

Mahmood and I made captehs using cockerel feathers. ... We would chase a cockerel, corner it somewhere, grab it tightly under our arms and pull a few of its beautiful feathers as it squawked and struggled to free itself. But we made sure that the cockerel was not harmed or injured. Often we would get claw marks on our arms and scratches on our legs as we chased it all over the place, but that never stopped us.

A Kite in the Evening Sky is Shaik Kadir's firsthand account of growing up in a Geylang Serai kampung in the late 1950s and 1960s. It was a time when children spent the hours after school playing *capteh* and marbles, eating fresh *jambu*, hauling pails of water home from the public standpipe, attending prayers at the *surau*, learning to fast, reading the Qur'an, as well as enjoying evenings in the open-air cinema.

Despite the poverty, he thrived in the twilight years of the kampung and managed to make his dreams soar like a kite, fulfilling the aspirations of his single mother for a better life in a modernising city. Thoughtful, amusing and heartwarming, these stories hark back to simpler days and humbler ways, offering us a vivid glimpse of the kampung that raised the child.

About the Author

Shaik Kadir holds a Master in Education degree from the University of Sheffield, UK. He received training in teaching and journalism both locally and overseas, and has years of experience as an educator and journalist.

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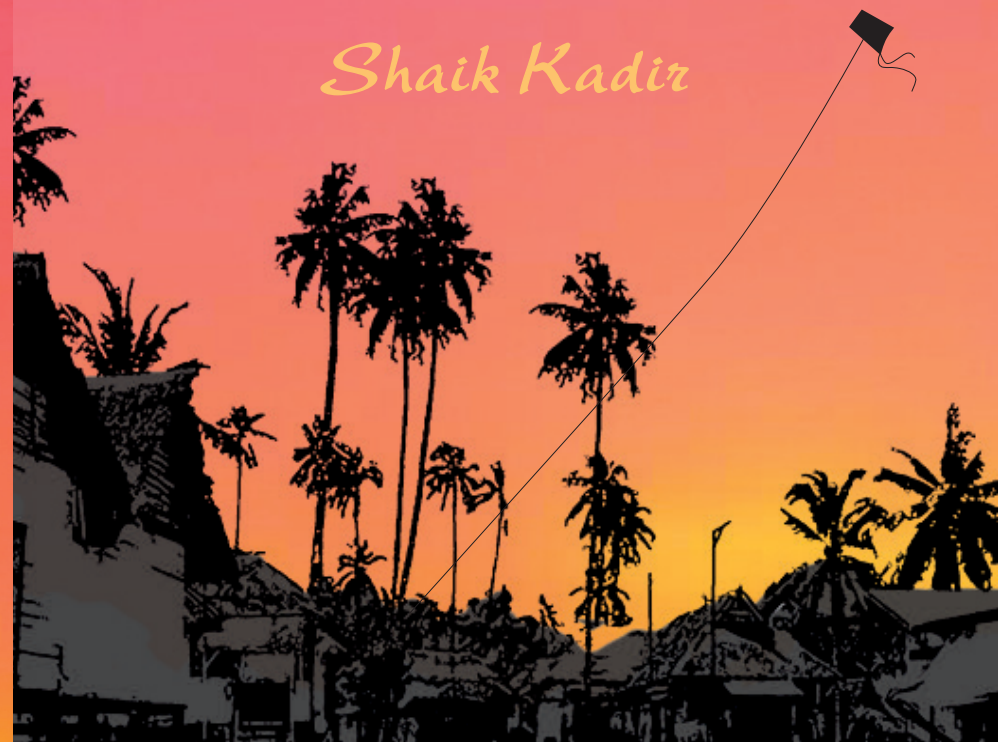
Shaik Kadir

A Kite in the Evening Sky

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Tales of Kampung Life in Geylang Serai

For Review only

*A Kite
in the
Evening
Sky*

Tales of Kampung Life in Geylang Serai

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All characters in the story, except Mohamed Noor, do not bear their real names.

