

Digging Bidadari's Past: From Palace to First Muslim State Cemetery

Kartini Saparudin



Sultan Abu Bakar was the Sultan of Johor. The Bidadari estate was home to his second consort, Cecelia Catherina Lange. Courtesy of Antiques of the Orient.

This article is a response to a call on the dearth of literature on Muslim cemeteries especially Bidadari.¹ Ironically, documentation on Bidadari is lacking compared to the contemporary Bukit Brown cemetery or even the older Fort Canning Cemetery. For the case of Fort Canning, most of the surviving headstones have been preserved, embedded in a wall that stands till today. In addition, tombstone rubbings of surviving headstones were made. For Bidadari, there was no systematic documentation, mapping or photography done of the cemetery that could at least remain a record for future reference and research.²

In addition to the general lack of documentation on the Bidadari cemetery, there are limitations to reviewing a burial community such as the Muslim and/or Malay community. First, a Muslim community in the early 20th century was diverse. Second, simpler gravestones in the Muslim cemetery are not much of a textual source. This was the case for the Muslim tombstones in Bidadari cemetery, Kampong Glam's royal cemetery and Keramat Radin Mas Ayu at Mount Faber. Most tombstones in the vicinity of the royal keramats hardly have names inscribed on them – and these were members of royalty!

Hence what is possible for the moment is a look into the history of the Bidadari estate and the history of its acquisition as the first Muslim state cemetery and first multi-religious cemetery. This article provides an introduction to the history of burials in the Muslim/Malay community in Singapore, and contextualises the claim Bidadari has as the first Muslim state cemetery.

Before Bidadari,³ Muslim burials were private events. There were three types of burials:

- (i) keramats that were considered “holy grounds” by the community and lastly;
- (ii) licensed burials made up of burials on wakaf lands and state lands;
- (iii) unlicensed Muslim burials performed mostly by the poor.

Keramats

Keramats are one of the oldest and well-known burials in Singapore. It is usually a holy place that could be an old burial ground, cemetery, graveyard, object or place. The word is derived from the Arabic *karamah*, which means holy.⁴ Keramats are usually associated with dead persons of royal birth and sacred backgrounds. One of the oldest and most well-known keramat is Keramat Sultan Iskander Shah located at Bukit Larangan, or Forbidden Hill, at Fort Canning. Keramats are often associated with mysticism and venerated as shrines. Keramats in Singapore are mostly related to the Islamic community and popular belief, and are connected to one or more cultural groups. It is a syncretism of animism, Hinduism and Islamic beliefs.⁵

Some of the other well-known royal keramats are Keramat Bukit Kasita at Kampong Bahru, which was thought to have been in use for the last 400 years;⁶ Makam di Raja at Telok Blangah, which has been in existence for more than 100 years;⁷ the 200-year-old Kampong Glam royal cemetery⁸ and finally, Keramat Radin Mas Ayu at Mount Faber.⁹ Most keramats mentioned here are considered holy because of their association with dead persons of royal birth. Most of these tombstones in the vicinity of the royal keramats hardly have names inscribed on them.

Licensed burials: Wakaf and State lands

The second category of Muslim burials is licensed burials, which can take place on either wakaf lands or state lands. A form of licensed burial takes place on wakaf lands for private or public purposes. Wakaf lands are donated to the public for charitable causes such as madrasahs (Islamic schools), mosques or Muslim burials. However, in the context of Muslim public cemeteries in Singapore, a wakaf burial plot may not be considered public cemetery land if the donor and family are buried within the same wakaf land. Many poor Muslims who were not able to reserve plots for private burials could be buried on wakaf lands. It is mentioned that “a trust of land as a wakaf for the burial of the donor or family and relatives was held not to be public charity as it was not to the benefit of the public and was therefore void”.¹⁰ Hence, wakaf burials may both be public and private. The existence of such wakaf lands prove that financially able Muslims could provide burial plots for their descendants and for poorer Muslims.

