

THE GRAVE THAT BECAME A SHRINE:
THE LIVES OF *KERAMAT* GRAVES
IN SINGAPORE

MUHAMMAD FAISAL BIN HUSNI

School of Art, Design and Media

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts (Research)

2019

Nanyang Technological University
School of Art, Design & Media
MA (Research) Programme

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by
BY MUHAMMAD FAISAL BIN HUSNI

Supervised by
ASST PROF SUJATHA ARUNDATHI MEEGAMA
School of Art, Design & Media, NTU

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express the immense gratitude I have for everyone who has helped me and had been a part of this endeavour to give voice to the *keramat* graves of Singapore.

Firstly, to my supervisor, Asst. Prof Sujatha Arundathi Meegama, who has guided, mentored and inspired me throughout this journey with unlimited patience and wisdom.

To Assoc. Prof Andrea Nanetti, Assoc. Prof Michael Walsh and Ms. Chia Hsiao Ching and the faculty of ADM, NTU, who have supported us through this research programme, constantly accommodating our queries and needs, and offering assistance so generously. To my fellow course mates who are constant fonts of encouragement and the occasional sources of additional research material.

To my parents and family who have been understanding and loving through my academic pursuits. To my grandfather, especially, who was the first to tell me stories about *keramat* graves in Singapore.

To everyone I have met who have contributed, in one way or another, to this study. To the caretakers and worshippers of the *keramat* graves for keeping these sites alive.

A warm and special thank you to Lucy Davis who introduced the undergraduate me to art history and set me on my adventure into the field.

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SUMMARY

Keramat graves may be found in many parts of the Malay world. The Malay word *keramat* signifies venerated objects. Some of these include Malay or Muslim graves of significant and holy persons, which have become sites of worship or shrines. By focusing on the objectness and lives of these sacred sites, this paper will look at the *keramat* graves through the lens of art history. It aims to build upon and contribute to earlier studies on *keramat* graves—which have been mainly focused on ethnographic aspects of *keramat* grave worship or the lives of the individuals buried at these sites —by providing an art historical perspective on the topic.

Just like humans, *keramat* graves, like any objects, have lives. Borrowing from Richard Davis' and Igor Kopytoff's approaches to examining lives of objects, this thesis will study the lives of *keramat* graves in Singapore by looking at the different aspects of their lives. It will first show how their forms inform their identity-making, and vice versa. It will then examine the relationships between *keramat* graves and their locations; focusing on the trees surrounding them, the height on which they were built upon, and their proximity to water. Lastly, it will examine how they change and grow in form, through the accumulation of offerings. In doing so, this research hopes to demonstrate how the form, materiality and objectness of the *keramat* graves grant them some agency upon their lives and how they are approached by worshippers from numerous religious and cultural background.

This thesis hopes to show that *keramat* grave worship in Singapore, while part of a larger tradition of Islamic grave worship, still sets itself apart from the latter tradition through its localisation. It also hopes to provide one possible approach to studying religious spaces that are shared and worshipped by numerous different communities.

INTRODUCTION

Nestled before a HDB flat at Bukit Purmei, Singapore, Keramat Bukit Kasita sits resolute against land development, at least for now. To get to it, one would need to enter the unlit hut-like threshold, pass feral cats and the loyal resting caretaker, to the worn stone steps leading to the entrance of the sacred space—a large bricked and gated archway. Keramat Bukit Kasita is not a single grave but a small cemetery of individual *keramat* graves. One is forbidden to cross the gates and into the burial ground, the caretaker warns, or one's feet would swell. And no photography, she adds, or the *pocong*¹ will come for you in your sleep. So, one stands in this patio, this permissible space, in front of the archway, and observe or worship. The rectangular graves fit around each other like jigsaw puzzles; some are concrete grey, others bright yellow. A few of them have shelters; wooden posts with green fabric tent-like covers. The gravestones on the graves—two on each—seem similar to those found in Muslim cemeteries in Singapore. Cloths of green and yellow have been wrapped around these gravestones. A large petrified tree, grey as ash, punctuates the centre of the cemetery. At the gate, vessels of incense and joss sticks have been placed on the ground. One may even find garlands of jasmine buds and loose flowers. Giant trees, banyan mostly, surround and shelter the site. The smell of the green of leaves and burning incense enfolds the air. The place is so quiet. They are the graves of Malay royalties, the caretaker remarks.

Keramat graves may be found in many parts of the Malay World.² They are venerated graves that have become sites of worship or shrines. Some include, the *keramat* graves of the Wali Songo³ in Java, Indonesia, Keramat Datuk Machap in Malacca, Malaysia, and Keramat Habib Nuh in Singapore. This thesis will focus only on those found in Singapore and proposes studying them as religious art,

¹ Malay ghosts that appear in the form of a corpse, still wrapped in burial fabric.

² I acknowledge that definitions and boundaries of the Malay World continue to be debated. For the purposes of this thesis, I use the term to encompass Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Southern Thailand and Singapore. However, evidence of *keramat* grave worship can be found mainly in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

³ A group of nine famous *awliya* (Islamic saint-like figures) who are revered in Indonesia.

through the lens of art history, specifically, as objects with lives. Most of the studies on *keramat* graves have been mainly ethnographic or focused largely on the lives of the persons interred beneath them. This thesis hopes to add an art historical perspective to the study.

Keramat Bukit Kasita, described earlier, is an example of the few *keramat* graves that are still present in Singapore. In 2009, Keramat Siti Maryam in Kallang, Singapore, was exhumed and demolished. A 2011 exhibition, *The Sufi and the Bearded Man: Re-membering a Keramat in Contemporary Singapore*, by curator Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, scholar Teren Sevea and photographer/researcher Nurul Huda B. A. Rashid, presented at the National University of Singapore Museum (NUS Museum), looked at the stories and histories surrounding this particular *keramat* grave and the burial ground it resided upon.⁴ It is not the first and only *keramat* grave to have been removed or destroyed, and sadly, it may not be the last. This situation has spurred me to begin my research as time is of the essence, to study the surviving *keramat* graves before it is too late.

Hence, this thesis focuses on the following *keramat* graves in Singapore⁵ (Map 1):

- i) Keramat Habib Nuh at Mount Palmer (Fig.1 and Fig 2)
- ii) Keramat Sharifah Rogayah at Duxton Plain Park, Outram (Fig.3)
- iii) Keramat Iskandar Shah at Fort Canning (Fig. 4)
- iv) Keramat Radin Mas Ayu at Mount Faber (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6)
- v) Keramat Kusu at Kusu Island (Fig. 7)
- vi) Keramat Bukit Kasita at Bukit Purmei⁶ (Fig. 8)
- vii) Keramat Tok Lasam at Siglap (Fig. 9)

⁴ Teren Sevea, Shabbir Hussain Mustafa and Nurul Huda B. A. Rashid, *The Sufi and the Bearded Man: Re-member in a Keramat in Contemporary Singapore*. (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2011).

⁵ There may be other *keramat* graves still surviving in Singapore, however, these few are the ones that I have found while researching on the subject. Towards the end of this research, I have discovered three possible *keramat* graves in Kubur Kassim on Siglap Road, with evidence of worship. I will include them in future studies of *keramat* graves in Singapore.

⁶ Photography is prohibited at Keramat Bukit Kasita. An illustration of the site has been made for the purposes of this thesis in place of photographs.

Assuming that Keramat Iskandar Shah is in fact grave of the fourteenth-century ruler of Singapore, who died in 1413,⁷ this *keramat* grave is probably the oldest in this research project. Radin Mas Ayu was believed to have died in, 1511.⁸ The oldest grave found at Keramat Bukit Kasita, which is a cemetery of *keramat* graves, dates back to 1721.⁹ The other *keramat* graves in this research seem to belong to individuals who are known to have lived or died in the nineteenth century or later.¹⁰

This thesis will show that, through their form and materiality, *keramat* graves possess a level of agency over their lives and their identities. These identities may change, shift and multiply throughout time and space. *Keramat* graves are also spaces open to different approaches of worship, by communities from different cultures and beliefs. Thus, *keramat* grave worship in Singapore cannot be viewed as a single, uniform method of worship, but one with many approaches. They form relationships with the locations they reside upon: these locations may legitimise the sacredness of these graves and the graves in turn may acquire the sacredness of these locations. Lastly, this thesis will explore the constant growth and renewal of these graves throughout their lives, through the offerings left by their worshippers.

It would be useful to note that in other research, publications and historical records, the terms ‘tomb’ or ‘mausoleum’ have sometimes been used to describe graves with shelters, and these include *keramat* graves such as Keramat Iskandar Shah, Keramat Radin Mas Ayu and Keramat Habib Nuh. However, for the purposes of this thesis, ‘grave’ will be the primary term used, and will encompass those with and without shelters.

Throughout this thesis, the words ‘veneration’ and ‘worship’ will be used often. These terms may be difficult to quantify, especially ‘worship’. However, for the

⁷ W. Linchan, “The Kings of 14th Century Singapore,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (215), Singapore 150th Anniversary Commemorative Issue (1969): 53-62.

⁸ This article is the only instance I found where the year of her death was mentioned. Audrey Tan and Rachel Au-yong, “Radin Mas: Legacy of a princess,” *The Straits Times*, September 6, 2013, 17.

⁹ Jerome Lim, “Keramat Bukit Kasita: A Link to 16th Century Singapura?,” *PASSAGE* May/June (2014): 12-13.

¹⁰ P. J. Rivers “Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 76, no. 02 (2003): 93-119.

purposes of this thesis, the word ‘veneration’, in relation to the experiences of an object, will be used to signify cases when the object is conferred an elevated status, often, but not necessarily, a holy or sacred one. ‘Worship’ on the other hand, especially at *keramat* graves, may involve either or both the presence of rituals—such as, the leaving of offerings—and the asking of miracles. I will refer to acts or rituals of worship as ‘approaches of worship’ while the items used in these approaches, for example, offerings, would be referred to as ‘tools of worship’.¹¹

This introduction will begin by introducing what is a *keramat* grave and key terms pertaining to it. It will address how *keramat* grave worship has roots in the larger tradition of Islamic grave and tomb worship, yet it is also a unique and localised practice, setting itself apart from the former tradition and those found in other parts of Southeast Asia. It will also introduce the theoretical framework that will direct this art history research: the lives of objects.

***Keramat* Graves and the ‘wali’**

One definition of the Malay word, *keramat*, is a place or object that is sacred and is (believed to be) able to bring magical blessings.¹² The word is also used in the Malay world to refer to living Islamic miracle workers, not just their graves.¹³ The term is derived from the Arabic word *karamah*¹⁴ (كرامة) which is defined as dignity or worth, and also a miracle performed by a Muslim saint-like figure, a *wali*.¹⁵

The Arabic word *wali* (ولي, plural *awliya* أولياء), has multiple definitions, one of which is “friend”. The definition and usage of the word which this thesis will deal with is “saint; marabout”.¹⁶ According to Newby D. Gordon, an Islamic Studies

¹¹ Justin McDaniel, whose book, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, is cited in this thesis, uses the term ‘tools’ in a different way, to refer to approaches of worship. I will choose to use the term ‘tools’ to refer to the objects and items used in approaches of worship. Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011)

¹² *Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2013), 751.

¹³ Teren Sevea, “Writing a History of a Saint, Writing an Islamic History of a Port City,” *Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper*, No. 27 (Apr 2018), 2.

¹⁴ Russell Jones, *Loan-words in Indonesia and Malay* (Jakarta: KITLV Press, 2008), 150.

¹⁵ *Oxford Arabic Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 703.

¹⁶ *Oxford Arabic Dictionary*, 910.

specialist, a *wali* is “Often translated as “saint,” this term refers to the holy person in Islam who is the conduit through which the *barakat* [blessings] of Allah is transmitted. Unlike Christian saints, there is not a formal process for determining who becomes a saint and who does not, nor is there a regular way of including Islamic saints into a regular rotation of the liturgy. In popular practice, the *wali* has the power to intercede for the worshiper, to bring about fertility, healing, and wealth.”¹⁷ While many scholars and authors on the topic have used the word “saint” in substitute of “*wali*”, I have chosen to avoid this as the word “saint” has stronger roots in Christianity and Latin. Also, the process of elevation of an individual to the status of a saint in Christianity, as mentioned, is vastly different to the process of elevation of an individual to a *wali*.

Cyril Glassé, author of *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, states, the word *karamah*, while literally meaning “acts of generosity”, denotes the “gifts or powers of a spiritual or psychic nature acquired by a Saint, short of miracle workings.”¹⁸ These gifts could range from the ability to bring fortune to others, to teleportation. The hagiographies of individuals like Habib Nuh bin Muhammad Al-Habshi, who is believed to be a *wali* and whose grave is the Keramat Habib Nuh (Fig. 1), are replete with stories of miracle workings. Such stories include Habib Nuh turning water to milk, healing the ill, clairvoyance, teleporting to Mecca for Friday prayers and even magically executing a prison break.¹⁹ Incidentally, according to Newby, *karamah* is “understood as the favors shown by God to humans; in popular parlance, the miracles performed by a *wali* (saint). It is generally felt that Allah bestows special gifts to humans through holy persons, prophets, and *walis*. These gifts come outside the natural order of things and fall into the category of “miracles.””²⁰ This suggests a lack of clear consensus as to whether the acts and abilities that fall under *karamah* may be considered “miracles”. It may also suggest that interpretations of some Islamic terms may be somewhat open or fluid.

¹⁷ Gordon D. Newby, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 211.

¹⁸ Cyril Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 251.

¹⁹ Mohamad Ghouse Khan Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore: The Life of Habib Nuh Bin Muhammad Al-Habshi* (Singapore: Masjid Al-Firdaus, 2008), 37-45.

²⁰ Newby, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, 121.

However, from these observations of the interpretations of the word, in this thesis, I will use the words miracles and miraculous when describing these occasions where the wishes of *keramat* grave worshippers are believed to be realised through their asking from and worshipping of these sites. These include individuals being cured of illnesses, conceiving children, gaining wealth or winning the lotteries, and doing well in school examinations, just to name a few.

The Arabic word *karamah*, has then been adopted by the Malay language, through the loan-word, *keramat*, to also label shrines, venerated animals, objects such as rocks and trees, miracle workers and graves of significant persons or *awliya*.²¹ Within this process, it needs to be noted that there is a shift from the meaning of the noun *karamah* (to signify the miraculous abilities) to the noun *keramat* (to signify also the vessel with the abilities). It can thus be argued that *keramat* grave worship occurs through the filtering of Islamic grave worship through the Malay language and culture—one of the ways *keramat* graves are set apart from other worshipped graves in the Islamic world.

***Keramat* Graves as Religious Art and The Life of the Object**

There have been some studies on *keramat* grave worship, both in Singapore and other parts of the Malay World. Most of them, especially on *keramat* graves found in Singapore, have been focused on ethnographic studies on the topic and the individuals buried at these sites. “Writing a History of a Saint, Writing an Islamic History of a Port City” by Teren Sevea, whose research focuses on the history of religion and Islam in South and Southeast Asia, for example, looks at the different hagiographies of *wali* figures their lives. These hagiographies, often collected in Malay and, on occasions, in Tamil poetry, catalogues the miracles and relationships of these *awliya* with their communities and even, colonial authorities. Analyses of these hagiographies reveals the importance of the *wali* in *keramat* grave worship.

²¹ Apart from miraculous abilities, the word *keramat* is also used mean many other objects and animals that possess such characteristics. “The name *keramat* is given to many old trees, stones, etc., which are believed to be haunted by familiar spirits and which point rather to an older religion than Muhammadanism than to Muhammadan saintship. The word is also applied to some elephants, crocodiles, and other animals which are believed to possess a supernatural character.” R.J. Wilkinson, *A Malay-English Dictionary* (Singapore: Kelly & Walsh, Limited, 1901), 509.

Many of them, like Habib Nuh, had already garnered followers even before their deaths, and the worship of their graves continue that reverence.²² This is supported by the tradition of using the term *keramat* for both the miraculous living individual and their grave, and the belief that the grave is simply the posthumous form in which one can access a *wali* and his miracles. However, in this thesis, I consider these graves not as simply legacies of the lives of these late *awliya*, but as objects with their own lives and experiences that may or may not be dependent on the individuals buried beneath them.

“Popular Sites of Prayer, Transoceanic Migration, and Cultural Diversity: Exploring the significance of *keramat* in Southeast Asia” by Sumit K. Mandal, explores the significance of the Hadrami heritage of some of the *awliya* whose graves have become *keramat* graves, and explores how transnational, trading and migration histories in Southeast Asia contributed to the proliferation of *keramat* grave worship. Referencing Henri Chambert-Loir, Mandal also explores the person- and site-specific nature of *keramat* grave worship, focusing on the histories of maritime movements and how they contribute to the “multi-ethnic and hybrid practices” of *keramat* grave worship.²³ Other scholars have also worked on the multicultural and multi-religious dimensions of *keramat* grave worship, its localisation, and how *keramat* graves “provide a key insight into how the different cultures and religions interacted and offered a space where all faiths could be practised and intermingle freely.”²⁴ This thesis will add to this discussion by not only looking at how the multi-cultural and multi-religious interactions manifest materially and visually, but also how certain characteristics of the *keramat* graves and their locations allow for these cultural and religious interactions to occur.

