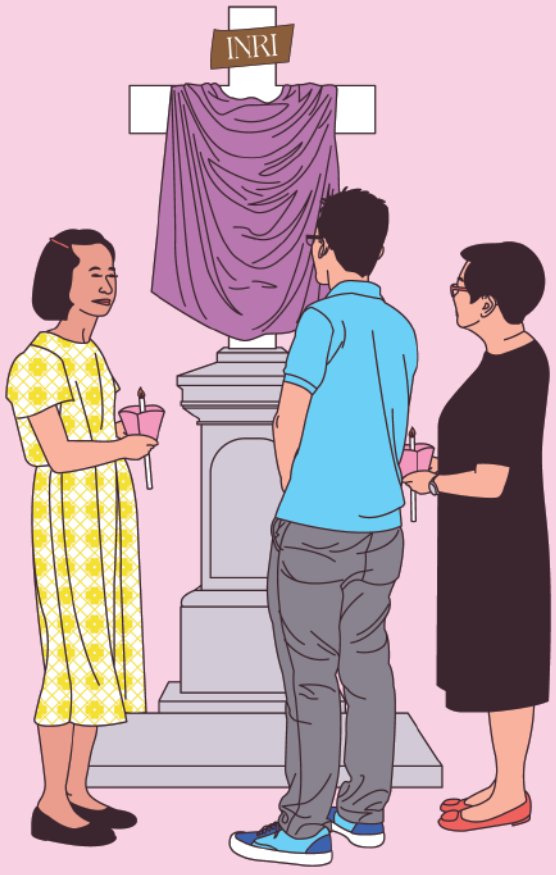

NO. 41 VOLUME 13 ISSUE 01

MUSE SG

THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE ISSUE

National Heritage Board

DID YOU KNOW

Did you know that people used to dig for *remis* (clams in Malay) on the shores of the eastern coast using their hands or wooden spatulas?

For more stories about the east coast, explore the #BedokHeritageTrail at Roots.sg.

FOREWORD

Singapore may be a young nation, but the traditional, cultural and religious practices that represent our diverse society reach deep into antiquity. These practices, both communal and individual, are key elements of our Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). With Singapore having ratified the UNESCO convention to safeguard ICH in 2018 and having nominated Hawker Culture to the UNESCO Representative List of ICH, MUSE SG is launching a two-part series that uncovers the various ICH practices in Singapore.

In this first issue, the National Heritage Board has partnered with students from the National University of Singapore's History Society to jointly explore seven traditions and cultural practices in Singapore.

We begin the issue with an introduction that delves into the different forms of ICH and how these cultural expressions have, over time, become part of our cultural identity as Singaporeans. Moving on to our feature article on Malay dance, we examine the wide-ranging cultural and artistic traditions that this genre encompasses. Having evolved from court and kampong as well as incorporating influences from across the globe, innovation forms an intrinsic part of this art form. The theme of plurality is apparent too in our article on Eurasian cuisine, which shows how family, culture and community come together in delicious fashion.

The historical depth and multicultural character of heritage practices in Singapore is further underlined in our articles on Ayurveda and Catholic observations of the Easter Triduum. Ayurveda, drawing from the ancient Vedic tradition, continues to be a holistic philosophy and a health management option for Singaporeans of different ethnicities today. Likewise, during Easter, Catholics in Singapore join the worldwide Catholic community in observing liturgical prayers and rituals that are steeped in tradition. Some commemorations here, however, incorporate practices influenced by Southeast Asian culture.

In articles on the soya sauce industry and effigy-makers in Singapore, we focus on the often overlooked heritage of craft. In an era of mass production and fast-changing tastes, local soya sauce makers rely on the artisanal quality of their products, sustained by traditional methods and family-based brand heritage. Likewise, Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop, the last traditional maker of religious effigies in Singapore, keeps time-honoured craft methods and cultural transmission alive even as they find new ways of doing business.

Finally, our article on songbird rearing takes a look at the Singaporean characteristics of a practice that has been popular across various eras and cultures in world history. In Singapore, songbird rearing has taken its own form, with local methods of training and diet, and carefully honed criteria for competition. More than that, it has become a culture that emphasises community, with regular sharing of tips and ideas, whether online or face to face.

On behalf of the team at MUSE SG, we hope that you will find the articles informative and insightful, and we hope this issue may pique your curiosity to further explore Singapore's multi-faceted ICH!

MUSE SG TEAM

PUBLISHER

National Heritage Board
61 Stamford Road,
#03-08, Stamford Court,
Singapore 178892

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Chang Hwee Nee

DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE
Alvin Tan (Policy & Community)

MUSE SG TEAM
Director, Education & Community Outreach
Wai Yin Pryke

Editors
Norsaleen Salleh
Stefanie Tham
Nicholas Yeo

DESIGN & LAYOUT
Oneplusone
The Workbench LLP

PHOTOGRAPHY
Alex Heng

COPYEDITING
Alvin Chua, A Distillery

PRINTING
Hobee Print Pte Ltd

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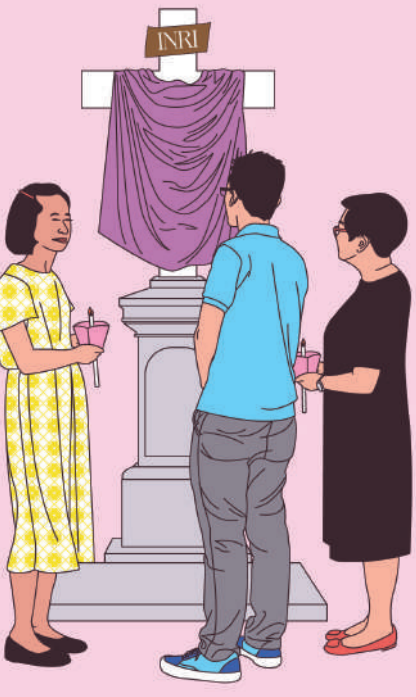

Singapore's Intangible Culture Heritage:

The role of living heritage in the identity of a multicultural nation

Text by Nicholas Yeo

01 Audiences enjoying a traditional drum performance as part of the 2017 Singapore Heritage Festival at Bukit Pasoh. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

What are the ties that bind Singapore, a metropolis and a young nation, with cultural traditions thousands of years old? How do Singaporeans, a people always primed for the future, connect with and continually redefine the practices of venerable religions and cultures brought from far-flung shores? The answers lie in the humble prayers offered up during Ramadan, Deepavali and other celebrations of faith, the efforts of ordinary families during the tomb-cleaning of Qing Ming, the deep dedication to craft and the arts inherent within *dikir barat*, as well as the making of heritage cuisines and other cultural practices.

All of the above, and many other practices, are part of Singapore's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). ICH is the living, everyday heritage practised across the island by the varied communities in Singapore. Over the years, these forms of shared cultural expressions have evolved and adapted to our changing environment and have grown to be part of our cultural identity as Singaporeans, whether at a personal, communal or national level.

How do we define ICH? Who are the people and communities behind it, and what can be done to ensure these rich traditions of ours continue to be around for generations to come? This article, and this issue, will explore some of these ICH narratives, as well as the heritage practices that have helped define us as a people.

Understanding Intangible Cultural Heritage

ICH was formally defined when UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. According to UNESCO, ICH is defined as:

The six categories of ICH in Singapore

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Social Practices, Rituals and Festive Events

Practices that help reaffirm and strengthen the identity of those who practise them as a group, community, or society at large. Often, these elements are closely associated with important social, cultural or religious events and may be practised or performed in private or in public. Examples in Singapore include Pongal and Hari Raya Haji.

Performing Arts

Forms of traditional creative activities and expressions that include dance, theatre and instrumental music. Examples in Singapore include various Indian dance forms and *nanyin*.

Traditional Craftsmanship

Traditional skills and knowledge involved in the crafting of products that range from clothing and decorative art, to musical instruments and household objects. Examples in Singapore include the making of gold jewellery by Indian goldsmiths and the making of wood-fired pottery.

Knowledge and Practices Concerning Nature and the Universe

The knowledge, skills, practices and representations that are derived from communities interacting with the natural environment and the universe. Examples in Singapore include Ayurveda and traditional Malay medicine.

02 From religious-based festivals like the Nine Emperor Gods festival (top) to performing arts like wayang Peranakan (bottom), Singapore is home to a wide array of diverse and colourful ICH practices. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

03 Hari Raya Puasa sees Muslim households coming together to celebrate the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. Some households invite friends or family of different ethnicities to partake in the festivities. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

Oral Traditions and Expressions

Traditions such as songs, folk tales and storytelling that use language to transmit knowledge and expresses one's cultural values. Examples in Singapore include *dondang sayang* and wayang Peranakan.

Food Heritage

The different cuisines, their methods of preparation, as well as the sociocultural contexts and spaces in which food is prepared and consumed. Examples in Singapore include Eurasian cuisine and laksa.

"the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage". It is "transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity".[1]

On 22 February 2018, Singapore announced that it had ratified the UNESCO 2003 convention and became a Member State to the convention. In doing so, Singapore committed itself to the safeguarding and promotion of its ICH for future generations. Since then, the nation has been on a journey to raise awareness of our ICH through various new initiatives, including the launch of Singapore's ICH Inventory.[2] Most recently, we nominated Hawker Culture in Singapore as the nation's first item for inscription onto the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.[3]

Currently, there are six categories of ICH in Singapore. Five categories followed the UNESCO convention's definitions, while Food Heritage was included as an additional category. This was added after a nationwide poll of over 3,000 respondents in 2018 named it as the most important aspect of Singapore's ICH, a reflection of our love of diverse cuisines.

Adapting to challenges faced by ICH in Singapore

ICH practices in Singapore face many challenges as a result of globalisation, technological disruption and economic and cultural shifts. A number of practices may wane if they do not remain relevant to their communities.

Some of these challenges are explored in this issue. The article "Umami magic: The soya sauce tradition in Singapore" reveals that Singapore was once home to an estimated 70 to 80 soya sauce breweries of various sizes in the 1950s and 1960s.

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However, economic challenges such as increasing operating costs over the decades have led to many breweries having to wind up or move overseas. Today, there are fewer than 10 breweries still operating in Singapore. Those have stayed the course, including Tai Hua Food Industries and Nanyang Sauce, bank on both the fundamental strengths of their craft heritage and creative marketing strategies to meet the demands of the modern customer.

Other heritage businesses forge their own adaptations to changing times. In the article, "Technique and tradition in effigy-making", we share how Ng Tze Yong, a fourth generation member of the family behind Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop has helped to reignite interest in the craft of Chinese effigy-making by conducting tours and workshops through the global travel platform of Airbnb. In "Reimagining Malay Dance", we explore the ways in which practitioners have incorporated regional and contemporary influences, not only as part of artistic innovation, but also to interest a new generation of practitioners and dance aficionados. While the challenges that heritage businesses and practitioners face vary, at their core lies a constant endeavour to stay relevant to fast-changing social and economic circumstances.

Intangible Cultural Heritage is all around us

In a densely populated city-state like Singapore, blessed with a diversity of cultures and religious traditions, many of us encounter ICH in our everyday lives. Located in neighbourhoods across Singapore, hawker centres are home to just about every delectable cuisine imaginable, and serve as community dining spaces where our multicultural food heritage and the skills of our master hawkers can flourish in a sustainable way. Elsewhere in the neighbourhood, one might be able to pop into a traditional Chinese medical hall filled with remedies for various ailments, or visit a *jamu* (herbal medicine) or Ayurveda practitioner. In estates like Ang Mo Kio or Bedok, you may chance upon the bird-singing corners like the Kebun Baru Birdsinging Club that come alive with the sounds of prized songbirds on the weekends.

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04 To help ICH to evolve with the times, practitioners like Soultari Amin Farid (left) and Ng Tze Yong (right) have developed their craft to attract a new generation of audiences. *Courtesy of Bhumi Collective and Joseph Nair*

05 *Jamu* is a form of traditional Malay medicine that makes use of herbal remedies to treat the body. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

06 Members of the Eurasian Association Singapore performing the traditional Jinkli Nona song and Branyo dance. *Courtesy of Eurasian Association, Singapore*

07 Hawker centres such as Geylang Serai Market and Food Centre serve as community dining spaces where people enjoy the multitude of cuisines that make up Singapore's food heritage. *Courtesy of National Environment Agency*

Closer to our own homes, living among people of different cultural and religious beliefs means that we can see, hear, and sometimes smell how ICH practices are carried out. The presence of lighted *diyas* or colourful *rangoli* pieces at Indian households signals the arrival of Deepavali, while the all too familiar songs from *getai* (song-stage) performances resound throughout the neighbourhood during the Hungry Ghost Festival. Finally, who can forget or resist the aromatic smell of homemade rendang from households whipping up traditional Malay cuisine, particularly when Hari Raya Puasa comes around!

