

Life in Death: The Case of Keramats in Singapore

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The keramat cult could be interpreted as a channel which brings together the connections and contradictions between the deeper historical structures of ethno-cultural hybridity and the nature of modern ethno-religious nationalism.

GOH B.L., *Engaging the Spirit World*, 2011:158

Keramat Habib Noh located at Palmer Road is the resting place of Habib Noh bin Muhamad Al-Habshi, a highly regarded mystic. Worshippers from as far as China come here to pray to or pay their respects. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Keramats (or shrines) have endured the fast-paced changes characteristic of Singapore's urban progress and development. Over the centuries, keramats have obtained a symbolic significance that transcends the vibrant social fabric of multiple religions and cultures.

It is the religious syncretism and symbolism that has been imbibed in these keramats that allow for such a relic to still remain relevant to Singaporeans in this modern era. Within the keramat are embedded the ebb and flow of Singapore's history and its continuing evolution. In essence, the keramat is not just a monument of remembrance for the dead, but also a rallying point for the living.

Despite being hidden away in the folds of Singapore's concrete jungle, keramats and keramat-worship are far from being entrenched in the forgotten annals of history. The entrances to many of these keramats are often "invisible", seemingly quiet, offering respite from the heat and throngs of people. What we mistake for wooden huts, serene and seemingly forgotten, belie the hopes, dreams and prayers of those who have taken a chance to lay their most personal needs and desperation in the forms of fragrant offerings at the foot of a grave of a person they have never met, much less a faith in which they do not believe.

Surviving the dredges of urbanisation and commercialisation

Theoretically, keramats are supposed to be the graves of deceased holy men, the early apostles of the Muhammedan faith, the first founders of the village who cleared the primeval jungle, or other persons of local notoriety in a former age.

However, many of these keramats are not graves at all: many of them are in the jungle, on hills and groves, like the high places of the Old Testament idolatries; they contain no trace of a grave, and they appear to be ancient sites of a primitive nature worship or the adoration of the spirits of natural objects.

W.W. SKEAT, *Malay Magic*, 1984:62

Evidence of keramats have pre-dated even the arrival of colonials¹ and attest to Singapore's important position in the sea routes of the 18th century, by the sheer variety of existing keramats at important historical sites such as Fort Canning Hill (Keramat Iskandar Syah), close to the then-river mouth (Makam Habib Noh at Mount Palmer before reclamation)

and elsewhere inland – supporting Singapore's role in the wider maritime world that encouraged a porous and plural society. Despite their long history, keramats have managed to survive in the fast-changing urban landscape characteristic of Singapore. Keramats located in prime estates such as those belonging to Habib Noh at Mount Palmer; Keramat Iskandar Shah at Fort Canning; Keramat Dato Syed Abdul Rahman (otherwise simply known as the Malay/Kusu Keramat) and the Da Bo Gong Temple (Merchant God or God of Prosperity) at Kusu Island have managed to retain their relevance and thwarted the (often fatal) insurgence of tourism brought about by the imaginings of the tourism industry.² More often than not, these keramats and shrines are fully funded by the kind donations of devotees who come to offer their prayers and/or give thanks for a bountiful harvest believed to have been derived from their patronage of these shrines. The key to their survival despite Singapore's cut-throat urban land use policies may lie in the symbolism that has appealed to the various races, cultures and religions in Singapore.

The religious syncretism and symbolic significance that has been imbibed into these keramats, has ensured their survival throughout the years. Of interest is also local history that has seeped into the crevices of these tombs, which may provide an insight into Singaporean life from before the arrival of the British. The keramats provide a key understanding of how the different cultures and religions interacted and offered a space where all faiths could be practised and intermingle freely. The interaction of the different cultures and localisation of the various religious influences have undoubtedly helped in the socialisation of the various communities in Singapore (Choo, 2007; Goh, 2011); then,³ now and possibly even the future. The trans-ethnic and trans-cultural symbolism that are prevalent in these keramats bear testament to the fluid and plural maritime world that was the bedrock of pre-modern Singapore (Goh, 2011).