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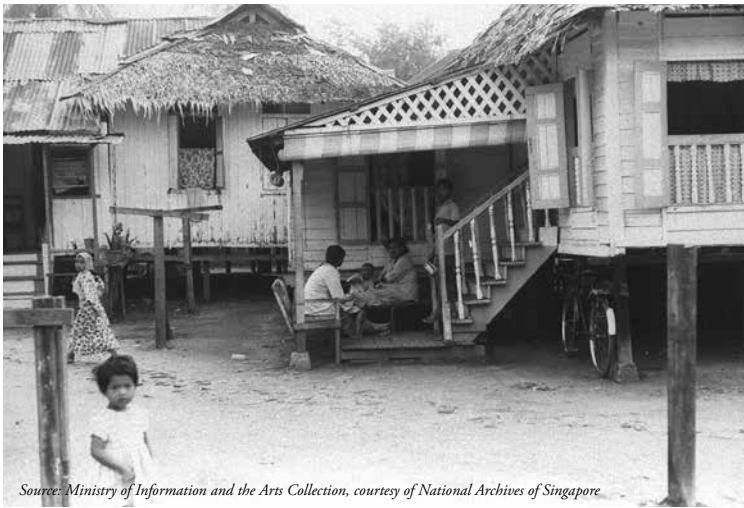
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Kampung houses: some had atap roofs, others zinc roofs and almost all stood on stilts.

Preface

Whenever Geylang Serai is mentioned, our minds instantly conjure up a picture of a busy commercial hub that has an abundance of delightful food, lovely clothing and exquisite handicraft.

What is less known is that Geylang Serai has always been bustling with people and activity even in the 1950s and 1960s. Back then, kampung houses, mud tracks and fruit trees filled the place. While it was physically different, the rural life of the former Geylang Serai was no less lively or charming.

Today, Geylang Serai has the glitter and glamour of city life. Kampung life has vanished, having faded into history with the urbanisation of Singapore, but its spirit remains. It is in the hope of capturing and conveying the unique and exciting flavour of the Geylang Serai kampung lifestyle that *A Kite in the Evening Sky* has come about.

First published in 1989, this book captures an authentic snapshot of the lifestyle, mood and worldviews of the kampung people, allowing readers today to consider what has changed and what has stayed the same.

A Kite in the Evening Sky traces the growth of a carefree boy who, amidst the challenges of kampung life, manages to fulfill the aspirations of his twice-widowed mother for a better life for the family. Besides depicting the kampung activities, the book brings out vividly the cultural and religious practices of the kampung folk of Geylang Serai and their close-knit community life that is today valued and cherished as the “kampung spirit”.

Prologue

It was a very hot day. I was up on a huge cherry tree in Maxwell Road Kindergarten. As I was stretching my hand to pluck a fat, red cherry, Muttu tapped my shoulder and, pointing to the far end of the road in the school compound, said, “Your father’s coming.”

I saw him cycling up the road to the school. I quickly got down the tree and ran towards him. I ran very fast. Suddenly I slipped and fell. My father rushed over to help me. I cut my left knee and had bruises on the other. Blood, as red as the tarboosh he was wearing, flowed from the cut. My father immediately drew out his handkerchief from his shirt pocket to stop the blood with it. As he was pressing the wound with his handkerchief, a few drops of blood fell onto his Pulikat sarung.

My father was the caretaker of the Shahul Hamid Shrine, commonly known as Nagore Dargah, which was situated at the corner of Telok Ayer Street and Boon Tat Street in Chinatown. I was born in the caretaker’s room and grew up playing in this big concrete building.

When I was six years old, my mother gave birth to a baby girl. Some time later, my father enrolled me at the Sepoy Lines Primary School in Tiong Bahru. Again, like when I was in the kindergarten in Maxwell Road, he sent me to school and took me home on his bicycle.

Even when my father fell ill, he still sent me to school and took me home by bus. Soon, however, his illness became

serious, and I had to go to school and return home on my own.

One afternoon, I was sitting beside my father fiddling with his fingers when he turned on his side and suddenly became completely motionless. I shook his body violently, calling out loudly to him in a frightened voice. My mother who was in the kitchen came running to us, but my father was already dead. I cried the whole night. I even refused to go the following morning to the cemetery for the burial.

My mother had nobody in Chinatown. My maternal grandfather, whom I came to know for the first time, got us a room in his relative’s house in Lorong H, Telok Kurau. I did not go to school for a few months after my father’s death. When we moved to Lorong H, I was enrolled into a Primary One class again the following year, in Telok Kurau English Primary School.