One individual, multiple practices

ICH practices serve important roles in contributing to a sense of identity and belonging at national, community and individual levels. Some Singaporeans may also find themselves participating in practices from various cultural traditions, paving intersecting connections across communities. For example, a Chinese person who partakes in a reunion dinner on Lunar New Year's eve may also be a devotee at a Hindu temple. At the same time, a Catholic could also join their friends' Deepavali or Hari Raya gatherings.

Many mixed-ethnicity families also participate in or perform traditional practices from multiple cultures. Indeed, migration and inter-marriages over the years have given rise to communities such as those of Eurasian and Peranakan descent, who have contributed immensely to Singapore's ICH through traditional crafts like Peranakan beadwork and embroidery, performing arts including the music of Jinkli Nona and the Branyo dance, as well as sumptuous dishes like *curry debal*, *ayam buah keluak* and *sugee* cake.

Initiatives to safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage in Singapore

ICH belongs to everyone who calls Singapore home, and plays an integral role in our traditions and way of life. To highlight its importance, ICH has been included under "Our Cultures" as one of the four pillars of Our SG Heritage Plan, the first masterplan

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08 In 2020, the campaign *Thaipusam – A Journey of Devotion* was launched to raise awareness of social practices and communities involved in this annual festival. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

09 Singapore's first community gallery dedicated to ICH, Kreta Ayer Heritage Gallery organises exhibitions and programmes to showcase cultural art forms found in the Kreta Ayer precinct. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

09

(2018-2022) for the future of Singapore's heritage and museum sector. Since the launch of the plan in 2018, the National Heritage Board (NHB) has been actively carrying out various ways to raise awareness of ICH, while also continuously working with the community to co-develop initiatives to safeguard the various ICH traditions for the future.

One such initiative is Singapore's Inventory of ICH, which is co-created by the community and supported by extensive research and documentation. Launched in April 2018, the inventory is a continuously expanding repository of Singapore's ICH, and presently lists a total of 88 ICH elements. Information from the inventory has also been used to raise awareness of ICH through online campaigns by NHB such as *Thaipusam – A Journey of Devotion* (2020) and *Ramadan Together* (2020).

Other initiatives to raise awareness of ICH include the opening of the Kreta Ayer Heritage Gallery in July 2019, the first community gallery dedicated to ICH in Singapore that currently has cultural art forms like Chinese calligraphy, tea appreciation and Chinese opera on display. The Stewards of Singapore's Intangible Cultural Heritage award scheme, launched in October 2019, is another ICH initiative and recognises practitioners dedicated to the promotion and transmission of ICH.

What's next?

The journey of understanding, documenting and the safeguarding of ICH in Singapore involves each and every one of us. While practitioners and communities play a pivotal role as the people with the skills and knowledge to carry out these practices, organisations like heritage groups, non-profits, and government agencies like NHB do their part by documenting and raising awareness of ICH through platforms like the ICH Inventory, social media content, guided tours, exhibitions and programmes.

The articles in this ICH edition of MUSE SG aim to foster a better understanding and appreciation of the cultural practices found in Singapore. Whether it is discovering the origins and diversity of ICH in Singapore, or admiring the dedication that practitioners put into the craft, we hope that the articles will spur you into deeper conversations and appreciation of our shared ICH.[4]

Notes

[1] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003", October 17, 2003, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

[2] National Heritage Board, "Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage," https://roots.sg/ich.

[3] National Heritage Board, "Hawker Culture in Singapore," https://www.oursgheritage.sg/hawker-culture-in-singapore.

[4] National Heritage Board, "Stewards of Singapore's Intangible Cultural Heritage Award", October 30, 2019, https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/awards.

Umami Magic:

The soya sauce tradition in Singapore

Text by Koh Hong Kai

Whether we know it as *jiangqing*, *kecap*, *shoyu* or *ganjang*, soya sauce is a symbolic bridge that connects the diverse foods and cultures of Asia. Salty or sweet, but always full of umami, this millennia-old condiment often accompanies the favourite foods of Singaporeans, from *mee goreng* to chicken rice to sushi.

Beyond its wide array of variants, the flavour and aroma of soya sauce is shaped by production methods and environment. Singapore-made sauces will differ from those made elsewhere, and recipes closely held for generations by different brands add even more variety. In this article, we take a look at the heritage of soya sauce making on the island and the businesses sustaining traditional sauce-making.

Soya sauce may have been derived from *jiang*, a fermented soybean paste extant in China from at least the Han Dynasty.[1] *Jiang* was also made from meat and shellfish, and was part of an ancient tradition of fermented condiments that arose independently across various cultures. These included fish sauce in Southeast Asia and *garum*, a fish sauce popular in the Mediterranean.[2] The first textual reference to a type of soya sauce, *qingjiang*, appears in the Chinese text *Simin Yueling*, published in 160 CE.[3] Historians theorise that condiments like *qingjiang* and other soya sauces served as a way of stretching the use of salt, an expensive commodity at the time.[4]

It is not known when exactly soya sauce came into widespread use in Southeast Asia, but the condiment is likely to have been long established in this region, given its centuries-old trade and cultural links with East Asia. Soya sauce only began to be referenced in textual sources in this region from the 17th century, after the arrival of European traders and colonialists, although soybeans and soy foods like tofu were made in Indonesia centuries earlier.[5] In the same way, the earliest known mention of soya sauce in Singapore comes from John Crawfurd's listing of the island's

01 Vats containing soy beans undergoing fermentation at Tai Hua Food Industries, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

02

02 The three key ingredients used by Tai Hua Food Industries to produce all types of soya sauce (from left): salt, soy beans and wheat flour. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

03

03 Soy beans are naturally baked and aged under the sun at Nanyang Sauce's factory, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

Making the grade: Traditional soya sauce production

In Singapore's globalised marketplace, consumers can choose from soya sauces manufactured across the world, as well as varieties from *shoyu* to *kecap manis*. Local manufacturers have long competed against heavyweight brands from Hong Kong, Japan and China, and some bank on their heritage and traditional methods to retain customers.

Mass-market soya sauce production often includes the chemical hydrolysis of soybeans with food-grade hydrochloric acid. This process serves to break down the bean's proteins into flavour compounds, and is quicker and more efficient than the traditional method of adding *koji* (*aspergillus* mould spores, a fermenting agent) to steamed beans and allowing the mixture to develop into sauce over many months. Many consumers are of the opinion however, that soya sauce made through chemical hydrolysis lacks the full-bodied taste and fragrance of naturally fermented sauces.[10] Beyond brewing conditions, storage temperatures, the *koji* agents used and the quality of the soybeans all make a difference as well.

Nanyang Sauce, which established its factory in 1959, is one company that adheres to the traditional style of sauce-making.[11] Ken Koh, the third-generation owner of the company, recalls the reaction of his grandfather when business consultants proposed the use of chemical hydrolysis: "I remember he stood up and told them to get out! I was a little boy in primary school, and I was terrified, wondering what was happening. He pointed at me and said: 'If I don't dare to feed my grandson this new method of making sauce, how can I feed the rest of Singapore?' That left a deep impact on me because (it showed) the values and tradition of not short-changing our customers, and integrity in using the right way to make sauce."[12]

Today, companies like Nanyang and Kwong Woh Hing continue to produce soya sauce by coating soybeans with wheat flour and *koji*, leaving them on trays for the first fermentation stage before steeping the soy mash for months under the sun in earthen "dragon vats". The complexity of the taste comes from the wheat flour breaking down into sugars and alcohols, while the soy proteins are gradually converted into a variety of taste compounds.[13]

This depth of flavour is what keeps consumers coming back, as explained by Kwong Woh Hing director Simon Woo in a 2017 newspaper article. "My clients prefer soya sauce fermented naturally under the sun. They are the reason we still exist and what they want is our persistence in maintaining soya sauces of such flavours. We are persisting because we have the support of a group of old customers," he says.[14]

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04 Steamed soy beans being removed from the boiler at Nanyang Sauce's factory, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

exports in the 1820s, although the condiment is likely to have been used here even before the colonial era.[6]

In the 19th century, local production of soya sauce was likely a cottage industry, made by small-scale manufacturers and consumed by different communities, from the Chinese to groups from the Indonesian archipelago. The soybeans were imported from China, Japan and India, although the Botanic Gardens made attempts to cultivate soy in the early 1900s.[7] Writing at that time, the director of the Gardens, English botanist Henry Ridley, visited three sauce factories and detailed the production of soya sauce and tofu (called "bean cheese" in the text).[8]

In 1935, the Yeo Hiap Seng company established one of the earliest major soya sauce factories in Singapore. Located on Outram Road, the factory was set up by Yeo Thian In, scion of a soya sauce-making family from Zhangzhou, China.[9] Another contemporary, and still a household name, was the Kwong Woh Hing brand, established in 1943.

The majority of soya sauce manufacturers in Singapore today are family-owned businesses. Ownership and management pass generationally, along with family recipes and brewing techniques. Back in 1904, Ridley noted that among sauce brewers, there was "a general idea of there being some secrets (in the manufacturing process), known only to the head man and religiously preserved by him".[15]

Interviews with sauce-makers like Nanyang reveal structures where each family member specialises in specific areas of the business, from brewing to marketing and sales. Children in these families are

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05 Large metal containers have helped enable Tai Hua Food Industries to produce soya sauce in larger quantities, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

06 Thomas Pek, who grew up learning about the soya sauce trade from his grandfather, is managing director of Tai Hua Food Industries, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

07 Tai Hua Food Industries produces a variety of soya sauce products to pair with specific local dishes. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

often exposed to the sauce manufacturing process and the heritage of their brands from a young age.

Thomas Pek, managing director of Tai Hua Food Industries, remembers: "I spent most of my school holidays in the soya sauce factory. My grandfather let us help out in the factory very early on… accompanying deliveries and helping out with odd jobs. Even after we started National Service, we would also help out in the company. We wanted to learn everything, every step of the process."[16]

However, upholding the legacy and heritage of a longstanding soya sauce business makes for a path fraught with its own trials. The artisanal, labour-intensive nature of traditional sauce brewing has been a major challenge for manufacturers in Singapore, along with the island's limited domestic market, rising operating costs including rent and raw materials and competition from industrial sauce factories.[17] Thomas Pek estimates that in the 1950s and 1960s, there were between 70 to 80 sauce-making family businesses of varying sizes. Today, the number of brewers still making soya sauce in time-honoured styles has dwindled to less than 10. Others have been taken over, closed down or shifted their operations overseas.[18]

Rising to these challenges has meant the necessary evolution of business models, even as brewing techniques, core values and trust built up over the years are maintained. Koh elaborates: "We don't have (wide) distribution, we have very low quantity production. (The manufacturing process is tedious, the business) unprofitable. We had to look at our space (within the market), we had to carve out a new strategy for ourselves. Our strength is that we've got a very good tasting product."[19]

The strategies that local soya sauce makers have adopted include selling through a variety of online

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08 Ken Koh's grandmother (seen here pasting labels onto soya sauce bottles) continues to be part of the family-run business, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

09 Ken Koh, the third-generation owner of Nanyang Sauce, with his mother and second-generation owner Tan Poh Choo (left), and his uncle (right), 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

10 Soya sauce makers like Nanyang Sauce offer unique packaging and gift sets that have now become collectible items. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

10

channels, emphasising the quality and heritage of their products through branding and design, as well as premium packaging. Tapping into their business histories and craft-intensive methods, the companies have marketed their products as artisanal, premium sauces. Other brands have also begun packaging sauce bottles into gift sets, harking back to traditional gift-giving customs practised by early factory owners.[20]

To these artisans, soya sauce represents longstanding family traditions, cherished childhood memories and deep family ties. The family and business ties that have traditionally underpinned the soya sauce industry in Singapore continue to be relevant today. As Ken Koh of Nanyang sauce says: "I hope that we can continue to have a place in Singaporeans' hearts, (that our sauce) can represent something to them (and be something they) can be proud of."[21]

Notes

[1] Karen Bescherer Metheny and Mary C. Beaudry (Eds.), *Archaeology of Food - An encyclopedia* (Maryland: Rowland & Littlefield, 2015), 162.

[2] Metheny and Beaudry, *Archaeology of Food*, 162; Mark Kurlansky, *Salt - A world history* (United Kingdom: Vintage Books, 2003), 20.