²² Sevea, “Writing a History of a Saint”

²³ Sumit K. Mandal, “Popular Sites of Prayer, Transoceanic Migration, and Cultural Diversity: Exploring the significance of *keramat* in Southeast Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012): 355-; Henri Chambert-Loir, “Saints and Ancestors: the cult of Muslim saints in Java,” *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*, (Indonesia, Allen & Unwin, 2002), 132-140.

²⁴ Liyana Taha, “Life in Death: The Case of Keramats in Singapore,” *The Mapping Series Reader*, (Singapore: National Library Board, Singapore and Singapore Art Museum, 2014), 45.

With land development being inevitable in Singapore, it has led to a few *keramat* graves being exhumed or removed. Thankfully, P. J. Rivers, in "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century", catalogued many of the *keramat* graves in Singapore that was known to exist or have existed in Singapore before the article's publication in 2003. His work is valuable to any research on *keramat* graves as it provides useful, albeit brief, descriptions of the *keramat* graves and the individuals buried beneath them. However, its largest contribution to this thesis were the addresses of these graves which Rivers managed to collect. It allowed me to find many of these *keramat* graves or learn if they no longer exist.²⁵

It is pertinent that an art historical study of *keramat* graves in Singapore is conducted to supplement the ethnographic studies of these sites. This thesis will study the subject through the lens of art history. Except for a single occasion, I have yet to come across any other instance where the Singapore *keramat* graves are viewed through this lens. The exhibition, *The Sufi and The Bearded Man*, presented the life of the exhumed *keramat* grave of Siti Maryam through the objects left behind after its destruction—wooden beams, fabric, lamps and even a circuit box—and documented images of the site before the exhumation. It focused on the objectness and materiality of the *keramat* grave, its shelter and offerings. Through these objects, a life may be inferred: the life of Keramat Siti Maryam. This exhibition proved inspirational for my research and this thesis. I wondered if an art historical approach to studying other *keramat* graves—especially those in Singapore—would be possible, focusing on the form and materiality of these sacred objects. In doing so, this thesis will also suggest that *keramat* graves in Singapore—like many objects of worship such as temples or mosques—be viewed as art, specifically religious art. In fact, many of the *keramat* graves in this study—as will be explored later—function formally and ritually very much like small temples.

²⁵ Rivers managed to locate around sixteen *keramat* graves. However, I only managed to find seven from his list for this research. I did however, locate three more, not from his list, however, did not manage to include them in this research. Rivers "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century."

Other similar Islamic tombs, mausoleums and grave shrines have been studied and viewed as Islamic art and architecture. Due to their similarities to these sites, it is my belief that *keramat* graves too should also be viewed similarly and this thesis hopes to add them to the larger field of Islamic art. For example, the grand *keramat* graves of the Wali Songo in Indonesia are being studied within the field of art history.²⁶ Islamic and Indian art historian, Catherine Asher has researched on the *dargahs* or shrines of the *wali* Shahul Hamid Nagori. In “The Sufi Shrines of Shahul Hamid in India and Southeast Asia”, she employs an “ethno-art history” approach and draws relationships between the beliefs and cultural backgrounds of the worshippers, stories from hagiographies of the *wali*, the rituals practiced at these shrines, and the material and visual properties of the *dargahs* and the offerings presented to them.²⁷ One example was Asher’s compelling connection between the themes of water-based miracles in the hagiographies of Shahul Hamid Nagori and the large water tanks often found at these *dargahs*. Learning from Asher, this thesis hopes to identify connections and relationships between the beliefs and cultures of the worshippers and the materiality and objectness of the *keramat* graves.

While there are many approaches to art history, scholars like Richard Davis²⁸ and Igor Kopytoff²⁹ have studied art and objects as subjects with lives and biographies. This thesis aims to apply that methodology as *keramat* graves undoubtedly have lives, exemplified by *The Sufi and The Bearded Man* exhibition. They were born (from deaths), they grow (in size and through the accumulation of offerings), and can be destroyed (through exhumation and demolishment). There are stories of *keramat* graves being moved³⁰ and stories of *keramat* graves standing resolute despite

²⁶ Helene Njoto, “Javanese Mouse Deer and Chinese Lions: Early Islamic Sinicised Imprints in Java’s North Coast Sculpture (15th – early 17th century).” Lecture, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, March 29, 2016.

²⁷ Catherine B. Asher, “The Sufi Shrines of Shahul Hamid in India and Southeast Asia.” *Artibus Asiae* 69, no. 2 (2009), 247-258.

²⁸ Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (USA: Princeton University Press, 1997).

²⁹ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Ed. Appadurai, Arjun. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-91.

³⁰ Ahmad Mohd Don, “Makam Siti Subaida Yg Penuh Misteri” *Berita Minggu*, March 31, 1985, 3.

attempts at uprooting them.³¹ Davis' approach, will be the foundation of the methodology of this research. His view is that an identity of an object is not singular nor fixed upon the point of fabrication or creation, but instead, are made and remade through interactions with humans or communities with different approaches and beliefs—these different communities he calls “communities of responses”.³² He also explores the degrees of agency objects have over their identities and ultimately, how they are approached.³³ The application of Davis' methodology, which had been employed to study Hindu images, proved very applicable for the study of *keramat* graves for a few reasons. Firstly, the relationship between a Hindu deity and its image—which is viewed by worshippers as the divine in material form—is not dissimilar to how worshippers view the *keramat* grave as a material form to access the blessings of the *wali*. Secondly, the worshippers of the *keramat* graves come from different cultural and religious backgrounds, much like the different communities of responses of the Hindu images.

Often, through an analysis of their form, colour and materiality, this research will suggest that the *keramat* graves in Singapore have some agency over how they are approached by their worshippers and visitors. I find it prudent to qualify this before moving forward. Here, I build upon Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*, where he posits a theory of the agency of objects. He states that an object—or, an “indexes”—may elicit an inference or “abduction” from an individual who views or interacts with the object. This individual may be viewed as a “patient”; a person or object “which is causally affected by the agent's action.”³⁴ Gell also qualifies that objects are “secondary agents,” where “originators” or artists are primary agents who “distribute their agency in a causal milieu, and thus render their agency effective. But to call artefactual agents [objects] ‘secondary’ is not to concede that they are not agents at all, or agents only ‘in a manner

³¹ There are stories about how the construction of the East Coast Parkway Expressway (which would have involved the demolition of the *keramat* grave of Habib Nuh) was wrought with misfortunes and mechanical malfunctions. Only upon the plans of the expressway being altered and prayers at the *keramat* grave were made was the project able to continue. Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*. 51-52.

³² Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 9.

³³ Davis gave an example of the image of Visnu Venkatesvara deciding its identity by choosing a discus and a conch over a trident and a drum. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 261.

³⁴ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Athropological Theory* (USA: Oxford Press Inc., 1998), 12-27.

of speaking’.”³⁵ He also states that the inference received from engaging with the index, may or may not coincide with the intentions of the artist/originator.³⁶ The *keramat* grave here, is the ‘index’ and its form, colour, materiality and even history will initiate inference or ‘abductions’ from its visitors and worshippers, who will in turn act accordingly to those inferences and ‘abductions’. For this thesis, these acts include approaches of worship, actions and movements the worshipper would go through, including climbing when the *keramat* grave is on a height or has stairs, or navigating through series of chambers. These acts, are then further responsible in affecting the lives of the *keramat* graves. I will have to point out that in his theory, Gell takes great effort to avoid symbols and meanings of objects. I however, feel this should not be avoided, at least for the case of *keramat* graves, because the inferences of the worshippers, and in turn the way they approach the *keramat* graves, are filtered through the lens of their culture—ethnic, religious or social—which may carry traditions of symbolic values, such as the meanings of certain colours. The ‘originators’ or artists in this dynamic may be argued to be the numerous individuals who erected the *keramat* grave, designed them and built their shelters. This becomes even more complicated—as will be addressed in Chapter 3—as the *keramat* graves may go through numerous transformations, often through the contributions and actions by worshippers, suggesting that even the worshippers may be considered within this group. While the *keramat* graves may be inanimate, they can thus be argued to have some form of agency over their own lives and ever-changing, ever-shifting, and sometimes ever-multiplying identities.

Religious Framing of *Keramat* Graves in Singapore and Their Communities of Responses

Keramat graves in Singapore are often, if not always, graves of individuals who have connections to the Malay or Islamic community, culture and people. It needs to be noted, however, that *keramat* grave worship may be considered forbidden by many within the Muslim community,³⁷ including religious leader,³⁸ especially in Singapore,

³⁵ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 20.

³⁶ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 24.

³⁷ Zuraihan bte Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions: A Study of Keramat Worship in Singapore* (Singapore: Dept. of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 1995).

because it may be seen as idolatry and sinful (*yirike*)³⁹, and worshipping something or someone other than Allah.⁴⁰ Quranic extracts are often cited in defence of this prohibition against practices such as *keramat* grave practices.⁴¹ It has also been labelled as a form of innovation to Islamic practices or *bid'ah*.⁴² While this term usually has a negative connotation of “heresy”, it isn’t always the case as there is “the presence of the classifications of “good” innovations that were in accord with the Qur'an and the *sunnah* of the Prophet.”⁴³ Despite all this, there are still Muslim worshippers visiting *keramat* graves in Singapore for miracles and there are many other examples of venerated graves in the Islamic world, from the Sufi tombs in Kerala⁴⁴ to the Uyghur Islamic grave shrines in Xinjiang, China.⁴⁵

Dominik M. Müller describes how Islamic bureaucracies such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ Faith/Doctrine Control Section or Bahagian Kawalan Aqidah (BKA) of Brunei and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore or Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) of Singapore may claim a “monopoly on the interpretations of Islam”, often regarding such practices as superstitious (*khurafat*).⁴⁶ These bureaucracies may sometimes implement measures to curb these practices. The BKA has conducted surveillance at *keramat* graves in Brunei, identifying possible worshippers.⁴⁷ At the *keramat* grave of Tuan Syarif for example, a “district based

³⁸ *Bongkar*, a Malay documentary, interviews a Singapore Muslim religious leader, Ustaz Md Saiful Alam Shah Sudiman, who explains the idolatrous nature of the practice. It may also be argued that the tone of this documentary served to deter the Malay speaking members of the Muslim community from the practice of *keramat* grave worship. *Bongkar Season 2*, presented by Screenbox (2008: Singapore: Screenbox 2008), DVD.

³⁹ Dominik M. Müller, “The Bureaucratization of Islam and its Socio-Legal Dimensions in Southeast Asia: conceptual contours of a research project,” *Working Paper No. 187*, (Halle / Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2017)

⁴⁰ Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions*.

⁴¹ Holy Quran (4:116), “Indeed, Allah does not forgive association with Him, but He forgives what is less than that for whom He wills. And he who associates others with Allah has certainly gone far astray.” This or similar extracts from the Quran, have often been cited for arguments against practices that may be deemed idolatrous, which includes *keramat* grave worship.

⁴² “Contoh Bid’ah Dan Khurafat Di Indonesia,” *Islam For World: Information islam in the world*, accessed Dec 7, 2018, <https://putrahermanto.wordpress.com/2010/09/09/contoh-bid’ah-dan-khurafat-di-indonesia/>

⁴³ Newby, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, 44.

⁴⁴ One example are festivals called *nerccas* held at tombs of Sufi saints of Kerala by worshippers. Stephen D Dale and M Gangadhara Menon suggest that the practice is an amalgamation of saint worship and martyr worship. Stephen F. Dale and M. Gangadhara Menon, "Nerccas: Saint-Martyr Worship Among The Muslims of Kerala," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London 41, no. 3 (1978): 523-538.

⁴⁵ Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2014)

⁴⁶ Müller, “The Bureaucratization of Islam,” 25.

⁴⁷ Müller, “The Bureaucratization of Islam,” 25.

Islamic office” had set up a signboard regarding jail time (and punishment in the afterlife) for worshipping at the *keramat* grave. In Malaysia on the other hand, seven *keramat* graves found on Pulau Besar, have been destroyed by Majlis Agama Islam Melaka, a “state-Islamic institution” in 2011.⁴⁸ In Singapore, however, the MUIS do not implement measures of such extent, which Müller credits to the organisation’s “commitment to “pluralism” and the “secular” state”.⁴⁹ In fact, some “non-state Islamic groups” in Singapore have expressed that they hope to see MUIS take “a more orthodox and forceful and explicitly exclusionary (if not punitive) stance” on issues like *keramat* grave worship.⁵⁰ However, there are some measures that attempt to curb the practice of *keramat* grave worship in Singapore, by non-religious or Islamic organisations, not motivated by Islamic doctrine or interpretations. The National Parks Board of Singapore (NParks), for example, had put up a sign at Keramat Iskandar Shah, prohibiting the burning of incense, leaving of food and performing of rituals at the site.⁵¹ This however, as I have witnessed, had not eliminated these practices at the *keramat* grave.

Yet, despite organisations such as the BKA and MUIS being of the opinion that the practice is in contradiction with Islam, there are still Muslims who still worship at *keramat* graves. Müller describes this as worshippers “refusing to comply with the bureaucracy’s interpretation of Islamic doctrine”. These personal interpretations or beliefs may be difficult to extract from them, as Müller expressed, because they often keep it secret to avoid the attention from these bureaucracies.⁵² However, Rian Thum’s research into the Islamic grave shrines in Altishahr (Xinjiang, China) may offer possible glimpses into these personal interpretations of Islam. One possibility is that the worshipper views these holy figures interred at these graves

⁴⁸ Dominik M. Müller, “Sharia Law and the Politics of “Faith Control” in Brunei Darussalam: Dynamics of Socio-Legal Change in a Southeast Asian Sultanate,” *Internationales Asienforum*, Vol. 46 (2015): 330; 'Ein Azmi, “Makam keramat' Pulau Besar diruntuhkan.” *Malaysiakini*, May 14, 2001, accessed, December 7, 2018, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/2971>

⁴⁹ Müller, “The Bureaucratization of Islam,” 30.

⁵⁰ Müller, “The Bureaucratization of Islam,” 34.

⁵¹ Müller, “The Bureaucratization of Islam,” 31.

⁵² Müller, “The Bureaucratization of Islam,” 28.

as closer to God and serve “intercessors” between them and the divine.⁵³ This is similar to the view provided by the caretaker of Keramat Radim Mas Ayu, with regards to the acceptable intentions and beliefs of the worshippers.⁵⁴ Another interpretation is that these figures, and by association their graves, “retain supernatural powers, which they wield from the spirit world.”⁵⁵

In her study of *keramat* grave worship in Singapore, Zuraihan Bte Isahak managed to interview two Muslim worshippers of Keramat Habib Nuh, whose testimonies of their intentions and beliefs lie within *keramat*-graves-as-intercessors category.⁵⁶ An agreement with this belief may be found in her interview with Islamic religious leader, Ustaz Syed Abdullah al-Jufri, who expressed that, to a degree, *keramat* grave worship may be “allowed, but it is not encouraged” under the umbrella of *tawassul*, “performing a religious act in a way that can bring us close to Allah, like remembering someone who God loves.”⁵⁷ Such practices, “is merely to hope that with a saint’s grace, a person’s request to God would be fulfilled.”⁵⁸

However, Isahak also interviewed a seventy-year-old Muslim, Tok Hamid, who doesn’t seem to be a worshipper of *keramat* graves, who informed her “the Malays of his generation” not only believed in the power of the *keramat* graves, they even believed that the food offerings would be consumed by these graves. He claimed that despite being Muslims, some of the practices of his people were “incompatible with Islam” and may be “Hinduistic”. He credited this to the “superficial and ritualistic manner” Islam had been taught.⁵⁹ Another interesting result of the study, through a survey of a number of young Muslims in Singapore, revealed that some, while believing that *keramat* grave worship is *yirik*, expressed

⁵³ Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 99.

⁵⁴ "Pak Daeng, the caretaker, accepts the idea of getting in contact with the deceased princess and asking her to convey one's wishes to Allah, but rejects some other traditional keramat practices as sinful (*syirik*) and insists on upholding orderly “manners of grave visiting” (*adab ziarah makam*)." Müller, “The Bureaucratization of Islam,” 32.

⁵⁵ Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 99.

⁵⁶ Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions*, 25-26.

⁵⁷ Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions*, 16-17; Haji Dusuki Haji Ahmad, *Kamus Pengetahuan Islam* (Malaysia: Utusan Publications & Distributors Sdn Bhd, 2012): 879-880.

⁵⁸ Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions*, 16.

⁵⁹ Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions*, 14-15.

that “no one has said that *keramat* [grave] worship is wrong.”⁶⁰ This incongruence may support Müller’s opinion that the personal interpretations of Islam that may contradict the Islamic bureaucracy’s or majority’s view of Islam may be difficult to extract from individuals who do not wish to attract attention or be viewed as a religious transgressor. This may also be why Tok Hamid could discuss the practices of his peers. There may be less pressure and stake to one’s reputation when speaking about possible transgressions of others.