We will focus on the more prominent keramats such as Keramat Iskandar Syah, Makam Habib Noh and the two keramats on Kusu Island. These keramats have been

¹ By the time Raffles landed in Singapore in 1819, Bukit Larangan (Forbidden Hill, now known as Fort Canning Hill) was already the ancient burial ground of the royal Sultanate. The Tomb of Iskandar Syah, said to be the fifth and last ruler of Simhapura (Sanskrit term 'सिंहपुर' from which the name Singapore was derived) still resides at the top of Fort Canning. Jalan Kubor was also another site of royal burial. Early plans of Singapore by G.D. Coleman (1836) indicate the parcel of land as 'Tombs of the Malayan Princes', quoted in Rivers (2003).

² The Singapore Tourism Promotion Board (now known as Singapore Tourism Board) did plan to market the 'largely under-utilised' [Southern] islands as resorts for the rich, as early as 1989. Kusu Island was not initially considered for these plans as it was recognised as a pilgrimage site. (*The Straits Times*, 17 September 1992)

³ Early colonial surveys have indicated the existence of keramats and of their trans-ethnic worshippers. For an in-depth reading, please refer to Richard Winstedt's *The Malay Magician: Being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi* (1961) and Walter W. Skeat's *Malay Magic* (1984).

acknowledged and mentioned in the Singapore Street Directories and various other surveys of sites of interest in Singapore, such as D.S. Samuel's *Singapore's Heritage Through Places of Historical Interest* (2010) and even the National Parks Board, or NParks, Walking Trail,⁴ so as to offer a more extensive survey and better sample of the instances of trans-cultural and trans-religious cosmologies.

The term “keramat”, derived from the Arabic term “karamah”, generally refers to the sacred nature of a person, animal, boulder, trees, etc.; but takes on different meanings when applied in different contexts (Skeat, 1984; Marsden, 1812; Wilkinson, 1959). This article specifically examines the term “keramat” as it is used on a person, to indicate and imply sacred divinity and referring to the tombs of revered and holy persons, especially the early Arabian missionaries. These keramats are not mere graves with a greater significance that applies to a wider audience beyond the individual. Whilst these sacred sites are still known as “keramat” today, the nature of keramat-worship has taken on a different facet, and will be discussed in the following sections.

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Evolving definitions of keramat and keramat-worship

The foundations of the practice of keramat- (or saint-) worship are based on early Sufi Islam and pre-Islamic animistic traditions. Worshippers believe in *semangat*⁵ (an intangible mystical force imbibed in objects, totems or nature) and attached the Arabic-derived title of keramat to accord a certain status and venerability to superstitious sites. The term was subsequently absorbed into Bazaar Malay (Rivers, 2003), otherwise known as colloquial

Malay, or Bahasa Melayu Pasar. These sites, in particular the shrines and tombs of Sufi masters regarded as saints, are frequented as part of a pilgrimage to either beg that a wish be granted, or to pay respects and give thanks for the fulfilment of the said wish. Although this is in direct opposition to the Islamic belief of the singularity and One-ness of God, keramat-worship carries an undercurrent of Islamic reverence for saints who attain *barakah*, or semi-devine power, due to their extreme piety and devotion to God (Cheu, 1996). As such, these saints are sought after even in death, by those in need of advice and assistance.