[3] William Shurtleff & Akiko Aoyagi, *History of soy sauce* (160CE to 2012) (Lafayette: Soyinfo Centre, 2012), 6.

[4] Kurlansky, *Salt - A world history*, 20.

[5] William Shurtleff and Akiko Aoyagi, *History of soybeans and soyfoods in Southeast Asia* (13th century to 2010) (Lafayette: Soyinfo Centre, 2010), 7.

[6] John Crawfurd, *Journal of an embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China: Exhibiting a view of the actual state of those kingdoms*, 2, (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), 359.

[7] Shurtleff and Aoyagi, *History of soybeans*, 8, 152.

[8] Henry Nicholas Ridley, "Soy and Bean Cheese", *Agricultural Bulletin of the Straits and Federated Malay States*, Vol. III, No. 12 (Singapore: Kelly & Walsh, 1904), 494.

[9] "Five brothers run flourishing sauce factory and cannery," *The Singapore Free Press*, October 7, 1955. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

[10] Weets Goh, "Heritage Heroes: Artisanal Soy Sauce Makers in Singapore," SALT Magazine. August 2, 2018, https://saltmag.asia/food/ingredients/soy-sauce-singapore.

[11] Nanyang Sauce. "Traditional soy sauce," https://www.nanyangsauce.com/about.

[12] Ken Koh, interview by Koh Hong Kai, National Heritage Board, February 11, 2020.

[13] Weets Goh, "Heritage Heroes: Artisanal Soy Sauce Makers in Singapore." SALT Magazine. August 2, 2018. Retrieved from https://saltmag.asia/food/ingredients/soy-sauce-singapore/.

[14] Ng Sor Luan, "Soya sauce steeped in tradition," *The Straits Times*, June 12, 2017. Retrieved from https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/soya-sauce-steeped-in-tradition

[15] Ridley, "Soy and Bean Cheese", 495.

[16] Thomas Pek, interview by Koh Hong Kai, National Heritage Board, December 28, 2017.

[17] Goh, "Heritage Heroes".

[18] Pek, interview.

[19] Koh, interview.

[20] Koh, interview.

[21] Koh, interview.

Reimagining Malay Dance

Text by Sarah Grace Lim

The catch-all term "Malay dance" encompasses a range of dance forms from the Malay, Javanese and other Southeast Asian cultures. Characterised by diversity and innovation, these dance (*tarian* in Malay) forms include *tarian inang*, *joget*, *tarian asli* and *zapin*, and have traditionally incorporated influences from the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and Europe.

Distinguished by delicate hand gestures and elegant footwork, performances may also weave in the use of *sapu tangan* (handkerchiefs), *selendang* (scarves) and other props, while the intricate patterns and colours of *sarongs* (waist-wrapped garments) often worn by dancers complement their movements.[1]

While it is not known when exactly dance emerged in this region, forms such as *kuda kepang* are linked to the culture of the Majapahit Empire (at its height in the 14th century). Other forms like classical *tarian asli* are associated with various royal courts across different eras, and continued to be performed into the period of European colonisation from the 19th century.[2] In Singapore, these dance forms gained popular momentum with the emergence of cabarets and amusement parks such as New World and Great World, as well as the growth of the Malay film industry from the 1920s.[3]

Groups including Sriwana and Perkumpulan Seni provided new avenues for Malay dance forms to flourish, before Sri Warisan, Singapore's first professional Malay dance company, was formed in 1997.[4] Today, these dances are performed as standalone productions, at festive occasions and arts events, and at community gatherings such as weddings.[5] This article introduces the roots of Malay dance and explores its continuing evolution.

01 Students from Admiralty Primary School performing a traditional Malay dance for Bulan Bahasa (Malay Language Month) in 2014. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

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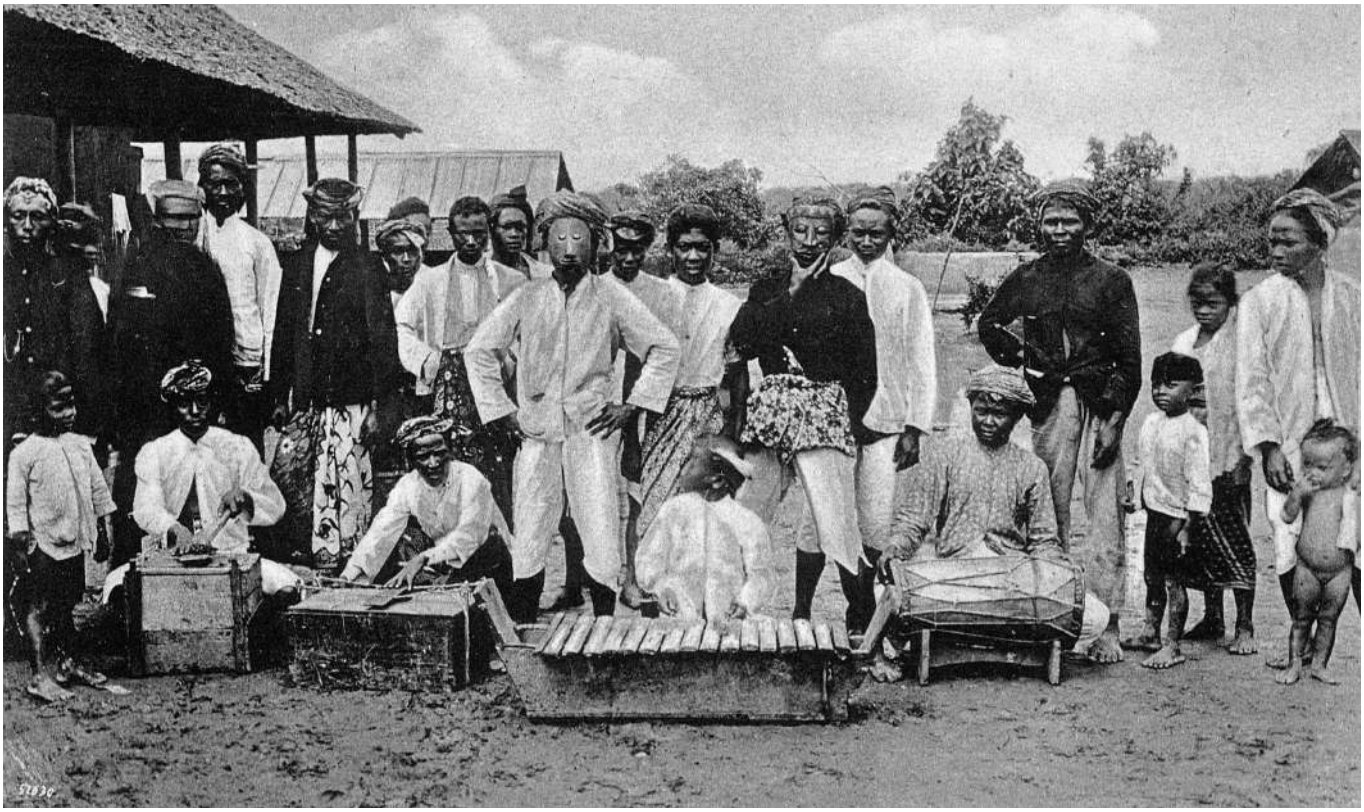
02 The Bunga Tanjong Malay dance hall at New World Amusement Park, c. 1950s. *National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board*

03 Malay dance was highlighted in Arena Filem, a former entertainment magazine, as an aspect of Malay film, 1961. *Image published in Arena Filem Magazine, 1960s. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.*

04 A Malay dance troupe involved in a festival, c. late 19th century. *National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board*



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Malay dance in Singapore

Malay dance may be loosely categorised into classical forms, originating from the royal courts of the region, and "kampong" forms with more ground-up beginnings.[6] In Singapore, grassroots dances have gained wide traction and are shaped by continuing exchanges with practitioners in Malaysia and Indonesia.[7] Beyond their origins, scholars may also categorise Malay dance forms by their tempo, differentiating forms like *tarian mak inang* with its graceful, slower movements from the faster forms such as *joget* or *ronggeng*.[8]

In the 19th century, Malay dance was in the public eye during celebrations held by the colonial elite, including British King George IV's birthday in 1827 and Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887.[14] *Bangsawan* opera troupes also included dance performances from the deliberative, fluid *tarian mak inang* to the up-tempo *joget*, showcasing dance at the pop culture level.[15]

The emergence of urban entertainment parks including Happy World, Great World and New World from the 1930s further popularised dance forms including *joget lambak* mass dances. Beyond providing the usual amusements, these "Worlds" also included cinemas, *bangsawan* performances, nightclubs and dance halls. Patrons of the latter purchased tickets to dance with hired partners, who were usually fluent with Latin dances, ballroom dancing and various Malay dance forms.[16]

The entertainment parks were a significant platform for Malay dance beyond the traditional court and kampong settings, and gave the art form currency as popular social pastimes. The infusion of European dance forms such as the *rumba* and the *tango* also provided an avenue for the evolution and innovation of traditional dance forms.[17]

The rise of the Malay film industry in Singapore from the 1930s provided another showcase for musicians, dancers and choreographers, and further propelled local dance forms before a mass audience. Performers vitalised traditional dance forms with more complex, novel choreographies and assimilated

Common Malay dance forms in Singapore

Tarian asli is derived from the word *asli* ("original" in Malay), and generally refers to traditional Malay dance and music styles.[9] Most *asli* dances are characterised by intricate, well-defined movements and poses, typically starting and ending with decisive flourishes of gongs. Dancers curl and flex their fingers while moving in slow, walking motions, contributing to the refined image of *asli* dances.[10]

Tarian mak inang is thought to have originated in the court of Sultan Mahmud of the Melaka Sultanate (15th century to 16th century). Making graceful, contemplative movements, dancers perform in pairs by facing, turning and circling around each other. Props such as handkerchiefs, scarves and umbrellas may be used.[11]

Tarian zapin is a Southeast Asian adaptation of the Arabic dance *samrah*, and derives its name from the Arabic word *zafn*, meaning fast footwork. *Samrah* is performed only by men, but *zapin* involves both male and female performers. The dance is thought to have been brought to this region by Arab traders centuries ago, and involves themes of comradeship, exploration, trade and the spread of Islam. *Zapin* performances are usually set to the music of a ghazal orchestra, with instruments including the *gambus* (Arabic lute), *hadrah* (tambourine) and *rebab* (violin).[12]

Bearing significant influence from Portuguese dance and music forms, the popularity of ***joget*** is such that it is often used as a byword for dance itself. Also known as *ronggeng* up to the 20th century, *joget* is known for its lively beats and fast-paced rhythm. Accompanied by the *rebab*, *gendang* (two-headed drum), flutes, gongs and *rebana* (hand drum), the *joget* was popular at the dance halls of the mid-20th century. Today, it is commonly performed at festive events such as weddings and gatherings.[13]

dance movements from far-flung cultures, which were quickly picked up by locals.[18]

In the 1950s, groups including Sriwana and Perkumpulan Seni brought Malay dance to arts festivals and dance performances at home and abroad. They introduced dance dramas and collaborated with groups from other traditions in multicultural productions.[19] Their works were also informed by exchanges with groups and performers from Malaysia and Indonesia, including Indonesian choreographer Surianty Liu Chun Wai, who produced more than twenty choreographies over two years with Sriwana.[20] A number of these repertoires, including *Tanjong Katong*, *Serampang dua belas* and *Baju kurung*, remain widely practiced in Singapore today.[21]

Singapore Malay dance: A heritage of innovation

Given its deep roots in long-established regional dance traditions and its multi-faceted character, is there more to Singapore's Malay dance scene than the sum of its parts? This question has engaged practitioners and scholars, with veteran dancer Som Said asking: "What would make Malay dance in Singapore different from what we received?"[22] While searching for Singapore's Malay dance identity, how do practitioners balance tradition and innovation?

While considering these questions, practitioners point to the inherent ability of Malay dance to reimagine traditional forms and assimilate diverse influences. "Innovation is the DNA of Malay dance," said Muhammad Noramin Mohamed Farid, better known as Soultari Amin Farid and one of the founders of multi-disciplinary arts group Bhumi Collective.[23] For example, *zapin* bears the imprint of Arabic culture, while *joget* or *ronggeng* is strongly influenced by

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05 A *tarian mak inang* performance, where dancers perform in pairs by facing, turning and circling around each other. *Courtesy of Malay Heritage Centre*

06 A *tarian zapin* performance, which is usually set to the music of a ghazal orchestra as seen in the background. *Courtesy of Malay Heritage Centre*

07 A *joget* performance, which is known for its lively beats and fast-paced rhythm. *Courtesy of Malay Heritage Centre*

Portuguese dance and music, likely dating back to the 16th century occupation of Melaka.[24] As such, practitioners can embrace the dynamism of Malay dance by understanding that even the "traditional" forms have always innovated and challenged norms.

