experienced strange encounters in the house which is why they were quick to want to sell it at a cheaper rate. Haz said her family did not suspect anything because the house belonged to Malays who were most probably Muslims and who are most likely to 'respect their place of living through prayers'. It would however be a different story if the house had belonged to a Chinese family because their "cultural practices are different". Furthermore, Chinese cultural practices were seen to be "impure" or might be 'haram' and as such the house may not be blessed by Allah and malaikat (angels). The Ustaz who arrived at Haz's flat to perform the exorcism rites said that there are spirits lingering in the flat because the house wasn't 'semak' or 'cleansed/ thoroughly checked' properly. Haz mentioned that her family had a kenduri or a housewarming/blessings ceremony where they invited relatives to recite quranic verses to cleanse the house. Apparently, they did not do enough.

I asked if she felt motivated to perform religious practices such as Praying frequently in her room to avoid being disturbed. Haz claims that the idea of being religious did not occur to her. She knows it might reduce her chances of being disturbed as spirits do not dare haunt those with a strong 'iman' (strong faith in Allah) but she is not entirely convinced that religion works for her. She claims she is not a religious person, praying would seem rather force. She practices other kinds of rituals such as washing her feet before she enters the house and greeting "asalamualaikum" (the

muslim manner of greeting before entering an area) as a form of respect to the spirits and also to hint her muslimness. Haz felt that the possession did not have much impact on her lifestyle other than the fact that she now avoids isolated dark places at night. She maintains that sometimes she is rather skeptical of her own possession experience. But when she recalls she feels it was impossible for three people who hardly knew each other to provide the same conclusions with regards to her spirit disturbance. Furthermore, she was not able to account for her change in behavior since she has never been a jealous and temperamental girlfriend. If it had always been in her nature to be temperamental, she would have done the whole scratching and screaming outburst when her fiancé decided to break off their engagement a few months after her possession. Instead she reacted calmly and rationally, which she felt has always been her disposition. She maintains that there was not any instability in their relationship during the period when she was supposedly possessed. The decision to break off the engagement was a mutual decision because they both felt they were too young to be committing too much and planning for marriage. They continue to remain good friends despite their break-up.

Appendix B2

Fieldwork: Trip to Old Changi Hospital

20/4/2004

Participants: Khai, 24, Faizal. 24 and myself

Notes:

I met Khai and Faizal at a birthday party which was held at Aloha Changi. On my way to the Chalet at Aloha Changi, my parents, my domestic helper as well as two middle-aged aunts warned me to “hati-hati”(be careful), “mulut jangan celupa”(refrain from articulating taboo), “Nampak benda jangan macam-macam”(don’t panic or fuss about)...or first reaction “tempat tu kan keras.” (or say that the place is strange). And as an added measure they collectively warned me “jangan pandai-pandai mencari..” (don’t try to find trouble)(suspecting that I might decide to go “ghost haunting” at Old change hospital since it was nearby) I tried to explain that if I did go “ghost haunting” it was strictly for research purposes and I was reprimanded as being someone “naïve” or “pandai-pandai cari nahas” (one who looks for trouble). They proceeded to regale stories of an uncle so and so or a cousin so and so who had been possessed because they were at a “tempat keras”(strange or uncanny/haunted place). Since I did not plan to go “ghost haunting” I did not pay attention to their words since I thought they were irrelevant.

At the party, Sri introduced me to her good friend Zainab who has been fascinated with the Pontianak for some time. When I first told Sri about my research project she informed me about a friend who is “dying to rewrite the story of the Pontianak because she is tired of narratives vilifying the Pontianak as a monstrous evil creature when in actual fact she might not be so.” In between chicken wings and drinks Zainab and me had a very enlightening chat about the Pontianak. Zainab told me she came from a family lineage that possess knowledge with regards to the supernatural “ilmu-ilmu bomoh” and that some of her family members were involved in possession rituals, had been possessed/disturbed before and interestingly, some of them were “hypersensitive” they could see ghosts. Such skills are considered “special” within the family and such traits were passed down genetically, from grandparents, to some of their children and later passed down to the grandchildren. Zainab thought it was unfortunate she was not blessed with such capabilities but excitedly told me that her nephew, who would be at the party, had the ability to “see” and I could ask him more questions about the Pontianak whom he had “seen” before.

