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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 artifact 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 nation’s 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 concert 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
The Beginning

Baking Cake
can be an experience of happiness because it is the closest thing to immortality.

But if you are passionate about baking, you will find happiness in the process, not just in the end result.

When baking, you are not just creating a cake; you are creating a memory. Each step you take, each source you read, each ingredient you mix, all contribute to the final product.

So, whether you are a professional baker or a beginner, remember to enjoy the process. Baking is a form of therapy, and you can find peace and relaxation in each and every bowl you stir and each oven you preheat.

In conclusion, baking is an art form that requires patience, precision, and perfection. It is a way to express yourself and bring joy to others. So, let’s get baking and create something amazing together!
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." 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 gravestones and death rituals. These rituals, I argue are capable of building and retaining the cohesion 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 1960. 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. Shamkur to describe Malaysia’s multiculturalism, the communist threat gave the young nation the capacity to unite in opposition to the "Other." In Shamsur’s analysis, Malaysia was home to several tribes or nations seeking to chart out different routes in achieving their idea of the Malaysian nation. 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.

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 and consequences 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. 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 recollection of events present multiple fragments of 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. 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
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.  

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." 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." 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. 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."

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.  

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.  

Through the interview, she described what the counterinsurgency meant to squatters like her. The arrival of the troops spoke 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 soldiers took us to a nearby house and got us into the back. They then took us to the police station where we were called up to the police stations. The police questioned us and said we were going to be detained. They then took us to the police station where we were questioned and detained.

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Through oral history, survivors like Tham are able to speak truth to power and demand justice. The museum is a struggle to make sense of what happened in December 1948. As the beginning shows a picture of the Chinese community's life before World War II, many of them worked in the rubber plantations and the factories. The museum provides an overview of the Chinese community's life in the 1940s and 1950s.

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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 Mool 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.”

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-Malaysian 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. 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. 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.”

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.” 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. Halfwachs 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.” Despite the psychological anguish, these visits provide an important continuum with
In the Shadow of History

sound of barking

In the autumn of 1918, the shadow of history loomed over the American continent. The Great War, which had been raging since 1914, was drawing to a close, and the United States, a neutral nation until that point, was being drawn into the conflict. The country was divided on whether to enter the war, and the decision was made by the government to support the Allies. The United States entered the war on April 6, 1917, and by the end of the war, over 11 million American soldiers had been sent to Europe. The war resulted in significant changes in the United States, including the expansion of its military and its role in global affairs.

Under the shadow of history, the United States began to focus on its own internal issues. The country was recovering from the war, and the Economic Conditions Act of 1919 was passed to provide economic relief to those affected by the war. The act provided for the creation of a War Loss Adjustment Board, which was responsible for determining compensation for war losses.

In addition, the Shadow of History Act of 1919 was passed to provide for the relocation of veterans and their families. The act authorized the War Department to establish and maintain veterans' homes, and it provided for the construction of veterans' hospitals and homes.

The shadow of history also influenced the country's foreign policy. The United States began to play a more active role in international affairs, and the country's involvement in the war resulted in significant changes in its relationship with other countries. The United States became a member of the League of Nations, and it played a significant role in the organization's efforts to promote peace and security.

In conclusion, the Shadow of History Act of 1919 and the Economic Conditions Act of 1919 were important pieces of legislation that helped to shape the country's economic and social landscape. The United States entered the war on a neutral footing, but it emerged as a major player in international affairs, and the country's involvement in the war resulted in significant changes in its relationship with other countries.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration
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. 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. 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

4. I was a journalist at the time with the independent news portal Malaysiainside.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 Malaysiainside.com have explored the issue.
15. Nye, *Chinese New Villages in Malaysia*, p. 188.
20. Quek's family moved to Batang Kali and his father later became an active member of the group seeking redress.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
34. Ibid., p. 181.
36. Ibid.