Oral History in Southeast Asia

Memories and Fragments

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CHAPTER 7

Memory, Trauma, and Nation: Contestation over the Batang Kali Massacre in Malaysia

Leong Kar Yen

Approaching Malaysia's capital city, one is struck by the sight of the verdant trees lining the wide avenues leading to the many memorials dotting Kuala Lumpur. One such artifice is the National Monument, which depicts government troops sacrificing themselves but heroically emerging triumphant over communist insurgents. Much like the monument immortalizing soldiers raising the US flag in Iwo Jima, Malaysia's very own National Monument features government troops standing victorious over the nations' greatest threat, the communist insurgency. These monuments seek to sear into the memories of citizens, the precarious nature of independence and national being. The edifices of stone and marble also seek to put into physical form the "enemy," which in turn defines the nation-state by identifying its adversaries. Therefore, the materials used in the construction of these monuments are to ensure that they will remain in perpetuity binding citizens together, forging a common memory. Malaysia's National Monument also works in consonant with other such symbols of its nationhood. For instance, half a kilometer down the road stands the court of the highest lawmaking body in the land. Adjacent to it, is the federal police headquarters and a stone's throw away is the National Mosque. If each of these bodies were to be read in sequence, one can discern

a narrative where through the defeat of the enemy, the nation is made whole. These officially sanctioned, triumphalist memorials and monuments to a nation's memories define the contours and boundaries of the nation and how its past should be remembered, with anything outside the approved narrative to be forgotten.

What lies beyond these managed borders of national memory? If officially sanctioned memories demarcate the existence of the nation, it is important to know what has been officially forgotten and how and why forgetting takes place? Forgetting, as Paul Connerton states, is a consequence of modernity.[1] He adds that physical alterations to place and space will ultimately decide what is to be remembered and forgotten. Therefore memory and forgetting act consonantly, like dancers in a never-ending waltz. Malaysia continues to pursue progress as a "developing" nation, placing emphasis on economic growth and large iconic projects such as its international airport and Kuala Lumpur's ever-growing skyline. What is important in the Malaysian context is that the forgetting caused by the headlong rush to modernity aids state-sanctioned efforts to promote a single narrative of the past and grey out contentious historical events. Beyond the borders of Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding affluent neighborhoods, though, lie various *loci* that remain untouched by modernity and national history despite the nation's obsession with tall buildings and palatial government offices. It is in these places beyond the official places of remembrance that memories continue to challenge state narratives about the nation's founding.

Given the growing popularity of oral historical methodology in Malaysia, these forgotten places are beginning to regain form. Underlying this archaeology of knowledge is the growth of a younger and more critical cabal of scholars who are peeling away the layers hidden underneath official history. In the endeavor to retrieve these forgotten places, it is important to understand why forgetting takes place. By investigating this, we can gain glimpses into how forgotten communities are silenced as development-obsessed regimes seek a new modernity while sacrificing the less sanguine aspects of the nation-building process. Where do we begin?

This chapter does not engage directly with conventional oral history sources, but analyzes statements by survivors who are interviewed by journalists, documentary filmmakers, and independent researchers such as Ian Ward and Norma Miraflor.[2] Such an approach highlights the marginal status of the deeply controversial episodes in Malaysian history, like the 1948 Batang Kali incident. While such statements might not appear to possess the authoritative primary source status of oral history recordings, narrators speaking through these mediums still possess a "shared authority" and are just as capable of exerting influence over the

themes and content of the interview.[3] As such, these materials are just as useful as conventional oral history in contesting the dominant discourses and official accounts of history.

Social theory ideas such as marginality and stigmatization feature prominently throughout my paper. I attempt to theoretically enrich our knowledge of oral history through different prisms. There is an urgent need to theoretically place into perspective the Malayan Emergency and the fragment that is Batang Kali.