Zainab: I think the Pontianak is a very misunderstood character. For all you know she may not even be evil...it’s just that at the point of time, zaman kampung kampung (the kampung days), villagers needed to point their fingers on something as to why women die during childbirths, or explanations towards birth complication. I mean in the past villagers were not as literate, medical knowledge were not that advanced or disseminated widely in villages so it was convenient to explain that something like the Pontianak was behind all of those deaths. It’s just convenient to push the blame to a dead woman who does not have the capacity to justify or defend herself. Besides when you get the entire

village to believe in such narratives it's just easier to galvanize the entire village because such forms of fear promotes supposedly ideal values such as protecting morality, virtue, adat. People are also afraid to disobey certain pantang (moral rules) "coming home late", "pre-marital sex" because they are afraid of things like the Pontianak might come after them. I actually went to a play organized by NUS, I can't remember when (2001...Someone interrupted her and told her it was Pontianak: A love story) but the play was so beautifully done very haunting. We had to meet at Sembawang MRT Station, the play was very well received. It was interactive-play, environmentally site-specific...so as audience you feel like you are part of it as well. When we arrived at Kampong Wak Hassan where the play was held there were actors acting as villagers and they were gossiping loudly about the death of some woman. When the Pontianak came it was just so eerie...I think because the ambience was there being in a kampong and all. Very haunting. I'm getting goosebumps now telling you how I remember the play. They were trying to explain why the Kampong had a fire...somehow the blame went to the Pontianak. They were trying to burn her to destroy her and somehow the fire spread such that the entire village was burnt down. In a way the legends surrounding the Pontianak is like the western idea of a witch-hunt created to identify the misfits of society and the Pontianak as the pregnant woman who fails to live through her pregnancy seems to represent the embodiment of what makes for a good witch hunt.

Ad: As a young child did you watch any Horror films about the Pontianak

Zainab: of course I did...in those days such films were incredibly popular but now it's of course not scary.

Ad: Are you afraid of the Pontianak

Zainab: of course I am, I mean who isn't? but I'm not afraid of the Pontianak like literally. For example if you ask me to watch a horror show and the Pontianak comes out flying and all wearing coloured make-up it's just so contrived it's not scary. You can see how the Pontianak is being made. But those horror films like Nangnak I think that's scary...the idea of the ghost. You are anticipating it, the whole ambivalence is she real is she a ghost or not...these to me motivates horror. Horror is when you have to rethink this entire notion of what is exactly monstrous. Most horror films on the Pontianak are getting so cliché. Girl has premarital sex, dies during pregnancy and comes back to haunt. And the entire focus on the monstrous feminine...that narrative HAS to be re-written.

Why is the Pontianak so monstrous? Is it because patriarchy created her to be so? I think what needs to be injected into this entire imagination of the Pontianak is a feminist perspective. For all you know, maybe the Pontianak still exists because she is trying to reclaim a certain part of her identity that we have displaced as something monstrous. I would like to do something like the Nangnak where she came back and she was actually a peaceful ghost but she got angry because people were trying to part her and her husband, and trying to vilify her as evil. Maybe the Pontianak wasn't even an evil character something happened along the way and she got blamed for a lot of evil happening in villages for example. Biasala orang dulu dulu (typical of the older generation)...they lead

very insular lives...what ever happens outside of the village they don't really pay attention to, issues were always about immediate social network and environment. As such certain stories maybe about someone's death gets hyped up and since they are not really literate, such stories are usually orally transmitted...some distortion might occur...dari mulut orang ke mulut orang (oral narratives) the story would become different. I believe along the way this idea of the Pontianak as evil and scary became popular. I am very interested in this whole idea of why female ghosts are scary and in our culture male ghosts are non-existent. The orang minyak is just racist and ridiculous and as such his myth died out a long time ago. The Pontianak still exists so there is something really important and interesting going on especially within our community. I have in fact spoken to film producers and some of them are very much interested in my project to create an alternative narrative for the Pontianak, one that doesn't attempt to vilify her, instead appreciate the woman she is. I just need to start writing on a script or find someone who can write a script or collaborate ideas. Funding is already settled once I have a script.

A few hours later Khai came to the party and Zainab immediately introduced us.

