The Kusu Pilgrimage: an enduring myth

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ON A SMALL ISLAND about 5 kilometres south of Singapore, the enduring power of myth manifests itself in the form of an annual pilgrimage, for which tens of thousands of devotees undertake on Kusu’s sacred hilltop dating back centuries. Over time, a fusion of religious practices occurred as believers of different faiths gathered to pray at a Chinese temple to a Malay shrine (keramat) on the island, a phenomenon that is none too surprising in a place like Singapore, where people of diverse cultures and religions share the limited physical space of this city-state.

Named for its turtle-like shape, Kusu (Turtle Island in the Hokkien dialect) is one of the most visited of some 60 offshore islands belonging to, and a rare instance of undisturbed sanctity in, development-driven Singapore. No longer suitable for modern uses, it is popular among which is the story of a giant turtle rescuing shipwrecked fishermen by transforming into the island.

The Kusu pilgrimage takes place throughout the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, falling between the months of September and November. This is when Kusu awakens from its slumber as ferry loads of mainly ethnic Chinese devotees arrive. Many devotees first visit the temple of Tua Pek Kong (Diaobong, 碧龙亭, literally meaning Great Uncle), a popular deity among the Southeast Asian Chinese. Also seen as the God of Prosperity, Merchant God and the patron god of seafarers, the origins of this deity remain debatable, with some identifying him as the local representation of the Chinese Earth God (Tudigong, 太极公), literally meaning Grand Uncle), while others see him as symbolic of early Chinese pioneers in the region.

After praying to Tua Pek Kong, some pilgrims climb 152 steps up a hillock to pray at the shrines of Syed Abdul Rahman, Nenek Ghalib and Puteri Fatimah, three Malay saints who lived in the 19th century. Most accounts generally relate how Syed Abdul Rahman came to the island, while the other two are said to be his mother and sister respectively. This form of saint worship or keramat worship – a legacy of early Sufi Islam – is thus simply referred to as “datuk Kong”.

No one seems to know with any certainty when or how the Kusu pilgrimage began. With no archival records kept by the Chinese temple or Malay shrines, memories fade as guardianship is passed down from generation to generation. Cecilia Seet lay Choo – a fourth-generation descendent of the first caretaker Bibi (a term of address for older Straits Chinese women) Ooi Chai Hoong – explained that the Tua Pek Kong temple’s founding is unrelated to the legend of the giant turtle. Instead, it was a fairly nondescript story in which some fishermen brought a statue of Tua Pek Kong to a little hut on Kusu to pray for safety on the seas and a good catch, the island was a resting point for them. The simple altar gradually expanded into a proper temple through regular visits and contributions by the devotees. Isak – a third-generation caretaker of the Malay shrines – similarly dismissed the turtle legend. His account is that Syed Abdul Rahman vanished while on Kusu with his friends. He later appeared in their dreams to ask for a shrine to be built. Isak is also skeptical of the claim that the three saints were family.

With no archival records, the only available textual references are the inscriptions listing contributors to the establishment and renovation of the shrines and temple. Much information is also gleaned from newspaper reports on the pilgrimage and the popular myths of Kusu. Spanning over a century, these reports shed light on how the accounts have evolved with time, thus showing the malleability of oral history.

According to some local English newspaper articles published in the 1940s and 50s, pilgrimage to Kusu began as early as 1813, the year of Syed Abdul Rahman’s death, before Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles’ arrival in 1819. A petition notice published on 14 August 1875 in the Singapore English daily The Straits Times further suggests that it was a fairly established practice by then. Submitted by Cheong Hong Lim, a wealthy Straits Chinese businessman and philanthropist, the petition sought to secure the title to Peak Island (as Kusu was known then) and noted that “many of the Chinese and native inhabitants of this Settlement” prayed regularly to the Tua Pek Kong and Datuk Keramat on the island “for upwards of thirty years”. It further reflected their unhappiness over the British colonial authorities’ use of the sacred island as a burial ground for immigrants who died in quarantine on the neighbouring St John’s Island.

Judging from inscriptions found at the temple and shrines, Straits Chinese devotees seemed to be the main or more active group in sustaining the pilgrimage in its earlier years. At the Chinese temple, Strats Chinese tycoon Ong Sam Leong figures prominently among the top donors for contributing 180 Straits dollars to renovation works in 1909, while inscriptions at the Malay shrines reveal that Nenek Ghalib’s shrine was constructed with donations from Baba (a term of address for Straits Chinese men) Hoe Beng Whatt and others, after she “arrived at the house of.” Hein in 1917. This was taken to mean that she had appeared in Hoe’s dreams and asked for the shrine to be built in exchange for granting the donors success in business. This tale reflects the situation in which keramat worship came to depend almost exclusively on local Chinese patronage, despite being Malay in origin, as many Malay Muslims renounced such practices as they became more orthodox in their faith.