Noramin is a strong proponent for exploring and pushing the boundaries of Malay dance, and Bhumi Collective, founded in 2016,[25] incorporates inter-cultural, multi-disciplinary and transnational practices in their work.[26] He adds that there must be a harmonised integration of taking ownership of the traditional while ensuring that works are relevant to evolving social landscapes.[27]

To illustrate this point, Noramin traces the historical evolution of Malay dance in Singapore, showing how practitioners of different eras have contemporised dance forms, exercised creativity and brought in fresh influences. In the 1980s, Indonesian choreographer-dancers Tom Ibnur and Noerdin Daud introduced new choreographic tools to the local scene. These included virtuosic elements like *silat* (a Southeast Asian martial arts form), resulting in dynamic movements that provided punch and speed. Today, local dance group Era Dance Theatre has incorporated a number of elements introduced by Ibnur and Noerdin in their contemporary explorations of Malay dance forms.[28]

As Noramin sees it, Atrika Dance Company is another "post-traditional" Malay dance group that synthesises Western and Eastern influences in their performances.[29] Their first piece *Jelingan Manja*, conceptualised and choreographed by founder Mazlina Buang, is heavily inspired by ballet, jazz and Broadway musicals, and also features Southeast Asian

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elements such as *tudung saji mengkuang* (woven rattan conical hats). This generation of practitioners is clearly unafraid to forge a new path for Malay dance.

Are there specific elements that must be present to qualify a dance form as Malay dance? Some may point to costumes and props, traditional movements and music, or the avoidance of body contact and overly sensuous gestures. However, to prescribe these qualifications would be to curtail the creativity of the Malay dance choreographer, says Noramin, and restrict the innovative character of the art form.[30]

The future of Singapore Malay dance

Within this context, it becomes clear that the identity of Singapore's Malay dance scene is one not set in stone. As Noramin puts it: "Malay dance, at its core, is an art form that should reflect its times."[31] Across the diversity of Malay dance forms, from both court and kampong, these dances originated from and remain for the people and by the people. Their origins reflect communities celebrating their daily lives through music and dance, producing organic, fluid dance forms that flow with changes in social and cultural contexts and time.

Noramin adds that the evolution of Malay dance can be seen as cyclical, with styles and techniques resurfacing and reviving when they resonate with the experiences of each generation. Digital recording technologies also provide avenues for Malay dance forms to be catalogued and studied against their cultural milieus. As such, innovation and tradition are not fundamentally opposed, and Malay dance can be a record of community identity and memory as well as a continually evolving art form.

Collectively, Singapore's scene nurtures and actively promotes the growth of Malay dance. In 2015, Era Dance Theatre introduced *Akar Subur* (Fertile Roots), an annual performance-based development programme with the goal of reinvigorating traditional dance forms. Choreographers are challenged to create fresh works, and the programme draws a large number of participating dance groups from the well-established to up and coming groups, including

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Artiste Seni Budaya, Perkumpulan Seni, Peneroka Daya Tari, Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts, and organiser, Era Dance.[32]

As a performing arts medium, Malay dance has long showcased the hopes and aspirations of the people of this region, while connecting communities and cultures across the world through its assimilation of diverse influences. The path of Malay dance in Singapore appears set for continuing evolution, remaining connected to its roots while also being attuned to contemporary society and resonating with practitioners, audiences and communities at large.

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[4] Muhd Ariff and Mohd Raman, "Rhythm & Dance", 213, 215.
[5] Muhd Ariff and Mohd Raman, "Rhythm & Dance", 213, 217.
[6] Muhd Ariff and Mohd Raman, "Rhythm & Dance", 215.

08 Noramin Mohamed Farid, also known as Soultari Amin Farid, performing *Ikan Girl* in 2016. *Courtesy of Bhumi Collective*

09 Dancers from Atrika Dance Company performing *Jelingan Manja* (#ADC25; Home & Hereafter) in 2019. *Courtesy of Atrika Dance Company*

10 As part of the staging of *Bhumi* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2016, local artistes from Bhumi Collective performed alongside three British dancers, integrating both traditional Malay dance and contemporary styles. *Courtesy of Bhumi Collective, photography by Stanley Lin*

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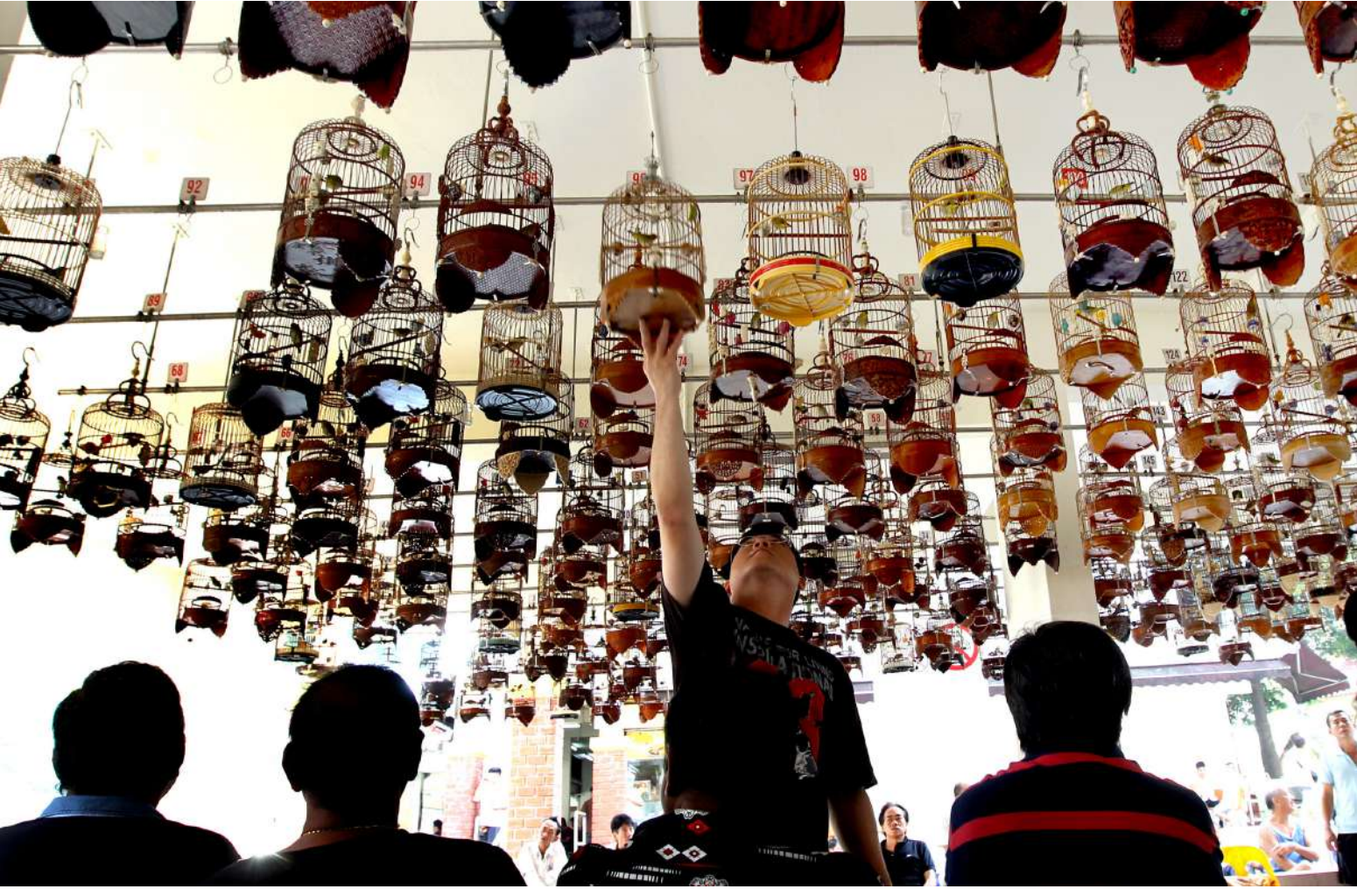
11 Part of the m1 Singapore Fringe Festival 2020, *Mak-Mak Menari* by Bhumi Collective explores the role of the modern Malay mother in Singapore today, and how dance continues to play a part in their lives. *Courtesy of Bhumi Collective, photography by Mark Benedict Chong*



Songbird rearing:
Community and tradition

Text by Neo Pei En, Phedra

Mention songbird rearing and the stereotype is often one of uncles sitting around, *kopi* in hand and gossip at the ready, gazing at a menagerie of caged songbirds either hung on tall poles or kept closer to hand. Behind this rustic image however, there lies a long tradition of observation and experimentation, dedicated towards the training and socialisation of singing birds, customised diets and carefully developed criteria for bird-singing competitions. Spend a little time with the songbird rearers of Singapore, and a community of knowledge-sharing and time-honed expertise becomes evident.

A brief history of songbird rearing

The practice of keeping birds as pets reaches deep into antiquity, having been referenced in ancient Sumeria, Persia and the Roman empire among others.[1] In the context of Southeast Asia, it is not known when songbird rearing emerged, although the practice has likely been established for centuries. Literature from the Tang Dynasty (618 CE to 907 CE) records the import of birds from Southeast Asia, including specimens that were claimed to have the ability to speak Chinese.[2] An abundance of old, beautifully-made cages and traps have also been discovered in the region, providing further evidence of rearing practices.

During Singapore's colonial era from the 19th century, references to the practice of rearing songbirds started to appear in newspapers, books and journals.

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01 Songbird owners at a void deck in Ang Mo Kio, 2012.
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02 A store selling songbirds in Singapore, 1938.
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

The Illustrated London News reported on the island's thriving trade in songbirds in 1872, and bird markets were noted at Rochor Road and other areas. Different communities took easily to songbird rearing, ranging from across the Indonesian archipelago to the Chinese and European communities.[3] The Malay community was said to favour Zebra Doves, Spotted Doves and Red-whiskered Bulbuls, while the Chinese prized Oriental White-eyes and magpies.

There is little consensus over the earliest bird-singing competitions in Singapore, with some pointing to a 1953 event held at Chancery Lane that had fewer than 20 bird-owners participating.[4] Others claim that the singing competitions evolved from magpie-owners in Chinatown, who initially brought their birds together to fight.[5] By the 1960s, an increasing number of bird-singing competitions had appeared, reflecting the rising popular interest in songbird rearing. The sport was said to be enjoyed by a wide cross-section of Singapore society across different ethnic groups and socio-economic strata, with birds being ferried to competitions by owners riding anything from an expensive car to a bicycle.[6] Most however, were men.

A key player in the songbird scene was the Kelab Burong Singapore (Singapore Bird Club), which held annual competitions at venues that included Jalan Besar Stadium and Gay World amusement park. Events were also held by community centres, many of

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which had their own bird clubs, as well as the Singapore Tourism Board and other organisations. Some of these competitions were well-attended, and winning participants received trophies and monetary prizes.

The 1960s also saw the rapid urbanisation of Singapore, and the local songbird scene was reshaped by the move of much of the population into public housing and other urban residential estates. Where a songbird might have previously been kept in the backyard or garden of a kampong house, it now had to share a flat or apartment with the family. While the adjustment to urban living may have initially discouraged songbird rearing, the practice actually gradually gained momentum as hobbyists found more opportunities to gather at Housing & Development Board (HDB) void decks, green spaces and near coffeeshops and markets.