Z: this is the nephew I was talking about the one who can see. And this is Ad she's the one I just told you, the one researching on the Pontianak...maybe we can all go for an excursion to Old change hospital

A: Are you coming with us?

Z: no I just follow you and wait outside because I am too afraid to go in.

Personal notes: The thought of going to OCH never came across my mind because I doubted I had the courage to do so in the first place after hearing many reminders and advice that the place was "keras" and I should never trespass such an area with so many horror stories because I might never know how I might offend some spirits who would get even by "disturbing" me and then decide to "follow" me home. But it was also embarrassing to be in a situation where my respondent appeared more adventurous more excited and more passionate and knowledgeable about my topic than I was (which was a very humbling experience, something that all social science students should go through: because Zainab told me that one of the pantangs (taboos) include the one in which the a woman who dies during the childbirth had to be kafan-ed (shrouded) with a batu lesung (tombstone) in her arms to replicate the baby she lost to prevent her from preying on children) and it would be completely impolite to say "no". Besides the entire time we were chatting I kept telling (if u have read here call me! We can write to each other) her how much I was interested to know, how much I was curious to learn... to reject the opportunity based on my preconceived notions of "danger" and then to attempt to write a research on the phenomenology of the Pontianak made me feel like a poseur. I just had to get my hands dirty on this one and find out what and how it really feels to fear, something which I had not really gone through before my entire life.

Apparently Zainab suggested the ghost excursion because she thought the adolescent boys at the party were interested in it. But it appears she was mistaken because when she asked her son and Faizal (at the time when I was first introduced to Zainab) they told her

they were not going anymore because she was afraid. She managed to convince Khai to take me for the walk since he was braver having seen ghosts before.

Meeting Khai

Khai did not actually seem excited about going for the ghost excursion at first but since his aunt had promoted his “powers to see” he was encouraged to see through it. Besides I was practically pleading him because 1) I had never met anyone who could “see” ghosts and 2) someone who was brave enough to give me a tour of OCH at midnight. Before we went for the trip we sat around the barbecue pit and Khai started opening up to me by telling me stories of ghost haunts with his friends. He has gone to OCH a number of times. There was once he went with a group of friends and while walking down the hallway he looked up and happened to see some cloth-like movements above the ceiling where they were walking. One of his friends had the same capabilities as he “boleh Nampak” (has the ability to see) but they kept quiet and tried not to be affected by it because if the others who couldn’t see knew what they saw they would be affected and get scared. He walked further down the hallway and claimed he saw a Pontianak moving fleetingly past a door. He was shocked but tried to remain calm. He said seeing ghosts had become such a norm for him that he would get shocked for awhile but he would get over it. He couldn’t really say when was the first time he saw spirits because when he was a child he wasn’t able to understand that they were supposed to be “scary” or that something was “abnormal” looking he thought they were just people who looked different. He only realised he possessed the ability to see when he started to understand “horror”, from looking at horror films. When asked what did he feel when he saw the Pontianak at OCH with his friends he claimed it was scary but normal. It did not really affect him. For him it was more of a visual experience than a “felt” one, he did not experience Goosebumps except for instances where he couldn’t see but could “sense”.

At OCH

The gate was locked so Khai suggested we climbed the steps leading to the main building of OCH. The steps were buried in long weeds and it was a steep climb. We did not have proper torches, all we had were two mobile phones that fortunately had torchlight functions. Although the place was filled with graffiti (route666 here, mat rep takut apa...belo! (slang for “hey malay dude, what are you afraid of? Fool!)) Skull and bones graffiti, it was relatively clean despite broken windows, broken shelves. The place was largely intact. We could see clearly where the wards once were however it was too dark for me to read the signs on the walls. Or perhaps I didn’t dare to look up to the ceilings too much after hearing Khai’s story about seeing a sheet of white cloth dropping down from the ceiling. We went up and down the stairs and since it was dark the corners looked the same. I distinguished a location from another through graffiti more than anything else. I thought it was good that Khai was not overly familiar with the history OCH so he was more of a guide trying to find us pathways to walk instead of giving us a tour on what was what before. I thought if had told me things such as this place was the SAF ward or torture chamber I would have been “affected” and start imposing fear on myself which might put me, him and Faizal in “danger”. It helped that we were smoking it was a