The Beginning

I remember the long journey as I traveled to Batang Kali in 2004 as part of a news assignment.[4] From my briefing at the office, I was told it was located in the deep enclaves of Selangor, a state more well known for its industrial wealth than agricultural hinterlands. The press conference was set in a small house in a little town surrounded by palm tree plantations. As the details of the incident in Batang Kali were slowly revealed to me during the press conference, I was surprised and shocked that in 1948, several innocent villagers were allegedly shot by a group of British soldiers looking for "communist bandits" in a botched military operation. As the aged witnesses began retelling their stories, I was amazed by the clarity of the memories they recounted to the large group of journalists who had congregated at the place. As several witnesses came forward to speak, it soon became clear that their stories demanded voice and, more importantly, justice.[5] What was more disorientating for me was the fact that I was never aware that such an event had ever occurred. When the Malayan Emergency erupted in 1948, it was cast in history texts as the beginning of a major struggle between the disruption and chaos brought about by communist insurgents and the order the government bravely struggled for. The silence surrounding the Batang Kali story, or incident, however, mirrored its remote geographical presence within the state of Selangor. It is an out-of-the-way place located at the interstices not only of modern Malaysia's creation but also of the historical understanding of the nation as a whole. No doubt it is this sense of marginality that has caused these witnesses to history and atrocity to belatedly claim their place in Malaysian history.

Official accounts have muted the echoes of the incident, and the voices of those affected by the incident have remained largely in silence. Therefore, I aim to critically analyze the form and structure of the Malaysian narrative, as a way of explaining the silences that occur in many of its aspects. The chapter also looks at the pursuit of historical truth and justice through the

eyes of those affected by the incident. In the process, I will also touch on the trauma brought about by such violent events, described by scholars Degung Santikarma and Leslie Dwyer as an element that, "soaks into the ground of the present, saturating it with meaning and shifting the landscape with its cultural and emotional weight. It can be buried or even burned but its ashes change the composition of the soil."[6] For the small community of Batang Kali survivors and their families, attempts have been made to exhume the body of the past, I believe, through rituals of remembrance that include gravesites and death rituals. These rituals, I argue are capable of building and retaining the cohesiveness of this "community of trauma" and yet at the same time appease the restless spirits of Batang Kali still seeking historical restitution.

Interstices

Between December 11 and 12, 1948, a group of British soldiers from the Scots Guards battalion were alleged to have rounded up a group of agricultural workers from the Sungai Remok estate in the district of the Batang Kali, an area situated at a 90-minute car ride from the capital, Kuala Lumpur. The Malayan Emergency had just been declared, and the conflict would continue till the armistice between the Malaysian government and the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) in 1989. The period of the Malayan Emergency was the crucible for Malaysian nation building. However, the emergency was both an aberration as well as a necessity in Malaysia's nation-building narrative. The struggle claimed many lives both among government forces as well as the communist guerrillas. Repressive legislation was put in place to counter the rising tide of communists and other subversive types. The young nation during its early days lived in the shadow of fear as huge swaths of its population were virtually put under lock and key in fenced-up New Villages to cut off possible support to guerrillas in the jungle. At the same time, the struggle against communism gave the Malaysian nation an opportunity to imagine itself. While made up of differing "nations-of-intent," a phrase used by Malaysian anthropologist A. B. Shamsul to describe Malaysia's multiculturalism, the communist threat gave the young nation the capacity to unite in opposition to the "Other." In Shamsul's analysis, Malaysia was home to several tribes or nations seeking to chart out different routes in achieving their idea of the Malaysian nation.[7] Francis Loh Kok Wah, a political scientist, attributes the fragmented nature of the Malaysia polity to the presence of these nations, which are particularistic and exclusive in nature rather than universal.[8]

The Malayan/Malaysian Emergency was perhaps that one episode in the course of Malaysian history that was able to bind the nation together beyond the exclusivity of its different tribes. The law-abiding inhabitants of Malaysia were awarded their status as citizens with the distribution of identity cards as the dangerous, violent Other continued to live as shadowy phantoms in the jungle.

Thus much of the postcolonial Malaysian narrative was built on the experience of combating communist insurgents. The Batang Kali incident represented a "fragment," broken from the grand Malaysian national narrative. Beneath the larger stream of the nation-building theme, Batang Kali and many other fragments represent the less than ideal consequences of the nation-building process. In highlighting the need for analyzing fragments, Indian scholar Gyanendra Pandey suggests that when national narratives avoid or overlook these fragments, it leads to an avoidance of deeper discussions of ethnicity. In the Indian context, this has blinded the country to understanding the present ethnic unrest as anything more than minor glitches in its national narrative.[9] Similar blinkers to such fragments and consequences plague Malaysia.