Some locales became known as congregational hotspots for bird-singing enthusiasts, including around Ann Siang Hill, the Wah Heng coffeeshop at Block 53, Tiong Bahru and the Jalan Pagak community centre in the Jalan Eunos Malay Settlement.[7] At the outdoor areas of coffeeshops and around bird-singing corners built by the HDB, horizontal metal poles were erected for owners to hang their birdcages. More shops selling songbirds were opened, and the variety of birds available also increased.[8]

Songbird rearing enjoyed the peak of its prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, with Singapore's population of pet songbirds estimated at 25,000 in 1985. Competitions were drawing hundreds of entrants, with the first national contest said to have been organised by the People's Association (PA) at Toa Payoh in 1978. The PA later joined the Jurong Bird Park and the tourism board to bring about larger events that drew more than 800 participants, including some from Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.[9] By the late 1980s, the national competition was drawing more than 1,000 birds, and competitors had to qualify for the national event by winning a local prize first. The winners of the national competition received a trophy and $500.[10]

At the height of the sport, bird-singing corners were familiar sights in Singapore. Tourism promoters and coffeeshop owners sought to tap into its appeal, and curious Westerners wrote books, newspaper articles

03 A coffeeshop in Chinatown with a bird-singing corner, 1965. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

04 A hobbyist observing his songbird at a coffeeshop, 1965. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

05 A bird-singing competition at Cairnhill Community Centre, 1979. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

06 Then Minister for Culture and Social Affairs Othman Wok attends a bird-singing contest at Gay World Stadium organised by Kelab Burong Singapore, 1966. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

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and filmed television features on it. As social tastes evolved however, and the variety of leisure options available to locals jumped with each passing year, songbird rearing began to lose its lustre for the masses. Regulations on the import or entry of birds were tightened in 2003 after an outbreak of bird flu, further crimping the options available to enthusiasts. The hobby continues to exercise its charms on some Singaporeans however, including veterans who keep songbird rearing on the island alive by organising competitions and sponsoring prizes.

Training sessions, ginseng and gilded cages: Taking care of songbirds

Songbird rearing entails more than simply buying a bird, a cage and waiting for it to sing. Along with the bonds it has helped build across different communities, this subculture has developed its own vocabulary, criteria for performing excellence and traditions based on communal knowledge transmission. For instance, the gatherings at void decks and coffeeshops are tailored for enthusiasts to exchange knowledge of songbird diets, care and maintenance. The birds too, are put together to learn from each other and expand their musical repertoires, with newcomers taken under the wing of veteran songbirds for "training".[11]

The voices of songbirds can also evolve, according to Chua Foon Khoo, who has been rearing birds for some two decades. Over its lifespan, the bird goes through several stages of development, and owners pay careful attention to its changes in tone.[12] In particular, diet is thought to play a major role in the quality of birdsong. Teng Leng Foo, the doyen of songbird enthusiasts in Singapore, has experimented with a variety of foods and tonics over the years. To protect the all-important voices of his birds, he mixes feed with ginseng, eggs and honey, a concoction that he also sells at his shop

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07 Veteran songbird owner and cage-maker Teng Leng Foo at his shop at Ang Mo Kio, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

08 Some of Teng's hand-crafted cages include motifs that reflect Singapore culture. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

09 Teng Leng Foo's handmade birdcages. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

10 Customised diets are an essential aspect of songbird rearing. Teng Leng Foo created his own special bird feed and supplements that have been tailored to protect the birds' voices. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

near the Kebun Baru Birdsinging Club. Other owners apply Western medicine to ailing birds or tie a string around the bird's neck to prevent it from over-straining its voice.[13]

The songbird's living environment carries much importance as well. The birdcages are another medium through which owners can display their craft and sense of aesthetics. Cages can feature intricate carvings, decorative panels, porcelain feeding bowls and ivory stands and handles (before strict regulations on the use of ivory). Teng, who began hand-crafting his own cages after being initially unable to afford those on sale as a young boy, soon drew admirers for his intricate designs featuring elements of Chinese, Indian, Malay and other Southeast Asian cultures. He was able to turn cage-making into a business, and has become regarded as an authority on the many aspects of songbird rearing.[14]

Keeping songbird rearing alive

For competitions, the community has developed an elaborate judging criteria based on grassroots preferences and local quirks, all without the organisational oversight of governing bodies. Take for example the concept of *buka*, a criteria that scores a bird on its continuous singing tone and is likely derived from the Malay word meaning "open".[15] Another criteria is play, where judges note how a bird moves in its cage, including jumps and landings on its perch. Other criteria judge the "kek kek" call of songbirds, the shapeliness of the bird itself including its plume, and the volume of its call.[16] Different criteria come into play according to the species of bird being scored, with the White-rumped Shama, Mata Puteh (Oriental White-eye), Merbah Jambul (Red-whiskered Bulbul) and Hwa Mei (Chinese thrush) being the most common classes.[17]

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Today, the Kebun Baru Birdsinging Club helps keep the flame of the subculture alive, regularly organising competitions and providing avenues for owners and their birds to gather.[18] It plays a vital role for the community, given the challenges that they have faced since the sport's heyday in the 1980s. While many marvel at the four or five-digit sums paid for prized birds and cages, the rising costs of the hobby, including those resulting from regulations over avian imports and inflation, can put up barriers to newcomers. For example, a Mata Puteh sold for about S$6 before the outbreak of avian influenza in the 1990s, but may cost up to S$100 now.[19]

Worries over bird flu have also curbed the travels of songbird enthusiasts, many of whom regularly crossed the Causeway into Malaysia to participate in competitions or acquire birds.[20] In the wider social context, bird-singing corners and competitions no longer enjoy frequent media coverage or sponsorships from various bodies.

Yet the foundations of the subculture remain firm, supported by the efforts of the hobbyists themselves. They organise competitions, maintain community spaces and online channels, and take newcomers under their wing. While bird-singing flies somewhat under the radar these days, veterans note an encouraging number of young people taking to the melodies of songbirds. That is a reason to be optimistic for the future of this home-grown, resolutely ground-up subculture.

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11 Kebun Baru Birdsinging Club, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

12 Songbird cages hanging from poles at Kebun Baru Birdsinging Club at Ang Mo Kio Avenue 5, 2012. *© Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Permission required for reproduction*

Easter in Singapore:

Faith and heritage of the Catholic Community

Text by Brandon Kit

For Catholics in Singapore and around the world, the Easter period is a time to reflect on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as to reaffirm their redemptive covenant with God. The religious practices and traditions of the faithful, from fasting and abstinence during Lent to prayers, processions and vigils during the Easter Triduum, recall and honour Christ's sacrifice.

While the liturgy of Easter services follows the worldwide form instituted by the Roman Catholic Church, the Catholic community in Singapore also practises traditions from diverse roots, some of which bear testament to historical and social intersections between Southeast Asian and Western cultures. Thus a visiting Catholic traveller may find familiar comfort in the sacrosanct structure of the Good Friday service, and also wonder at the synthesis of cultures inherent in the joyous use of *bunga rampai* in church. We take a journey through some of the Easter traditions close to the heart of Catholics in Singapore, and highlight the intertwined hallmarks of faith, community and heritage.

Catholicism in Singapore

The Catholic Church in Singapore is part of the Roman Catholic Church, headed by the Bishop of Rome (also known as the Pope) based in Vatican City. As such, the religious services and rites conducted by Catholics here follow the liturgy of the worldwide Latin church. The Bras Basah-Waterloo Street area can be seen as the cradle of Catholicism in Singapore, with the island's first Catholic chapel established in 1833 on a site where the Singapore Art Museum stands today, to serve congregants who had arrived early in the 19th century.[1] Across the road from this site is the oldest Catholic church still standing, the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, while St. Joseph's Church (Victoria Street), the Church of Saints Peter

01 Maundy Thursday Mass, which signals the start of the Easter Triduum for the Roman Catholic Church, 2019. *Courtesy of Cathedral of the Good Shepherd*

and Paul and the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes are all in the vicinity.

Other institutions founded in the area bear testament to the Catholic presence in Singapore, including St. Joseph's Institution, the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus and Catholic High School. From these early Catholic institutions, priests and missionaries spread the religion throughout Singapore. Today, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore has 32 churches across the island, and counts some 360,000 Catholics in their number.[2]

The Easter Triduum

The Easter Triduum is a three-day span that begins on the evening of Maundy Thursday and culminates on Easter Sunday, when Christian congregations celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ three days after his death on the cross as depicted in the Bible.[3] In preparation for Easter Sunday, Catholics observe Lent, a six-week period of prayer, almsgiving and penance. Within this Lenten season is Holy Week, directly preceding Good Friday and regarded as the most important period in the Catholic liturgical calendar. The religious services and liturgy (known in Catholicism as Holy Mass), prayers, processions, vigils and traditions during this time are occasions for congregants to express their faith as well as reflect on the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ.

Daniel Soh and his Catholic family come together to fast and practice abstinence during Lent. "I have a pretty big family, with five siblings, but as much as we can, all of us will come together and we will talk about what we want to do for Lent, in terms of what we want to give up," he said.

"When I was younger, I would groan to my mum every time (during the Lenten fast), but it was nice to go through it with them because I knew I wasn't

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02 The 14 Stations of the Cross at the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, which line the walls of the main church hall. Catholics will stop at each station to meditate on selected prayers. *Courtesy of Cathedral of the Good Shepherd*

03 Catholics may refer to prayer books as they move from station to station. *Courtesy of Royston Lin*

alone in my sacrifice. Ultimately, even now, when I go through Lent I know that the Catholics around me are going through something similar. It isn't easy but we are all doing it together."[4]

A number of traditions tied to the Easter Triduum are practised during Lent, including the devotion known as the Stations of the Cross. This practice involves prayer and meditation along a series of 14 images depicting Christ's journey towards crucifixion.[5] For Fr. Ignatius Yeo, chairman and master of ceremonies of the Archdiocesan Liturgy Commission, the devotion is an invitation for Catholics to reflect on narratives of Christ and the significance of the cross in the Catholic faith. More than simply an instrument of crucifixion, the cross symbolises redemption and renewal through Christ's act of sacrifice.[6]

Catholic Vivian Tan described the meaning that the Stations of the Cross holds for her: "I feel that there is always a life lesson to be learnt at every station. My favourite station (and) the one that I always reflect on most deeply about, is the station where Veronica wipes the face of Jesus. For me… we are doing acts of love to Jesus when we show compassion to others because he is in the people whom we meet every day."[7]

As Holy Week approaches, Catholics come together to prepare for key celebrations, including Palm Sunday (the Sunday before Easter), Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. While the Mass mirrors the liturgy instituted by the Roman Catholic Church, some of the processions, venerations and reenactments performed by Catholic communities in Singapore draw on a wide variety of religious and cultural traditions, including a number that have their roots in Southeast Asia.

The Easter Triduum observances begin with Maundy Thursday, also known as the Mass of the Lord's Supper

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04 Good Friday service at the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, 2019. *Courtesy of Cathedral of the Good Shepherd*

05 Archbishop William Goh presenting a crucifix to the congregation during the Veneration of the Cross segment of the Good Friday service. Standing before the congregation, he proceeds to uncover the upper part of the cross, the right arm and finally the entire cross. *Courtesy of Cathedral of the Good Shepherd*

06 In the background, the figure of Christ is being taken down from the cross at St. Joseph's Church after the Good Friday service. It would be laid on a bier, before being part of the procession around church compound. *Courtesy of Jerome Lim*

07 The crowd at the candle-lit procession outside St. Joseph's Church during Good Friday, 2016. *Courtesy of Jerome Lim*

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and remembers the final meal Christ shared with his disciples. On the following day, Catholics attend Good Friday service, which commemorates the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Unlike the weekly liturgical services, the Good Friday service is not referred to as a Mass, as the service recalls the reality of the Passion of Christ (his last days and his sacrifice) and does not involve the consecration of bread and wine. Mass, on the other hand, is seen as a re-enactment of the Passion.[8]

Good Friday is a public holiday in Singapore, and the service is occasion for congregants to observe key tenets of their faith as a community. The service includes the Liturgy of the Word with Solemn Intercessions, the Veneration (or Adoration) of the Cross and Holy Communion.[9] The readings include a Passion narrative, with different speakers enacting the story of Christ before his crucifixion.[10]

The congregation participates in the reading of the Passion, and the rejection of Jesus in the narrative involves the congregation repeating the words, "Crucify him!" Adele Chin, a Catholic, describes the significance this part of the service holds for her: "It's characteristic of what we do every day, how we sometimes intentionally turn away from God and reject him when we sin. Saying it out loud so explicitly makes me feel remorseful and more aware of my actions and my sinfulness."[11]

From the fifth Sunday of the Lenten season, the church's crosses and religious images would have been veiled with purple cloth. For the Veneration of the Cross segment of the service, a single cross is uncovered, followed by the rest after the service. The religious images are unveiled shortly before the start of the Easter Vigil Mass the next day. Congregants proceed to venerate the cross by kneeling before the crucifix and kissing it. For Catholics, this act of devotion is central to the Good Friday service as it affirms Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of mankind.[12] The service ends with Holy Communion.