The keramats, burial grounds of persons believed to be saints and rulers of dynasties, are revered beyond their native worshippers and even by the colonials themselves who, short of providing offerings, acknowledge and respect these sacred sites. Raffles referred to Bukit Larangan as “the tombs of the Malay Kings”⁶ and in his letter to the Duchess of Somerset remarked that should he pass on while on duty, he “preferred ascending the Hill, where if my bones must remain in the East, they would have the honour of mixing with the ashes of the Malayan kings”.⁷ The keramats and Bukit Larangan were regarded as the “only remains of antiquity” to Singapore’s pre-colonial history.⁸

Although initially regarded as a rural Malay practice by colonial scholars (Winstedt 1924, Skeat 1967), other forms of such veneration, that is, ancestral and deity worship, were already practised by Chinese religionists and Hindus in British Malaya. The central principle in such worship is the propitiation of guardian spirits, receiving protection against calamities and ensuring abundant harvest or profits (Cheu, 1996). John Crawford, on his visit to Bukit Larangan during a stopover in Singapore en route to Siam, noted that a crude shrine had been erected over the tomb of Iskandar Syah so as to allow Muslims, Hindus and Chinese (religionists) to pay homage.⁹ Several articles in *The Straits Times*¹⁰ in the early 1900s, such as “Singapore’s Keramats: Wonder-Working Shrines Sacred to Many Nationalities” (11 June, 1939), a thorough survey of the existing keramats in Singapore and its surrounding islands, also indicated that such keramats and shrines were patronised by all and was a subject of interest to the public.

This syncretism is also noted by renowned French scholar, Chambert-Loir, who observed that “mausoleums of Muslim saints were built upon Savaite temples and Buddhist stupas in Java as early as the 15th and 16th century”.¹¹ The keramat, in essence, is a prime example of a hybrid practice that is emblematic of the spread of this syncretic pseudo-Islamic custom in maritime Southeast Asia (Goh, 2011). Its spread, from its initial adaptation of Sufi

⁴ National Parks Board. A Guide to Singapore’s Ancient History Walking Trail at Fort Canning Park.

⁵ See Mohd Taib Osman. (1989) *Malay Folk Beliefs: An integration of disparate elements*. KL: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka.

⁶ C.E. Wurtzburg, *Raffles of the Eastern Isles*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954, p. 620, quoted in P.J. Rivers (2003:105)

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 621.

⁸ John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China*, KL: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 46, quoted in P.J. Rivers (2003:105)

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Various other articles were written over the years that showcased and surveyed these keramats or were queries from residents to find out more about the keramats in Singapore. Among others, were *The Straits Times*, ‘Kramats of Singapore’ (11 April 1939, p. 10) and *Berita Harian*, ‘Bendera Jepun putus dekat keramat tertua Singapura (Japanese flag rips off at the oldest keramat in Singapore’ (3 January 1970, p. 4).

¹¹ Chambert-Loir. (2002) ‘Saints and Ancestors: The Cult of Muslim Saints in Java’ in *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*, quoted in Goh, (2011:154).

¹² For a better understanding of Kusu Island, please refer to Singapore Infopedia: Kusu Island. Retrieved on 6 October 2012 from: infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_233_2005-01-20.html

¹³ Month-long Kusu pilgrimage begins next week. *AsiaOne*, 9 Oct 2012.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