As the surviving family members and witnesses of the Batang Kali incident continue to campaign, their account and recounts of the events present multiple fragments in Malaysian history. Their stories represent undercurrents that flow alongside the grander Malaysian narrative stream. In analyzing the statements and understanding the dynamics of the ongoing campaign for justice and restitution in this group, I am attempting to show their agency and the efforts made to "remake the world." Anthropologists Arthur Kleinman and Veena Das speak of the ability of many communities suffering from collective trauma to create their own narrative fragments in order to survive.[10] I believe the attempts by the relatives of the victims and the witnesses to seek redemption and justice is such an effort.

Historically, the CPM drew its membership mainly from the Chinese ethnic community when Japanese meted out especially harsh measures against the community during the Second World War. The different levels of treatment among the groups caused a great deal of tension between the ethnic groups that came to the fore during the interregnum, immediately after Japanese surrender and before the return of the British forces. Members of the British-sponsored (but primarily pro-communist ethnic Chinese) Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) exacted vengeance on collaborators who had cooperated with the Japanese. The MPAJA's heavy-handed tactics earned the ire of the Malay community, who in turn retaliated and attacked neighboring Chinese communities. According to historian Cheah Boon Kheng, atrocities committed

during this period would later color the perceptions of Malaya's ethnic communities, though all of them suffered equally during the war and the postwar period.[11]

Blighted Landscapes

The escalation of armed struggle between the British, the local government, and the communists successfully created "hostages" amounting to over a million people at the height of the emergency in 1951 consisting mainly of ethnic Chinese. Held in large camps, some communities were forcibly relocated and had to readapt themselves to unfamiliar environs.

Most were squatters who during the war period were forced to move into the jungle to survive. They of course came into close contact with the MPAJA, feeding its soldiers with food and information as a way of resisting the Japanese Imperial Army. The symbiotic relationship continued to a certain extent until the Briggs Plan from 1950 to 1952, which moved about one million two hundred thousand people into 600 New Villages. Living in prison-like conditions, the massive program was designed to cut off the CPM from its lifeline.[12] The programs and physical amenities provided to these New Villages were of course lauded by the colonial government but caused unhappiness among other communities. According to anthropologist Judith Strauch, "Many Malays tended to resent the amenities... given to suspected traitors."[13] The new villagers were literally caught in the middle. The conditions in the camps were oppressive as they lived constantly under guard and with curfew. Communist operatives were also known to terrorize them by forcefully taking supplies or threatening them. And to compound this, the land on which they lived was not theirs but subject to short-term leases.

However, according to new villager Sim Chee Jia, "We were really innocent victims back then. The British just assumed that as long as we were Chinese, we were helping the Communists!"[14] In a newspaper interview, Sim recounted how his family and life were put into a state of flux, being forcibly moved from one area to another. He adds, "When you went out they would check your belongings. You were not allowed to bring food outside. If they saw you outside the gates after 6 pm they would just shoot you—no questions asked." Sim stated, "In the past, people only saw things from the British point of view that the communists were dangerous and killing people. However the British were just as bad in some ways, especially in their disregard for civilians." Sim's voice offers a counterbalance to the depiction

of how the emergency was needed to flush out a dangerous foe. In reality, at least according to Sim, everyone was at some point or another equally culpable.

These New Villages were physically, geographically, and psychologically sequestered from the nation-state. They existed in a peripheral space where inhabitants had to be cleansed of "undesirable" influences before rejoining the general population or being accepted into the nation-state. According to anthropologist Ray Nyce, "A common attitude has been that the new villages were places of comparative lawlessness and hotbeds of communism. Many have viewed the villagers as country cousins, a little backward and awkward."[15] Their liminality created gaps with little space for their narratives to surface. Reports in the media at the time about these places were about encounters with communists and not an actual representation of their reality. Military lingo described the New Villages as "black areas," rife with communist activity in need of cleansing to become "white areas." Malaya/Malaysia at the time was a "mapped geo-body." If we were to reflect on the nature of military maps of colonial Malaya, we can think of "surgical" strikes performed by the military authorities to cleanse and "neutralize" the dangers to the Malayan geo-body in the form of communist insurgents. Upon successful sterilization, these areas would then return to a clean state of being, becoming white again.[16]

An emergency-era British propaganda pamphlet shows how Malaya progressed from 1951 when the entire country was "infested" with communist insurgents to 1957 when the geo-body was nearly 50 percent free of the communist disease. Mapping creates boundaries and margins, defining an area or space that needs to be defended. But who or what was it to be defended against? The answer is of course the communists. According to propaganda, given that nearly the entirety of Malaya was a black area in 1951, does it suggest that all of Malaya had "gone" communist? However, with enough "attention and effort," Malaya was cured, purged of "dark" impurities. The borders between black and white are distinct, but within these spaces "othering" happens. For the security forces, the map reinforced the idea that all within the dark area, places like Batang Kali, were suspect.