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Localised traditions and practices

The Good Friday service, central to the Easter Triduum, is celebrated the same way among Catholic communities worldwide. However, a number of the processions, venerations and other traditions practised in Singapore carry cultural and social influences that make them distinctive. At St. Joseph's Church (Victoria Street), which was established by the Portuguese Mission in Singapore, the commemoration of Good Friday incorporates often emotion-filled processions, long-held traditions and aspects of Southeast Asian culture. On Good Friday, a human-sized, nearly two centuries-old wooden statue of Christ is mounted on a cross in the church at 3pm in the afternoon, traditionally known as the hour of Jesus' death. After Stations of the Cross prayers and evening service, the figure of Christ is taken down from the cross and laid on a bier, before forming part of a candle-lit procession around the church.[13]

Congregants, clergy, members of Catholic societies and choirs retrace Christ's final earthly journey, with some members of the faithful bearing a large cross, the bier with the figure of Christ and a statue of the Virgin Mary clad in black robes. A member of the congregation also enacts the role of Veronica, a Catholic saint who met Christ on his way to the cross. After the procession, the figure of Christ is positioned in front of the church's altar for devotees to perform veneration and prayers. Parishioner Gerard Pereira says: "We call the (Good Friday) procession the procession of Our Lady of Sorrows. We (take) down the various artefacts (from) the cross… and the procession follows the bier of Christ. When we come back into the church, the significance is that we follow Christ into his tomb."[14]

For congregants, participating in the procession and reflecting on their faith stirs strong emotions, as Sandra Ross describes: "The choir sings grieving songs in Latin and in English, and every song, you can see people crying. When you hear the words, they are hitting you straight in the heart. Every year, I train the Veronica and dress her up. And every year, when

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08 The procession at St. Joseph's Church includes a statue of the Virgin Mary clad in black robes, 2017. *Courtesy of Jerome Lim*

09 A congregant collecting a packet of *bunga rampai* on Good Friday at St. Joseph's Church, 2017. *Image retrieved from catholicnewslive.com*

the choir sings, *O Come and Mourn*, and every year, I'm always breaking down crying at the altar."[15]

The candle-lit processions at St. Joseph's and other churches are based on the symbolism of Christ as "the light of the world" referenced in the Bible, according to Fr. Yeo. Carrying a candle in a procession acts as a public demonstration of a believer's decision to follow Jesus, while the burning of candle wax to fuel the flame signifies personal sacrifice in sustaining religious faith.[16]

The Portuguese roots of St. Joseph's Church and its centuries-long association with the Eurasian community means that its commemorations are infused with distinctive traditions. For example, during the candle-lit procession, the choir chants the phrase "Senhor Deus, Misericordia" ("Lord, have mercy" in Portuguese). Pereira notes that the celebrations at St. Joseph's Church share numerous elements with those held by Catholic communities in the former Portuguese colonies of Melaka, Goa and Macau.[17] The tradition of carrying a statue of Christ on a bier may derive from a similar practice at St. Peter's Church, which is one of the oldest Catholic churches in the region, having been established in Melaka in 1710. The procession and veneration of Christ at St. Joseph's is also known to draw non-Christians.[18]

Another tradition linked to Southeast Asian culture is the making and collection of *bunga rampai*, a floral potpourri that usually includes cut *pandan* leaves, *daun limau perut* (kaffir lime leaves), *nilam* (patchouli), rose petals and other flowers. The making of *bunga rampai* is a regional tradition and is practised by the Eurasian, Indian, Chinese and Malay communities among others, with the latter community using *bunga rampai* during weddings and other celebrations.[19] According to Fr. Yeo, some Catholics bring this potpourri home as a sign of God's blessings, "so that the fragrant offering of [Christ's] saving Passion may fill our hearts and home".[20]

Easter Sunday marks the date of Christ's resurrection, and Catholics observe the Easter Vigil

Lent and Easter

01 Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of **Lent** for Catholics. Lent is a six-week period of prayer, almsgiving and penance as Catholics prepare themselves for the Easter Triduum. During the Ash Wednesday Mass, congregants will receive ashes on their forehead as a sign of repentence.

02 Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday falls on the Sunday before Easter, and remembers the day Jesus made his journey into Jerusalem days before his crucifixion. As depicted in the Bible, the people welcomed Jesus by laying palms or branches in his path, or by waving them in the air. Following this tradition, palms are distributed to congregants at the start of Mass.

03 Maundy Thursday

Maundy Thursday commemorates the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples on the evening before his crucifixion. The Mass is noted for the Washing of Feet, where the priest wipes and kisses the feet of 12 individuals, mirroring Jesus' act of service to his disciples in the Bible and symbolising his unconditional love and mercy.

04 Good Friday

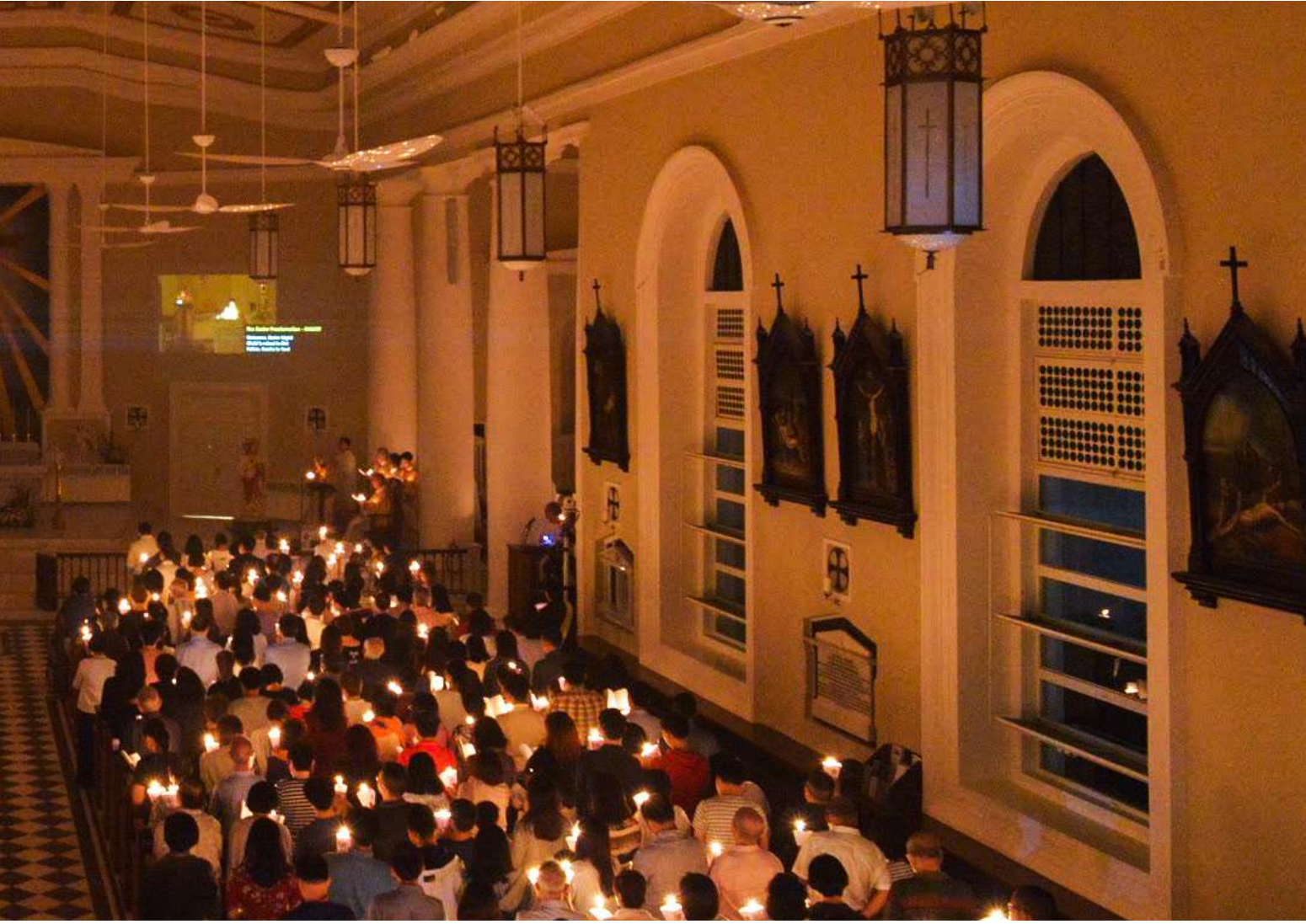
Good Friday commemorates the day Jesus was crucified. The service includes the Veneration (or Adoration) of the Cross, an act of devotion where congregants are invited to venerate the cross by kneeling before the crucifix and kissing it.

05 Easter Vigil or Easter Sunday

Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, which is the foundation of the Christian faith. It is the most important day of the Catholic liturgical year. Catholics may attend the Easter Vigil Mass, where a feature of this celebration is the lighting and procession of the Paschal candle, which represents the light of Christ entering into the world.

liturgy as the first official celebration of his rise from the tomb. Held between nightfall on Holy Saturday and daybreak on Easter Sunday, the vigil includes the lighting and procession of the Paschal candle, the Liturgy of the Word, baptismal rites and Holy Communion. For Catholics, these liturgical ceremonies recall the redemptive promise of God and spiritual renewal through baptism, and believers remember the death, resurrection and eventual return of Christ. Many families will attend Easter gatherings as well as Mass on Easter Sunday, after which the Easter Triduum is complete.

10 During Easter Vigil, the flame from the Paschal candle is passed from person to person. The lighting of the candle represents the risen Christ (symbolised by light) coming into the world. *Courtesy of Cathedral of the Good Shepherd*



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Renewed:

An exploration of Eurasian food heritage

Text by Tan Jia Yi and Timothy Loh

01 A spread of Eurasian cuisine at Quentin's Eurasian Restaurant, 2018. *Courtesy of Singapore Tourism Board*

Eurasian cuisine has a well-earned reputation for being hearty, communal and encompassing a wide variety of tastes. With Eurasians tracing their roots to Melaka, Goa, the United Kingdom, Holland and elsewhere, their food brings together a diversity of cultures, fusing a riotous palate of influences into something more than simply the sum of its parts. Through dishes like *curry debal* and s'more, we explore the food map of the Eurasian community through its facets of family and multicultural diversity.

Curry debal and *feng*: Family and feasts

Numerous iconic Eurasian dishes are closely associated with family celebrations, including *curry debal* (also known as devil curry), mulligatawny and *feng*. Both *curry debal* and *feng* cleverly utilise leftover meats, and require an experienced hand to turn a complex list of ingredients that may include turkey, beef, ham bones, pork offal and Chinese-style roast pork into well-balanced, delicious dishes. Traditionally, *curry debal* is cooked on Boxing Day or after major celebrations, while *feng* was an innovation born of the need to economise and make full use of meat and other foodstuffs.[1]

As the major celebrations of Christianity are a significant feature in the family life of adherent Eurasians, these occasions also call for a "grand *makan*" (feast in Malay), as oral history interviewee Marina de Cruz nee Scheerder recalled.[2] Food played such an important role that for some Eurasian families, the preparations for the Christmas period began as early as October. Curry powder was prepared, various pickles (also known as achar) and seaweed jellies were made and fruit cakes were baked and allowed to mature in brandy. Supper in the early hours of Christmas Day after the family had returned from midnight Mass was common among Eurasian households, with common fare including *tim* soup with pig's trotters and sour plums or mulligatawny paired with bread, ham, chicken pie and wine.[3]

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02 *Curry debal*, which is traditionally cooked on Boxing Day using leftover meats. *Courtesy of Quentin's Eurasian Restaurant and Eurasian Heritage Gallery*

03 *Feng*, a type of curry dish that may include various meats. *© Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Permission required for reproduction*

04 The O'Hara family during Christmastime, with Luanne Theseira-O'Hara pictured first from the left, 2019. *Courtesy of Luanne Theseira-O'Hara*

05 A Christmas meal with *curry debal* at the O'Hara household, 2019. *Courtesy of Luanne Theseira-O'Hara*

Christmas lunches typically included roast turkey, goose, duck or capon, *feng*, fruit cakes and *sugee* cakes.[4] Luanne Theseira-O'Hara's family traditionally prepares *curry debal* on Boxing Day with leftover ingredients, with her family's version including ham, bacon and Chinese-style pork belly. For some, the red colour of *curry debal*, spiced with chilli, mustard seeds and turmeric, is symbolic of the blood of Jesus Christ.[5]

Other Christian feast days included Passover, Easter and Good Friday, during which breakfasts at Eurasian tables may include hot cross buns and *kueh kochi* (a snack also served at funeral wakes). Eurasians also invented dishes for social and family celebrations such as weddings, anniversaries and birthdays, including birthday mee (also known as mee Serani) and the tea party favourite *pang susie*.[6]

Food also helps bring Eurasian families closer through a cooperative approach to preparation and cooking in the kitchen, communal gatherings for meals and "secret" recipes passed down through the ages. In the case of noted chef and cookbook author Mary Gomes, her culinary journey began with accompanying her mother on market trips and preparing ingredients during her youth.