The highest number of Muslim burials were found on state lands. Bidadari was the first of such a state cemetery followed by Pusara Aman, Pusara Abadi I and Pusara Abadi II. The Muslim section of Bidadari was open from 1910 to 1973.¹¹ By the time Bidadari was closed for exhumation in 1990s, there was an estimated figure of 78,800 burials for the 24-hectare Muslim section of Bidadari cemetery.¹² This was more than the estimated 54,000 in the Christian section of Bidadari.

The 48-ha Muslim section of Choa Chu Kang cemetery was made up of Pusara Aman I, Pusara Aman II, Pusara Abadi I and Pusara Abadi II. Pusara Aman I was a major part of the Muslim section of Choa Chu Kang. The 40-ha land was opened in 1970 and closed for burials in 1995.¹³ There were 45,000 burial plots in Pusara Aman I. Pusara Abadi I formed part of Pusara Aman I. Exhumed bodies from other cemetery plots which unclaimed by relatives were interred in Pusara Abadi I.

The other 8-ha section of Choa Chu Kang Muslim cemetery was made up of Pusara

Aman II. It was opened in 1995, after Pusara Aman I closed. Pusara Abadi II was also located in Pusara Aman II. Exhumed bodies from Bidadari that were claimed by families were interred in Pusara Aman II.



A big Muslim tombstone in Bidadari Muslim cemetery. Courtesy of Goh Si Guim.

Unlicensed burials

Before the opening of state lands for Muslim burials, there was a lack of organisation and coordination for burials in early colonial Singapore. The fate of the dead poor was captured vividly by the colonial surveyor, John Turnbull Thomson, during his stay in the Far East:

...a few days will suffice to convince strangers in Singapore that native burial-grounds are to be met with in all directions. These are generally much neglected, and are overgrown with weeds and scrub, and often are they desecrated by the unsympathising Christian, Mohamedan, or Pagan, as may be. Roads are recklessly carried through the bones of original native settlers, and crowded streets now traverse the sacred places where many Singapore primeval worthies are laid in their last homes. Such sights were often to be seen of fresh human bones and coffins and hums sticking out of the sand by the roadsides, warning the fair young maiden of Western birth what might be her fate, were she laid in this land of apathy and regardlessness.¹⁴

Bidadari estate: Istana of Cecilia

Catherina Lange, wife of Sultan Abu Bakar

Before Bidadari was a cemetery, it was an estate owned by prominent families. Henry Minchin Simons (known as H.M. Simons or popularly nicknamed H.M.S.), co-founder of Paterson Simons & Co and a civil engineer, was the original owner. In the early colonial period, the civil engineer was also the architect. Simons exchanged the Bidadari estate for Tyersall estate with William Napier. It was not known when exactly Simons had the building constructed or when he had the building exchanged for Tyersall. Few archival materials

¹ Tan, Kevin. (Ed). (2011). *Spaces for the dead*, p. 5. Singapore: Ethos Books.

² Ibid, p. 23.

³ The Bidadari cemetery comprises the Bidadari Christian, Muslim, Singapore and Hindu cemeteries.

⁴ Widodo, J. (2011) Keramats (p. 206). In *Spaces for the Dead*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society: Ethos Books.

⁵ Ibid, p. 209.

⁶ Tan, K. (2011). Introduction: The death of cemeteries in Singapore (p. 8). In *Spaces for the Dead*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, Ethos Books.

⁷ Widodo, J. (2011) Keramats (p. 212). In *Spaces for the Dead*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society: Ethos Books.

⁸ Ibid, p. 216.

⁹ Ibid, p. 212-213.

¹⁰ Widodo, J. (2011) Keramats (p. 212-213). In *Spaces for the Dead*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society: Ethos Books

¹¹ Ahmad Ibrahim. (1965). *The legal status of Muslims in Singapore*, p. 38. Singapore: Malayan Law Journal Ltd.

¹² Lebih 57,000 kubur di Bidadari belum dituntut. (2002, July 20). *Berita Harian*, p. 17.