In Batang Kali

In histories of the emergency, many facets of life under the wire in the New Villages remain hidden. This is where oral history is needed to complement an already copious amount of scholarship on the strategic and military aspects of

the Malayan Emergency. In the small community of Batang Kali in Selangor, the spirits of their memories still linger:

> The next day I tried to go back up, but some people from the nearby Malay village said, don't—they had seen two truckloads of soldiers go up to our village. A week later, I went back again. The manager of the estate gave us some cloth and sticks to make stretchers so we could collect the bodies. They were still all lying where they had fallen.[17]

When Tham Yong uttered these words to a British reporter in December 2009, she was already 78. By then she was the last remaining witness of an alleged massacre on December 11, 1948, which took the lives of 24 people in the Sungai Remok estate in Selangor's Batang Kali district. Five months after the interview was published, Tham Yong passed away without ever seeing justice.

Tham Yong's plight and that of the families whose loved ones died on that fateful day has fueled an ongoing campaign to seek compensation and restitution from the British government. It began in 1993 after the BBC produced a television program on the complicity of British troops from the elite Scots Guard regiment in the massacre at Batang Kali. The program, which was part of the "Inside Story" series, was entitled "In Cold Blood" and contained damning accusations that successive governments in Britain had covered up the murder of innocent civilians. The British however maintained that their troops did no wrong and the casualties were in fact communists. A month later in 1948, the colonial secretary stated "that had the troops not opened fire, the suspect Chinese would have made an attempt at escape."[18] Investigations into incident were stonewalled at every turn.

For instance, in the early 1970s, a shift of government in Britain, from Labor to Conservative, halted a Scotland Yard investigation. In 1993, the Royal Malaysian Police initiated investigations, but in 2004, the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi made an announcement that, "no evidence was found to charge anyone in the matter."[19] In 2009, while indicating that it would initiate an inquiry into the matter, the British High Commission reneged, stating provisionally that no inquiry would be held. To date, there have been no further updates on the issue from the British government.

Nonetheless, the campaign continues and retains a presence in cyberspace, run by spokesperson-cum-lawyer Quek Ee Meng.[20] During an interview with an Australian news program, he was asked what his motivations were since he was not directly related to any of those who were involved in the incident. He states that the campaign was necessary to counter stereotypical notions that Chinese Malaysians are always seen as "communist fifth columnists." He hoped that their campaign would show that the ethnic Chinese

worked as hard as everyone else and that, "the official history records must accurately portray all their contributions."[21]

In a press conference in 2004, jointly organized by a political party and the campaign group, witness Foo Mooi, whose husband and brother-in-law died in the incident, described the events in great clarity. According to her, the group consisting of men, women, and children had been detained in their *kongsi* or longhouses by British troops. The troops then rounded up a group of 24 men and in the early morning of December 12 shot them. Not only was Foo Mooi humiliated and harassed by the troops, she lost her husband and close members of her family. It is not surprising that despite being the oldest at the time of the press conference, she could recall the events clearly, including that of another young man who also "disappeared":

> The soldiers took him out of the hostel, handcuffed him, and told him to look straight. They shot him. He was only a teenager... they treated us like dogs. They asked if we knew of any communists, and we replied that we did not.[22]

Foo Mooi was also one of those interviewed in the in the BBC program "In Cold Blood." In it she described her experience when the troops arrived at the estate:

> I was about to cook when the troops arrived. I was surprised to be surrounded by these British Troops. They then ordered us to go outside for questioning. We have lived here for so long there have never been any problems. It has always been peaceful here. For all those years that we have been here we have only been working. We have never done anything illegal. We are just workers. We are just working people.[23]

Through the interview, she described what the counterinsurgency meant to squatters like her. The arrival of the troops spelt the real danger of the emergency and signified an end to normality for Foo Mooi. For her, the estate was a peaceful place and everyone living in the area was merely doing an honest day's work. They were certainly not bandits.