Growing into a capable cook in her own right, she opened Mary's Kafe at the suggestion of a friend from church. Even as she serves up her much-loved *sugee* cake, beef s'more (also known as smoore) and pork curry *asam* at her cafe at Bendemeer Centre, Gomes still maintains the longstanding family tradition of bringing extended relatives together every Sunday to cook, eat and play cards.[7]

She says of her family's eclectic culinary practices: "I'm an all-rounder: I can bake, I can cook, I can even make Nyonya *kueh* (desserts and sweets). My second sister likes to make Nyonya *kuehs*, and now her son is also interested. Every Sunday, when they come for dinner, he will make something: *ondeh ondeh*, *kueh*

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ko swee, *putugal*. There are a lot of other *kuehs* that we make, and he's interested to learn. My niece, whenever we make a pie, she's always involved. She wants to make sure that she learns how to make the pie, it's everybody's favourite!"

S'more, *rempah* and *belachan*: Connections across cultures

True to the diverse nature of the community, Eurasian cuisine is a treasure trove of multi-faceted heritage and a complex stew that reveals the interactions of myriad cultures. Theseira-O'Hara, who is of Chinese and Portuguese-Melakan ancestry, describes her community's cuisine and culture as "a blend of Asian and European".

Eurasian dishes ignore textbook definitions, and display their list of influences proudly: Malay, Indian, Peranakan, Portuguese, British, Chinese and others. Take the popular s'more for example; in families with Dutch or burgher ancestry, this everyday dish

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is prepared with curry leaves and powder, fenugreek, turmeric and onions. When cooked by Portuguese-Melakan chefs, s'more shows more of a Chinese influence with onions, soya sauce and cinnamon sticks, and is eaten with sambal *belachan*.

The importance of *rempah*, a spice paste also foundational to Malay, Peranakan and other cuisines of Southeast Asia, underlines the regional roots of Eurasian cuisine. Gomes emphasises the central position of *rempah*, which may include chilli, onions and the shrimp paste *belachan*, saying: "We'll put onions, mustard seeds (and other spices), and you must make sure to fry it properly to bring out the flavours. It must be properly done."[8] If not, she clarified, it gives a raw taste, and turns rancid easily.

Belachan, a fermented shrimp paste used as both a condiment and a flavour base, is also tied closely to

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06 Birthday mee, a noodle dish stir-fried with seafood and typically served on birthdays. *Courtesy of Quentin's Eurasian Restaurant and Eurasian Heritage Gallery*

07 Mary Gomes at her restaurant, Mary's Kafe, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

08 Some of Mary's signature dishes (clockwise from top): chicken buak keluak, fish curry *asam* and beef s'more. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

the cultural history of the Eurasians. Since the 16th century, many Portuguese-Melakans made their living by the sea, catching fish and the small shrimps known as *camarao* in Portuguese. Being expert fishers and producers of *belachan*, they soon became known colloquially as *gragok*, although some consider this nickname derogatory for its stereotypical and classist connotations.[9] In any case, the role that the fermented paste plays in Eurasian cuisine is entirely uncontroversial; as writer Julia d'Silva put it in a commentary: "Sambal *belachan* is a die-die must have, that even accompanies an English-inspired corned beef stew".[10]

Innovation and tradition in Eurasian cuisine

Experimenting with time-honoured recipes and innovating new dishes, desserts and snacks, the Eurasian community created a cuisine recognisably their own. Some families from less economically-privileged households turned this into an informal industry; out of necessity, they made achar, seaweed jelly and sweets to sell, particularly during festive periods.[11]

Some cooks also tweaked recipes to extract maximum taste from more affordable ingredients, as Theseira-O'Hara remembers. Her grandmother, seeking to find an alternative to cheese (a relatively costly commodity during the colonial era), rationed it with the cheapest chicken cuts. Shredded and boiled, these were cooked with macaroni, available in bulk at low cost, and tossed with Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce. The latter provided a savoury, umami boost and referenced the family's British heritage, with Theseira-O'Hara's grandfather having served in the British army.[12]

Eschewing standardised recipes, each Eurasian family has their own take on classic dishes; as Gomes explains: "There's no such thing as a 'right' or 'wrong'

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for *sugee* cake. Same for *curry debal*, these are the two signature dishes identified with Eurasians." Across family kitchens, ingredients and spices are measured out and used according to preference and experience, rather than strict adherence to recipes.[13]

With numerous versions of *feng*, *curry debal* and other favourites, particularly tasty renditions can take on near-legendary status. The "best" recipes are much sought after and closely guarded, shared and passed on only to "chosen ones" among family and friends, or to those gauged to have the highest culinary potential. Recipes were at times given with much reluctance and in modified form, with ingredients left out and proportions crucially adjusted out of balance.[14]

Gomes chuckles as she recalls: "(The most popular *sugee* cake recipes are) very hard to get. When I wanted to learn how to make it, people used to give me recipes. But it was never sincere. Something was amiss, the cake would rise, but then suddenly fall (or) there's something wrong, they gave too much baking powder or (inaccurate directions). So I didn't succeed

09 Mary Gomes adding *rempah* to her cooking, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

10 Common ingredients found in Eurasian cuisine (clockwise from top): lemongrass, onion, chili paste, *kunyit* powder, *belachan* and candlenut. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

11 Mary's *sugee* cake. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

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until finally, a convent nun gave me a recipe. From then on, I was successful."

Today, her *sugee* cake is one of the best-sellers at her cafe, ensuring that a recipe tried and tested by the community delights food lovers across Singapore.[15] In the same way, Eurasian cuisine continues to thrive in ever wider contexts, even as it is sustained by its twin pillars of familial bonds and multicultural diversity.

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Ayurveda:
Holistic health and healing

Text by Fam Hui Jiung

01 Tools used in Ayurveda therapy. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

The stresses of fast-paced modern lifestyles, unhealthy diets and the ill effects of urban pollution can often bring myriad health issues. Faced with growing awareness of side effects and complications from drugs used in Western medical treatment, some Singaporeans from across various ethnicities turn to Ayurveda, a traditional system of medicine that emphasises both building immunity and the treatment of illness.

Originating from the Indian subcontinent, Ayurveda includes therapies, dietary practices and exercises.[1] The term Ayurveda loosely translates to "the science of life", being derived from the Sanskrit words *ayur*, meaning life, and *veda*, denoting knowledge.[2] Ayurvedic philosophy holds that illness is a symptom of an imbalance between an individual's *doshas*, or vital life forces, and treatments aim to restore balance among the three *doshas*.[3]

Vasanthi Pillay, president of the Ayurveda Association of Singapore and an Ayurveda Wellness Counsellor with Innergy Ayurveda and Yoga, elaborates on the principles behind Ayurvedic treatment: "The physician will first determine what a patient's body type is and whether this corresponds to an imbalance in one of the patient's three *doshas*.[4]

"Next, he or she will then customise a diet, exercise and lifestyle plan specific to the individual. Everyone is born with a unique set of characteristics according to their *doshas* and there isn't a particular diet or lifestyle routine that is one size fits all," she adds.[5] The *doshas* are individual expressions of the five elements of the universe, according to Ayurveda: ether, air, fire, water and earth.[6]

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02 Textbooks for Ayuvedic physicians, which reference the classic Vedic texts. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

03 Herbs or spices such as *pathimugam* (Indian red wood), nutmeg, licorice and *karungali* (black cutch) are commonly used in Ayurvedic treatments. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

A prominent example of Ayurvedic treatment is Panchakarma therapy, which includes several programmes that comprise herbal oil massages, steam baths, cleansing enemas and healing *kitchari* (mixtures) diets. There are Panchakarma therapies tailored for eliminating toxins and stress relief, rheumatism, spinal disorders and other bone-related disorders as well as nose and chest issues such as sinusitis and congestion.[7]

History of Ayurveda

The roots of Ayurveda lie in the Sanskrit religious and philosophical texts collectively known as the Vedas, the oldest of which (the *Rigveda*) dates to 1500 BCE. Some scholars trace its origins to the Indus Valley civilisation (3300 BCE to 1300 BCE), but it is generally agreed that Ayurvedic medical techniques and diagnoses were first detailed in Vedic texts such as the *Atharvaveda*. During this period, education for practitioners depended on royal patronage or sponsorship from the wealthy, and was exclusive to men from higher castes.[8]

During the British colonisation of India, Ayurveda was laid into standardised curriculums with specialised subject divisions and qualifying examinations. Successful candidates received Ayurvedic medical certificates such as a Bachelor of Ayurveda, Medicine and Surgery (B.A.M.S), and M.D. in Ayurveda, which conferred graduates with a license to practice. The period also saw competition for Ayurvedic treatments as Western clinical medicine was introduced to India and other British colonies.[9]

While the practice of Ayurveda in Singapore is documented from the 19th century, its imprint may have even deeper roots in this region. Traditional therapeutic massage and post-natal practices such as *urut* and *bengkung*, long practised among Malay, Javanese and other Southeast Asian communities, are thought to be significantly influenced by Ayurveda.[10]

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Traditional medical practices, including Siddha medicine from the Tamil community and other folk medicine, may also be presented as Ayurveda.[11]

In Singapore, the Malayala Ayurveda Vaidya Sala was one of the earliest Ayurvedic centres to be established, and was originally housed in a two-story shophouse on Serangoon Road, near Masjid Anguilla. The centre was founded in 1932 by Narayanan Vaidyar, who later handed the clinic over to his nephew, Kerala-born Shri M. A. K. Appoo Vaidyar in 1947. Shri Appoo had acquired Ayurvedic techniques from his uncle through the Guru Shishya Parampar (teacher-discipline) tradition, including the concoction of herbal oils, powders, pastes and other medicines.[12] Today, the *vaidyasala* (clinic) has grown into a business offering treatment and therapies for various illnesses.[13]

A holistic system of medicine

Ayurveda is presented as a holistic system, with prevention of illness through diet and other everyday practices as much a feature as treatment. Diets are judged to be appropriate based on a person's *prakuti* (constitution). As Vasanthi emphasises: "A famous saying in Ayurveda goes: If a person's diet is wrong, medicine will be of no use. If the diet is correct, medicine is of no need."[14] This holistic nature of Ayurveda is a factor that allowed it to remain relevant into the 21st century and appeal to people across different ethnic groups.

The emphasis on holistic treatments forms the cornerstone of Ayurvedic practices, as Vasanthi notes: "Ayurveda and Western medicine have vastly different views on disease. Ayurveda treats the individual rather than the disease. The first question an Ayurvedic physician asks is: 'who is my patient', rather than 'what is my patient's ailment'." She is of the opinion that Western medicine tends to provide treatment that addresses the symptoms of illnesses, such as medication for high blood pressure, but sidelines underlying conditions. These conditions, which are considered

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04 Mahesh Appoo, owner of Malayala Ayurveda Vaidya Sala, and his mother, Leela Appoo, 2020. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

05 An Ayurvedic physician diagnosing his patient using *nadi pariksha* or pulse reading (top), as well as a stethoscope (bottom). *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

06 A physician employing *pada abhyangam* (leg massage) using medicated herbal oil. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

as important factors of ill-health and its treatment in Ayurveda, include a person's constitution, age, lifestyle prior to disease manifestation, the environment he or she is immersed in as well as diet.[15]

Today, many who seek Ayurvedic treatment, as well as physicians, view Ayurveda as being complementary to, rather than in competition with, Western medicine. Mahesh Appoo, a second-generation practitioner and owner of the Malayala Ayurveda Vaidya Sala, adds that one of the duties of the Ayurveda practitioner is to determine whether a patient needs Western medicine immediately, or is in a position to follow Ayurvedic treatment. As an example, Mahesh recalls a case where his physician had to redirect a cancer patient with stage four symptoms to Western medical treatment.[16]

Ayurveda in Singapore today

Paralleling the mainstream acceptance of Traditional

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Chinese Medicine (TCM), Ayurvedic practices and treatments have been adopted across cultural and communal boundaries in Singapore. Mahesh notes that some 20 per cent of his clients are Chinese and Malay, while there is also an increasing trend of couples in their 30s seeking Ayurvedic treatments. Explaining the rising interest in Ayurveda from non-Indian communities, he cites the greater awareness generated through social media, patient dissatisfaction with Western-style treatment and management of chronic diseases, poor doctor-patient relations and side effects from Western drugs.