As such, Chinese influences abound in the rituals observed across the shrines, with Malay caretakers chanting blessings in Hokkien and devotees burning joss paper and adding oil to lamp in front of the shrines for a small donation. However, as a gesture of respect to the Malay saints, devotees refrain from consuming pork and bringing food containing pork or lard when they visit. Ritual paraphernalia used here are also different from the ones used at the Chinese temple, with yellow savon rice, chicken, lamb and Indian incense being offered at the altar. Despite these differences, the Chinese temple and Malay shrines serve similar tutelary functions, receiving prayers for peace, health, wealth and prosperity. Both places also offer “fertility trees” on which those wanting children hang stones and other items to make their wishes, while gamblers pray to both Chinese and Malay deities for winning lottery numbers. It is not unusual to see followers of different religions visiting the temple and shrines. Professing to “believe in all gods”, Selvar M. (46, nurse) an Indian Hindu, visited Kusu with her Chinese Taisist colleagues during the pilgrimage season and prayed at both the Chinese temple and Malay shrines. Both Taisist and Buddhist pilgrims make offerings at Tua Pek Kong temple, which also houses the Guanyin (観音, Goddess of Mercy), revered by followers of both religions.

Given the twin attractions of a mystical origin and idyllic surroundings, Kusu has been marketed as a tourist attraction, with mixed results. Many tourist guidebooks on Singapore include information on Kusu and it is described in official tourism literature as a “holiday resort” with “blue lagoons, pristine beaches and tranquil settings”. Since the 1970s, Singapore tourism authorities have been keen to develop a cluster of islands south of Singapore (Southern Islands) – which Kusu was a part of – into a recreational resort. This spurred an ambitious project for which $550 million was spent to beautify these islands. Since then, Kusu has been enlarged to nearly 6 times its original size (from 1.5 hectares NURIOUS LEGENDS about the origins of the Kusu pilgrimage have surfaced over time. An information panel on Kusu lists five of them, though there are more. The most popular tale tells of two shipwrecked fishermen – a Chinese and a Malay – who were saved by a giant turtle that transformed into Kusu. This was likely inspired by the turtle-like shape of Kusu before reclamation took place, when it was made up of two smaller islands joined by a narrow strip of land visible at low tide, with the bigger islet resembling the turtle’s body, and the smaller, the head. A similar account, it was Syed Abdul Rahman and his family who were shipwrecked and the turtle emerged to tow them ashore.

Another legend speaks of two holy men, Syed Rahman (an Arab) and Yam (a Chinese), who meditated and fasted on their pilgrimage to Kusu. Yam fell ill and Syed prayed for him. Their lives were saved and a boat with food containing pork and lard appeared. Thereafter, the two men regularly visited Kusu to give thanks. When they died, they were buried next to each other on the island. The Tua Pek Kong temple and the Datuk Kong shrine were subsequently erected to remember them.

A third legend is the retelling of a tale in the Seventh Heaven [The Malay Annals, an account of the history of the Malay Sultanate in the 15th and early 16th century, describing schools of fish (swallow) that attacked people on the shore with their sword-like bills. One day, a Malay boy proposed to the king that banana stems be planted along the beach to dissuade the birds. This idea worked with the fish becoming trapped as their bills pierced the stems. The king later killed the clever boy as he feared a threat to his own rule. Said to be adopted by a Chinese couple living on Kusu, the boy’s spirit lingered on the island to protect his foster parents and they became the saints of Kusu after dying of old age.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I wrote a paper on the Tua Pek Kong temple on Kusu in which I argued that the Singapore government’s interest in harnessing the economic potential of this temple since the 1980s had led to the commercialization and touristization of Kusu. My instructor and classmates were amazed by the role that Kusu could play as a model for the state of managing society and developing the economy such that even a small 8.5-hectare island can barely escape its attention. Therefore, at the end of the semester, I brought them to Kusu to see how the larger forces of social change and state management had impacted it in general and the Tua Pek Kong temple in particular. However, during our trip, what struck me most was the simple question of a classmate from Mainland China: Who is Tua Pek Kong? To my surprise, my Chinese friend had neither heard of Tua Pek Kong nor was aware of his popularity among the Southeast Asian Chinese.