My mother later married a widower, an elderly Indian man. The marriage was arranged by my grandfather. Not many months after, my stepfather went to India to visit his relatives, saying he would return within a fortnight. But a week later, my grandfather broke a shocking piece of news to my mother. He said my stepfather had died in India. My mother looked worried. She told my grandfather that she was pregnant.

About this time, Hari Raya Aidiladha came and we went to visit a relative in Paya Lebar. That evening, my relative’s neighbour wanted to take his child and a few other children for a car ride. My mother allowed me to go with them. Having never been in a car, I enjoyed the ride, although I felt a little uncomfortable as five other children were also sitting in the back seat. After a while, the breeze through the open windows made me fall asleep. When I woke up I became conscious of bandages on my leg and forehead. I was in a hospital!

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Much later, I learnt that the car had crashed into an army truck along East Coast Road. Four children were killed instantly and one adult died in hospital the following day. I also learnt that someone had told my mother that I had died in hospital and so some neighbours and relatives bought the burial items and went to the hospital to collect my “dead” body, only to find me still alive.

I stayed in the hospital for some time. When I was discharged, with a cast that stretched from waist to foot on my left leg, we moved to a new kampung in Geylang Serai.



Shaik Kadir at 3 years old, with his mother at a friend's house in 1949.

1

My First Kampung Home

The chirping of the birds woke me up. My sister was still asleep and my mother was not in. The kitchen door was ajar.

Among the chirping sounds, one was exceptionally louder and shriller. It seemed to be getting nearer and nearer to my window. Slowly, I lifted my legs and carefully got down from where I was lying. With my crutches under my armpits, I went to the window and looked out. The chirping was coming from a tree just outside.

Craning my neck, I looked up at the tree. Clusters of *jambu air* were hanging all over it. I spotted a brown bird nipping at the light green fruit. Two *jambus* fell to the ground, joining the many that were already there. Suddenly a tiny yellow bird jumped onto a branch close to my window, chirping continuously in its loud and shrill voice. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it dived down onto a lower branch, stood there for a second and flew away, leaving only the chirping sound of the other birds.

I smiled. Turning around, I looked at my new home. It was a small rented room with a cement floor. The squarish room was part of the zinc-roofed house standing on metre-high wooden stilts.

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When we were at the Shahul Hamid Shrine, we had a wooden platform in the caretaker's room on which we laid mats for sleeping. Here, in this room, there was a similar platform, but it was much higher. It was an *ambin* really and it occupied about half the room. We had spread a pandanus-leaf mat on the *ambin* and we sat, ate and slept on it. The surface was hard but we had soft pillows for our heads.

The room was big enough to contain our possessions of one big wooden trunk, two medium-sized steel trunks and a little cupboard about a metre high and half a metre wide. I kept my school books and other things in this cupboard which had a glass door. This cupboard, my mother told me, was used to keep her cloth dolls when she was a little girl. The trunks and two or three boxes of items were kept under the *ambin*.

While I was surveying the room, the kitchen door opened and in walked my mother, holding a basket. My mother, who had a dark brown complexion, a high nose and naturally curly hair, smiled at me.

"Be careful when you walk. Use your crutches carefully," she said as she placed the basket on the *ambin*. She took out a loaf of bread, some things wrapped in newspaper and a small bunch of rambutans from the basket. "I bought this for you," she said, handing me the bunch of rambutans.

A couple of days later, the landlady lent me a stool because the *ambin* was too high for me. So every day I would sit by the window on the stool and look out at the birds and the *jambu* tree. I also watched the chickens and ducks that passed by my window. I would admire a mother hen for her motherly love of her chicks. With a big brood of chicks following her, she would peck at something on the ground and all the chicks would surge to it, trying to eat it up. When a passer-by got too close to them,

she would suddenly become grumpy and spread her wings to shield her chicks.

There was no electricity in the house. Kerosene lamps and pressure lamps were used. We had two small oil lamps to light our room at night. We carried one of them with us whenever we went to the kitchen. Outside, unlike Chinatown, there were no street lights and so the kampung was very dark and quiet. During the day flies menaced us, and at night mosquitoes took over. They bit us, dived into our noses and made irritating sounds in our ears.