Whichever these beliefs may be for any of the worshippers of *keramat* graves in Singapore, these personal interpretations of Islam—which may or may not match the interpretation advocated by Islamic bureaucracies like MUIS—can be argued to still be relevant and not any less Islamic as they are rooted in the Islamic belief in the power of the *wali* figure. I believe, for the purposes of this thesis, and the topic of *keramat* grave worship, these personal beliefs and interpretations of the worshippers of these sites should be considered and respected. Also, Müller highlights that even amongst the different Islamic bureaucracies in Southeast Asia, opinions regarding practices like *keramat* grave worship may vary.⁶¹ It is also worth noting that there are Islamic grave shrines, such as that of Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Punjab for example, that are viewed by their communities and worshippers as unquestionably Islamic and integral to how they approach and practice their faith.⁶² These points and instances support the perspective of the plurality of Islam, and that Islam is not a monolithic religion with only a single approach or interpretation; an argument not foreign in fields such as Islamic art.⁶³

Acknowledging then, that *keramat* grave worship is just one example of Islamic grave worship, it is important to ask, what distinguishes *keramat* graves from other forms of Islamic grave worship. The first is the unique appropriation and

⁶⁰ Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions*, 21.

⁶¹ Müller, “The Bureaucratization of Islam,” 34.

⁶² Richard M. Eaton, “Court of Man, Court of God: Local Perceptions of the Shrine of Baba Farid, Pakpattan, Punjab,” *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (India: Oxford University Press, 2002): 227-246.

⁶³ Avinoam Shalem, “What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art’? A plea for critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam.” *Journal of Art Historiography*, Vol. 6 (2012)

transformation of the word *karamah* to *keramat*, as described earlier. This loan-word shows a local and cultural (Malay) agency in the labelling of the object, and not something that is taken wholly from its Arabic-Islamic source.

Scholars like Henri Chambert-Loir, have suggested that *keramat* grave worship may be an extension of ancestor worship,⁶⁴ and this could be another way in which *keramat* grave worship distinguished itself from the larger practice of Islamic grave worship. This is not an opinion I share as I do not believe that the worshippers at these *keramat* graves in Singapore view the interred as their ancestors. However, there may be some validity in Chambert-Loir's claim. It has been highlighted that most of the individuals whose graves become *keramat* graves—especially in Singapore, Malaysian and Indonesia—were Hadrami or Hadrami descendants.⁶⁵ For example, Habib Nuh and Syed Abdul Rahman (of the Kusu Island *keramat* graves) are believed to be Hadrami. While it would be easy to assume that this Hadrami connection was simply because of Islam's roots in Arabic culture, Engseng Ho, suggests that the significance of the Hadrami to the Malays may have reasons beyond just Islam, but in ancestry. He suggests that “the Hadrami genealogies had become intertwined with Bugis and Malay ones, in moral exchanges that created creole communities and transcultural families.”⁶⁶ This could suggest that locally, the Hadrami ethnicity, is seen as part of the contemporary Malay ancestry, and thus opens up a possibility that ancestor worship may be another foundation of *keramat* grave worship.

It has also been suggested that the *keramat* grave tradition is formed from the layering of three belief systems that have had, at one point or another, been important to the Malay world; namely Animism, Hinduism and Islam.⁶⁷ This is problematic and I will explain why a little later. However, let us first take quick

⁶⁴ Henri Chambert-Loir, “Saints and Ancestors: the cult of Muslim saints in Java,” *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*, (Indonesia, Allen & Unwin, 2002). 132-140

⁶⁵ Sumit K. Mandal, “Popular Sites of Prayer, Transoceanic Migration, and Cultural Diversity: Exploring the significance of *keramat* in Southeast Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012)

⁶⁶ 355-72; Engseng Ho, *The graves of Tarim: genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean*. (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2010), 197.

⁶⁷ Zuraihan bte Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions*.

journey through this argument. Animism is often considered the earliest belief system of the Malays.⁶⁸ Within that system was the belief in *semangat*, a “vital or effective force” that exists within everything, “present in placenta, in all parts of the body, in spittle and sweat, in clippings of the hair and paring of the nails, in a person’s shadow, in his name, in the water in which man or beast has washed and in the earth marked by their footprints... the leaves and branches of plants, stones and beads and tin and iron...”⁶⁹ This belief set the foundational environment for *keramat* grave worship.

According to scholars like Walter Skeat, when Hinduism spread across the Malay world, it was localised in some ways. In *Malay Magic*, he noted that “the greater gods of the Malay Pantheon, though modified in some respects by Malay ideas, were really borrowed Hindu divinities, and that only the lesser gods and spirits are native to the Malay religious system.”⁷⁰ Much like the case with the loan-word *keramat*, this is evidence that when the Malay people adopted the new, an accommodation or appropriation happens instead of changing or abandoning the old ways.

When Islam came, it brought with it Sufism,⁷¹ and introduced the practice of the visiting of shrines of *awliya*, through a notion that “the saints of god die not, they merely depart from one habitation to another.”⁷² It is also believed that the Islamic “worship of saints [in the Malay world] countenanced the continuance of time-hallowed offerings at the graves of ancestor, ruler and teacher”,⁷³ a practice that was present in the region before the introduction of Islam. Hindu concepts such

⁶⁸ John D. Gimlette, *Malay Poisons & Charm Cures*. 2nd ed. (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1923)

⁶⁹ Richard Winstedt and Seong Chee Tham, *The Malays: A Cultural History* (Singapore: G. Brash, 1981), 19.

⁷⁰ Walter W. Skeat, *Malay Magic: Being an Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religions of the Malay Peninsula* (London: Mcmillan and Co, Limited, 1900), 85.

⁷¹ At the end of the thirteenth century to the early fourteenth century, “Islam started to gain foothold among the local communities in the Malay world”. This was a period with “overtly missionary content of communications between the Muslim and the Malay world” where Sufi missionaries played a large role in the proselytisation process and propagation of Islam in the region. However, there were interactions prior to this, between Muslim traders and the communities of the Malay world. Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, “The Impact of Sufism on Muslims in Pre-colonial Malaysia: An Overview of Interpretations,” *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2002): 467-493.

⁷² John A. Subhan, *Sufism: Its Saints and Shrines: An Introduction to the Study of Sufism with Special Reference to India* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1938), 106.

⁷³ Sadly, Winstedt did not give further elaboration where these earlier practices came from. Richard Winstedt, “Indian Influence in the Malay World,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 2 (1944): 19.

as the *devaraja*, or “the king being the incarnation of a deity” was “replaced by the concept of rulers as the ‘shadow of [the Islamic] God on earth’”.⁷⁴ This could also account for why some of the *keramat* graves worshipped here, such as Keramat Iskandar Shah (Fig. 4) and Keramat Radin Mas Ayu (Fig. 5), are not of *awliya* or pious Muslim persons, but instead, royalties.

As neat as this three-layered origin story is, it may be problematic. It makes assumptions that the Malay culture—and all its earlier belief systems—and Islamic cultures are the sole contributors to the practice of *keramat* grave worship. Even if they were, at some point, they have ceased to be the only contributors to this practice. It is a complex amalgamation of the above-mentioned belief systems and all the beliefs and culture of the other different communities of people that worship it. Besides Muslims and Malays, *keramat* graves of the Malay world may be worshipped by the many other different communities that reflect the diversity of their place and population. In Singapore, the *keramat* graves are worshipped by Malays, Chinese, Indians, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, just to name a few. Those found in Malaysia too, for example, also receive worshippers from different communities.⁷⁵ Thus, *keramat* graves are set apart from the larger tradition of Islamic grave or tomb worship through how its practice has become localised and infused with so many beliefs and cultures. *Keramat* graves within the Malay world may even exhibit vastly different characteristics from one region to another; the reason why I chose to narrow the focus only on those in Singapore. For example, the *keramat* graves of Wali Songo in Java are decorated with carvings of guardian animals unlike the *keramat* graves found in Singapore.⁷⁶ It is interesting to note, the Kusu Island *keramat* graves (Fig. 7, Fig. 10 and Fig. 11) seem to be worshipped by mainly the Chinese during the annual pilgrimage period to the island, and its worship is done in conjunction with worship at a Chinese temple on the island. They also receive very unique offerings left by their worshippers, such as stones in

⁷⁴ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, “The Impact of Sufism on Muslims in Pre-colonial Malaysia,” 485.

⁷⁵ Cheu Hock Tong, “Malay Keramat, Chinese Worshippers: The Sinicization of Malay Keramats in Malaysia,” *Research Paper No.25* (Singapore: Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 1996/97)

⁷⁶ Njoto, “Javanese Mouse Deer and Chinese Lions”

tubular clear plastic bags upon which worshippers would write their wishes on and tie to the shelter of the *keramat* grave (Fig. 12). These offerings do not seem to be used at other *keramat* graves in Singapore, suggesting that there may even be vastly different or unique approaches of worship reserved for different *keramat* graves.

Some of the *keramat* graves may have received worshippers from different cultural and religious communities right upon their construction, meaning, upon the death of the person buried beneath them. Habib Nuh, as stated earlier, was said to have followers from numerous ethnic and religious communities, even before his death.⁷⁷ This raises the possibility that the Keramat Habib Nuh may have had worshippers from different ethnic and religious groups from the moment it was built. It is thus difficult to ignore the possibility that contributions from cultures, other than the Islamic or Malay cultures, to the worship of his grave, may have happened from the get go. To deny that the *keramat* grave is a product of all these different beliefs together, and claiming that it is merely part of the Islamic tradition of tomb worship or just a product of Malay culture and practices, is to deny its uniqueness and the agency of pre-existing and current local culture surrounding the *keramat* grave sites.

In its amalgamation of elements from different beliefs, it has become an all-inclusive space with tools for different approaches of worship; where worshippers need only use the tools that they find useful, and leaving those they do not require. Meaning, a Keramat Kusu Island worshipper who identifies with Islamic approaches of worship, may choose to read Islamic prayers (in fact, Islamic religious books may be found there) while a worshipper who identifies with Buddhist approaches of worship may find joss sticks at the site, which they may use. This then allows for people of different religions to come together in a single space.

⁷⁷ Even from at from the age of fifteen, when he was living in Pulau Pinang, there were many from the Chinese community who believed he was blessed. Mohamad Ghouse Khan Surattee, *Lambang Terukir: Dalam Mengisahkan Manaqib Habib Nob Bin Muhamad Albabsyi Yang Syahir* (Singapore: Masjid Al'Firdaus, 2010), 37.

With all the different beliefs and approaches to worship that is part of the *keramat* grave tradition, Davis' use of "communities of responses" in *Lives of Indian Images*, proved to be extremely useful.⁷⁸ In fact, his methodology has served as the backbone for this research. Davis managed to merge Kopytoff's⁷⁹ "biographical method with a notion of "interpretive communities," drawn from reader-response literary theory"⁸⁰ expressed by Stanley Fish.⁸¹ This theory asserts that meaning is not (just) embedded within a work, but, as Davis explains, "develops within the dynamic relationship between reader and text established during the act of reading. The reader gains joint responsibility in the production of meaning, and meaning itself becomes an event rather than an entity." And "communities who share cultural assumptions may also share "interpretive strategies""⁸². And with this "idea of interpretive communities" or "communities of responses", Davis manages to address and acknowledge the many ways an object is approached and the multitude of meanings and identities it is given, throughout time and space.

The "communities of responses" of *keramat* graves are many. In terms of age groups, I have observed a wide range. I have seen children at *keramat* graves with their parents, often to wish for academic success. I have also seen young adults who visit these sites with their elderly parents. The climb required at these graves did not seem to deter the older worshippers, it seems. However, most of the worshippers I have encountered seem to be middle aged. With regards to their ethnicity and faith, I have observed a variety as well; namely Malays, Chinese, Indians, Muslims, Taoists, Buddhists and Hindus. Some *keramat* graves may receive more worshippers from a specific community. Keramat Habib Nuh, for example, sees more Muslim worshippers. Keramat Kusu Island, as mentioned earlier, sees more Chinese and Taoists worshippers during its annual pilgrimage period throughout the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar. The *keramat*

⁷⁸ Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 8-9.

⁷⁹ Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things"

⁸⁰ Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 8.

⁸¹ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980)

⁸² Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 8-9

graves may also receive worshippers from other countries. Keramat Kusu Island receives worshippers from Thailand, Myanmar and even China.⁸³ Keramat Habib Nuh, on the other hand, sees worshippers from Indonesia and Brunei.⁸⁴ Another thing that varies from worshipper to worshipper is the wish they make at these graves. The most common are wealth (or win the lottery), fertility (or to conceive) and health (or to be cured of an illness). Speaking to the caretaker of Keramat Kusu Island, he revealed that a number of the worshippers visiting the site wished for marriage or to find a partner. These are concerns that are not only universal, they remain relevant today, especially so in Singapore where governmental initiatives, like the Baby Bonus Schemes,⁸⁵ are in place to promote family building to raise the nation's fertility rate,⁸⁶ and where the cost of living is high.⁸⁷ The universality of these concerns could also account for why the *keramat* graves in Singapore attract worshippers from other countries as well.

Each of these communities of responses *keramat* graves have their own approaches or strategies of worship, as described earlier with the Keramat Kusu Island for example. These are approaches they bring with them from their respective cultures and belief systems. Each community of responses may share approaches and tools of worship but they may also be independent. This will be further explored in Chapter 3 of this thesis. *Keramat* grave worship, then, cannot be viewed as a single and uniform method of worship but one with myriad of

⁸³ This information was related to me by the caretaker of Keramat Kusu Island when I interviewed him on the 2nd of September 2017.

⁸⁴ I attended the annual *Haul* at Keramat Habib Noh on 20 January 2018, a ceremony marking the anniversary of the *wali's* death. The carpark compound in front of the *keramat* grave and the mosque had to be converted into a tented prayer space to accommodate the people who attended the ceremony. I managed to meet people and overhear some conversations, and I discovered that some of them were not Singaporean and had come from Indonesia and Brunei.

⁸⁵ Ministry of Social and Family Development, "Baby Bonus Scheme," accessed on Nov 20, 2018.

<https://www.msfc.gov.sg/policies/Strong-and-Stable-Families/Supporting-Families/Pages/Baby-Bonus-Scheme.aspx>

⁸⁶ Fertility rate and family building remains a huge concern for the Singapore government. Rachel Au-Yong, "Singapore's fertility rate down as number of singles goes up." The Straits Times, September 28, 2018, accessed on Nov 20, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/spores-fertility-rate-down-as-number-of-singles-goes-up>

⁸⁷ In the Global Power City Index, released in October 2018, Singapore ranked poorly for cost of living, the key indicators of which are Housing Rent and Price level. For these indicators, Singapore scored 30 or lower out of the 44 countries ranked. Institute for Urban Strategies, The Mori Memorial Foundation, Global Power City Index 2018 (Japan: Institute for Urban Strategies, The Mori Memorial Foundation, 2018)

forms. *Keramat* graves too cannot be viewed as a uniform group of religious objects. Each one may be vastly different from the other.

The Plan of This Thesis

This thesis will look at the elements and attributes of the *keramat* graves that influence how they are approached, viewed and worshiped, which in turn, shape and reshape lives of these graves. It will be organised into three chapters, which will each explore different aspects and moments in the life of the *keramat* grave.

The first chapter will open with the becoming of a *keramat* grave and its fluid and multiple identities. It will do so by studying two elements found on most, if not all, *keramat* graves—graves and shelters. The *keramat* grave is first and foremost, a grave; a location of burial, in this case, of someone important. This chapter will examine how the religious functions and roles of the *keramat* graves are not constant and always shifting. The identities of those buried beneath each *keramat* grave within this study will be discussed. It will also look at the architecture of the *keramat* graves and the presence of shelters protecting these shrines and posit how they may have contributed to the elevation of the statuses of these graves to religious shrines, and separate the sacredness of these graves from the realm of the profane. It will also briefly compare them with other graves and tombs in Islamic and religious art, especially those in the region. By studying the grave, the body beneath it and the shelter above it, this chapter discusses how the *keramat* grave redefined its own identity, from a place of burial to a site of worship through how its form is approached by its communities of responses.

The second chapter will explore the complicated relationships between the *keramat* graves and the land and location they sit upon. It will show that these locations are not simply places of habitation for these graves. By analysing similarities and differences between the locations of the *keramat* graves—focusing on altitude and proximity to trees and water—this chapter will show how these elements may have not only aided in the veneration of these graves, but also affected their lives.

The third chapter will focus on the growth and renewal of *keramat* graves by studying the objects and offerings left behind by the worshippers and visitors, and also their interesting history of undergoing repairs and renovations. This chapter will investigate the social significance of the offerings, positing symbolisms and meanings behind their colour, materiality and form. More importantly, it will also show how the accumulation of objects and images at these shrines, contributes to the constant growing and changing of these sites throughout their lives. In doing so, it will not only show how offerings need to be considered when studying sacred spaces through the lens of art history, it will also suggest that religious art making is not always fixed to a single moment of production. Instead, it may be a continuous process where worshippers serve as collaborators. Another element of the lives of the *keramat* graves that this chapter will explore is renewal, through renovation, repairs and upkeep. Some have had numerous facelifts throughout their lives, to a point that they look vastly different from their original appearances. This chapter will not only look at these examples but also show how some of the *keramat* graves are able to fund their own renovations through (monetary) offerings; which often requires these shrines to make sure they are able to grant the miracles of their worshippers if they want to secure constant maintenance. It will suggest that in such situations, worshippers take on roles beyond just those of patrons but also participants and makers of in the continuous and perpetual process of the making of a *keramat* grave.