¹³ Tan, K. (2011). Introduction: The death of cemeteries in Singapore (p. 21). In *Spaces for the Dead*. Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, Ethos Books.; Nadzri Eunus. (2007, Oktober 24). 10,000 kubur lama di Pusara Aman akan dipindah. *Berita Harian*, 24 October 2007, p. 1. Numbers given by Tan is 78,800 Muslim burials in Bidadari, whereas a *Berita Harian* article reports 77,700 exhumed graves in Bidadari that was later to be interred in Pusara Abadi.

¹⁴ Suhaimi Mohsen. (1996, April 14). Meninjau persoalan kubur. *Berita Harian*, p. 4.; Hasleen Bachik. (1996, April 2). 720 famili daftar tuntutan mayat di Bidadari. *Berita Harian*, p. 3.; Lebih 57,000 kubur di Bidadari belum dituntut. (2002, July 20). *Berita Harian*, p. 17.



Sultan Abu Bakar & Che' Zubaidah Besar with their first-born.
Courtesy of Dato' Rahim Ramli.

It remains a mystery how Bidadari obtained its name. The name was already in existence before Sultan Abu Bakar and his wife took up residence in the estate. Newspapers reported that there was a pool in Bidadari visited by beautiful nymphs.

remain to elucidate the relationship of the two previous owners of the Bidadari estate.

Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor acquired the two estates (Bidadari and Tyersall) from Napier and Simons respectively. Several newspaper reports from this period reveal that the Sultan was a personal friend of both Simons and Napier and hence, purchasing the estates was not out of the question. Tyersall became the palace of Sultana Fatimah and was Sultan Abu Bakar's official residence in Singapore, when he became Sultan of Johor in 1885.

Bidadari was the home of the Sultan's second consort Cecilia Catherina Lange (1848–1939), a half-Danish, half-Chinese woman who was the daughter of Mad Johansen Lange, a well-known Danish merchant in Bali. Her mother, Teh Sang Nio, was one of two wives Lange had during his 17 years in Bali. Teh survived Lange and inherited a comfortable home in Banuwangi, Java.¹⁶

Cecilia remained abroad after her father's death. She returned to Bali in 1859 to visit his grave. She lived with a family friend for a time in India, England, France and then back East. When she returned to Singapore, she attended school in a convent and met Abu Bakar. Upon

her conversion to Islam and marriage to Abu Bakar, she was known by the title and Muslim name Enche' Besar Zubaidah binte Abdullah. She was only 20 years at that time. She bore him two children: a daughter, Mariam, who later became the first wife of the Sultan of Pahang and a son, Ibrahim, who succeeded his father upon his death in 1895 and ruled Johor as Sultan Ibrahim.¹⁷ It was established that Mariam and Ibrahim were born in the Bidadari estate in 1871 and 1873 respectively.

When Sultan Abu Bakar's title changed in 1885 from Maharaja of Johor to Sultan of Johor, Zubaidah left Singapore to stay in Johor and never left. She lived in a palace in Johor until 1930 and hardly appeared in public. Mad Lange's Danish biographer described her as an "animated little lady, with white hair, blue eyes and aristocratic feature".¹⁸ Cecilia was the "bidadari" (from Persian word *widadari* or beautiful nymph) who resided in the estate for a while. The estate was then left vacant for some time. When the Municipal Commission wished to acquire the land for a Christian cemetery in 1902, no one would have imagined that it would also be the first state Muslim cemetery as well as the first multi-religious state cemetery in Singapore.

It remains a mystery how Bidadari obtained its name. The name was already in existence before Sultan Abu Bakar and his wife took up residence in the estate. Newspapers reported that there was a pool in Bidadari visited by beautiful nymphs. The pool was said to be in existence but was closed down as part of a measure to reduce mosquito breeding. Oral accounts mention a hill on the estate on which the palace of the Sultan of Johor stood. This was where the Upper Serangoon Technical School was once located.¹⁹ However, images of the Bidadari palace are rare compared to Sultan Abu Bakar's other residences in Singapore such as the Tyersall or Woodneuk palaces.