One day, while the landlady was talking to my mother, she noticed the mosquito-bite marks on my sister's arms and legs. She then gave us an old mosquito net which had a few big holes in it. My mother patched them up and we all slept under it. From then on, the mosquitoes ceased to trouble us.

During the day, when I became very tired of sitting at the window, I would hobble out to the compound. There, on a mat placed under a tree, the girls would be playing "five stones" and the boys, close by, would be having their game of *capteh*.

"You should not go out there. What if you fall?" my mother cautioned me whenever I wanted to go out of the room.

"I'll walk slowly. I'll take care of myself," I replied earnestly, afraid she would try to stop me. But she never did.

The *capteh* could be played individually or in teams. Each player, using his leg only, had to keep the *capteh* in the air for as long as he could, counting every kick that he made. The one who scored the most number of kicks would be the winner.

There was a boy called Mahmood who could keep the *capteh* going for at least fifty counts at any one time. I admired Mahmood's skill. Knocking the cast on my leg with my knuckles, I wondered if I ever could play *capteh*, let alone play it as skillfully as Mahmood.

2

Comics and Coconut Trees

A few weeks after the removal of the cast on my leg, I was able to walk properly. Very soon I was able to play games with the boys. We played tops, marbles and *bola hentam*. Of course, *capteh* was our favourite. Mahmood and I often teamed up in these games.

“You shouldn’t play *capteh* or run about,” my mother warned me. “You must not forget what happened to your leg. It is not strong.”

“Don’t worry, Mother. I am OK now,” I replied as I walked away, looking at her big stomach and feeling quite happy that soon there would be another member in the family.

Mahmood and I made *captehs* using cockerel feathers. Chicken feathers were easy to get as chickens were reared by many people and they wandered everywhere. We would chase a cockerel, corner it somewhere, grab it tightly under our arms and pull a few of its beautiful feathers as it squawked and struggled to free itself. But we made sure that the cockerel was not harmed or injured. Often we would get claw marks on our arms and scratches on our legs as we chased it all over the place, but that never stopped us.

One evening, my mother clutched at her stomach in pain. She told me to call the landlady. The landlady quickly called

a *bidan* and that evening my mother gave birth to a baby girl. For a couple of weeks, I didn’t go out to play with the boys. I had to help my mother with the household chores. Then one day Mahmood came looking for me. He invited me to his house to look at the many storybooks his father had bought for him, and I accepted the invitation gratefully. It was nice to be out again.

While most houses in the kampung had atap roofs, Mahmood’s had a zinc roof. A *jambu* tree with its flaming red crop of fruit was right in front of his house. I looked up at the fruit hugging one another in large clusters. Looking up at the same time, Mahmood said, “Let’s have some. I’ll ask my mother to give us some soya sauce mixed with green chilli. The red *jambu* is not sweet like the green *jambu*. It will taste better if we dip it in soya sauce.” With that Mahmood ran off to get a bamboo pole from under his house. He hit the fruit with it, collecting a handful of them for me.

Later, when Mahmood went to his room to get his books, I sat admiring his house. The rattan sofa was comfortable. There were pictures of the family on the wall. I got up and looked at some of the pictures. As I was looking at them, Mahmood came in, placed three storybooks on the table and went back to his room. I picked up one and started looking at it. While I was doing so, a woman, tall and fair and with hair rolled into a bun, walked in with a tray of *jambu* and soya sauce. She smiled at me and asked me to help myself to the *jambu*.

Mahmood took a long time to come out. When he did he had with him a stack of comics.

“Ah, I see my mother has brought the *jambu*,” he said, and we started eating them.

The comic that attracted me immediately was the *Beano*. I grabbed it and eagerly turned the pages. I was familiar with

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the characters. When I was in hospital, somebody had left two issues of *Beano* on my bed and I had read them over and over again until I knew the characters very well. Mahmood also had another comic series, *Dandy*. He asked me if I would like to borrow them. Happily I took a few issues of the comics and a storybook as well. For the first time, I began to read. From then on I borrowed many of Mahmood's storybooks.