good distraction. When my cigarette ended I politely asked Khai for another one and he said “why are you asking me? Have you walked this kind of tour before to know that it’s good to walk with “bara” (fire)?” I said no. I just felt like one.” He gave it to me and I noticed him walking and his breaths seem deeper. I lit up my cig and asked if he was ok, we were walking up a flight of steps and he hesitated. And took a sharp intake of breath “eesh.” So I told him it’s ok tell me later. He said “this I have to tell.” We walked on for a bit, I was worried when Khai’s phone-torch stopped working at some parts but I tried to remain calm. I was just worried that my worry or fear might disrupt his calm disposition which might not be favourable to us because he was the only one who knew the way out. At some points of the walk (we spent a good 45 minutes in the building), we encountered dead-ends and had to turn our backs and re-trace our steps. I dreaded this experience of dead ends because I imagined us to be lost (everything looks the same so each path was trial and error) and then find ourselves trapped. Thinking about it now, I should have told myself that we had mobile phones and it was not hard to call the police but somehow that thought didn’t occur to me. I was very comforted at the background sounds of motorbikers ramming their acceleration because they were reminders of the present time. Being in the old change hospital made me feel as if I was in a warped time zone. There were things like hosereels and the stainless steel lifts that comforted me because I could associate them with a sense of the familiar. As much as I was trying to look for the Pontianak I was also trying my best not to see. I’d look hard into a dark room, turn my head to explore corners but just enough for me to catch a glimpse. I was just afraid of looking too hard because I understood that I was not prepared at all to be “rewarded” for looking too hard. Khai appeared disturbed at some points he would rub his arms and murmur comments like “sial-ah”...”tempat ni dah boleh rasa...(oh crap, i can feel something here)” and his sentences would trail off. Faizal and me didn’t dare question him because we realised it was just not an appropriate time to do so. I told him “takpe nanti kau bilang aku eh (it’s ok, you can tell me later)”. Khai said that we had walked the entire building and what was left was the mortuary. Then he added “tapi...dasyhat ah (but it feels really horrifying)”. I was very curious to know how “dasyhat (horrifying) it was” so I asked if it’s really that bad and he confided that he wasn’t that confident to bring us there because the last time he went it was quite horrifying for him. We started to make our way back and saw the gate where our not-quite-brave friends were waiting for us. We walked towards the gate and realised there was an opening where we could exit. I felt sort of relieved that the entire tour was over until Khai said out loud “alamak. Ada hal sikit ah. (oh dear, we have a problem)” I replied “what?” Khai: “patutnye (actually) we have to end where we start. Tak bagus (it’s not good) kalau (if) we never end we start. Macam kita belum habis this thing (it’s as if we didn’t complete the journey).” By then Faizal was already on the other side of the gate we had to call him to come in. We told him what khai said and started retracing our steps. We could hear our friends telling us “eh come out. You can walk through the gate come out!” I just waved my hands and turned my back I didn’t want to explain out loud because it might just make them unnecessarily worried. Khai told me “the problem is, I’m not sure how to get back where we started. Because all the steps we took were based on trial and error” We entered a part of the building that we did not enter before. At the entrance there were Styrofoam containers of burnt joss sticks and offering. Khai was reluctant to go through so I told him “look we don’t know how to get back all the entrances seem blocked. This is a new