Tham Yong, another witness interviewed in the program, vehemently denied that there was any communist activity in the area, thus challenging the official version of history. Relating the incident to another British media outlet, she explained:

> Before the soldiers came, we had led a very simple life in our village. We worked on the rubber plantation, would use bamboo poles to catch fish in

the river and had about two dishes that we would always cook. We didn't see any fighting, although we heard from other villagers about some in the hills nearby. As for the communists, we didn't know what one was and they didn't come to the village—if they had, we would have reported them to the police.

Some soldiers came to our village once or twice though. When we were burning bamboo, it would sometimes explode, like a gun going off, so they came to investigate. On December 11th though, when the soldiers came, they were with a [ethnic] Chinese detective and very fierce. They ordered the women to stop cooking the rice and the men to stop tapping the rubber trees.[24]

She then charts the sequence of events closer to the alleged massacre when the women and children were separated from the men. The terror of counterinsurgency and the fear of the villagers became clear:

By this time, as there was no food, the children were crying. Then the detective said we must keep the children quiet or they would burn down the *kongsi* (company). All night long we could see outside that the soldiers were lighting fires, which made us very frightened that they would burn down our house. They told us to separate, with the women and children going into one side of the *kongsi* and the men into the other. We stayed there as it grew dark. There was no food for us and no explanation of what was happening. Then the Chinese detective said to us: "You saw communists, they came here." I said I didn't know anything, but he kept shouting, he didn't believe me.[25]

The next morning, the women and children were bundled into lorries and as they were being driven away, they were greeted with the sight of their *Kongsi* being burnt to the ground and the sound of gunfire. This, explained Tham Yong, would also be last time they would ever see of their male companions:

The soldiers then took us to a lorry and we got on the back. When I was on the lorry, I saw the men coming down from the *kongsi*. There was a ladder, which could only take two people at a time. The men were then put into three or four groups and then led off towards the rubber plantation by the soldiers. Then I heard the gunshots. I thought that the men were gone. I heard shots from five different places. Then the soldiers fired shots at the *kongsi*, which set it on fire.

As a parting shot, Tham Yong threw a challenge to the British authorities, letting loose the pent up emotions of the past:

The soldiers were not right to do what they did. We were not communists, we were innocent people. I want them to pay compensation. I want the British government to apologize and to pay some compensation. Of course I am still angry about this. We also want to have the truth finally. They owe us that much.[26]

Through oral history, survivors like Tham are able to speak truth to power and demand justice.

The narrative within Tham Yong's story is a struggle to make sense of what happened in December 1948. At the beginning, she paints a picture of peace and stability within the estate. But the apparently simple lives of the villagers understate the uncertain and often harsh conditions typical of agricultural settings like that of Batang Kali. Rubber tappers like Tham Yong and Foo Mooi eked out a hand-to-mouth living, which was dependent on the elements. If they worked they had wages. If it rained, they would receive nothing from the estate management. The practice continues even now. Moreover, if the insurgents were to damage the rubber trees, this would also mean a loss of income.

The other contentious issue facing them was that of land ownership. Judith Strauch states, "The lots on which settlers built houses over... do not belong to the people outright... but are held on... renewable temporary occupation licenses. The most basic problem however, was the continued vulnerability of the Chinese workers. Chinese were not permitted to be neutral."[27] The estate workers lived in twilight conditions where within the confines of the estate they were subject to harassment by security forces. Strauch further adds, "Once outside the fence for a day's work, however, the Chinese rubber tapper or tin miner was an easy target for the guerrilla assassin."[28] Life in the estates during this period was a series of daily struggles to survive. Tham Yong's call for compensation is not surprising given that many of them continued to live in poverty even as Malaysia's economy grew. Psychologically, her narrative demonstrates how the massacre disrupted the expectations and the direction her life was expected to take. Roxana Waterson states, "The self... is situated both in place and time, at a particular historical moment. The individual as narrator maybe engaged in a struggle to make sense of that moment, so that as well as self-consciousness, a historical consciousness simultaneously emerges from the telling."[29] Tham Yong's story, as told to the journalist was