One day, my mother said, "Now that you can walk properly, you have to go to school." She was breast-feeding my baby sister. My other sister was sitting near her on the *ambin* stroking the baby's head.

I had, in fact, forgotten about school. I had been away from it for more than seven months already and I didn't really like the idea of going back. I tried to make excuses. But they apparently did not convince my mother.

"You will have to go to school. Your father told me never to stop your schooling however poor we are," she continued sternly.

I looked at her serious face and then at Mahmood's storybooks on the *ambin*.

"Yes, I'll go to school," I replied, and saw a look of relief on her face.

Telok Kurau English Primary School was some kilometres away from my home but it was the nearest school. Although I had not taken the final examination for Primary One, I was admitted into Primary Two.

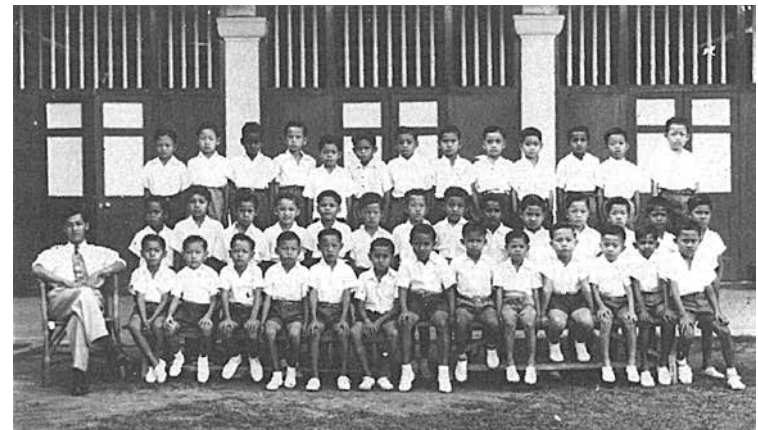
I walked to school. I would take the same route most of the time. From Jalan Sunggoh, I would turn into Jalan Modin where a big house stood. The owner, an Indian Muslim, sold Indian *acar* in small bottles. I had once gone there to buy a bottle of *acar*. We ate it with plain, hot rice and pappadam. Entering Jalan Alsagoff, I would turn right and reach a wooden

bridge over a stream. Near this bridge, a Chinese girl sold ice water on a pushcart. There were times when I would buy a drink from this girl on my way back from school.

After school, my friends and I played all sorts of games under shady fruit trees. Yes, there were fruit trees everywhere. The most common fruit trees were the *jambu batu*, *jambu air merah* and *jambu air hijau*. There were also *cermai* and *belimbing* trees. And coconut trees were everywhere.

One day, while we were playing under a coconut tree, a coconut fell near us. I became scared. "Let's not play under a coconut tree. A person can get killed if a coconut falls on his head," I said.

"No, it won't fall on our heads," Mahmood replied. "Coconuts have invisible eyes. They avoid falling on people's heads. That's why, while you see hundreds of coconut trees everywhere, you don't hear of coconuts falling on people's heads!" I was awed by his air of wisdom and saw no reason not to believe him. I suppose I'm fortunate I never proved him wrong!



Shaik Kadir (middle row, sixth from right) with his classmates in Primary One at Telok Kurau English Primary School in 1953.

10

A Hard Day's Work

“People like my *goreng pisang*. That’s why by the time I get here, they are all sold out,” said Ghani Lidi, who was from another kampung. His basket was always empty when he joined my friends and me.

While Ghani Lidi sold *goreng pisang*, another friend of ours, whom we called Buncit, was fond of going to the markets to collect discarded fruit and vegetables for his mother.

The markets nearest to Geylang Serai were the Changi and the Joo Chiat markets opposite the entrance to Geylang Serai. Buncit would go to the bins in these markets and look for vegetables and fruit which were not totally damaged. He would even eat some of the fruit there and then. My friends and I went with him a number of times, but we didn’t have much luck — the fruit and vegetables he found looked too rotten to be eaten. So, we just walked in the crowded markets looking at people doing their marketing and watching live crabs trying to climb out of their boxes.

One day, as Buncit, Ghani Lidi and I were looking for fruit in the rubbish bins, I spotted Kak Nafisah, a woman from my kampung, at the fish stall close by. I quickly walked away, afraid that she might see me and tell my mother about my

being in the market.