The lives of *keramat* graves may sometimes be finite; the concluding chapter will remind us why there is an urgency to continue the study of these objects. It will highlight the arguments of thesis, but more importantly, it will suggest future avenues of research that may continue from them. It will emphasize the value of an art historical perspective in the study of *keramat* graves and their worship.

CHAPTER 1

FORM AND FORMING IDENTITY: THE DIFFERENT IDENTITIES OF THE KERAMAT GRAVE AND THE SHAPES THEY TAKE

At Palmer Road, on the top of a hill, sits the Keramat Habib Nuh, one of the most famous *keramat* graves in Singapore (Fig. 1). Its earth green shelter, topped with a magnificent bulbous dome, overlooks the Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque.⁸⁸ A busy expressway stretches just beside it. To enter this hallowed space, one climbs up a flight of stairs, barefoot of course; shoes remain with the profane. Contained within the grand architecture is the grave of an even grander man. Curtained posts support a dark wooden canopy with gold Arabic slashing calligraphy. Beneath it, a grave of white marble with veins of grey and inscriptions of gold. Its large headstones are wrapped in fabric of green and yellow. Glass vases placed, at the corners of the grave are always full of blooming colours. A little mountain of flowers rest upon this grave while, beneath it, buried, is Habib Nuh. When retold, his life is often decorated with miracles and the impossible. When spoken of, he is regarded as a friend of God, a *wali*. Worshippers, devotees, visitors, come from everywhere—Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei—to sit by his grave, praying, mostly, and wishing, often.

About a kilometre away, at Duxton Plain Park, is the supposed *keramat* grave of his granddaughter, Sharifah Rogayah (Fig 3). Unlike her grandfather's, her grave has no domed shelter, no grand decorative calligraphy. No large headstones wrapped in fabric. And no hill. Her modest grave sits behind a shop house. It is of concrete and tiles, painted over with yellow and green. Yellow bricks, mark its boundaries. Flowers are placed upon the top of the grave and within cut PVC

⁸⁸ There is another grave within the compounds of the mosque. It is the grave of Syed Abdur Rahman bin Salim AlHabsyi, a relative of Habib Nuh. This grave doesn't seem to be worshiped as a *keramat* grave. Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 53.

pipes in front of it; no glass vases here. And when spoken of, Sharifah Rogayah, she is always known, and often simply, as the granddaughter of Habib Nuh.

One person can be many things, to different people and to oneself. Some of these are less fixed than others, may change over time, and may highly depend on the person's relationships with the different people and their roles in those relationships. And a person can sometimes be very contrasting things to different people. Just like people, a *keramat* grave may be many things to different people or communities. For the purposes of this thesis, I will call this the different identities of *keramat* graves. These identities can exist concurrently and may be determined by the cultural and religious backgrounds of the communities of responses of the *keramat* graves. Here, I borrow Davis' approach once more, in the way he addresses Indian images as "social beings whose identities are not fixed once and for all at the moment of fabrication, but are repeatedly made and remade through interactions with humans."⁸⁹ This means an object may have different identities throughout space and time due to its different relationship and interactions with different communities at different times and places of its life. An ancient statue of a Hindu deity will inevitably be approached, treated and viewed differently when it was initially in its temple than when it sits displayed in a museum. The communities interacting with it, in those two cases are vastly different. As Davis explains, the "viewer also brings their own frames of assumptions, understandings, needs, expectations, and hopes of what they see"⁹⁰ and a community of response may share these perspectives. With the case of the statue, its different communities of responses—temple worshippers and museum visitors—imbue it with very different identities; an object of worship and a work of art. However, we should not assume that an object does not have any agency in its identity-making. When more explicit or apparent forms of agency may not be possible,⁹¹ the form, colour and materiality, and sometimes, even the past, of an object will, as Gell puts it, elicit inference or abductions, from their communities of responses, which will depend on the assumptions, understandings, needs [and]

⁸⁹ Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 7-8.

⁹⁰ Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 9.

⁹¹ As with the earlier example of Visnu Venkatesvara deciding its identity. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 261.

expectations”.⁹² This in turn will affect how these communities of responses approach the *keramat* grave, contributing to this identity-making. Thus, the object would still possess some power and influence on the spectrum of possibility of how it may be approached and perceived.

This chapter will look at the multiple—and not always fixed—identities of *keramat* graves, focusing on three that they may possess: a grave, a *makam* and of course, a *keramat* grave. It will begin by introducing these identities and describe the different types of individuals buried at these graves (and in some cases, the corpses) to show distinction between a grave that is respected or venerated (a *makam*) and a grave that is worshipped (a *keramat* grave).

As explained earlier, the visual appearance of an object is important in its identity-making. Also, just like a person’s body may serve the needs and requirements for a specific identity, the form of a *keramat* grave may also function for its identity, either as a marker of the identity or be useful to it and its worshippers for its identity as a sacred object and space. Thus, this chapter will describe how these identities are reflected visually and materially, in the form and shape of the graves. It will focus on the commonalities in visual qualities among graves in this research to show how they are identifiable as Malay and Muslim graves. Lastly, this chapter will show how, as a *keramat* grave and a *makam*, such sites of burial are able to form layers and boundaries of sacredness through their forms and the architecture of their shelters, and thus setting them apart from other Malay and Muslim graves that are not worshipped or venerated.

Hence, this chapter aims to show that their identities as ‘*keramat* graves’ (as shrines) is not a given. It will also show how the identities of the *keramat* graves in this research are not just many, but may change into another, based on their different relationships with people; relationships that are dependent on the form,

⁹² Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 9.

colour and materiality of these graves. Essentially, this chapter aims to explore the becoming of a *keramat* grave.

The Multiple Identities of a Keramat Grave

Before looking at the visual and material features of the *keramat* graves in this study, and how they relate to the identities of these objects, we must first address the multiple identities that *keramat* graves may possess.

The first identity is the grave. It is a tragic fact that a *keramat* grave cannot come into being without there first being death, as it is first and foremost a grave, a site of burial. When a community acknowledges these sites as the final resting place of the departed, they provide these sites the identity of a grave. The *keramat* graves in Singapore are usually, if not always Malay or Muslim graves.⁹³ It may be fair then to assume that the community that first had interactions with these different graves were from the Muslim or Malay community because often one is buried by family or members of one's immediate communities.

The *keramat* graves have two other identities. These identities often exist together and are dependent on the cultural and religious backgrounds of the communities of responses of these graves. The first is the *makam*. A *makam* is a Malay word, which means a grave of a significant individual, a prophet, a *wali* or a member of a royal family.⁹⁴ Thus, the *keramat* graves, especially those in this study, are often considered as *makam* as these graves are often graves of *awliya* or Malay royalties. The Malay word *makam* is derived from the Arabic word *maqam*⁹⁵ (مقام), which is “tomb of a saint” and also “refers to a stage of spiritual development.”⁹⁶

⁹³ “In Penang, there are a significant number of *keramat* of saints who are non-Malays, especially Siamese (Thai) and Indian.” So, in other parts of the Malay world, there may be more (ethnic) diversity in terms of the individuals whose graves become *keramat* graves. Tan Chee-Beng, *Chinese Religion in Malaysia: Temples and Communities*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 72.

⁹⁴ *Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat*, 980.

⁹⁵ Jones, *Loan-words in Indonesia and Malay*, 189

⁹⁶ Newby, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, 140.

A grave is considered *keramat*, however, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, when it is capable of miracles or is worshipped for those abilities. Similar to a *makam*, a grave's identity as a *keramat* is very connected to the individuals buried at the graves. There are several categories of individuals whose graves are often given the identity of *keramat* graves and these categories are almost exactly the same and those of *makam*. For this reason, 'makam' and 'keramat grave' while often used interchangeably, especially in the vernacular, are not exact synonyms. What distinguishes the terms 'makam' and 'keramat graves' seem to be the element of miracle workings and the presence of worship. Not any grave, of just anyone, can possess these miraculous abilities. Also, some of these individuals have already displayed acts of miracles in their lifetime; gifts that seems to be transferred onto their graves. Also, it is important to note that the terms *makam* and *keramat* are not stable ones. They are dependent on their communities of response. In the cases of the graves studied in this thesis, the terms, especially *keramat*, are used by a large enough community, or by numerous communities, that they have become agreed-upon labels for these objects. Academically, scholars and researchers on these graves have also chosen to use these two terms, especially *keramat*, when addressing them. However, it is unavoidable that other terms may be used in referring to these graves, by different communities, especially because differences in languages amongst the different communities may require translations of terms to occur. For example, the word 'shrine' has sometimes replaced 'keramat' when translated to English.⁹⁷

While the of list categories of individuals whose graves become *makam* and *keramat* in the Malay world, is long, there are a few that are more common among the *keramat* graves in Singapore⁹⁸ and they include: *amliya*, royalties, community leaders or village founders, individuals who suffered violent deaths or martyrs, and

⁹⁷ A plaque on Keramat Sharifah Rogayah labelled the grave in English, "Shrine of Sharifah Rogayah".

⁹⁸ There are other categories of individuals whose graves have become *keramat* graves, in the Malay world, however they will not be discussed in this thesis. One of the reasons is that they do not seem to be present in Singapore, which is the context of this research. One example of the categories is the "magician" figure. Mohd Taib Osman, *Malay Folk Beliefs: An Integration of Disparate Elements* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1989), 121.

miraculous corpses. Do note that I will only give a brief description of these categories in the main body of this thesis because, even though the individuals interred at the *keramat* graves of Singapore are important to the discussion of this thesis, the primary focus of this thesis are the *keramat* graves themselves.⁹⁹ Thus, more exploration has been given to the object than the person. However, for fuller exploration of each of these different categories, and the cultures and traditions that influenced them, please refer to the attached Appendix A.

The first category is the *wali* figure, as described earlier in the introduction. This includes Habib Nuh (of Keramat Habib Nuh), Syed Abdul Rahman (of Keramat Kusu Island) and Sharifah Rogayah (of Keramat Sharifah Rogayah). These are figures whose hagiographies are peppered with acts of miracles, often to assist others in their community.¹⁰⁰ This role of providing miraculous assistance, such as healing illness, seemed to have been inherited by their *keramat* graves, and thus attracting worshippers.

The second category is royalties, especially Malay or Javanese royalties. These include Sultan Iskandar Shah (of Keramat Iskandar Shah) and Radin Mas Ayu (of Keramat Radin Mas Ayu). Keramat Bukit Kasita is also believed be graves of Malay royalties. Richard Winstedt suggested that there were pre-existing traditions of “leaving offerings” at the graves of rulers, before the spread of Islam to the Malay world and proposes that it could be connected to the Hindu belief of the divinity of kings; possibly the concept of the *devaraja*.¹⁰¹ It has been argued that, with the propagation of Islam, the concept of *devaraja*, in the Malay world was replaced with a similar concept of kingship being blessed by God or Allah.¹⁰² This in turn could have led the graves of Malay and Javanese royalties to be conferred not just identities of *makam*, but also *keramat*.

⁹⁹ Other scholars, like Teren Sevea and Sumit K. Mandal, have worked on the topic with a larger focus on the individuals interred. Sevea, “Writing a History of a Saint”; Mandal, “Popular Sites of Prayer, Transoceanic Migration, and Cultural Diversity”

¹⁰⁰ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*; Rivers, “Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century.”

¹⁰¹ Winstedt makes parallels between the way some Malay royalties had been approached and treated, and the treatment of Hindu deities. Winstedt, “Indian Influence in the Malay World,” 186-196.

¹⁰² Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, “The Impact of Sufism on Muslims in Pre-colonial Malaysia,” 485.

Another category is the community elders or founders. Tok Lasam (of Keramat Tok Lasam) is one such figure. He was one of the founders of Siglap in Singapore and known for his acts of heroism.¹⁰³ The worship of the graves of village elders could be another manifestation of the veneration or worship of kings or royalties, extended or bestowed to deserving community leaders.

The fourth category are individuals who have suffered violent deaths or martyrdom. This include Radin Mas Ayu (of Keramat Radin Mas Ayu) who died being stabbed by a *keris* while protecting her father,¹⁰⁴ and Syed Yasin (of Keramat Syed Yasin) whose death has been gilded with a theme of both religious and anti-colonial martyrdom.¹⁰⁵ The worship of martyrs is not uncommon in the Islamic tradition. In Kerala, South India, Islamic ceremonials known as *nerccas* are conducted at tombs, some of which, are those of Muslim martyrs.¹⁰⁶

The last category, with one interesting example here in Singapore, is the miraculous nature of a corpse, which contributed to the grave receiving the elevated identities of *makam* and *keramat*. Upon his death, the body of Tok Lasam became the colour of saffron. This was viewed as a miracle.¹⁰⁷ Along with his role as a community leader, his miraculous corpse could have been partially responsible in his grave not only be viewed as a *makam*, but also a *keramat* grave. The tradition of the worship of miraculous corpses or relics occurs in many traditions. In Thailand, for example, there are Thammayut monks who, “as a sign (nimitta) of their level of meditational achievement... after they die[,] often their bones crystallize.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 113.

¹⁰⁴ Ibrahim Tahir, *A Village Remembered: Kampong Radin Mas 1800s – 1973* (Singapore: OPUS Editorial Private Limited, 2013), 49-52.

¹⁰⁵ His grave became a site of worship because he “killed a Fakir (the Hindoo) and wounded a Nazarene (Colonel Farquhar)” before being brutally killed himself. Charles B. Buckley, *An Anecdotal history of Singapore, Volume I* (Singapore: Fraser and Neave, Limited, 1902), 100.

¹⁰⁶ Dale, and Menon, "Nerccas."

¹⁰⁷ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 76.

¹⁰⁸ McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, 38.

As mentioned, ‘*Makam*’ and ‘*keramat* grave’ are only close synonyms and not exact ones, with *keramat* denoting a miraculous quality or presence of worship. Moreover, the term *makam* also includes graves of so many other respected individuals such as national leaders. This is why, graves of individuals such as Yusof Ishak, the first president of Singapore is considered a *makam* but not viewed as a *keramat* grave. One way of looking at the two identities is to view *keramat* graves as a subset of *makam*. However, this is a statement I make with regards to those found in Singapore as it is difficult to know for certain at this point in time, that this is the case for all the *keramat* graves in the Malay world.

The Identity of The Grave Taking Form

The identity and form of an object are rarely, if not never, independent of each other. Sometimes, the identity may inform the shape the object may take. Other times, the appearance of an object may influence how it is approached by people and through this interaction, provide the object with a role or identity in its relationship with different communities. The first identity of a *keramat* grave discussed earlier—the grave—too possesses this relationship with its form. The features and appearances of *keramat* graves in this study seem to possess elements that other scholars and research have described as attributes of Malay graves. Malay graves in Singapore are similar to many graves found in Malaysia and Indonesia. Interestingly, many graves of non-Malay Muslims in Singapore also seem to have features that are Malay grave features. One possible conjecture I may make is that it may lie in the fact that Islamic culture in Singapore seems to be very tied to Malay culture as Malays make up 83.51% of the Muslim population here.¹⁰⁹ The Malay language is also largely used for the dissemination of religious sermons at most mosques in Singapore. This may be why some non-Malay Muslim graves have adopted the features of Malay graves.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ 457,435 of the “Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Over” identify as Muslims, of which 382,017 are Malays. Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry, Republic of Singapore, “Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion,” *Census of Population 2010* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry, Republic of Singapore, 2011), Table 5.

¹¹⁰ The graves of some of my own ancestors, who were Singaporean Muslims of Pakistani ethnicity, too possess features that may be described as Malay grave features.

Like most Malay graves that may be found in the Malay world, the *keramat* graves in Singapore usually have a combination of three characteristic features: *batu nisan*, *dapur-dapur kubur* and inscriptions. However, some *keramat* graves in Singapore may have some, but not all of these elements.

i. Dapur-Dapur Kubur

A *dapur-dapur kubur* is a Malay term for the structure or framework that either sits around the grave mound or over it. The word *dapur-dapur* means an exterior structure around an object while the word *kubur* means grave. The basic form a *dapur-dapur kubur* creates a rectangular shape that marks the space of ground taken by the grave. This prevents people from stepping over the grave mound, either by having a large form that prevents such transgressions or creates a visible boundary they should not step into. They may vary in size and material. They may be made of wood, bricks, stone and even marble. The *dapur-dapur kubur* of *keramat* graves can also range from the grand to the very modest.

An example of a grand *dapur-dapur kubur* belongs to the Keramat Habib Nuh (Fig. 2), which is made of white marble with veins of light grey. It is 2.4 metres long, 1.27 metres wide and 0.65 meters tall (Approximately 1.40 metres, including the *batu nisan* or gravestones). It consists of two tiers; the lower with edges carved more decoratively. (Fig. 13) The top of the *dapur-dapur kubur* is covered with a thick green fabric with gold trimmings. On the sides of the *dapur-dapur kubur* are gold inscriptions of prayers. One of them is an extract from the Surah Al-Fajr.¹¹¹ (Fig. 14) The four-post wooden canopy with the calligraphy, shelters it. (Fig. 15) It is evident that the *dapur-dapur* of this *keramat* grave had been expensive to construct and no expense was spared to make sure it looked grand enough for a person dubbed as “the grand saint of Singapore.”¹¹² The presence of shelter over the structure also allows for its expensive material and craftsmanship to be well

¹¹¹ Quran 89:27-30.