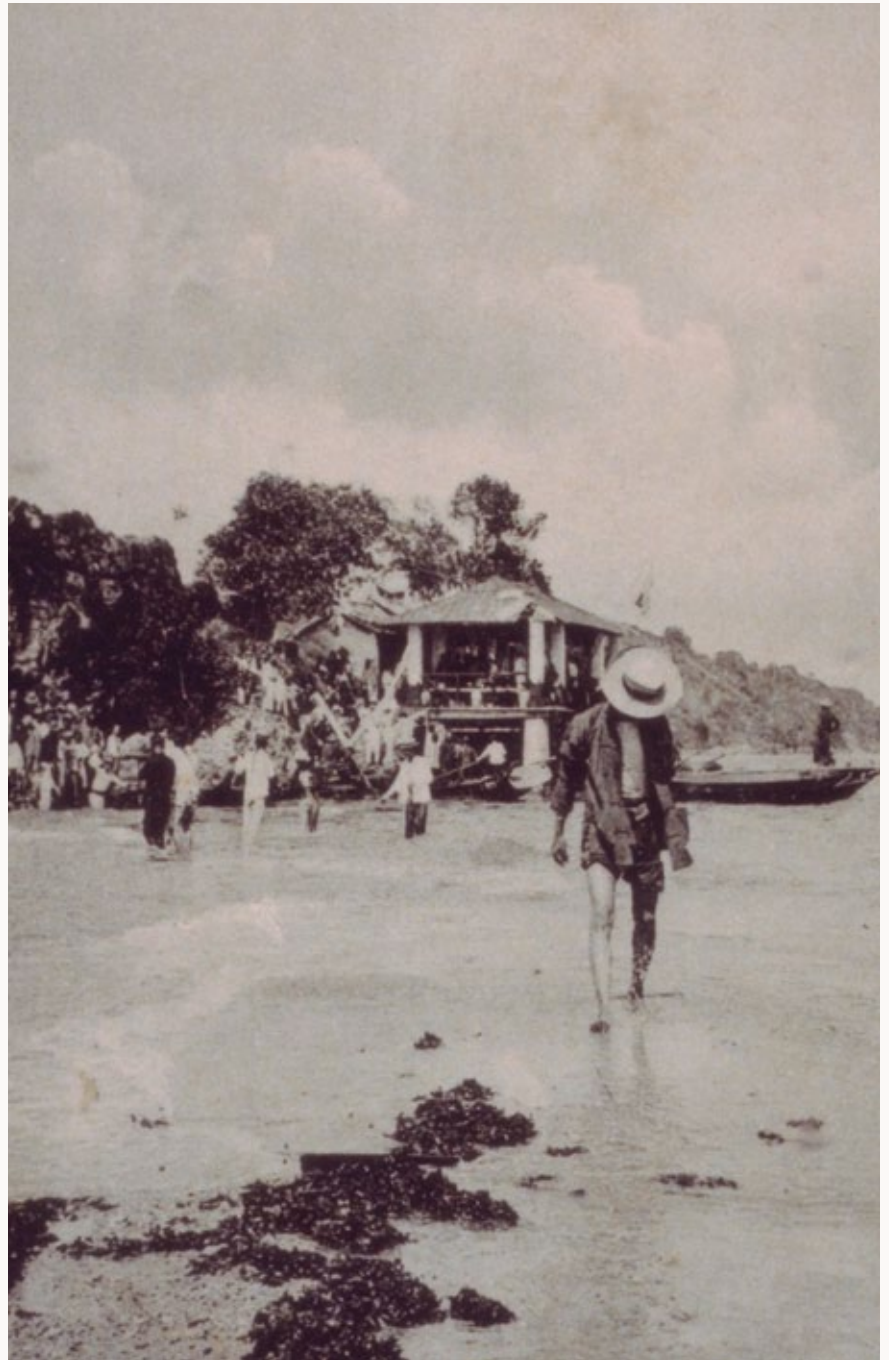
¹⁵ The terms *makam* and *keramat*, although not synonymous, are used interchangeably in colloquial context. For the purposes of this paper, we will retain the interchangeable nature of these terms as the site is regarded as both a *makam* (mausoleum) and a *keramat* by different groups under different contexts.

and animistic origins, began to morph in tandem with the various cultures and belief systems of arriving migrants into Singapore and the larger southeast maritime region (Rivers, 2003).