The story of Bidadari Muslim cemetery 1910 to 1973: The first and oldest Muslim state cemetery

The creation of a multi-religious cemetery plot that began with Bidadari cemetery was incidental. In the beginning, due to a lack of space at the Bukit Timah cemetery for Christian burials, the Municipal Commissioners intended to acquire "the Bidadari estate" to address the problem of burial plot shortages at the Bukit Timah cemetery and the poor drainage there.

While enquiries were made regarding the purchase of the Bidadari estate, investigations were also carried out to ascertain if the land was suitable for the construction of a new Christian cemetery.

...enquiries [were] being made as to the state of the Christian Cemetery in Bukit

Timah Road, and a thorough examination of the Cemetery was ordered. The portion of the Christian Cemetery, fit for burials, is all but used up. The remaining portion is altogether unsuitable, being made ground; in several places, the ground water is only 1 ft 8 in to 5 ft below the surface, and after rain a considerable portion of the old cemetery is under water, in some places more than 1 ft 6 in in depth. The drainage of the graves flows along the surface of the underlying mangrove swamp direct to Rochor Canal, and practically without filtration, instead of passing through porous soil, which would tend to free the drainage from deleterious matter.

Commissioners to survey the property for acquiring it as a site for a cemetery.

Dato' Mentri was the trustee for the Sultan of Johor for the Bidadari estate. Negotiations between Dato' Mentri and the Commissioners took almost three years to complete. This was later complicated by a petition "numerously" signed by Muslims so that part of the Bidadari Estate would be set aside as a burial ground for the use of their co-religionists. The lack of Malay press at that time made it difficult to trace this interest by the Muslims to have their own cemetery. The Muslim Advisory Board was set up three years later in 1905. Hence, any record of organised attempts to create a public Muslim cemetery was noted only in passing. Perhaps, more efforts to look into the annual



The side and back of Bidadari mosque. Courtesy of Goh Si Guim.

It was decided, therefore, to abandon the present cemetery and to provide a more suitable site. The sanction of the Governor in Council was obtained to the acquisition of the land for this purpose. Provision to the extent of \$80,000 was accordingly made in the 1902 loan of \$400,000. Several sites ...[Bukit Timah Road, Thomson Road and Serangoon Road]...were inspected. The Commissioners decided that Bidadari Estate on the Serangoon Road was the most suitable, the soil there being porous and sandy and in every way adapted for the purposes of burial. A survey was made of the land.²⁰

The earliest declaration for the acquisition of land at Bidadari was published in the Government Gazette under the Land Acquisition Ordinance in September 1902.²¹ At that time, Dato' Mentri of Johor did not reply to a request by the Municipal

reports of the Muslim Advisory Board/Hindu Muslim Endowment Board could shed more light on documented attempts for a Muslim burial space.

The Municipal Commissioners were reluctant to accede to a request to purchase the land for other religious groups. They were clear that the motivation was for a Christian cemetery, as noted by the response of the Deputy President of the Municipal Commissioners, who passed the recommendation of the By-Law Committee,

That the obligation of the different sections of the Community must be recognised but that as the ground at Bidadari was acquired for the interment of deceased members of the Christian Community for a limited period only, it is inadvisable to set apart any portion of

¹⁵ Thomson, J. T. (1865). *Some glimpses in life in the Far East* (p. 280). London: Richardson & Co.

¹⁶ Author compiles table of Muslim burial places namely from the following sources: (i) *Report of the Committee Regarding Burial and Burial Grounds*. (1952). Singapore: Printed at the Govt. Print. Off; (ii) Soal tanah wakaf: MTFA rancang adakan bincangan. (1982, Oktober 24). *Berita Harian*, p. 2; Sejumlah 324.55 h kawasan kuburan akan diambil. (1978, April 8). *Berita Harian*, p. 2; URA ambil alih tanah kubur wakaf di River Valley Road. (1983, June 8). *Berita Harian*, p. 3; Hasleen Bachik. (1996, March 26). 8,000 kubur di Bidadari terjejas dengan projek LTA. *Berita Harian*, p. 3. There were notifications that appeared in *Berita Harian* in the 1980s-2000s from MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore), MTFA (Muslimin Trust Fund Association), NEA (National Environment Agency) and even private construction/ contractors who bought land and discovered that it contained Muslim burials. These notifications seek descendants to claim the deceased burial lands.