¹¹² Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*.

taken care of and not be too damaged from the weather. This is especially true for the wood, and the gold inscriptions and calligraphy, which remains readable.

However, not all *dapur-dapur* of *keramat* graves are grand and expensive in appearance. The Keramat Sharifah Rogayah, for example, has a more modest *dapur-dapur kubur*, which is approximately 2.53 metres length, 1.2 metres wide and 0.63 metres tall. (Fig 16) This *keramat* grave also has a two tiered and tapering *dapur-dapur kubur*, which sits on top of concrete which has been painted green. It is difficult to know what material the *dapur-dapur* is made of. It is possibly that it is made from concrete or cement. What is very evident, however, is that it had been tiled with small tiles. The whole structure had, at one point, been painted over in green and yellow, both over the tiles and grout, so none of the original colours of the tiles are visible anymore. On the front of the upper tier is a simple plaque upon which is inscribed “Keramat Sharifah Rogayah, 1891” in Jawi and “Shrine of Sharifah Rogayah, 1891” in English.

Unlike Keramat Habib Nuh, this *keramat* grave has no lavish calligraphy, expensive materials and beautiful four-post canopies. The difference may be because the Keramat Habib Nuh has gone through numerous renovations and receives donations and some funding from MUIS as it is connected to a mosque. Also, Habib Nuh was a famous and celebrated *wali* before his death and it would not be surprising that his community and followers would have wanted to have a grave built that is worthy of a man of that stature. On other hand, very little is known about Sharifah Rogayah and it may be possible that her fame and celebration grew posthumously, unlike her grandfather who was already renowned before death. Another possibility of the difference between the two *dapur-dapur kubur* of the two *keramat* graves could be practicality. As mentioned earlier, Keramat Habib Nuh is sheltered from the tropical weather and climate of Singapore. This made sure the wood of the canopy remains undamaged, the gold paint of the inscriptions does not fade, and the marble does not warp from the heat and the sun. Keramat Sharifah Rogayah, on the other hand, does not have any form of shelter. It sits behind a

shophouse and is exposed to rain and sun. Thus, the more durable material makes more sense. Even the paint used to paint over the tiles of the *keramat* graves seems to be of the hardy and industrial variety.

While the the *dapur-dapur kubur* of the *keramat* graves may vary from the grand to the modest, in terms of materials, they may also vary in size. Of all the *keramat* graves in this study, the Keramat Radin Mas Ayu is one of the largest. (Fig. 6) Its *dapur-dapur*, while modestly covered in pale yellow tiles, is a massive cuboid structure; approximately 2.47 metres long, 1.38 metres wide, 0.78 metres tall. The *keramat* grave also has four-post canopy with yellow curtains, however, it seems to have been removed, the last time I visited it in the February of 2018. The *dapur-dapur* of Keramat Radin Mas Ayu has gone through some transformations. A still from the 1959 film *Raden Mas* shows that its *dapur-dapur* was shorter than it is today and that it grew taller, possibly through renovations over the years.¹¹³

While the *dapur-dapur* of some *keramat* graves may be larger than others in terms of height and width, some choose to be longer. Much much longer. Most Malay and Muslim graves are usually a little over two meters in length. The *keramat* graves in Singapore are also usually of this size. However, a famous *keramat* grave, which once could be found at Ringwood Road, Singapore, was said to be about 47 feet (approximately 14 metres) in length!¹¹⁴ The *keramat* grave was that of one Syed Hussein and it is said that over the years, the grave grew from its original length of 7 feet (Fig. 17).¹¹⁵ Archived images of the *keramat* graves show it having extremely long *dapur-dapur kubur*. It seems to have been constructed out of cement or concrete and possibly painted with a light colour. Its cross-section is somewhat semi-circular and thus the entire structure looks like half of a very large and long cylinder. This long *keramat* grave is by no means unique, even in Singapore. One was even claimed to

¹¹³ *Raden Mas*, directed by L. Krishnan. (1959; Singapore : Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd. : Comstar, 2003), VCD.

¹¹⁴ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 111.

¹¹⁵ Kenneth Hammonds, "Riddle of S'pore's 40 ft.-long grave," *The Singapore Free Press*, 13 July, 1959, 4.

have been 60 feet in length.¹¹⁶ There have been at least three recorded long graves that have existed in this country, all of which are no longer around.¹¹⁷

Some *keramat* graves, however, have very small *dapur-dapur* or none at all. The Keramat Bukit Kasita, which is in fact a small cemetery of numerous graves, contain graves with a variety of sizes. Some, large (often yellow) structures, while some are just flat rectangular platform-like structures no taller than a staircase step. Yet, even these small structures effectively mark the shape of the grave and distinguish them from average earth and ground. Between the jigsaw-puzzle-like arrangements of these graves, small areas of non-grave spaces can be discerned, where the caretaker would be able to walk on without stepping on the graves.¹¹⁸

Two of the three graves that make up the triumvirate of *keramat* graves on Kusu Island, on the other hand, do not have any *dapur-dapur*. The grave of Syed Abdul Rahman has a rectangular raised mound, usually covered by fabric. (Fig. 18) The graves of his mother, Nenek Ghalib and his sister, Puteri Sharifah Fatimah, do not. Instead, low walls mark the rectangular shape of the graves and allow worshippers to view the graves over them. (Fig. 19 and Fig. 20) These walls too manage to carve out the rectangular shapes of the graves much like a *dapur-dapur kubur*.

The Keramat Iskandar Shah has an interesting shaped structure or *dapur-dapur*. It consists of two parts. The base is a large rectangular granite or concrete slab. On top of this sits a structure with 14 sides, including its non-visible base, and, may be described as sarcophagus-like. (Fig. 21) Its vertical sides are decorated with small yellow tiles along the top and bottom. Two of the longer of these sides have the Islamic moon and star emblem on them, also in yellow. It also has a plaque with the inscription, "Keramat Iskandar Shah" in both Arabic and English alphabets. The shape of the *dapur-dapur* of Keramat Iskandar Shah is

¹¹⁶ Yahya, "Singapore's Keramats," *The Straits Times*, June 11, 1939, 16.

¹¹⁷ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century."

¹¹⁸ Worshippers are not allowed into the cemetery space and may only make worship at the archway of the space. However, this has not prevented individuals from transgressing, namely, and sadly, researchers.

vastly different from the other *keramat* graves in this study. One possibility that could account for this difference in style could be the fact that Keramat Iskandar Shah may be the oldest *keramat* grave in Singapore as it is believed to belong to the Sultan Iskandar Shah, a fourteenth-century ruler of Temasek.¹¹⁹ Most of the *keramat* graves in Singapore, on the other hand, are of individuals who lived in the late nineteenth-century or later. That said, it is hard to tell if the *dapur-dapur* of Keramat Iskandar Shah is truly that old,¹²⁰ especially since the site, much like many other *keramat* graves in this study, have gone through renovations. While images of the *keramat* grave in the 1980s shows that it already has this sarcophagus-like structure (Fig. 20), most of the earlier photos of the grave have it concealed either by its shelter or fabric. So, it is difficult to be sure how it looked like before, and if or when this *dapur-dapur* was built.

Structures such as the *dapur-dapur kubur* are by no means unique to the Malay world, however, the *dapur-dapur kubur* of Malay-Muslim graves has been suggested to have had Malay pre-Islamic influences and maybe even the traditional graves of the Jakun people, an indigenous community of the Malay Peninsula.¹²¹ G. G. Hough highlights that there are similarities between the structure over Jakun graves, called *mendolor*, and its construction, with some Malay wooden *dapur-dapur kubur*. The *mendolor* sits over the grave mound and on wooden frameworks called the *kalang dapor*, suggesting a connection to the Malay term *dapur-dapur*. Referencing Herbert D. Noone, Hough suggests that the terms *kalang dapor* and *dapur-dapur* could be vestiges of symbols of hearth burial. It is interesting to note then, that the Malay word *dapur* means kitchen or stove.

¹¹⁹ W. Linehan, "Kings of Singapore," 42.

¹²⁰ The factual identity of the person interred beneath the Keramat Iskandar Shah is still uncertain. John Miksic discusses this and states that "No records say that... Iskandar Shah was buried in Singapore." However, this does not prevent the communities from conferring this identity, the grave of Iskandar Shah, to this *keramat* grave. John N. Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300-1800* (Singapore: NUS Press and National Museum of Singapore, 2013), 219.

¹²¹ G. G. Hough, "A Pre-Islamic Element in the Malay Grave," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (137) (August 1940): 46-48.

However, this theory, that the *dapur-dapur kubur*, especially those of *keramat* graves in Singapore, is largely influenced by “pre-islamic” elements or traditions, is one I am unable to corroborate as there are a variety of *dapur-dapur kubur* and Hough does not account for that variety. For example, his focus is mainly on wooden *dapur-dapur* while, as we have seen, there are *dapur-dapur* of other materials and forms that may be more different than the Jakun *mendolor* or *kalang dapor* in shape and material. That said, there may have been less variety of *dapur-dapur kubur* when Hough researched on the topic in the 1940s. Another reason I find Hough’s argument difficult to confirm is because many cultures have some version of a structure built over a grave mound and so, it is difficult to be sure how much of the Malay *dapur-dapur* is influenced by “pre-Islamic elements” or even, from the spread of Islam within the Malay world. It is maybe more advisable to acknowledge all the possible influences instead.

ii. Batu Nisan

As mentioned earlier, many cultures have versions of structures that are built over grave mounds to mark the space as a grave. So, it may be difficult to say that the *dapur-dapur kubur* is unique to Malay culture—beyond the term itself—especially when in its simpler rectangular forms. So, another way Malay graves (and by extension, Malay Muslim graves) is recognisable is through the *batu nisan*.

Batu nisan is a Malay form of gravestone. They usually come in pairs and sit on top of the *dapur-dapur kubur* or the grave mound, if the mound is exposed. They are usually narrow in shape and pointed at the top, and may vary in size. They may be with curved sides or edges and may even have onion-dome-like tips. They also range from the ornate, like some of the *batu nisan* found on the graves of royalties in Brunei which may have ornamental carvings of plants and geometric patterns,¹²² to the simple forms of the *batu nisan* of Keramat Tok Lasam and his wife, at Siglap, Singapore (Fig. 9). The *batu nisan* of the *keramat* graves in Singapore seems to

¹²² Awang Haji Mohamad Bin Salim, *Ragam Hias Batu Nisan dan Makam: Satu Pengenalan*, (Brunei: Jabatan Muzium-Muzium Brunei, 2003).

mostly comprise of the simpler variety, and less ornamental. They should not be confused for headstones and footstones as they are often too close together to be read as marking the head and foot of the person buried.¹²³ The term is a joining of two words, *batu* and *nisan*. *Batu* simply means stone or rock in Malay. *Nisan*, on the other hand, is believed to be derived from a Persian word *nishan* (نشان) which means a marker or a sign. Hough argues that while the *batu nisan* cannot be found in other Islamic burial practices besides those in the Malay world, the use of a Persian word *nishan* could show the importance of Islam in the naming of the object. He believes that while the object is from “pre-Islamic” traditions, it was used by Malay Muslims and then given an Islamic name—*batu nisan*.¹²⁴

However, the *batu nisan* does not only serve as burial markers, it also serves as an indicator of the gender of the individual buried. The cross-section of *batu nisan* for males is round while the female counterpart is flat.¹²⁵ A good display of this difference in *batu nisan* may be observed from the *keramat* grave of Tok Lasam and his wife, located at Siglap, Singapore (Fig. 9). The two graves have very simple *dapur-dapur kubor*, which seem like yellow rectangular cement structures with the centre exposed and filled with gravel or stones. Nestled within the gravel are four *batu nisan*, two on each grave. One grave has *batu nisan* that have round cross section and have curvy shapes like a vessel or vase. The *batu nisan* of the other is a flat version of the earlier *batu nisan*. In fact, the second set of *batu nisan* looks like the silhouette of the first set that was cut out of a thick wooden plank. It is thus safe to assume that the grave with the rounder *batu nisan* is Tok Lasam while the other grave is that of his wife.

The *batu nisan* of *keramat* graves are also often covered in yellow or green fabric, often fastened by having them tied (with strips of fabric or string) by the grooves or between the curves of the *batu nisan*. Yellow and green are significant colours in *keramat* grave worship. The colour yellow, in Malay culture, is associated with

¹²³ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 102.

¹²⁴ Hough, "A Pre-Islamic Element in the Malay Grave," 48.

¹²⁵ Hough, "A Pre-Islamic Element in the Malay Grave," 46.

royalty and of elevated status.¹²⁶ While green is associated with Islam.¹²⁷ I believe that by wrapping these grave markers with these symbolically charged fabric, it allows for the markers to be read as a grave of a significant individual or even a *keramat* grave. An interesting function of *batu nisan* of the *keramat* graves of Kusu Island is as receivers of garlands. (Fig. 19) Because of their vertical nature and curvy shapes, garlands of flowers are sometimes placed around them much like how they may be placed around the necks of Hindu images.

Some *batu nisan* of *keramat* graves may also function beyond these earlier mentioned ones. The *batu nisan* of Keramat Habib Nuh are large and are even taller than its *dapur-dapur*. And like its *dapur-dapur*, it is also made of white marble. Their size allows for prayers to be inscribed upon them. (Fig 23). Of all the *keramat* graves in Singapore that I have studied, this is the only instance of inscriptions on the *batu nisan*. However, there are *batu nisan* of graves and *keramat* graves in other parts of the Malay world that also have inscriptions, calligraphies or prayers.¹²⁸ *Batu nisan* of some of the royal graves in Brunei, for example, also exhibit inscriptions of prayers and extracts from the Quran.¹²⁹

There are, however, *keramat* graves without *batu nisan*. Keramat Radin Mas Ayu, for example, does not have *batu nisan*. However, this is not always the case. Earlier photographs of the *keramat* grave documented times when it had a pair of *batu nisan* that were usually wrapped in yellow fabric. Now, two little stumps protrude off the *dapur-dapur* of the *keramat* grave, under the layers of cloth that usually cover the structure. These stumps could have been the base where the *batu nisan* would have sat. It is unclear why they have been removed. Another *keramat* grave without *batu*

¹²⁶ The caretaker of Keramat Kusu Island described it as symbolic of elevation or importance.

¹²⁷ Green is one of the few colours mentioned in the quran and is “associated with vegetation, spring, the sky and paradise.” It also the color favoured by the Prophet Muhammad. It became the “dynastic color” of his family and descendents and took a “political dimension.” By the 12th century, green became the “religious color of Islam... Green became the sacred color.” Michael Pastoureau, *Green: The History of A Color*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 46-49.

¹²⁸ Elizabeth Lambourn, “Tombstones, Texts, and Typologies: Seeing Sources for the Early History of Islam in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2008): 252-286.

¹²⁹ Awang Haji Mohamad Bin Salim, *Ragam Hias Batu Nisan dan Makam*.

nisan is Keramat Sharifah Rogayah. It too once had *batu nisan*. However, they were stolen in 2008.¹³⁰ The *batu nisan* continue to be missing and have not been replaced.

The Keramat Iskandar Shah also does not have *batu nisan*. As explained earlier, there are not enough earlier photos of the grave and thus, it is hard to know for sure if it ever did have *batu nisan*. However, its *dapur-dapur* does have a large protrusion on top of it, at the center of its length, in the shape of a truncated pyramid. Much like the *batu nisan* of Keramat Kusu Island, this protrusion has also been garlanded from time to time. (Fig. 21)

The *dapur-dapur kubur* and *batu nisan* of the *keramat* graves, serve to mark the graves and provide an above-ground and visible form to graves. For some of the *keramat* graves, these forms serve also as objects that can allow the physical and ritual components of the interactions of their worshippers. As mentioned earlier, with the example of the garlands on some of the *batu nisan*, these physical forms provide a place or space for the leaving of offerings. Flowers are also often left on top of the *dapur-dapur* of *keramat* graves. These structures also provide worshippers three-dimensional points of focus of their veneration or adoration. This allows for an element of touch in *keramat* grave worship, which some worshippers value. It is not uncommon to see worshippers at Keramat Habib Nuh touching its *batu nisan* or *dapur-dapur*, mostly with their hands, sometimes with their foreheads, and on occasions, with a kiss.

iii. Inscriptions and Calligraphy

Some of the *keramat* graves have inscriptions, as mentioned, upon either their *dapur-dapur* or *batu nisan*, just like many Malay graves. They are used in mainly two ways: as information about the person buried or as prayers usually from the Quran or *yaseen*.

Inscriptions upon *keramat* graves may provide a clear indication of who is interred. *Keramat* graves like Keramat Sharifah Rogayah and Keramat Iskandar Shah, have

¹³⁰ Desmond Ng, "Swiped By Mystery Tomb Raider," The New Paper, February 4, 2008. 9.

plaques upon their *dapur-dapur kubur* providing visitors and worshippers such information. In both cases, the name of the *keramat* graves are presented in both Arabic and English alphabet. Both of these alphabet systems are or have been used for the Malay language. It thus is difficult to be sure, for example if “Keramat Iskandar Shah” is in English or Malay. However, we can safely assume that “شاه راسكند سلطان كرامة” is in Malay written in Jawi¹³¹ and not Arabic. This is because, as explained earlier the word ‘*keramat*’ (كرامة), used to refer to a shrine and not the miracle, as used in this case, happens in the Malay adoption of the word and not the Arabic word *karamah* (كرامة). Thus, even though they may have the same spelling when using the Arabic alphabet, it is possible to discern in this case that it is the Malay word ‘*keramat*’ in Jawi.