Mahesh adds that if Ayurveda was to be increasingly viewed as complementary and beneficial with Western medicine, more Singaporeans might be predisposed towards Ayurvedic practices. However, he notes that the number of Ayurvedic clinics in Singapore is a small fraction of that of TCM clinics, and hence lack the same organisational capacity and resources of their TCM counterparts.

Continuing migration and expatriate workers from India in recent decades have also reshaped the dynamics of the Ayurveda trade in Singapore. Like their predecessors during the colonial era, the newer practitioners have helped to expand the Ayurvedic customer base, awareness of the tradition and deepen Singapore-based Ayurvedic knowledge. *Vaidyas*, or physicians, here regularly meet to discuss their profession, and an International Conference on Ayurveda was held in Singapore in 2016.[17]

Today, Ayurvedic tradition continues to innovate and redefine itself in response to modern needs and the evolution of societies across the world. Despite these adaptations, as well as the inclusion of variant medicinal traditions under the umbrella of Ayurveda,

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07 Ayurvedic physicians may use a *kizhi* (or bolus) in their treatments. A *kizhi* contains a herbal mixture that is gently warmed in a vessel with medical herbal oil. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

08 The warmed *kizhi* or bolus may be used during a *abhyangam* therapy session. *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

09 A patient undergoing *shirodhara*, which is an Ayurvedic technique where herbal oil is poured onto one's forehead. The word "*shirodhara*" comes from the two Sanskrit words, "*shiro*" (head) and "*dhara*" (flow). *Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

the enduring principles of Ayurvedic philosophy and focus on holistic treatments ensure continuity over millennia. At a local level, the growth of Ayurveda will depend on the preservation and passing on of knowledge and medical techniques honed over many decades by expert physicians. This passing of the flame is imperative, in the opinion of Malayala Ayurveda Vaidya Sala's Mahesh, who also points to the rising interest from Singaporeans from diverse cultures as a positive harbinger for Ayurveda's future on the island.[18]

Notes

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Technique and tradition in effigy-making

Text by Wong Li An

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In multicultural Singapore, icons, symbols and statues of deities from a kaleidoscope of religions rest on wall-mounted altars, above doorways, a corner of a shop or a factory, or from shrines under trees. Their presence in the background of daily life means that even non-adherent or non-religious locals can usually recognise culturally-specific aesthetics or elements. In the case of Taoism, Singaporeans from across diverse cultures might find Sun Wu Kong's golden staff, Guan Gong's halberd or Ne Zha's flaming wheels familiar, even if they struggle to trace their symbolic meanings.[1]

In a shophouse on Neil Road, details like the gold-band and the red face are deftly applied onto wooden statues by crafters and painters, rendering them identifiable as religious and cultural icons. Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop is the last in Singapore where these deity statues, also known as effigies, are gilded and painted by hand. While effigies are also produced in paper form for Taoist rituals, those produced at Say Tian Hng are bound for places of worship, home altars and sites of business, where devotees use them as focal points for prayers and blessings.[2]

01 Tour attendees observing Madam Tan Chwee Lian gilding motifs onto a wooden carving, 2018. *Courtesy of Joseph Nair*

02 A selection of carved effigies produced by Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop, 2018. *Courtesy of Joseph Nair*

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03 A four-generation photograph of the family behind Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop, 2018. *Courtesy of Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop*

04 A closeup of the traditional tools used in gilding the effigies, 2018. *Courtesy of Joseph Nair*

05 Madam Tan Chwee Lian gilding motifs onto a wooden carving with a "dough" made from ingredients including sandalwood incense ash, 2018. *Courtesy of Joseph Nair*

Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop: Craft and heritage

Say Tian Hng ("Heaven's Garden" in Hokkien) was established in 1896 by two brothers who emigrated from Kinmen Island, an island near Xiamen, China.[3] One of them passed away, and the surviving brother later passed on the business to his sons Ng Yew Kian and his brother Ng Tian Sang.[4] The Ng family also traces its heritage in carving and working statues of Taoist deities even further back in time, with an ancestor said to have learnt the trade from a master in Tong'An, China during the Ming dynasty period (1368-1644).[5] Today, the shop is run by Ng Yeow Hua, with help from his retired mother Tan Chwee Lian, and a team of woodcarvers, painters and calligraphers.

Besides the production of effigies, Say Tian Hng also handles the consecration, deconsecration and restoration of deity statues.[6] Tan's grandson Ng Tze Yong also conducts heritage education and experience tours in the shop, which are well-attended by both tourists and locals. While the woodworking of the statues takes place elsewhere to comply with regulations, the effigies are gilded and painted in the shophouse at 35 Neil Road.[7]

On a visit in December 2019, I watched as Madam Tan gilded a wooden carving with a "dough" made to a closely-held family recipe, which includes sandalwood incense ash. Her practised hands held a spindle and a fine bamboo brush, tracing elaborate patterns, filigrees and motifs with an unbroken thread of dough. Having learnt the craft from her late husband (the son of the shop's founder), Madam Tan's precise, gravity-directed technique stands in contrast to the piping methods commonly used in China and other countries today.[8] The motifs, including embroidery patterns, dragons and armour plating, appear on each statue's robe, armour or other clothing, helping identify the deity and reflecting the virtues, legends and philosophies associated with each divine figure.[9] Other motifs often seen include chrysanthemums, castles, white peonies, tempestuous seas and swirling clouds.[10]

The gilding so deftly demonstrated by Tan is one of the stages in the process of producing deity statues, with each stage infused with cultural and religious beliefs. When an effigy is commissioned, the first step involves consulting the Tong Sheng (通书), a Chinese almanac and divination guide to derive auspicious dates for

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the start of the effigy-working process and the date on which the effigy is collected by the customer.[11] The crafter then visualises the deity image, including his or her features, garments and accessories, before realising the vision with a mallet and chisel. Camphor wood is the main material for the statue carvers, providing the advantages of being easy to work and possessing a smell that drives wood-boring insects away, although other woods like teak can also be used.[12]

The carved figure is then sanded and plastered, before the gilding that brings out raised features and decorations with various materials, including wafers of gold foil and gold dust. After being hand-painted in vivid colours, the statue has its pupils dotted in a ritual known as *kai guang* (loosely translated as "opening (for) illumination" in Mandarin), which symbolically invokes the deity.[13] In the case of effigies destined for homes or places of business, the eyes are painted cast downwards, while those to be housed in temples have their eyes looking upwards, the better to meet the gazes of worshippers standing across a bigger space.[14] The eyebrows of the deity are also portrayed in a wide variety of styles.[15] The consecration process also sometimes includes the sealing of a bee or other insect and talismans into a cavity within the effigy, as some Taoists believe that the sacrifice adds spiritual power to the statue.[16]

The diverse, multi-faceted nature of the Taoist pantheon means that the crafters of Say Tian Hng must be well-versed in the origin stories and legends of myriad deities, as well as the elements of their appearances that symbolise time-honoured values and virtues. For example, according to one of several legends for the high-ranking deity Xuan Wu, he was once a butcher who, regretful and repentant for a sin he had committed, tore open his own body. His stomach was transformed into a tortoise and his entrails turned into a snake; consequently, his effigy is often portrayed with his feet stepping on these creatures of ill origin.[17]

Relating the stories of Xuan Wu and other deities like Guan Gong during heritage tours of the shop, Tze Yong explains to participants that many Taoist gods were historical figures deified for their deeds and principles, possessing human flaws even as they

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ascended through their trials and tribulations.[18] Through these stories, he elucidates the virtues behind the deities such as loyalty, courage and devotion.[19] Through both their expert craftsmanship and the heritage education they conduct, the people behind Say Tian Hng act as cultural transmitters and keepers of tradition.

The future of effigy-making in Singapore

While it possesses a century-spanning heritage of craftsmanship, Say Tian Hng remains a business and faces a new host of challenges in the 21st century. The shop's artisanal, hand-crafted method of production means that it can take up to thirty days to finish a 30cm-tall deity statue.[20] In recent decades, it has faced increasing competition from workshops using machine-tooling, which can produce effigies faster and cheaper.[21] In Singapore, Say Tian Hng stands alone as the last artisanal maker of deity statues.[22]

Even as hand-crafting methods cannot compete directly with machine-tooling for efficiency, they still hold value in their own right. During a visit to Say Tian Hng to learn about the shop's carving techniques, Hawaii-based sculptor Robert William Holden expressed the view that factory-made statues would lack a human touch and distinctive qualities that make each effigy unique.[23]

The Ng family continues to pass on the traditional crafting techniques, with members of the family learning from their elders even as they hold jobs in other sectors. Beyond sustaining heritage techniques, the family has long had the future of the shop and its survival on their minds. Besides the heritage tours already introduced, Tze Yong muses over possible future directions for Say Tian Hng.[24] "It is possible to display (Taoist effigies) as decor in London or as a table-piece in France," he says, with modifications to the production process to emphasise the aesthetic, artisanal qualities of the statues rather than their religious aspects.[25]

The cultural facets and legends associated with the deities may be another avenue to broaden the market

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06 On the far right is a block of camphor wood that will eventually be sculpted into an effigy, 2018. *Courtesy of Joseph Nair*

07 Ng Tze Yong, the grandson of Madam Tan, sharing with visitors about the different Chinese effigies that Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop produces, 2018. *Courtesy of Joseph Nair*

08 Effigies of Sun Wu Kong, the Monkey King in various tones, 2018. *Courtesy of Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop*

09 A closeup of the intricate details of the deity Nezha, who is often depicted riding on flaming wheels, 2018. *Courtesy of Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop*

for these effigies. Tze Yong points to the changing depictions of the goddess Guan Yin over the centuries, which reflected evolving social priorities and virtues across different eras, as well as her role as a bodhisattva who blends in with the common folk.[26] He raises the prospect of the goddess being depicted in the modern attire more familiar to Singaporeans today, rather than the traditional robes of the deity.

Perhaps effigies carved in Say Tian Hng will grace art biennales in distant lands, while crafters interpret the iconography of deity statues for different audiences and generations as they help keep this cultural heritage alive for the ages. The owners of Say Tian Hng view their heritage primarily as artisans - they would produce carvings of gods and goddesses from any religious or cultural tradition, not just Taoism.[27] This stance, together with their determination to adapt to new social and economic realities, means that the future is full of possibilities for this venerable shop.

Notes

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10 One of the final steps in creating effigies is carefully hand-painting the required colours on to them, 2018.
Courtesy of Say Tian Hng Buddha Shop

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WRITERS FOR MUSE SG

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Nicholas Yeo is Manager (Intangible Cultural Heritage) at the National Heritage Board's Heritage Research & Assessment division. He is involved in research and content development of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Singapore and was most recently involved in the UNESCO Nomination of Hawker Culture in Singapore.

Tan Jia Yi is a Year 4 History major at the National University of Singapore. She enjoys travelling and seeking out new experiences that challenge her. Attendant to these hobbies is an unhealthy passion for caffeine and dessert, one which Singapore has been so good in fulfilling.

Timothy Loh is a Year 1 Economics and History major at the National University of Singapore. When not slaving away among pages of math, research and essays, he can be found in the gym, listening to webcasts between sets. He likes his coffee like the Death Star - huge, on the Dark Side, and strong enough to take out planets.

Koh Hong Kai is a Year 2 History major at the National University of Singapore. Typically over-caffeinated and under pressure from school-related deadlines and commitments, he enjoys his coffee even more over a good book in a nice cafe.

Wong Li An is a Year 4 History major at the National University of Singapore. She cycles a lot and likes to experiment with different cooking techniques.

Sarah Grace Lim is a Year 1 History and English Literature major at the National University of Singapore. She dreams of having 40 hours in a day because there are never enough books to be read, music to listen to, and new knowledge to learn.

Neo Pei En, Phedra is a Year 1 Political Science and History major at the National University of Singapore. When she isn't in a heated discussion with her friends on social issues, you can find her either drinking too much coffee or reading up on Singapore politics. She hopes that one day she will be able to visit all the theme parks in the world.

Brandon Kit is a Year 1 History major at the National University of Singapore. He is particularly interested in military history. Also fascinated by different cultures (cuisines especially), he enjoys learning about them through documentaries.

Fam Hui Jiung is a Year 4 Sociology major at the National University of Singapore. In her free time, she enjoys having a good time with friends, exploring hidden gems in Singapore, and making music.