My mother seldom went to the market. Two or three days a week she would ask me to buy curry from one of the Indian food stalls near the entrance to Geylang Serai. I would bring with me a tiffin carrier and buy mutton curry or *dalca*. For thirty cents, we would get a piece of meat, a piece of potato and a piece of brinjal.

On other days, my mother bought provisions from one of the two *Kaka* shops near our house. These shops sold almost everything, from hair oil to salted fish. Even some common vegetables and fresh fish were found there.

My mother, like most kampung folk, bought the foodstuff from these shops on credit, the total amount being paid at the end of each month. A little book, usually the “555” brand notebook, was given to each household and every time we went to the shops to buy provisions we had to hand over the book for the shopkeeper to record what we had bought. Not everybody could pay the total amount due at the end of the month. Nevertheless, the amount would go on accumulating, much to the annoyance of the shopkeeper who would reluctantly allow further purchases on credit.

One day, my mother asked me to buy a bundle of firewood from the shop. I had always wanted to buy firewood instead of looking for discarded planks and pieces of wood and cutting them up into smaller pieces for use. So I was quite happy to run this errand for her. What pleased me more was that I could pay for the firewood out of my own pocket. I told my mother that I was helping a foodstall owner to wash his plates and got paid for it.

“I would prefer that you spend your time studying,” my mother said, looking at me seriously. “Remember your father’s wish? You are not to leave school however poor we are.”

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“But I am not leaving school. I am only trying to get some extra money,” I replied innocently.

Actually, I was not working at the foodstall. Ghani Lidi had suggested that we collect discarded cans and sell them to a *karung guni* shop. My friends seemed to be earning their own money and I had begun to feel a little left out. So I agreed. Ghani’s idea seemed good because cans could be found easily — under houses, in dumps and almost everywhere. We went to neighbouring kampungs and collected the cans in sacks which we carried with a *kandar*. The cans were then taken to the *karung guni* shop in Paya Lebar where they were weighed. The money was good.

Ghani Lidi and I became fast friends. He earned money from selling *goreng pisang* as well. He sold them from kampung to kampung and then would come to my kampung to play with us.

One day, I went to his home. It was a rented room in a kampung behind the Eastern World Amusement Park, near the Taj Cinema. Ghani’s mother was frying *goreng pisang* for Ghani to sell. “My father was a sailor. He disappeared at sea when I was four years old,” Ghani said when I asked him about his father.

Ghani’s mother asked me to stay for lunch. I agreed, and we had *nasi lemak* with *sambal tumis* and *ikan bilis*.

That afternoon, I accompanied Ghani on his rounds selling *goreng pisang*. We went along the track behind the amusement park first. Ghani shouted, “*Goreng pisang! Goreng pisang!*” and I joined in as well to help him promote the snack. We went to the kampungs in Jalan Ubi, winding our way through stony, sandy and uneven tracks and muddy paths by the sides of the houses.

As we walked, shouting “*Goreng pisang! Goreng pisang!*”, a woman called out to us and asked how much a piece cost.

Ghani told her they were five cents each and she bought three. By the time we reached my kampung, Ghani had sold them all.

The following week, I accompanied him again. This time we went in the opposite direction towards Paya Lebar. On the way we met Mahmood in a Chinese-owned provision shop. We chatted for some time. Mahmood seemed to like Ghani. When we parted, Mahmood had promised Ghani a basket which his mother wanted to give away. As it was a nice, big basket, Mahmood was sure it would come in useful for Ghani’s *goreng pisang*.

Suddenly, Ghani counted his remaining *goreng pisang* and ushered me towards Jalan Betik. He explained that a standing order had been placed by a woman whose children were very fond of the snack. On the way, we met a man who wanted to buy two pieces, but Ghani, seeing that there were only seven pieces left, was willing to sell him only one. Six were reserved for that woman.

When we reached the woman’s house at Jalan Betik, she was watering the plants in front of her big house. The house had a lot of potted plants all around it and in the compound. Plants were also hanging from the corners of the house.