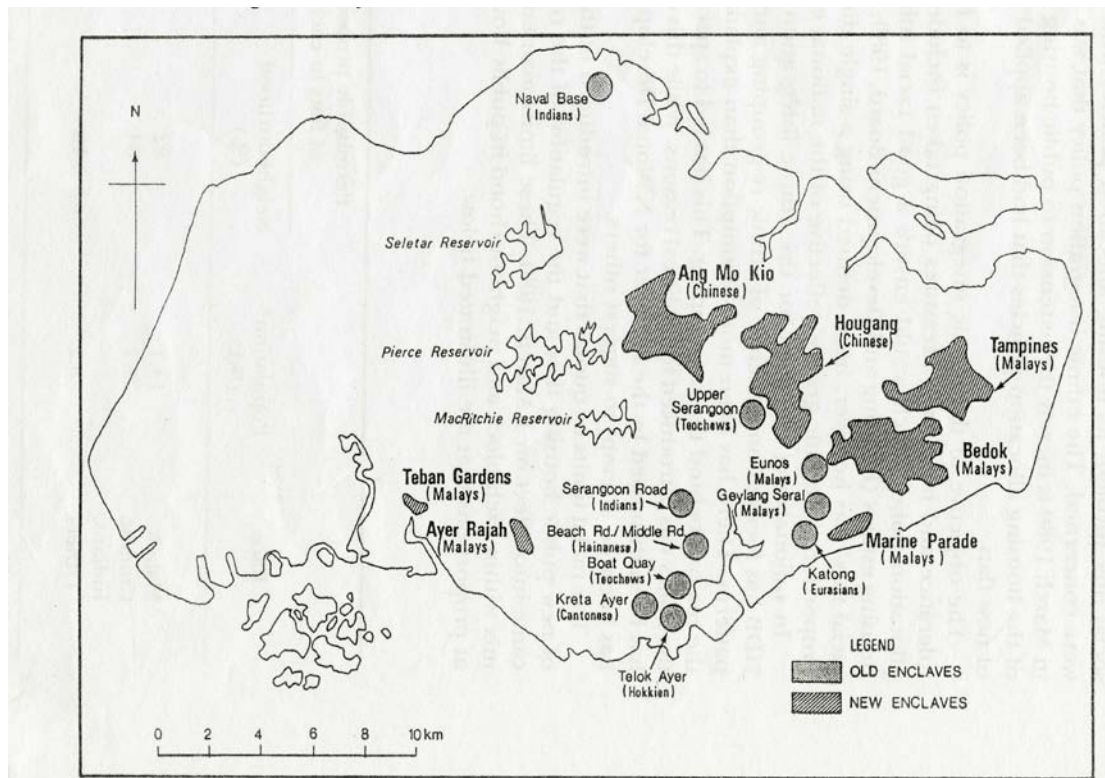
area is this ok?" Faizal kept quiet and khai motioned for us to go in. We were careful not to disturb the path of joss sticks. It was much more scarier retracing our steps back. Khai mentioned we had to go the exact same way. I did not like the idea of experiencing familiarity with the building I wanted the experience to be as forgettable because I knew that any memory of the tour retained in my mind would be cause for unnecessary paranoia later on. True enough I seemed to remember the "retracing" part of the journey and our experiences walking through it. Khai also appeared more uncomfortable during this leg of the journey I noticed the changes in his breathing more frequently but it could be because he was tired but there were times when he looked away. We managed to find our way out but towards the end of the walk Khai asked if I wanted to continue walking and exploring a new area I said I didn't mind. Faizal complained he was starting to get "very hot" but he could bear with the heat. Khai claimed he was starting to get very hot too. But he told me we could just continue walking. I thought it was strange that the both of them felt heat when they were dressed in tee shirts, jeans and slippers while I was dressed in a long sleeve shirt, Bermudas and shoes. It must be our bodies had different ways of adapting to the humid weather. Khai said maybe he could bring us to the mortuary. I was encouraged by his sudden change in terms of his courage level and told him we should go since we were already in the area.

He was leading us towards another building and we were walking around 10 steps across a narrow concrete pathway. He was looking through a large broken window when he suddenly stopped in his tracks. I was the last one in the single-file line. He let out a loud "sialah...mak kau (oh damn!)" and motioned for me and Faizal to look through the window. Faizal claimed he saw a glimpse of it. I didn't know what they saw because both of them started walking away. Khai wondered why I didn't see because she was just there. I asked him what was there and he said "I think cik pon ah, siapa lagi rambut macam panjang pakai putih-putih...(i think it's the Pontianak. Who else can it be, with long hair and white robe?)"

We decided to turn back because khai suddenly lost his courage. We went down the steps and our friends had left us. On the way back khai asked me "Ad kau Nampak mata aku kilau tak (Ad, are my eyes glazed?)" he was raising his shoulders as if in deep shrug, looking straight at me. khai: "Macam mata aku besar". I guess he meant if his pupils were enlarged. I looked in his eyes and saw that his pupils were really large. He told me that might be a cause of concern he just had to calm down. When we got back I asked if he was affected and he said no. But my friend and I caught him sitting on a nearby kerb and his body letting out a slight shiver.

[illegible]

Appendix C2



Singapore Racial Enclaves in the 1980s