in part about achieving self-consciousness. However, for people like Tham Yong, questions remain over the savagery of the military operations then. The suffering at the hands of the authorities did not make sense, for after all, the workers at Sungai Remok estate were merely trying to make a living. Therefore in seeking an apology from the British authorities and perhaps in receiving one, Tham Yong could finally give meaning to the randomness that has permeated her life since that day in 1948. An apology would also be for Foo Mooi and Tham Young, an acknowledgment of their innocence. Living in a well-known "black area" and later on being moved into New Villages was a form of distrust. Both the government and the colonial authorities were not able to place their trust in a population that could turn either way. An apology would be an acknowledgment that they were not bandits, merely innocent bystanders in a war beyond their control. The distrust of those who had lived in "black areas" was unfounded, and the stereotypes should not persist. Those who had suffered historical injustice in the past should be allowed to share in the history of the nation.

Stigma

In a recent news article, a BBC journalist interviewed Firoz Hussein, a lawyer representing the community in their campaign for reparation. Firoz noted that a public inquiry would not only provide them with reparations and redress, it would also take away the stain, "that the families are still tainted with the stigma that those executed were communist terrorists."[30]

Justice ultimately for the families means being absolved of the stain and the stigma of being suspected communists. Reparations would then be a way in which they could remove the taint that had been placed on them. As I have explained earlier in the article, being referred to as communist is tantamount to being outside of the Malaysian nation-state, to be alien. In the same way that Thongchai argues that all non-Siamese were to be kept outside the boundaries of the Siamese geo-body, non-Malaysians and violent communist insurgents are similarly seen as alien to the Malaysian geo-body. In analyzing the community of Batang Kali, I was especially fascinated by the use of the word "stigma" by their lawyer. Stigma includes "the tribal stigma of race, nation and religion, these being the stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and can equally contaminate all members of a family," or even a community.[31] Many of these places, which in the past were deemed "black areas" continue to exist in the popular Malaysian imagination as liminal places that are still "backward" and "lawless." Similarly, in Indonesia, many individuals

and communities continue to live the stigma of having been branded as "radicals," or even communists, after the abortive 1965 coup attempt. Up until the fall of Suharto in 1998, many generations of Indonesians had to suffer the stigma of being communist tainted on their identity cards. A telling example of this stigma was recounted by puppet master Ki Tristuti Rachmadi during his years as a prisoner in the penal colony of Buru Island.[32] However, within any society, individuals interact among themselves and are constantly ordering, reordering, making, and remaking the world they live in. People are not mere prisoners of society but actively reinvent their worlds.

Remains of the Day

In a book chapter written on the Batang Kali incident, Ian Ward offers fascinating insights into the lives of those who were directly affected by the incident. According to Ward in, "the aftermath of the raid—what the women and children had to confront following the deaths of the husbands, fathers and brothers—was part of the whole Batang Kali equation. With each passing year, their hardships multiplied. The legacy of that particular 1948 Scots Guard weekend mission was a collection of marginalized lives, scarred by recollections of mindless butchery."[33] The horror of the event did not end that day and the repercussions of the event followed the people of Sungai Remok estate in Batang Kali throughout their lives. Wong Mook Sang was 11 when his father Wong Yan was killed. He states, "My father's death caused us much suffering and misery, my life has been a tough one." Ward also tells the story of a widow who had to take on the burden of her dead husband in earning a living to support her two children. One child died while she was still at work and the other grew up with deep-set psychological issues. It would seem that the, "Batang Kali killings have left an attitude of wariness towards the working of the system and the fairness of authority. The fear of undeserved recriminations was learnt fast and only too well. It stayed, seared in the minds of those left behind."[34] Ward however notes that despite the painful memories, most of the families regularly visited the graves of those who died in the event. As ancestor remembrance and worship is an important aspect of Chinese culture, scholars contend that such commemorative acts can fulfill several very important functions for traumatized communities. Halbwachs adds that, "participation in commemorative meetings with group members of the current generation, they can recreate through imaginatively re-enacting a past that would otherwise slowly disappear in the haze of time."[35] Despite the psychological anguish, these visits provide an important continuum with

the present. Such commemorations allow the group to become "conscious of itself"[36] and aware, in the case of Batang Kali, of the marginality of being forced to live through the traumatic events of that fateful day. Therefore the event for many of the family members represents injustice; and injustices must be rectified. Similar strategies of remembrance/resistance, studied by anthropologist Jun Jin, have also been employed by marginal groups in China as a reaction toward state-sponsored terror during the Cultural Revolution.[37] These groups responded by utilizing ancestor worship, spirit tablets, and temples as mnemonic devices linking them to their past (these villagers claim to be direct descendants of Confucius). Jun Jing claims that their strategy was not so much to resist but rather to cope, bringing the villagers together in a time of uncertainty.