So who is Tua Pek Kong? Apparently, there is no agreement among scholars on the origin and identity of this deity. In the history of Malaysia and Singapore, the cult of Tua Pek Kong appeared in three multifaceted forms: a symbol of female devoteeslene Mui from Penang – joined one such three-day tour of Singapore. For a fee of RM250 (about US$57), she travelled overnight on a coach, reaching Kusu in the morning by 8.5 hectares. Pleasure cruises on Chinese junks and island tours were organized. In the 1990s, to 8.5 hectares) through land reclamation. coral reefs damaged by land reclamation.

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sworn brotherhood, a local Sino-Malay deity, and a Sinicized god. As a sworn brotherhood, Tua Pek Kong was both a patron deity and a mutual aid organization to its members. This group even took control of governance, law and order in the diasporic community. After becoming involved in destructive riots with its rival groups, it was outlawed by the colonial government and eventually ceased to exist by the end of the 19th century. Concomitantly, Tua Pek Kong was venerated as a Sino-Malay deity, in several different forms, in the Chinese diaspora. According to an old inscription in Pahang, the local community worshipped him as Bentoung (昆神). In other parts of Malaysia and Singapore, the Sino-Malay Tua Pek Kong symbolically blended elements of Malay animistic worship with Chinese religious practices. Most interestingly, on Kusu, Tua Pek Kong is a Sino-Muslim brother. The cult even incorporated Islamic ideas and Datuk Kong worship into its religious practices. Finally, the Sinicized Tua Pek Kong temple demonstrates how the Chinese bureaucratic religious hierarchy in the Chinese Overseas communities.

In the absence of a Chinese bureaucratic state structure, Chinese migrants in the 19th century Southeast Asia probably appreciated the familial connections and dyadic relationship between themselves and the divine uncle more than a multifaceted bureaucratic hierarchy. Furthermore, they were active agents in inventing their religious beliefs. Some were quick to incorporate local Malay animistic worship and popular Islamic ideas into the cult of Tua Pek Kong, making him a Sino-Muslim deity. Others deemed him a Sinicized god with efficacious response and a personal touch. Nevertheless, it is not possible to exactly pinpoint who Tua Pek Kong is. Perhaps it was precisely his multi-faceted nature of the cult that best serves the complex needs of the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia.

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Tua Pek Kong’s Cult in the Chinese Diaspora

Their example illustrates the changing nature and trend of the Kusu pilgrimage. What was a family affair is now mostly observed by the older generation, in shrinking numbers. According to statistics from the Sentosa Development Corporation – the agency responsible for managing Kusu – pilgrimage numbers have decreased yearly since 2001. Compared to more than 20,000 visitors in the top year in 2001, less than half (about 5,000) did so last year. This was in stark contrast to three decades ago when a record number of 23,000 former Port of Singapore Authority (PSA). Yap Kok Chuan, recalls: “Bumboat rides to the island cost only 30 to 50 cents in the 1960s and 70s. Even during the oil crisis, ticket prices did not go up.” In the late 1970s, the PSA declined to increase fares despite pressure from bumboat operators, stating that it was providing a public service. It relented in 1981, citing heavy losses, and eventually relinquished this responsibility. Today, a single private company provides the ferry service.

Although pilgrim numbers have fallen sharply over the past decade, those interviewed hope that the Kusu pilgrimage will see a revival. The Siong Long Musical Association – a traditional arts group formed in 1941 to preserve, develop, and promote Nan Yin (literally meaning “The Music of the South”) and Li Yuan opera – stages a musical performance on Kusu every year during pilgrimage season, a practice started by its late chairperson, Teng Mah Seng in the 1970s. Over the years, this event has garnered more attention and the number of participants and observers has increased from dozens to hundreds.

Cecilia Sost hopes that more people will visit Kusu when a new subway station opens at the pier – next to a new international cruise terminal – in two years’ time. Meanwhile, the pilgrimage is gaining new followers among the migrant community. Sheila Lin [35, from the service industry] – a Chinese Fujian native – went on her first pilgrimage five years ago after hearing about the supposed efficacy of the Kusu deities. Far away from home, her prayers are for safety and good luck, both for herself and her family in Fujian. Continually fuelled by the hopes and wishes of those who reach its shores, the Kusu pilgrimage survives the times.

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5: An inscription at the Tua Pek Kong temple listing the Chinese donors who contributed to its renovation in 1990.
6: An inscription at the Datuk Novel Koramatt listing the Chinese donors who contributed to its construction. It further reveals that Datuk Nenek “paid a visit” to the main donor Baba Hoe Hong Whatt at his home.
7: An idyllic and peaceful getaway – an image that a revamped Kusu Island seeks to project.
8: Some pilgrims hang stones on fertility trees to pray for children and remove them when their wishes have been granted.
10: A group of nurses, both Chinese and Indian, make the Kusu pilgrimage together on their day off from work.

All photos taken by or Caixia unless otherwise indicated.

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