Keramat Sharifah Rogayah, also has inscriptions in the Arabic alphabet naming the grave as Keramat Sharifah Rogayah, “رقية شريفه كرامة”. Just as with the case with Keramat Iskandar Shah, we can safely assume that this is in Malay written in Jawi. However, the inscription on Keramat Sharifah Rogayah also labels the grave as “Shrine of Sharifah Rogayah.” Here, there is no ambiguity as to the language used here. By using an English word, “shrine” instead of the Malay-adopted word, “*keramat*”, there seems to be an effort to communicate the information about this grave in a language that may be more easily understood by people of different backgrounds, as English is spoken by most Singaporeans of different cultural backgrounds. This could also reflect the diversity of *keramat* grave worshippers.

Apart from naming the *keramat* graves and the individual interred, these inscriptions may also provide other information. On Keramat Sharifah Rogayah are the numbers “1891” (which is also present in Arabic numerals, ١٨٩١) marking the year of Sharifah Rogayah’s passing. On Keramat Habib Nuh on the hand, at the base of one side of its *dapur-dapur kubur*, written in Malay are two lines:

“Hadiyah Dari Syed Abdul Rahman Bin Abdullah Aslagoff

¹³¹ Jawi employs Arabic alphabets for writing a few languages in Southeast Asia. In this case, Jawi is used for writing Malay.

15 Klang Road Singapore 1st October 1958”

This can be translated as “Gift from Syed Abdul Rahman Bin Adullah Alsagoff, 15 Klang Road Singapore, 1st October 1958.” This means that this inscription would have served as a public sign which explains that at some point a renovation of the *keramat* grave had been done and was funded by the mentioned individual.¹³²

While there are a number of *keramat* graves, especially those in Singapore that are without information (names, dates or names of donors) inscribed upon their *dapur-dapur*, it does not mean that this information is not found at these sites. Often, for *keramat* graves with larger shelters, the information is on the shelter structures. Keramat Kusu Island, for example has a large signage near its entrance with the words “Keramat Kusu”. On top of that, each of the three *keramat* graves that make up the triumvirate, are marked with the names of the interred. A yellow fabric banner with green letters hang just before Syed Abdul Rahman’s grave with the words “Dato Syed Abdul Rahman”¹³³ while the graves of his mother and sister both have green words, “Mother” and “Sister”, respectively, painted on a yellow wooden structure that hang above them. This trio of graves also have the names of their patrons inscribed onto plaques found on their shelter, in Chinese, Malay and Jawi.

Prayers are also sometimes inscribed onto *dapur-dapur kubur*. Keramat Habib Nuh has flourishes of gold calligraphy on all four sides of its *dapur-dapur*, each bordered in gold frames. One of them, as mentioned, was an extract of Surah Al-Fajr from the Quran,¹³⁴ (Fig. 2) which translates to “O reassured soul. Return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing (to Him). And enter among My (Righteous) Servants.

¹³² The Alsagoff (sometimes spelt al-Saqqaf) family is a rather well-known family in Singapore, of Hadrami descent with a history in spice trading. Over the years, members of the family have either contributed to, funded or have played roles in running Muslim orphanages, schools and mosques. Leif O. Manger, *The Hadrami Diaspora: Community-building on the Indian Ocean Rim* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 19-41.

¹³³ The term *Dato* or *Datuk* is sometimes used as an honorific for *keramat* graves or the individuals interred. It is derived from the Malay word *datuk*, which means grandfather. The term “Datuk Kong” is sometimes used to refer to *keramat* graves, by the Chinese community. “The term “Datuk Kong” is composed of two synonyms, Datuk and Kong, meaning “grandfather” in Malay and Chinese, respectively.” Cheu, “Malay Keramat, Chinese Worshippers.”

¹³⁴ Quran 89:27-30.

And enter My Paradise.” This prayer, with its themes of entering Paradise and returning to God, seems to have been appropriately selected for a grave. I have to admit, throughout my visits to the *keramat* graves, I have yet to see anyone reading the prayers off the graves. There may have been some and I simply did not notice. However, couple this with the fact that these prayer inscriptions are painted in gold after being etched into the marble, one cannot help but wonder if its primary function here—or at least one of the primary functions, along with it possibly meant to be read—is to serve as decorative elements, much like the golden calligraphy found on its wooden canopy (Fig. 15), which are less easy to read as their strokes are more dynamic and their spacing, denser.

Calligraphy of texts from the Quran, on graves and tombs are not unheard of in the Islamic tradition. The Taj Mahal, commissioned by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan for his late wife, Mumtaz Mahal, is known for being covered with twenty-two Quranic passages. Incidentally, the extract from Surah Al-Fajr mentioned earlier, also appears on the Taj Mahal, “inscribed on the entrance facade of the main gateway... which one reads before passing through the gateway into the garden.”¹³⁵ Wayne E. Begley, suggests that the choice and placement of the inscription was not just decorative. It functioned symbolically and thematically, comparing the garden of the Taj Mahal to the gardens of Paradise. “And enter My Paradise” also serves as an invitation to enter.¹³⁶ Since this extract from Al-Fajr is the first Quranic inscriptions a visitor to Keramat Habib Nuh will see upon entering the chamber of the *keramat* grave, it is possible that it too functioned as an invitation to enter the space. Another inscription found upon the *dapur-dapur* of Keramat Habib Nuh is an extract from Surah Al-Ra’d, which translates to “Peace be upon you for what you patiently endured. And excellent is the final home.”¹³⁷ (Fig. 13) The extract from Surah Al-Fajr speaks of entering Paradise and returning to God, while the line from Surah Al-Ra’d, speaks of the final home after death.

¹³⁵ Wayne E. Begley, “AmāNat KhāN And the Calligraphy on the Tāj Maḥal,” *Kunst des Orients*, Vol. 12, H. 1/2 (1978/1979): 34.

¹³⁶ Begley, “AmāNat KhāN And the Calligraphy on the Tāj Maḥal,” 5-60.

¹³⁷ Quran 13:24.

Both inscriptions seem to contain themes of the afterlife and the paradise awaiting those deserving of them. It can thus be argued that these Quranic inscriptions were chosen for Keramat Habib Nuh, not only because they are appropriate, thematically, for a grave, an object of death, but also for a *wali*.

Inscriptions on *keramat* graves may have many functions. They may give information about the interred, such as a name or a date in which he or she passed away. They may also give recognition to patrons who contributed to the upkeep or renovations of these *keramat* graves. However, inscriptions may also validate the identity of these graves as *keramat* graves and making this identity more permanent. As explained earlier, the term '*keramat*' is not a stable one and thus the identity of a grave as a *keramat* grave is very dependent on the communities of responses. However, having an inscription upon a grave with the word '*keramat*' in it—for example "Keramat Sultan Iskandar Shah"—would validate that identity and make it more official and lasting. Apart from inscriptions of names, dates and labels, calligraphies may also be found *keramat* graves, which may be meant to be read, or serve a decorative function, or both. One thing the prayers and Islamic calligraphy does show is the Islamic influence upon these graves. These grave, are not, as suggested by some scholars, as simply or mostly indigenous or pre-existing Malay traditions.¹³⁸ It is instead an amalgamation of many beliefs and traditions and not an "either-or" situation. The tradition of these graves may be a living, breathing thing, continually evolving (in materials and forms), and with constant renovations, even newer technologies may possibly be used in its construction.

Many of the examples I have given seem to suggest that a *keramat* grave's identity as a grave informs its shape and appearance. The *dapur-dapur kubur*, the *batu nisan*, and even the inscriptions, remind people who approach them that a *keramat* grave is first and foremost a grave. However, this may not be the case for all of the graves in this study. When I interviewed the current caretaker of the Keramat Kusu Island on the 2nd of September 2017, he told me a version of the tale of Syed

¹³⁸ Hough, "A Pre-Islamic Element in the Malay Grave".

Abdul Rahman where the *wali* did not die leaving a body to bury. His soul moved on, his body simply disappeared and a shrine, which seems to have taken the form of a grave, was made in his honour.¹³⁹ Interestingly enough, this was first time I have heard this rendition of this story. Other scholars too have seemed to have considered the site a grave, which carries the assumption that someone was buried there.¹⁴⁰ This would also be the case for most people who visit these sites. Without actually conducting an exhumation at the site, there is simply no way to be sure whether these structures are in fact graves. I believe, however, because the forms of these objects were built as such, with the rectangular shapes or *the dapur-dapur kubur*, and the *batu nisan*, they had contributed to and ensured that these sites being given the identity of graves. This suggests a possible (secondary) agency on the part of the forms and appearances of these *keramat* graves in determining how they are perceived by their communities of responses, in determining their identities.

Constructing Sacred Spaces of The Keramat Grave Identity

Apart from being a signifier to an object's identity, the form of an object can sometimes function in other ways within this form-identity relationship. The *keramat* grave identity and its form and appearance exhibit one such function; the management of sacredness attached to the sacred identity (*keramat* grave), through construction of spaces and boundaries.

Many *keramat* graves, including those in this study, have shelters. They protect these graves from the weather and environment, and provide spaces for the worshippers to perform rituals or prayers without the interruption from the elements. As described earlier, the terms 'tomb' or 'mausoleum' have sometimes been used to describe some *keramat* graves, including Keramat Iskandar Shah, Keramat Radin Mas Ayu and Keramat Habib Nuh. These occasions are often

¹³⁹ Also, in this version of the story, Nenek Ghalib was not Syed Abdul Rahman's mother, at least not in the traditional sense. Instead, she was a spirit or being, not of the human world, who Syed Abdul Rahman had a connection with through his years of meditation on the island, so much so that he considers her his mother.

¹⁴⁰ P.J. Rivers, in describing the *keramat* graves of Kusu Island as 'graves', suggests that there are individuals interred beneath each of the three structures. Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century". 107.

reserved for graves with shelters or some form of architecture housing them. Shelters over graves are not unique to *keramat* graves, of course, even within the Islamic tradition. The Islamic graves of *awliya* and martyrs, found in Kerala,¹⁴¹ and the *dargah* of Shahul Hamid Nagori in India,¹⁴² for example, also often possess shelters.

However, shelters for objects such as *keramat* graves have functions beyond just protection from weather. As explained, the identity of *keramat* grave is one that signifies sacredness. One of the ways a sacred object is viewed as sacred is through how it is distinguished or separated from the profane and every day. Many *keramat* graves use their forms and shelters to mark that separation, and in doing so, highlight its identity as *keramat* and sacred. Walls and shelters around and over *keramat* graves are the most basic way this is accomplished. Walls in any architecture demarcate space and boundaries. However, walls for sacred sites and spaces have the additional function of marking the spaces of sacredness. Temple complexes of South Asia, for example, have series of sacred spaces, with the centre, being the most sacred, the main image resides. These spaces are formed through series of walls. The outermost wall is where, as Baidyanath Saraswati, the “comparative holiness of space in South India temple terminates”.¹⁴³ Thus, similarly, the walls of *keramat* graves separate, and possibly protect, them from the world of the profane and everyday visually and physically, much like how walls and architectures of temples function. Such forms of architecture might not even have to be extremely complex to achieve this. Keramat Radin Mas Ayu, now, has a shelter, which is surrounded by a small patio-like space, and a staircase beyond that, which leads down to the road. However, in the 1960s, it was only a simple rectangular shelter, consumed by roots of a tree. Yet, even this humble architecture served its purpose in separating the *keramat* grave from the everyday or profane.

¹⁴¹ A wonderful photo of one of the tombs shows a beautifully decorated shelter. Dale, and Menon, "Nerccas," Plate II.

¹⁴² Asher, "The Sufi Shrines of Shahul Hamid in India and Southeast Asia."

¹⁴³ Baidyanath Saraswati, *The Spectrum of the Sacred: Essays on the Religious Traditions of India* (India: Concept Publishing Company, 1984), 49.

It needs to be acknowledged, however, that it is not easy to determine exactly where the line is—where the profane stops and the sacred begins. In the case of *keramat* graves in Singapore, it is, instead, a progression from the world of the profane towards the sacred. The architecture and space around *keramat* graves may assist worshipper in navigating through the journey towards this said sacredness. A good example of this is Keramat Iskandar Shah. Currently, this *keramat* grave is sheltered under a wooden pavilion, supported by twenty carved decoratively wooden pillar. This shelter is surrounded by a paved walkway, which is in turn surrounded by the flora and fauna of Fort Canning. Worshippers would enter into the walkway space, from paths on either side, and be surrounded by trees and greens. And they would then enter the shelter after removing their shoes. In many cultures, it is a norm to remove footwear when entering homes and sacred spaces, such as Hindu and Buddhist temples and mosques.¹⁴⁴ This is because shoes are in contact with the ground and considered impure. Removing one's shoes when entering a sacred space is “a sign of respect and humility in Islam as well as in other religions.”¹⁴⁵ The act of removing shoes when entering sacred spaces ensures that they remain clean for the acts and rituals of worship. At Islamic graves such as the tombs found in Xinjiang, China, worshippers are known to remove their shoes when approaching these tombs and before praying at them.¹⁴⁶ The act of removing shoes at Keramat Iskandar Shah, thus, may be seen as an act of conferring the space respect and the acknowledgement of the sacredness of the space, much like when worshippers enter a temple or mosque. The Keramat Iskandar Shah space then—whether intentionally built for this reason or not—manages to create concentric layers of varying degrees of sacredness, allowing worshippers to ease into the sacred space. (Refer to Fig. 24 for an illustration of this.) Before it was extensively renovated, Keramat Iskandar Shah had a moat surrounding it, which worshippers would have to cross.¹⁴⁷ This is an even more symbolic act, I believe,

¹⁴⁴ Margo DeMello, *Feet & Footwear: A Cultural Encyclopedia* (USA: Greenwood Press, 2009)

¹⁴⁵ DeMello, *Feet & Footwear*, 174.

¹⁴⁶ Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 104.

¹⁴⁷ I am unable to find out when exactly the moat was removed, however, an image from *The Lights of Singapore*, first published in 1934, clearly shows the moat being present. Roland Braddell, *The Lights of Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Oxford University Press, 1982), 57.

as it more obviously signifies the journey from the profane into the sacred, which the worshippers would have to perform.

Some *keramat* graves may also have layers of such sacred boundaries, which worshippers would have to go through before meeting the *keramat* graves. These boundaries may be formed by series of walls and rooms. Keramat Habib Nuh is exemplary of this. It resides in the compounds of Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque, so worshippers would have to already enter one boundary. Then, upon removing their shoes, they will climb up a series of steps up to the shelter of the *keramat* grave. They will enter a sort of antechamber before entering the room in which Keramat Habib Nuh resides. By the time the worshipper finally sits before the *keramat* grave, they would have journeyed through numerous sacred boundaries. (Refer to Fig. 25 for an illustration of this.)

The way these layers of sacredness are formed through walls and rooms are much like how some Hindu temples are constructed, with a main icon in the heart of the building or a “womb chamber” (*garbhagrha*), accessed through a series of rooms or chambers. The building itself would often be protected by an enclosure wall (*prakara*) or a series of walls, which sets the temple apart from the world of the profane.¹⁴⁸ Adam Hardy describes the journey of the Hindu temple worshipper rather elegantly:

“Approaching a temple the aspirations of devotee are directed inwards and upwards, through layers and levels of increasing sacredness: inwards towards the *garbhagrha* where the deity’s presence on earth is concentrated, and upwards towards the transcendent unity of the summit.”¹⁴⁹

This echoes the journey a worshipper of *keramat* graves like Keramat Habib Nuh would experience. Mosques found in South Asia are also known to possess this similarity with Hindu temples. They often have series of chambers or “transitional spaces” before the main prayer hall. Elizabeth Lambourn calls it a “pan-Indic

¹⁴⁸ Adam Hardy, *Indian Temple Architecture: Form and Transformation* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi Centre for the Arts, 1995).