For the people of Batang Kali, these graves are a constant reminder to push ahead in the ongoing campaign for justice. At the same time, the graves and death rituals are markers of a traumatic event, which nonetheless binds the community ever closer. Some scholars have further pushed the definition of "trauma" calling it a recurring event that at the same time disrupts or disables narrativity, making it impossible to tell a comprehensible story with a beginning and an end.[38] Yet if we were to look at the experience of trauma collectively, scholar Kai Erikson states that "trauma that is has a social dimension... trauma can create community."[39] Utilizing the individual/community organic metaphor greatly expands our ability to understand the blighted landscape that a community like the survivors of the Batang Kali inhabits. These acts of remembrance are embodied within the community as they pray and prostrate before the tombstones of their long-deceased relatives. As Erikson puts it, "The point to be made here is not that calamity serves to strengthen bonds linking people together—it does not most of the time—but that shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a source of kinship."[40]

In the Shadow of History

The community in Batang Kali is only one among many such communities of trauma, held together by the trauma of the past but blighted by stigma. The other articles written by various authors in this volume also amply describe and discuss other communities of trauma. This brings us back to the issue of fragments as we seek to understand their impact on Malaysian history. Pandey states that these fragments are substories that have been glossed over by the larger and grander necessities of the national narrative.[41] In the

colonial history of Malaysia, even the narrative of independence and nation building is considered a fragment. Therefore Malaysia should be understood as a place where several different fragments are all vying for attention. There is no need to place the Batang Kali story into an arena where it is contesting or struggling against the greater narrative. It should however been seen as another facet of Malaysian history that needs to be told. In that sense, perhaps the justice that the community seeks is recognition of its place in the Malaysian narrative. However, this begs the question of how Batang Kali should be acknowledged as part of Malaysian history.

So the question remains: What are some of the lessons we can learn from Batang Kali? We can see that these communities of trauma will continue to haunt us even as the nation continues to search for its modern soul and identity. If we were to shift the emphasis to an analysis of these many subaltern spaces, perhaps an all-encompassing language bridging the many groups and communities in Malaysia can emerge. By using oral history to reach out to individuals and communities, and ultimately linking it (as opposed to "reconciling") to Malaysian history, perhaps the plural society of Malaysia can find common ground in which to understand trauma and memory. Perhaps then the fractious nature of Malaysian society can be repaired. However, we must also be wary that the voices of the individual communities are not subsumed by the drive to create a supposedly more harmonious nation. The contentious issue of historical justice still remains for that small community in Batang Kali. Ultimately, Batang Kali will serve as a reminder through its oral history that while Malaysia has a grand narrative, it can only be made whole if it acknowledges the many other fragments of its history.

Postscript

While the sun has finally set over the British colonialism, much of its legacy remains. For those who were both directly and indirectly affected by the events of 1948 in Batang Kali, the ripples in time continue to reverberate through their lives. In September of 2011, the families of those who had perished on that day were allowed by the English law courts to argue for a new inquiry into the alleged massacre. It was also because of this that classified colonial records on the event, which were thought to be lost, resurfaced. However, their hopes for an inquiry, and possibly some form of restitution from the UK authorities, were dashed when a decision was passed down by the English high court in September 2012 stating that there was no need to reopen the case given that the passage of time had eroded any opportunity for definitive

answers. The ruling in itself was ambiguous, stating that while the 24 men were clearly shot by the British soldiers, it was difficult to prove that their actions had been deliberate. The Batang Kali families will appeal the case.[42] The case is similar to one brought forth by Kenyans alleged to have been tortured by the colonial forces during the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950s.[43] If successful, the Kenyan case may influence how the United Kingdom comes to deal with its past not only in Kenya but, perhaps, even in Batang Kali.