“Ah, you have come,” she said with a huge smile and, putting her hand into the neck of her *baju kebaya*, she drew out a tiny purse. Her numerous gold bangles almost got entangled with the long gold chains she was wearing. Extracting money from the small purse with her fingers which were decked with gold rings, she smilingly said, “Here’s thirty cents for the *goreng pisang* and another ten cents for you.”

We walked on with the empty basket. Close to the bridge across Jalan Betik, we saw the usual *Bai roti* making his afternoon rounds from kampung to kampung selling bread. The *Bai* also passed by my house and my mother would buy

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a French loaf, which cost fifteen cents, for our breakfast the following morning.

“We’ll buy *roti biskut* with the money the Makcik gave us,” said Ghani, and immediately called out, “*Bai, Bai!*”

The bread-seller stopped and turned his head in our direction, the big, round basket on his head turning round with him slowly.

He was short and stout, and wore his sarung rolled double with the lower end tied to his waist. His fat, hairy legs were exposed. He bent down, placed his basket on the ground and lifted the canvas cover which had been placed over it.

The basket was full of warm French loaves. In a corner there were pieces of *roti kelapa* and *roti biskut*. There was also a can of egg-jam.

“Give me ten cents of *roti biskut*,” said Ghani, and the man handed him six pieces wrapped in a piece of old newspaper.

Ghani gave me a piece, and took another for himself. Then we strolled into my kampung to play, as Ghani usually did after a successful day of selling.

11

Entertainment

“Hey, shall we go and watch the cowboy movie tonight at the 10-cent cinema?” Jamil asked excitedly, wiping his face. “It’s called *Vera Cruz*. It should be good.”

We were bathing at the standpipe at the junction of Jalan Betik and Jalan Alsagoff. There was no one there except us and we had a fine time splashing water at each other.

“Is it a colour picture?” I asked with enthusiasm.

“It is,” replied Jamil, with his eyes opened wide.

“Jameeel,” his mother shouted from his house across the road, “bathe quickly. I want a pail of water.”

Ignoring his mother, Jamil repeated that the picture was in colour. Water from his hair was dripping all over his face.

“Who’s the hero?” I asked.

“Burt Lancaster.”

“I like him.”

“Shall we go tonight then?” Jamil asked eagerly.

I nodded, wondering at the same time how to tell my mother about it.

“Jameeel, hurry up,” Jamil’s mother shouted again.

“Let’s go home now so that our mothers will let us go for the movie tonight,” I suggested.

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The “10-cent cinema” was an open-air cinema situated deep in Jalan Alsagoff. Tickets were at a flat rate of ten cents and that was how it got its name. Later, they were increased to twenty cents, but we still referred to the cinema by its old name.

Once, it rained after the show had started but my friends and I, as well as many other people, carried on watching the show — some with umbrellas up. Sometimes, when we ran out of money, we would go to the side of the cinema and peep at the screen through the tiny holes in the zinc wall.

Another “cinema” which we frequented was the government clubhouse in Haig Road. Here, films were screened only on Saturday at eight o’clock in the evenings. A cloth enclosure was erected all around the field and there would be a man sitting at a small table at the entrance collecting ten cents from everyone. People brought newspapers or mats to sit on in the field. A small projector would beam the film onto a white piece of cloth held by two poles stuck into the ground. I would usually sit quite close to the projector, being enthralled by its mechanics.

Once during a cowboy show, something unexpected happened. Red Indians were shown attacking an army fort in one scene. There was fierce fighting. The Indians managed to get inside the fort and were fighting hand-to-hand with the soldiers. Some parts of the fort caught fire as a result of the fire-arrows shot by the Indians from outside the fort.

The fire raged high when, suddenly, the audience realised that the screen was actually on fire. Half of it was burnt by the time we realised it. The show was halted. The audience became angry. Some shouted foul words. Others demanded a refund. In the end, we all had to leave without any compensation.

The Garrick Cinema close to the entrance to Geylang Serai screened mostly Hindi films. The cheapest ticket cost fifty cents. Although there were fans on the walls, the cinema was usually

very hot. A few times I was unlucky and got a seat by a pillar. It was not only very hot but also impossible to see the screen without craning my neck. Sometimes I also got to sit beside very vocal elderly women.