¹⁴⁹ Hardy, *Indian Temple Architecture*, 20.

feature” and acknowledges the Hindu temple influences, which are “unusual in the mosque architecture of the central Islamic lands.”¹⁵⁰ It is possible that such influences had contributed to the construction of the Keramat Habib Nuh shelter. In fact, the similarity between Keramat Habib Nuh’s architecture and Hindu temples did not escape others who have studied the *keramat* grave. Engseng Ho, was apt to point out that the architecture of Keramat Habib Nuh resembles that of a “Hindu *chandi*”.¹⁵¹

As mentioned, the degrees of sacredness, where it ends and where the profane and everyday begins, these are difficult to measure. However, there are some sacred boundaries that may reach a level of prohibited spaces. Keramat Bukit Kasita is a perfect example. After entering the kampong-house-like structure and up the flight of stairs, the worshippers would have to remain within the small patio. They are not allowed to go beyond the brick archway where the cemetery of graves are located, or else, according to the caretaker, their legs would swell up. No photography is allowed either, she reminds worshippers, or you will encounter the *pocong*. By the archway, a universal signage depicting a null sign over a camera, reiterates this. Worshippers would place their offerings at the archway and do their prayers and rituals at the patio. Similar to the series of sacred boundaries of other *keramat* graves, such as Keramat Habib Nuh, Keramat Bukit Kasita also has those series of boundaries that requires the worshipper to journey from the profane into the sacred through layers of spaces; into the kampong-house structure, up the steps, and into the patio. However, unlike Keramat Habib Nuh, the last and final space is forbidden. A similar—though not identical—situation of forbidden spaces, within the larger Islamic tradition of tomb worship is the *dargah* of Shahul Hamid in Nagore, India. “Men are allowed to enter the chamber where Shahul Hamid's body is interred, but women are not. However, even for men to enter, special

¹⁵⁰ Elizabeth Lambourn, “Islam beyond Empires: Mosques and Islamic Landscapes in India and the Indian Ocean,” *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, eds. Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoğlu (USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2017), First Edition, 768.

¹⁵¹ It needs to be noted that when saying Keramat Habib Nuh resembled a *chandi*, Engseng Ho could have meant it either structurally or aesthetically. Ho, *The graves of Tarim*, 195.

permission is needed.”¹⁵² Worshippers who are not allowed into the chamber will have to view from the entrance, much like how the worshippers of Keramat Bukit Kasita would have to perform worship and rituals at the gates without entering the cemetery space.

However, not all of the *keramat* graves in Singapore have walls, shelters or distinguishable boundaries that negotiate the transition from the profane into the sacred. Keramat Sharifah Rogayah, for example, is unsheltered. One possibility as to why this is so, could be because there isn't a clear consensus as to who is buried there. Some believe it is the grave of Sharifah Rogayah, the granddaughter of Habib Nuh, while others believe she was buried elsewhere.¹⁵³ If the latter is true, one reason why this grave has no shelter could be that the person interred had not been viewed significant enough by their community or family to have one built over their grave upon its construction. However, even if this is true, it still didn't stop worshippers from conferring the grave the identity of *keramat* despite this. While this explanation is definitely a possibility, it depends on the assumption that all other *keramat* graves of significant individuals have shelters, and this is simply not true. Keramat Tok Lasam for example, is a *keramat* grave of a prominent figure, believed to be a village founder,¹⁵⁴ yet his grave is also unsheltered. Incidentally, both these examples, the *keramat* graves are upon grass and (while not alone, for the case of Keramat Tok Lasam as it is accompanied by the grave of his wife) they are very isolated from man-made pathways or pavements. Was this by design? It is hard to be sure, why these pavements weren't made closer to these graves. It would be impossible to make a claim that the distance kept from these graves, in the construction of these walkways, were done to not intrude into the amorphous nature of the sacred boundaries of these sacred sites. Besides, there have been accounts of *keramat* graves resisting construction work that may threaten them. Yet still, to reach Keramat Sharifah Rogayah or Keramat Tok Lasam, one would

¹⁵² Asher, "The Sufi Shrines of Shahul Hamid in India and Southeast Asia," 255.

¹⁵³ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 33.

¹⁵⁴ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 113.

have to step off the concrete and manmade and onto the green and nature. That in itself, is a journey through boundaries.

Chapter Conclusion

Objects, like people, have identities, often numerous. However, objects depend more on their communities of responses to place these identities on them. In some cases, a community of response may even deny an object's identity. Keramat Habib Nuh is a good example of this. As raised earlier, *keramat* grave worship is viewed as idolatry by Islamic bureaucracies such as MUIS and many within the Muslim community, yet they may still view a *wali* figure as someone to be respected. Keramat Habib Nuh, being adjoined to and maintained by Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque, thus has a complex situation. Each visitor and worshipper to Keramat Habib Nuh may have conflicting views on the matter of *keramat* grave worship from each other, even between those who identify as Muslims, based on their religious interpretations of Islam. So, it is interesting that, while talking to the staff of the Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque, the term *keramat* was never uttered. They use instead, the term *makam*. Whether this was conscious or not, one can't help but wonder if it was an attempt to deny the grave the identity of a *keramat*; a quieter form of an erasure of the practice unlike the more physically destructive as instances of *keramat* graves being demolished by Islamic institutions to eradicate the practice, such as the case in Malacca.¹⁵⁵

While the identity of objects such as the *keramat* graves depend on their community of responses, it does not mean they do not have some form of agency in their own identity making. Their identities, and the way they are approached by their communities of responses, are often influenced by their form, materiality and colour. Sometimes, it difficult to determine which came first, the identity or the form. An example would be the Keramat Syed Abdul Rahman on Kusu Island. Is there really a *wali* buried there, and thus the *batu nisan* was placed at the spot to mark it as a grave? Or was it considered a grave, despite there being no body beneath it, because it had

¹⁵⁵ Müller, "Sharia Law and the Politics of "Faith Control" in Brunei Darussalam," 330

the *batu nisan* and *dapur-dapur*? Maybe, the best approach to dealing with this is to acknowledge the relationship between the identity and the form, where each have the capacity to inform or influence the other. And with case of *keramat* grave features, such as their inscriptions, they may explicitly label them as *keramat*, and make the identities of these grave harder to deny and more fixed or permanent.

In some instances, when an object is given an identity of sacredness, like a *keramat* grave, the form serves the needs and requirements of the identity, which is to negotiate and manage sacredness and set it apart from the profane, so that the sacred act of worship can happen. The shelters and spatial boundaries of the *keramat* graves not only keep the profane out, they also force the worshippers to journey inwards, through layers of growing sacredness, till they reach the grave itself where they may worship and ask for miracles.

CHAPTER 2

WHERE IS A KERAMAT GRAVE?

KERAMAT GRAVES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH TREES, WATER, AND HEIGHTS

The *keramat* grave of the Javanese princess, Radin Mas Ayu, sits at the foot of Mount Faber, yet a climb is still necessary. Up the curving road that forks from the main one, flanked by trees and brick houses. But mostly trees. A clearing opens on one side of the little road and between trees is a wire fence with a small gate. A sign sits in front of the wire structure, declaring “Makam Radin Mas Ayu.” Beyond the gates are stairs of alternating yellow and green, rhythm in colour and more climbing (Fig. 26). A small sheltered grave sits near the bottom of the stairs, yet this isn’t our princess.¹⁵⁶ Keep climbing until you reach the top. A shelter of yellow wood and green zinc roof greets each climber-visitor. Within it is housed Keramat Radin Mas Ayu. And all around this simple sacred structure are trees of such variety and silence.

And if one can rewind time, decades and decades back, peel off the years of renovations the grave and its shelter had undergone, one will see a completely different sight. A smaller structure, tighter to the grave than the current shelter, and consumed by fingers and limbs of roots and bark. It was as if the trees had made it their responsibility to protect the graves (Fig. 27 and Fig. 28)

We as people, as humans, often find ourselves building relationships with our land, our homes. Certain qualities about some places become important to us. They inform and affect our lives and emotions, and we in turn affect their appearance. Sometimes, we make choices to remain in those places and spaces. Objects too can sometimes possess a similar relationship with their place or the space they inhabit. *Keramat* graves are such objects.

¹⁵⁶ This grave is believed to either be that of Radin Mas Ayu’s father or his commander. Ibrahim Tahir, *A Village Remembered*, 55.

In his study of *keramat* graves across Java, Chambert-Loir discovered that often, these *keramat* graves existed or are built upon pre-existing sacred spaces or grounds. These spaces may contain large trees that are culturally believed to be sacred, or natural occurring features that are viewed as “manifestation of the supernatural world.” Sometimes, these graves may have been built on historical and religious sites, such as ancient palaces or, Hindu or Buddhist temple grounds. The worship of the *keramat* graves in these spaces allowed for a continuation of the veneration of these sacred spaces through a different form, sustaining the relevance of these spaces to current worshippers. “The power of the place is still revered but somehow legitimised by the veneration of a Muslim grave [*keramat* grave.]”¹⁵⁷

In the case of the *keramat* graves in Singapore, it is undeniable that the spaces in which these graves reside do exhibit features that are viewed as sacred in many cultures and beliefs, recurring in many of the *keramat* grave locations, if not all of them. This chapter will explore three of these recurring aspects, with a large focus on their sacredness. They are namely, the presence of trees, a height or ascent, and proximity to water. In addressing the sacredness of these features, I will mainly look to the cultural and religious beliefs of the different communities of responses of the *keramat* graves as these communities would be the ones making or inferencing the connections between the features of these locations with ideas of sacredness. They are the communities who will then be the most influenced by how the locations support—and maybe even validate—the sacredness of the *keramat* graves, and *keramat* grave worship.

I cannot be certain (as of the submission of this thesis) if these sites were chosen for the building of these Singapore *keramat* graves because of their sacredness, or if it was mere coincidences, or even if the *keramat* graves “legitimised” the earlier worship of these spaces but in a different form. I put forth that relationships

¹⁵⁷ Chambert-Loir provided a few examples of this phenomenon. For example, “in Leles, near Garut, the grave of one Syekh Dalem Arif Muhammad stands on the remains of a Hindu temple.” Chambert-Loir, “Saints and Ancestors,” 136

formed between the spaces and the graves, where the sacred features of these sites support, and may even amplify, the sacredness of the *keramat* graves, and the *keramat* graves accumulate or inherit the sacredness of the space throughout their lives at those locations. This relationship in the life of a *keramat* grave is the focus of this chapter.

Trees

When visiting many of the *keramat* graves in this study, namely Keramat Bukit Kasita and Keramat Kusu Island, one cannot help but be overwhelmed by the canopy of trees that protect these sites. They are part of the sacred experience of *keramat* grave worship and would need to be considered when considering the objectness and sacredness of these sites.

I believe that the trees add to the sacredness of the space. Trees, as with many things in nature, are viewed as sacred in many cultures. The Malay belief in the *semangat*, or soul substance, of things asserts that almost everything has *semangat*.¹⁵⁸ This includes plants and trees. This belief allowed for trees to be used in many earlier practices of the Malay people.¹⁵⁹ Sometimes, trees may also be viewed as *keramat* and believed to be able to bring blessings and miracles.¹⁶⁰ Within these earlier Malay beliefs, certain trees are also thought to be homes of spirits and ghosts.¹⁶¹ This was the reason given by Chambert-Loir as to why trees are viewed as sacred and why a space with a *keramat* grave may be “marked by the presence of a big tree...”¹⁶² Trees are also important to the lives of some of the individuals whose graves we now view as *keramat* graves. For example, in an interview on the 2nd of September 2017, according to the caretaker of Keramat Kusu Island, Syed Abdul Rahman, used to climb up the forested hill of the island to meditate or *bertapa*. This could speak to the sacredness of such a space, among trees or within forests, where a spiritual, and

¹⁵⁸ Winstedt and Seong, *The Malays*, 19.

¹⁵⁹ Skeat's Malay Magic catalogues numerous charms and magic practices of the Malay people that involved trees or parts of trees. Skeat, *Malay Magic*.

¹⁶⁰ Skeat, *Malay Magic*, 63.

¹⁶¹ Skeat, *Malay Magic*, 65.

¹⁶² Chambert-Loir, “Saints and Ancestors,” 136

possibly ascetic, act could be performed. Thus, trees, being things that are filled with power and *semangat*, a space such as a *keramat* grave surrounded by trees, would be further charged with sacredness.

Trees are also important in many other cultures and religions, not just Malay culture. With practices such as *keramat* grave worship, where the worshippers come from numerous cultural and religious backgrounds, the veneration of trees in these cultures and religions could have added to the significance of the trees found at or near *keramat* graves here in Singapore. Sacred trees, like the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya, may sometimes become extremely important religious objects or pilgrimage sites. Most early studies on tree worship and sacred trees agree that the practice stems from animistic beliefs in the sentience and soul of everything, including objects such as trees; everything is animate.¹⁶³ The Malay belief in the *semangat* of trees could be viewed as one such example.

David L. Haberman, a researcher of sacred trees in India, posits that the belief in sacred trees also grew from the acceptance of the “personhood” of trees, where trees are viewed as people and “the sharp divide between human and nonhuman beings cannot be taken for granted. It also cannot be assumed as universal...”¹⁶⁴ Within this view of the world and nature, trees may be regarded as more than simply objects and be considered as sentient beings. Within his exploration of tree worship, especially in India, in *People Trees*, Haberman highlights certain reasons why a tree may be worshipped. They may embody a divinity or the form of the divinity. They may be considered a dwelling of a divinity or a spirit, which would be the case of how trees are viewed as possible homes of spirits in Malay beliefs. Trees, as explained earlier, may also be worshipped because they possess a force or soul.

¹⁶³ However, these earlier researches into sacred trees and tree worship often relegated these practices and beliefs to a position of primitive religions or heathenism. David L. Haberman, *People Trees: Worship of Trees in North India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7-30.

¹⁶⁴ Haberman, *People Trees*, 20.

Singapore too has its share of tree shrines that receive worshippers, and are believed to provide blessings. One of the most significant examples of this is the sacred banyan tree at Toa Payoh, Singapore, which is equipped with a “Chinese shrine” for rituals.¹⁶⁵ Sadly, like the *keramat* graves, this tree too is constantly under threat of removal. Legend has it, when development was to be made in the 1960s, attempts at bulldozing it led to the vehicle being overturned. People believed this was because tree was protected by a deity. And that began its career as a tree shrine. The shrine attached to it also houses other gods such as Tua Pek Kong and the the Goddess of Mercy or Guanyin, suggesting Taoist and Buddhist influences.¹⁶⁶ Thus, with a number of the *keramat* graves in Singapore being either in close proximity to trees or surrounded by them, such religious practices or traditions within the Chinese community—be it Taoist or Buddhist practices—might have contributed to the approaches of the Chinese worshippers of *keramat* graves. This is one way the *keramat* graves provided elements that are familiar to their worshippers, from other established practices, such as tree shrine worship. It should also be noted, that, like the tree shrine in Toa Payoh, many of the trees present near or at *keramat* grave spaces in the region—including a number in Singapore—happen to be banyan trees.¹⁶⁷

Yet, unlike most sacred trees, like the Toa Payoh tree shrine, the trees around the *keramat* graves are not singled for worship it seems. Albertina Nugteren writes that one of the ways the “wish granting properties” of wishing trees, may manifest is through “an anthropomorphised and personified tree deity to whom the tree provides merely an abode, a locus, and who has an existence independent of the tree.”¹⁶⁸ I put forward that in at least one case of the *keramat* graves in Singapore—Keramat Kusu Island—the *keramat* graves take on that role of the residing deity and extend their reach into the surrounding trees and space (much like a genius

¹⁶⁵ Bill Campbell, “A sacred banyan, smack in the heart of Toa Payoh,” *The Straits Times*, July 11, 1971, 10.

¹⁶⁶ Yue Yong Sheng, “Fallen Toa Payoh's 'god tree' is now up again,” *AsiaOne*, August 17, 2104, <http://www.asiaone.com/singapore/fallen-toa-payohs-god-tree-now-again>

¹⁶⁷ Chambert-Loir mentions the banyan tree specifically as being often found at *keramat* grave spaces. Chambert-Loir, “Saints and Ancestors,” 136.

¹⁶⁸ Albertina Nugteren, *Belief, Bounty and Beauty: Rituals around Sacred Trees in India*, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 42.

loci) yet still have a physical body or structure and main point of worship surrounded by the trees. This then allows the trees to serve also as living altars, where offerings dedicated to the *keramat* graves may be offered upon these trees. The branches and trunks of the trees surrounding Keramat Kusu Island, upon the peak of the hill, are covered with a variety of offerings from ribbons to bags of stones (Fig. 29 and Fig. 30). These trees have become altars for the worshippers, extending the reach of the *keramat* graves beyond their *dapur-dapur kubur* and shelter. The phenomenon of trees being altars or places for offerings dedicated to another object or focus of worship is not unique to *keramat* grave worship. An example of a similar practice is one that surrounds the grave of Mae Nak in Thailand. Three trees that reside near the shrine are wrapped and covered with scarves, and between their folds are letters from worshippers entreating her protection for soldiers, children and the ill.¹⁶⁹ The trees have become an extension of her shrine, three living altars.

Trees are sacred in many cultures. I believe, when they surround a *keramat* grave, they add to experience of sacredness of the space. It is hard to be certain if some of these *keramat* graves in this study were worshipped partially because they were surrounded by trees, or if the site was chosen for burial of the individuals interred because it was charged with a certain sacredness that was granted by the trees. What can be discerned, however, is that there is a relationship that has been built between the trees and the *keramat* graves; a relationship that manages to charge a space with *semangat* and sacredness, from all around. They also sometimes serve as extensions of the *keramat* graves, where, while the *keramat* graves may remain permanent at a spot, their reach may extend to the trees around them, making these plants living altars for offerings.