¹⁷ Saga of a Danish trader in *Bali Chronicles*, p. 112. Bloch, Peter. (2007). *Mads Lange: The Bali trader and peacemaker*. [Batuan, Gianyar, Bali]: Bali Purniati Center of the Arts, p. 170-171.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 113.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 114.

²⁰ Khairani Ahmad. (1979, November 25). 'Bidadari' tempat puteriz bersiram?', *Berita Harian*, p. 8.

²¹ Singapore. *Administration report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1902*. (1902). Christian Cemetery. Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 3406.

²² Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette. Supplement to Straits Settlements Government Gazette.* (1902, September 26). Acquisition (b) Bididari (No. 27, col. 1562). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1047-1048. However, the specific intent for the acquisition of Bidadari estate for the purpose of a New Christian Cemetery was published a month later at the gazette of 24 October 1902. Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette. Supplement to Straits Settlements Government Gazette.* (1902, October 24). President Remarks. (c) New Christian Cemetery (No. 61, col. 1582). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1053-1054.

²³ Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette. Supplement to Straits Settlements Government Gazette.* (1904, May 27). Burial ground (No. 27, col. 595). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1053-1054.

²⁴ Ibid, 1905, June 23. Mohamedan burial ground, Seranggong Road (No. 32, col. 179). MFM No.: NL1055-1056.

²⁵ Ibid, No. 32, col. 291.

²⁶ Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette. Supplement to Straits Settlements Government Gazette.* (1905, June 23). Mohamedan burial ground, Seranggong Road (No. 32, col. 291). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1055-1056.

²⁷ Ibid, 1906, January 19. Bidadari Cemetery (No. 3, col. 179). MFM No.: NL1059-1060.

²⁸ Ibid, 1909, July 16. Closing Bukit Timah Road Christian Cemetery (No. 34, col. 207). MFM No.: NL1066-1067; Municipal Board. (1909, 26 June). *The Straits Times*, p. 8. ;Notices: Municipal Notice: Christian Cemetery Bukit Timah Road. (1909, July 28). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (1884-1942), p. 2.

²⁹ Benediction ceremony of the opening of the Roman Catholic section of the Bidadari cemetery. (1910, January 3). *The Straits Times*, p. 6.

³⁰ Administration report of the Singapore Municipality. (1906). *New Cemeteries.* Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL3408.

³¹ Ibid, 1909, February 19. Plans for mosque for Mohamedan burial ground (No. 4, col. 22). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1067-1068.

³² Ibid, 1909, September 10. For quarters, Mohamedan Cemetery (No. 43, col. 266); 1909, August 13. Muhammadan Cemetery (No. unknown, col. 41). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL1069-1069.

³³ [Untitled]. (1910, February 25). *The Straits Times*, p. 6.

³⁴ Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette.* "Progress report and statement of the receipts and disbursements on account of the Municipal Fund of the Municipality of Singapore Town,

this land for the interment of members of other religions.²²

The commissioners were firm about their plans to reserve the burial grounds at Bidadari for the Christian community only until Dato' Mentri made it a prerequisite for the Commissioners to also acquire the land for the purpose of a public Muslim burial ground as part of the offer in 1905.²³

The question of providing a public Mohamedan burial ground is considered by the Board. The President addresses the Board, and moves that the Commissioners accept the offer of the Dato' Mentri of Johore to sell to the Corporation for the purpose of a Mohamedan public burial ground, at the price of \$1,056.66 per acre, a piece of land forming part of the Bidadari Estate, being a portion of Government Grant No. 9.²⁴

Eventually, the 45-acre land was acquired at the price of \$2,500 per acre, on condition that the Commissioners made a road from MacPherson Road to the side of the cemetery. Payment for the Bidadari estate amounted to \$112,500, which was paid in two installments of \$80,000 and \$32,500.²⁶