Keramats as spaces for trans-cultural contact and interaction

The keramats at Kusu Island (previously known as Pulau Tembakul)¹² provide an interesting glimpse into the hybridity that transcends both race and religion. The annual, month-long Kusu Pilgrimage to the Da Bo Gong (Tua Pek Kong) Temple and the Malay Keramat, attracts pilgrims as far away as Hong Kong.¹³ The latter is supposedly the tomb of Syed Abdul Rahman, an Arab traveller who, according to legend, was saved by a tortoise during a treacherous journey and brought to Kusu Island. He continued to pay respects at Kusu Island and was finally laid to rest there. The Chinese have come to worship this keramat as the native Malay equivalent of Da Bo Gong, and refer to it as Datok Kong, or Na Du Gong (Loo, 2007). The term “Datok Kong” itself is indicative of the Sino-Malay interactions entrenched in keramat-worship—“Datok” and “Kong” are both synonyms meaning “grandfather” in Malay and Chinese respectively, and is used generically for the worship of a venerated person of Malay or native origin (Cheu, 1996). Worshippers are also not limited to any specific class, and include wealthy businessmen, entrepreneurs or ordinary laymen desiring better riches and luck in life.

Sino-Malay influences can be seen in the decoration of this keramat as well, with the juxtaposition of the emblematic green-coloured Crescent and Star indicative of the Islamic faith and the yellow banner with bold red Chinese characters that read “Na Du Gong” and hangs above the keramat. Even the donation box is inscribed with “Waatlaa [sic] Heng Heng Lai” (Prosper! May good luck come!). Burning joss sticks and incense adorn the front of the keramat, left behind after worshippers have made their prayers and given their due respect. Also, as a form of respect, visitors are encouraged not to bring any food or lard to the island.¹⁴ It is probably wise to note here, despite the supposed origins of this keramat, that Muslims no longer visit the Kusu Keramat. Cheu (1996) reiterates and concludes in his paper that “more and more Chinese have adopted the keramats as less and less Malays worship them in the wake of Islamic revival in the 1980s”. Kusu Keramat is relatively well-known by the generic name of “Malay Keramat” (since the supposed Syed Abdul Rahman is Arab, nothing about the shrine is Malay except its caretakers) and not tied to a known saint, indicating that this keramat has been popularised by Chinese religionists.



The temple at Kusu Island draws thousands of devotees and worshippers every year. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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The Keramat Sultan Iskandar Shah on Fort Canning Hill is believed to be the burial place of one of the last kings (Iskandar Shah) to rule in Singapore in the 14th century. All Rights Reserved. National Library Board Singapore 2004.

Keramats as repositories of history

It is perhaps this fluidity in which keramat-worship is practised that has kept the keramats in existence up until today. It offers a space where different groups can engage, influence and contribute to the significance of a physical site in their own way. This aspect of organic syncretism and mutual respect between cultures attests to the fact that keramat-worship is “as a repository of the deep structures of trans-ethnic cosmologies and shared socio-moral orders within local society despite their erasure by modern bureaucratic powers” (Goh, 2011). It has survived even without ardent state promotion, or through efforts by the Singapore Tourism Board and has been kept alive without neither re-enactments for tourists nor as an exoticisation of native practices. Loo (2007) even notes in her survey of the keramats on Kusu Island that the erected signboards indicate little of the rich history of the island. The survival of the keramats is a direct result of individuals who frequent and deem them important. Keramats have managed to remain relatively undetected and unharmed by consumerist tourism and yet relevant enough to serve the different communities. They are truly sites for the people because of their unadulterated and underrated history.

The keramats claim their significance and become ingrained into public consciousness through a larger historical framework grounded in the cultural plurality and fluidity among all races and faiths. Bukit Larangan, the site on which rests the Keramat Makam Iskandar Syah, is also rich with our ancient history. According to pottery fragments uncovered by John Miksic, the grave might have belonged to Sri Tri Buana “Lord of the Three Worlds” who lived from approximately 1299 to 1347; founder of the Singapore dynasty until Iskandar Syah fled Singapore (Rivers, 2003). This legendary ruler is recorded in the *Sejarah Melayu*, or *The Malay Annals*.

More importantly, however, these keramats exist beyond the personality that they were erected for by serving a larger audience that is not limited to any specific group. Over time, keramats absorb and incorporate the traits of the different cultures and faith that make up the social fabric of Singapore. In fact, the persona attributed to a keramat is usually that of its caretaker, who devotes his/her life in the service of the said saint or keramat.