“You scoundrels, I hope you’ll all die,” some of them bellowed at the bad guys who were walloping the handsome Indian actor, Dev Anand, in the show. “Cruel things!” another shrieked. Well, how could they not have sided with Dev when the poor chap, with a slight bruise on his forehead, was single-handedly fighting five crooks all the way from the foot of the hill to the top?

After this outburst, a complete silence followed as the audience held their breath to see Dev only a hair’s breath away from death — hanging from the edge of a ravine and being gloated over by the triumphant leader of the crooks.

Then, suddenly, the cinema burst into an uproar again. “Pheet! Pheet!” came excited whistles from the audience. The hero’s long-lost brother had appeared from nowhere and was charging towards the crooks with all his fury. Dev was saved! Everyone clapped heartily.

As a befitting epilogue to this happy moment, the hero’s sweetheart came onto the scene to give a sizzling song and dance number around a tree. The audience, enraptured by this enchanting performance, rapped their wooden seats with their fingers in accompaniment to the melodious music.

Similar excitement and entertainment were also found at the Taj Cinema, which screened mostly Hindi and Malay films.

Ghani and I loved to stroll around this area. There were numerous self-erected foodstalls selling all kinds of food in the open space on the right side of the Taj. On the left side behind the cinema was the Eastern World Amusement Park. During weekends and festive periods, this area would be packed with

people eating and drinking at the foodstalls, walking here and there, hanging around, waiting to go into the cinema, or playing games and taking joyrides at the amusement park. Whenever Ghani and I had extra money from selling more than the usual quota of cans, we would go for the joyrides.

However, this source of extra income was eventually shattered. Someone told my mother that I had become a *karung guni* boy and I was severely reprimanded. That ended my business, of course.

“I want you to study hard and not waste your time collecting and selling cans,” my mother said. “If I needed money I would have asked you to sell *goreng pisang*, but you wouldn’t have much time to study then. You said you were washing plates at a foodstall — I don’t quite like that either. Stop all these. Spend more time on your studies so that you can at least become a postman, like Mammy Maryam’s son. He studied hard and he is now a postman.”

Then, after a thoughtful pause, she continued, “Do you know that the money we get from the social welfare is very little and that I have been pawning the little jewellery that I have to keep us going? I’ve nothing left now and what we are getting from your accident is also very little. See that you study hard, so you can get a good job when you leave school.”

I listened meekly to all this and was filled with remorse. Then I quickly picked up a book and began to read.

12

Fun and Games

“The *sagun-sagun* is ready. Take it to the *Kaka* shop,” my mother told me, pointing at a nicely decorated box.

My mother made *sagun-sagun* for sale to earn some extra money. She would buy coconuts, grate them and then fry the grated coconut until it became slightly yellowish. Flour and sugar were then added to it. For containers, she would roll the pages of my old exercise books to about 20 cm long with a diameter of 15 mm, fill them up with *sagun-sagun*, and decorate them with colour paper, leaving a bushy frill at the top. Each roll cost five cents, of which two would go to the *Kaka* shop for every piece sold. Children loved *sagun-sagun*. They would pinch off the bushy frill and drop the contents into their mouths, a little at a time as they played.

At the *Kaka* shop I met Hussein.

“Shall we go and collect bus tickets? Mine are almost used up,” he said.

I did not have many either, so I decided to go with him.

Printed on all bus tickets were four-digit serial numbers and we boys had evolved a game based on these numbers. We would cover up the last digit for a player to guess. Correct guesses would win the stakes — ranging from rubber bands to cigarette

About the Author

Shaik Kadir holds a Master in Education degree from the University of Sheffield, UK. He received training in teaching and journalism both locally and overseas, and has years of experience as an educator and journalist. Formerly a senior lecturer at the Institute of Technical Education, Singapore, he has now retired from service.



He has written works of fiction, such as *Planet of the Dwarfs* (1988) and *The Girl with the Mole* (1992), and several non-fiction books including *Commanding a Dynamic Islamic Personality* (2000) and *Islam Explained* (2006, 2017). Many of his articles have appeared in local newspapers and magazines such as *The Straits Times*, *Berita Harian*, *The Asia Magazie*, *Female* and *Her World*.

(Photo: The author's wife, Khairon Mastan, and their children, Muhammad Imran and Munirah, 1980)