Work in progress

Work on the Christian section of Bidadari cemetery began first. Within less than a year, the plans for the layout of the Christian cemetery were prepared and arrangements were made for filling up the low lying portions and for forming and metalling the roads.²⁶

With the opening of the Bidadari Christian cemetery, the gazette as well as newspaper reports officially announced the closure of the Bukit Timah Road Christian Cemetery on the 31 December 1909.²⁷ In effect, the Catholic portion of Bidadari Cemetery was opened, except in cases where the interments in reserved plots of which leases were granted. The grounds had already been consecrated in January 1908. The benediction ceremony of the opening of the Roman Catholic section of Bidadari section was announced in January 1910.²⁸

At that time, Bidadari was the name of the Christian cemetery. The Municipal Commissioners would often use the terms "Mohamedan burial ground" at Upper Serangoon to refer to the Muslim section of Bidadari in government reports. It is not clear when Bidadari was became synonymous with the Muslim cemetery and other religious plots later.

The Municipal Commissioners agreed that work on the Muslim cemetery would not

begin until the completion of the Christian cemetery. Financial reasons were cited for this.²⁹ Years after, the plan for the Bidadari mosque in the Muslim cemetery was approved in 1909.³⁰ Quarters for the registrar and his coolies, as well as a mortuary, were erected.³¹

Opening of Bidadari Muslim cemetery

The Muslim cemetery was later opened on 14 February 1910. This brief announcement was made in a tongue-in-cheek manner, "the new Mohammedan cemetery at Bidadari, was opened on St. Valentine's Day, but yet has no tenants".³² This lack of response from the Muslim community is puzzling considering that the Muslims were actively petitioning for a cemetery plot in the earlier years.

The number of Muslim burials recorded during this time was limited in contrast to the utilisation rate of the Christian cemetery. No reasons were given in the government reports for this lack of numbers. In the later part of 1910, months after the opening of the Christian and Muslim cemeteries, there were 71 burials in the Christian cemetery and one at Muslim cemetery.³³ Six months after, there were 50 burials in the Christian cemetery and seven in the Muslim cemetery.³⁴

Almost 15 years afterwards in 1925, the Christian cemetery that was made up of four divisions – such as the Protestant division, French Roman Catholic division, Portuguese Roman Catholic division and Pauper Division – had recorded 15,109 burials since its opening. The Muslim section recorded 3,169 burials.³⁵

There may be many reasons for this gap in numbers between Christian and Muslim burials. One, Muslims could have had many alternative cemetery plots unlike the Christians. Two, the plot probably served the Muslim population in the surrounding area instead of island-wide because of its inaccessibility. There were tales of tigers roaming around the jungle, beyond the confined areas of the Municipality. Three, perhaps news of the new cemetery plot took time to spread to the outlying areas. In addition, the Malay and Muslim folks were probably unaware that they could also apply for subsidies for the plots.

A fee of \$2 was normally charged for adult interment and half of that for a child under 10 years of age.³⁶ For those in the service of the British such as civil servants of the colonial government or the municipality, the interment was \$1. In cases where the relatives were certified by the chief police officer or by the president of Municipal Commissioners as "too poor to pay the fees, the fee may be reduced or remitted".³⁷

Eventually, when the exhumation exercise commenced in 1995, the Muslim section of



A perspective of Bidadari Muslim cemetery in the 1990s before the exhumation. Courtesy of Goh Si Guim.

Bidadari consisted of 78,800 burials which was more than the estimated 54,000 in the Christian section.³⁸

The Chinese question

Apparently, the Muslims were not the only group who applied for cemetery sites in the Municipal areas in 1904; the Municipal also reported that they received applications from the Chinese as well.³⁹ However, applications from the Chinese at that time were rejected on the grounds that Chinese burial customs were incompatible with the ambience of the consecrated Christian site; even though land could be secured at Bidadari for a Chinese cemetery plot.⁴⁰ The Chinese community had been facing obstacles in acquiring land within and beyond the municipal limits for private interment for the first two decades of the 20th century.