Notes

1. Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
2. Ian Ward and Norma Miraflor, *Slaughter and Deception at Batang Kali* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2009).
3. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990).
4. I was a journalist at the time with the independent news portal *Malaysiakini.com*. Not knowing the way, I was chauffeured there by members of an opposition party. Later, the next day, I attempted a follow-up with the British High Commission in Kuala Lumpur hoping to get a response. The spokesperson never returned any of my requests for an interview.
5. One interesting point I pondered was that the issue of Batang Kali was more a concern for the Chinese vernacular press than other media. Up until today, the newspapers that have been vociferously following this story have been the Chinese language press. The English and Malay language newspapers have largely remained silent. Nonetheless, more independent English-language news portals such as *Malaysiakini* have explored the issue.
6. Degung Santikarma and Leslie Dwyer, "Landscapes of Emotion, Embodiment and Ritual: Post-1965 Balinese Culture," paper presented at the Conference of the Society for Balinese Studies, Denpasar, Indonesia, July 11–13, 2000. Quoted in Mary S. Zurbuchen, "History, Memory and the '1965 Incident' in Indonesia," *Asian Survey* 62.4 (July/August 2002): 678.
7. A. B. Shamsul, "Nations-of-Intent in Malaysia," in *Asian Forms of the Nation*, ed. Stein Tonneson and Hans Antlov (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), pp. 323–47.
8. Francis Loh Kok Wah, "Introduction," *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), pp. 1–20.
9. Gyanendra Pandey, "In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India today," *Representations*, Special issue on Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories 37 (Winter 1992): 27–55.
10. Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman, "Introduction," in *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering and Recovery*, ed. Veena Das et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 2001), pp. 1–30.

11. Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict after the Japanese Occupation, 1941–1946* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).
12. Ray Nyce, *Chinese New Villages in Malaya: A Community Study* (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1971).
13. Judith Strauch, *Chinese New Village Politics in the Malaysian State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 163.
14. *The Star*, "Barbed Past," November 30, 2009.
15. Nyce, *Chinese New Villages in Malaya*, p. 188.
16. For more on the concept of the "geo-body," see Winnichakul Thongchai, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).
17. Jonathan Gorvett, "I Survived Batang Kali," *The Guardian Weekly*, December 9, 2009.
18. Ward and Miraflor, *Slaughter and Deception at Batang Kali*, p. 75.
19. *The New Straits Times*, "AG Closes File on Batang Kali Massacre due to Lack of Evidence," September 16, 2004.
20. Quek's family moved to Batang Kali and his father later became an active member of the group seeking redress.
21. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Connect Asia*, interview with Quek Ngee Meng, December 15, 2008.
22. Leong Kar Yen, "Batang Kali: The Search for Justice Continues," *Malaysiakini.com*, July 14, 2004, http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/28416, last accessed October 6, 2012.
23. British Broadcasting Corporation, "Inside Story: In Cold Blood," 1992.
24. Gorvett, "I Survived Batang Kali."
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Strauch, *Chinese New Village Politics in the Malaysian State*, p. 65.
28. Ibid.
29. Roxana Waterson, "Introduction: Analyzing Personal Narratives," in *Southeast Asian Lives: Personal Narratives and Historical Experience*, ed. Roxana Waterson (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2007), p. 7.
30. Alistair Leithead, "Justice South in UK over Malaysian Deaths," British Broadcasting Corporation, December 11, 2010.
31. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoilt Identity* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 5.
32. Ki Tristuti Rachmadi, "My Life as a Shadow Master under Suharto," in *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*, ed. Mary S. Zurbuchen (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), pp. 38–46.
33. Ward and Miraflor, *Slaughter and Deception at Batang Kali*, p. 179.
34. Ibid., p.181.
35. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 24.
36. Ibid.
37. Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

38. Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 3–11.
39. Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," in Caruth, *Trauma,* p. 185.
40. Ibid., p. 190.
41. Pandey, "In Defense of the Fragment."
42. For more information, see BBC's report, "Malaysian Lose Fight for 1948 'Massacre' Inquiry," http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-19473258, last accessed September 5, 2012.
43. See Gabriel Gatehouse, "Mau Mau Struggle for Recognition at Home and Abroad," http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19852463, last accessed October 6, 2012.

PART III

Oral Tradition and Heritage