Oral and written accounts of “miracles” borne out of worshipping the keramat, or relating to keramat itself, keep them in our conscious memory. Although research in tracing the origins and documenting such keramats are still lacking, numerous scholars and individuals have begun the arduous efforts to claim these

Makam¹⁵ Habib Noh, located on Mount Palmer, is another important site to consider. Quite unlike the Kusu Keramat, the Makam Habib Noh is anchored by a definite personality, the saint Habib Noh¹⁶, who is highly revered in Muslim circles and is situated within Singapore’s Central Business District. Still, worshippers to the keramat are not unlike those at Kusu. Offerings of bananas, yellow rice, bottles of opened water (to be blessed) and burning incense are just some of the offerings found at the keramat. The variety of offerings is also denotative of the different cultures that frequent them.¹⁷

The scene that greeted me on my visit was pleasantly surprising, given the fact that this keramat is located within the compounds of the Haji Mohd Salleh Mosque: in the left corner, an elderly Chinese lady was kneeling in prayer with her hands clasped in fervent concentration. The grandchild she brought with her played by himself by the doors of the inner room. After she was done, she stood, placed her hands on a grave marker (*batu nisan*), and bowed before leaving. At the other end of the keramat were an Indian Muslim couple engrossed in reading the Quran. Shortly after, they stood and each took a grave marker, plastered their foreheads to it and bowed their heads, lips moving feverishly but silently. Around the keramat were a total of five opened bottles of water, fresh flowers and other offerings. I realised then, regardless of the purposes and forms of worship, that keramats are sacred precisely because they are tangible focal points in a community, a place to harbour intangible dreams. It was a place to ask, beg, and give thanks.

¹⁶ For an in-depth history regarding Habib Noh and his shrine, please refer to: Muhammad Ghouse Khan Suratte (2008) *The Grand Saint of Singapore: The Life of Habib Nub bin Muhammad Al-Habshi*. Singapore: Masjid Al-Firdaus.

¹⁷ Please refer to Cheu (1996:11) ‘Table 1: Beliefs and Practices in Malay Keramat and Datuk Kong’ for a list of the different nuances and types of offering presented by the different cultural groups.

¹⁸ Refer to Singapore Infopedia: Kusu Island, or Chia, M.T. (2009) *Managing the Tortoise Island: Tua Pek Kong Temple, Pilgrimage, and Social Change in Pulau Kusu, 1965–2007*, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 11, p.72–95.

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sites as historical and integral to Singapore's pre-colonial and ethnographic history.

Keramats are a lived reality and a window to Singapore's past. From a sociological perspective, they are an oasis for varying cultures, traditions and histories to blend together and coexist, merging into different practices that revolve in and around the same physical space. Keramats are evidence of the hybridity and syncretic culture that has been the bedrock of Singaporean society from its inception even before the colonial era and showcases ground-up efforts and an understanding of faith, popular religion and real life definition of religious and racial harmony. Its underrated and non-commercial nature has proven to be the boon of its existence, yet cannot guarantee its future. In Singapore's dense urban environment, it is difficult to justify the use of space that can neither be rationally explained nor commercially utilised. In the case of keramats, death is a starting point and a beginning of another chapter in history. It records, absorbs and bears witness to the changing practices and milieu of its surroundings. Should it finally be deemed irrelevant in the future, only then will it finally hear its death knell as the keeper of secrets to the past.

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Liyana is an Assistant Curator with the National Library, Exhibitions and Curation. She has recently concluded work on Yang Menulis (They Who Write), an inaugural collaboration between NLB and the Malay Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board. Yang Menulis will feature at the National Library Building, Level 10 from end March 2013 and will have a free companion publication of the same name. This is Liyana's first contribution to *BiblioAsia*.