Some years later, the acquisition of the 213-acre site at Bukit Brown, already part of an existing burial ground that belonged to the Seh Ong *kongsi* (clan association), was possible. This was so because the *kongsi* resented to the acquisition of their land under the Lands Acquisition Ordinance, and hence was able to acquire the Bukit Brown site. The Bukit Brown site was under municipal control at the end of 1919. Bukit Brown Cemetery opened for internment on 1 January 1922.

Bidadari exhumation exercise

As one of the oldest cemeteries in Singapore, Bidadari had 147,000 graves within its Muslim, Christian and Hindu burial grounds, of which about half the numbers belonged to the Muslims.⁴¹ Tan wrote that no detailed study of the Muslim section has been done and it is no wonder since the individual tombs were badly weathered.⁴² The grounds were closed in 1972. It was in 1996 that the government announced that the area was earmarked for redevelopment.

This sparked great public debate over the loss of Bidadari's rich history, which resulted in the Bidadari Memorial Garden. It was set up by the National Heritage Board to remind present and future generations of Singapore of its history. No remains were re-interred in the memorial garden with objects and structures moved to the new site. Some of the more prominent members of the Muslim community were Ahmad Ibrahim (former Minister for Health), Captain Noor Mohamed Hashim Mohamed Dali (Singapore's first Malay/Muslim commissioned military officer and unofficial member Malay member of Straits Settlements Legislative Council), Che Zahara Noor Mohamed (founder of the Malay Women's Welfare Association) and Abdul Rahim Kajai (father of Malay journalism).⁴³

Perhaps it was timely that the exhumation exercise happened because of the lack of effi-

for the month of December 1911" (1911, February 24). Burial grounds (No. 251, col. 36). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 1073-1074.

³⁵ Ibid. "Progress report and statement of the receipts and disbursements on account of the Municipal Fund of the Municipality of Singapore Town, for the month of June 1910" (1910, August 26). Burial grounds (No. 1036, col. 30). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 1072.

³⁶ Singapore. *Administration report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1925*. (1925). XVII Burial grounds. Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 3411.

³⁷ Straits Settlements. *Government Gazette*. (1909, October 15). Additional by-laws for the regulation of burial grounds (No. 1075, col. 34). Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 1069.

³⁸ Singapore. Administration report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1904. (1904). New cemetery and sale of land at the old cemetery, Bukit Timah Road. Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 3406.

³⁹ Tan, *In Spaces for the Dead*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Singapore. *Administration report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1904*. (1904). New cemetery and sale of land at the old cemetery, Bukit Timah Road. Singapore: Printed at Govt. Off. MFM No.: NL 3406.



Simple tombstones lining the sidewalk of Bidadari Muslim cemetery. Courtesy of Goh Si Guim.

cient use for Muslim burials. Ahmad Ibrahim acknowledged this when he, together with representatives from other communities, thought of the burial question in their report to the Governor. The recommendation of the report was prescient in its recommendation for cremation for cultures that allow it. However, for the Malay community, this was not the case. Hence, the Modular Burial System (MBS) was introduced to the Muslim community decades later. Through MBS, land optimisation of the cemetery land in Choa Chu Kang could last until 2130.⁴⁴

This article is about preserving dying legacies in cemeteries. From the lessons of Bidadari, we should attempt to actively campaign for documentation of other cemetery plots on wakaf lands slotted for exhumation exercises. Perhaps through such an exercise,

many of us would find ourselves in the past, learn to appreciate the present and salvage whatever is left of it.

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⁴¹ Yeoh. (1991). The control of "sacred" space: Conflicts over the Chinese burial rounds in colonial Singapore, 1880-1930. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 22, 2, September 1991, 282-311.

⁴² *Heritage places of Singapore*. (2009). p. 178.

⁴³ Tan. (2011). *Spaces for the dead*, p. 21

⁴⁴ *Heritage places of Singapore*. (2009). p. 178.

⁴⁵ Singapore. *Parliament. Parliamentary Debates: Official report*. (2002, May 22). Budget, Ministry of Environment. Singapore: [s. n.]. Call No.: RSING 959.57 SGG.

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