Height

To reach a few of the *keramat* graves in Singapore, one must be prepared to climb. I believe this is no accident. Keramat Iskandar Shah and Keramat Radin Mas Ayu

¹⁶⁹ McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, 2.

both sit on the sides of the large hills of Fort Canning and Mount Faber, respectively. Keramat Kusu Island resides on the peak of the hill of Kusu Island. Keramat Habib Nuh rests upon the Mount Palmer hill. At each of these sites, there are now stairs available for either the entire ascent, or part of it. This is not exclusive to *keramat* graves in Singapore alone, the *keramat* grave of Sunan Giri, one of the Wali Songo, in Indonesia, for example, also sits upon a hill.¹⁷⁰

As with the case *keramat* graves' proximity to trees, the fact that these locations were high or required climbing were not simply coincidences but were chosen for these characteristics. The altitude of these locations contributed to how their respective *keramat* graves are approached. The most obvious is that it forces the worshippers to go through a journey, which involves a level of ordeal, though not a painful one. The worshippers would have to endure exhaustion from climbing, often unprotected from the heat of Singapore. I would argue, it is similar to elements of pilgrimage where worshippers are to endure exhaustion and the weather to reach sacred sites around the world. In the wider Islamic tradition, pilgrims of the Haj, are also known to sometimes climb Mount Arafat, the hill where the Prophet Muhammad delivered his final sermon.

There are many religious sites and architecture in the region that require worshippers and visitors to ascend or climb to a level that is elevated and may be viewed as closer to a higher plane, be it simply, the sky, or symbolically, the heavens. These elevations push these sacred sites and architecture to heights deserving of objects of worship or reverence, above or overlooking the mundane ground level of the profane. An example of a religious architecture that requires devotees to climb is the Borobudur temple in Central Java. It has often been argued that this Buddhist structure—along with many other temple mountains of the region—was built upon the symbolism of

¹⁷⁰ Budi Santosa, Antariksa and Lisa Dwi Wulandari, "Dinamika Ruang Wisata Religi Makam Sunan Giri di Kabupaten Gresik," *El Harakah*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2014), 174-202.

the sacred cosmic mountain, Mount Meru.¹⁷¹ The ascent up Borobudur can thus be seen as symbolic of an ascent up Mount Meru.

Hills, while definitely not mountains, may also share this symbolism of Mount Meru. John Miksic explains that, “Hills... were frequently considered to have sacred qualities in Asia, as in much of the ancient world. The image of Mount Meru at the centre of the universe, a place where the gods were present and easily contacted...”¹⁷² Hills such as Fort Canning and Mount Faber could have possessed such identities as sacred spaces, and homes of the divine and supernatural. Fort Canning, once called Bukit Larangan or Forbidden Hill, was believed to be homes to ghosts and spirits. Munshi Abdullah, in his *Hikayat*, had related how sounds of drums and shouting could be heard from Bukit Larangan.¹⁷³ Miksic also wonders “If Fort Canning had been the ancient ceremonial centre of the isle, the holy mountain of Temasik [Singapore].”¹⁷⁴ The sacredness of these hills could have supported and validated the sacredness and status of the *keramat* graves as sites of worship, in the eyes of the worshippers.

Water

Singapore has gone through numerous land reclamation and still continues to, swelling slowly in size.¹⁷⁵ Its shape has inevitably changed. For this research, I had to plot the locations of the different *keramat* graves in this study and those that have disappeared, upon a map of Singapore (Refer to Fig. 31 for an illustration of the *keramat* grave locations on a Singapore map). As more graves are added, a visual pattern soon emerged. Many of the *keramat* graves dot the southern parts of Singapore. I posit that if we are able to turn back the clock on all the land

¹⁷¹ Julie A. Gifford, *Buddhist Practice and Visual Culture: The visual rhetoric of Borobudur* (USA and Canada: Routledge, 2011), 150; Hindu temples such as Candi Prambanan in Indonesia have also been said to be symbolic of Mount Meru. Jacques Dumarçay, *Borobudur* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 55-56.

¹⁷² Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea*, 181.

¹⁷³ A.H. Hill, “The Hikayat Abdullah, An Annotated Translation,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1911), The Hikayat Abdullah (1955): 131.

¹⁷⁴ Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea*, 240.

¹⁷⁵ “The first land reclamation measures in Singapore were taken shortly after the establishment of the territory by the Briton, Raffles, in 1819.” R. Glaser, P. Habertzettl and R. P. D. Walsh, “Land Reclamation in Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau,” *GeoJournal*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1991): 365-373.

reclamation initiatives of this country, we would see that these graves were much closer to the earlier southern shorelines of Singapore. Keramat Habib Nuh, for example, was said to be right by the sea, with the waves lapping against the side of Mount Palmer where it sits.¹⁷⁶ I believe the proximity of the locations of many of the *keramat* graves in Singapore to the sea or water, reflects the significance of the waters or the ocean to *keramat* grave worship.

One reason why the locations of these *keramat* graves may have been closer to the southern shoreline of Singapore could lie in the maritime history of this country. As raised earlier, Mandal points out when looking at the *keramat* graves of the region, that while the ethnic background of the individuals whose graves are considered *keramat* varies, they were often associated with Hadramis.¹⁷⁷ Habib Nuh was one such figure. He states that, “Given their prominence along the cosmopolitan trading routes of the Indian Ocean as well as their claims to descent from the Prophet, Hadramis or those of Part-Hadrami descent were the paradigmatic *keramat*.”¹⁷⁸ The connection between the Hadrami heritage of some of the individuals interred at the *keramat* graves in Singapore, and the significance of the Hadramis to maritime history could be why many of these individuals were buried near the shoreline. Immigrants to the region, especially during the 19th Century, settled along the coast. These also included Hadrami settlers.¹⁷⁹ Where they built their homes could also be where they bury their dead. This could be a reason why the *keramat* graves of Singapore had been so close to the shoreline. Also, many *keramat* graves of the region are located in areas with a history of “sea traffic and trading.”¹⁸⁰ The Keppel Harbour or New Harbour, which was used as a passage for maritime activity even before the 19th Century, lies on the southern point of Singapore.¹⁸¹ This could account for why the *keramat* graves in Singapore

¹⁷⁶ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 48.

¹⁷⁷ Mandal, “Popular Sites of Prayer, Transoceanic Migration, and Cultural Diversity,” 356

¹⁷⁸ Mandal, “Popular Sites of Prayer, Transoceanic Migration, and Cultural Diversity,” 359.

¹⁷⁹ Mandal, “Popular Sites of Prayer, Transoceanic Migration, and Cultural Diversity,” 359-360.

¹⁸⁰ Mandal, “Popular Sites of Prayer, Transoceanic Migration, and Cultural Diversity,” 359.

¹⁸¹ C. A. Gibson-Hill, “Notes on the History of the Old Strait, 1580-1850,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1954): 163-214.

are mostly found on the southern or lower shoreline of Singapore and not the northern or upper shoreline, which faces Malaysia.

Another reason these graves were close to the coastline could lie in how natural occurring water bodies—such as oceans, seas, rivers and streams—are viewed in many cultures and religions as connected to the sacred, spiritual and supernatural. Earlier Malay culture believed that water bodies are homes to water spirits and sometimes, rocks protruding from rivers or streams may be decorated with white cloth on sticks or poles to mark the space as a “sacred place.”¹⁸² Some of these spirits, specifically sea spirits, may be entreated to assist ships from meeting disasters.¹⁸³ Given the seafaring and maritime history connected to Singapore, this belief may be significant.

The sea had also been significant in some of the religious practices among the Muslim community in Singapore. While the practice began dying out some time in the early 1960s, the tradition of *mandi safar*, used to be popular among a portion of the Muslim community in Singapore. This practice involves the act of bathing to be rid of ill luck or misfortune. Many chose to perform this practice in the sea and often communally. The ritual was done on the third Wednesday of the month of *Safar* in the Islamic calendar. Some believe this practice could have been influenced by similar Hindu practices of bathing in the river Ganges.¹⁸⁴ This example of a sea-focused Islamic worship and its possible Hindu influence raise two important points. One, the ocean is believed, here, to be a force with the ability to bless worshippers, not unlike the *keramat* graves. Second, there are many other cultures and religions that share beliefs in the sacredness of oceans and seas, even within the Malay World and Southeast Asia, and some of these cultures and religions belong to the communities of responses of *keramat* graves. An example would be the Javanese belief and worship of Nyai Roro Kidul, the goddess queen

¹⁸² Skeat, *Malay Magic*, 279-280.

¹⁸³ Skeat, *Malay Magic*, 280.

¹⁸⁴ Hj Muhd Ariff Ahmad, “Temasya Mandi Safar,” *Berita Harian*, September 23, 1988, 5.

of the Southern Ocean.¹⁸⁵ Her worship and veneration is very tied to the seas. It is important to note that many from the Malay community in Singapore have Javanese ancestry. It may be possible that vestiges of such Javanese sea worship may have found a place in the worship of *keramat* graves that were close to the sea. Other communities of responses of *keramat* graves may also bring with them forms of sea or ocean worship and veneration, from their own culture and religions. This shared belief in the sacredness of the sea could have allowed *keramat* graves that were near the ocean or sea to be approached more easily by different communities. Also, this shared belief coupled with the *keramat* graves' close proximity to water, may have made these spaces that some *keramat* graves reside upon be considered sacred. And this in turn, validates the status of these graves as venerated objects.

Apart from being viewed as sacred, the sea had roles in the hagiographies of some of the *keramat* grave *awliya*. Habib Nuh was said to have been born on a ship out at sea and during a storm, and the storm immediately subsided upon his birth.¹⁸⁶ A version of the story of Syed Abdul Rahman, tells of how, by his miracle, a sampan carrying him and his companion could travel between Kusu Island and mainland Singapore without them needing to row, as if carried by the sea.¹⁸⁷ Siti Maryam, whose grave had been exhumed in 2010, was said to possess “sea knowledge” and was a “facilitator of healthy climate” and “protector of various groups such as fishermen, sailors, travellers and coastal communities in Singapore.”¹⁸⁸ It suggests that these miracles and blessings are strongly connected to the ocean, however, this is not unique in the Malay and Islamic world.

¹⁸⁵ Nyai Roro Kidul is believed to reside in a palace at the bottom of the ocean and requires sacrifice, which had can range from lives of sailors and sacrificial maidens to boats filled with food offerings. She is worshipped largely for the stability and fertility of Java. She is viewed not as a malevolent deity but one that could may prove dangerous if her wishes are not met. It has been argued that the worship of Nyai Roro Kidul, due to one of her more serpentine form, could have stemmed from the worship of snakes or serpents, like the Naga, which appears in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Robert Wessing, “A Princess from Sunda: Some Aspects of Nyai Roro Kidul,” *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (1997): 317-353.

¹⁸⁶ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 30.

¹⁸⁷ Rivers “Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century,” 107.

¹⁸⁸ Teren Sevea, “Listening to Leaves: Historical Memory of a Keramat in Contemporary Singapore,” in *The Sufi and the Bearded Man: Re-member in a Keramat in Contemporary Singapore*. (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2011), 10-17.

Khidr, for example is holy figure in the Islamic tradition—sometimes viewed as a prophet, sometimes, a *wali*—who is said to possess great wisdom and believed to be an immortal.¹⁸⁹ Some of his shrines may be found in parts of Turkey, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.¹⁹⁰ He is considered a “patron-saint of sailors that his name is invoked down to this day by the sailors every time a boat is being launched in parts of the Middle East and Northern India.”¹⁹¹ This also suggests that beliefs in Singapore *awliya* with sea-themed powers, may indeed have roots in, or influences from, older and wider Islamic traditions.

Another figure that *awliya*, like Siti Maryam, and their graves share similar sea-themed powers with is the *pawang*. A *pawang* is “a male or female miracle-worker who possessed *ilmu* (esoteric science) and the *berkat* (power-grace) of God and eclectic spiritual beings such as Muhammad and Siva”¹⁹² and is found in the traditions of the Malay world. They may be approached by communities or individuals for supernatural aid or miracles. Individuals considered *pawang*s are often divided into categories according to their expertise. For example *pawang gajah*, or the elephant *pawang*, has the ability to hunt, subdue and domesticate elephants.¹⁹³ The *pawang laut*, or sea *pawang*, may be further subcategorised into more specific specialties. *Pawang ikan* or fish *pawang* “has the mystical knowledge to sight fish and bring good catch”. *Pawang kapal*, or ship *pawang* “is believed to be endowed with the magical power to steer boats to safety in rough seas”.¹⁹⁴

This connection to water and the sea is not only reserved for *awliya* found or interred in Singapore. Hagiographies of the *wali* figure Shahul Hamid Nagori, whose shrines or *dargahs* may be found in may be parts of India and Southeast Asia (including Singapore), included many water or sea themed miracles from

¹⁸⁹ Irfan A. Omar, “Khidr in the Islamic Tradition,” *The Muslim World*, Vol 83, Issue 3 (1993): 279-294.

¹⁹⁰ Living Heritage Trust, “al-Khidr, The Green Man,” *al-Khidr, The Green Man*, accessed November 22, 2018. <http://www.khidr.org>

¹⁹¹ Omar, “Khidr in the Islamic Tradition,” 291.

¹⁹² Terenjit Singh Sevea, “Pawangs on the Malay Frontier: Miraculous Intermediaries of Rice, Ore, Beasts and Guns” (PhD diss., University of California, 2013), 2.

¹⁹³ Mastura A. Rahman, *The Practice of Traditional Cures Among The Malays in Singapore*, (Singapore: Dept. of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 1995), 2-3.

¹⁹⁴ Rahman, *The Practice of Traditional Cures Among The Malays in Singapore*, 3.

bringing rain to curing illnesses with water. The *dargahs* devoted to Shahul Hamid are known to have large tanks. The water from these tanks are for the public and are associated with the miraculous abilities of the *wali*. Upon the anniversary of Shahul Hamid's death, the head of the *dargah* also conducts a ritual, which is performed by the ocean, at the spot where Shahul Hamid himself was believed to have performed a forty-day meditation.¹⁹⁵ The significance of water and the ocean to the life of Shahul Hamid has somehow ensured that water and the ocean are part of the life of his shrines and the rituals surrounding them. *Keramat* graves are no different. The lives of some of the *awliya* interred at the *keramat* graves in Singapore have connections to the sea or have events where the ocean is a participant in these moments. The sea, then, at least in the example provided earlier, may be seen not only relevant to worship of these *keramat* graves, but also integral. And while I cannot assume that these individuals—namely, Habib Nuh, Siti Maryam and Syed Abdul Rahman—were buried near the sea because of their connection to it, this proximity does emphasize this relationship; a relationship that is built on miracles, and inherited by their graves.

Chapter Conclusion

Habib Nuh died on 27 July 1866. His community had intended to have him buried at a Muslim cemetery, however, attempts to move his casket proved impossible. It grew too heavy to be lifted. Someone eventually announced that Habib Nuh had mentioned his wishes to be buried upon Mount Palmer. The man then held the front of the coffin, while another lifted the back. It was no longer heavy and the body was buried upon the hill of Mount Palmer.¹⁹⁶ This story expresses the agency of the *wali* and his corpse, over his final resting place. However, it also underscores that the location of a *keramat* grave was possibly chosen and not random—whether by the *wali* or his body, as with Habib Nuh's grave, or by a community—and thus significant. I posit, the significance of this selection, was the combination

¹⁹⁵ Asher, "The Sufi Shrines of Shahul Hamid in India and Southeast Asia."

¹⁹⁶ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 46.

of its importance to Habib Nuh as a space of meditation and also the sacredness of hills and the ocean.

This chapter has shown that by looking at the similarities between the different locations, and looking at the shared beliefs of the different communities of responses, we are able to make necessary speculations as to why they still remain relevant today in *keramat* grave worship. In doing so, it is evident that many of the sites and spaces occupied by the *keramat* graves in Singapore have features that lend themselves to be viewed as possible sacred spaces, be it the presence of trees, heights or even proximity to water. Chambert-Loir claims, “The power of the place is still revered but somehow legitimised by the veneration of a Muslim grave [*keramat* grave.]”¹⁹⁷ At this stage of this research it is difficult to be sure, without much earlier records or documentation of these sites, if these spaces in Singapore were viewed as sacred before the arrival of their respective *keramat* graves, or would have received worshippers without these graves. However, there is still some truth in Chambert-Loir’s claim that is still relevant to study. These features of the land have served the *keramat* graves in creating locations that are charged with sacredness, tapping into the different yet somehow universal beliefs on the sacredness of trees, hills and water. By being on land that is viewed as sacred, the *keramat* graves’ status as sites and objects of worship is validated and endorsed, as deserving of worship.

In return, the *keramat* graves included the land as part of the phenomenon of their worship, having worshippers be surrounded by trees, climb heights and be near oceans or rivers, making the location relevant and integral in the practice. This continues the veneration and worship of trees, hills and water, in a form that—while different than solely or explicitly nature worship—is preserved through *keramat* grave worship. Thus, in the study of *keramat* graves—or any religious site or space, for that matter—their locations, surroundings and the land they rest upon need to be considered, and not just the structure itself in isolation.

¹⁹⁷ Chambert-Loir, “Saints and Ancestors,” 136.

CHAPTER 3

ONE OFFERING AT A TIME: THE GROWTH OF KERAMAT GRAVES AND THE ROLE OF OFFERINGS IN RELIGIOUS ART

The climb up to the Keramat Kusu Island (Fig. 7) is no easy feat, despite the available stairs for the ascent. It sits protected by a shelter of concrete, wood, zinc and yellow. A cacophony of offerings lay presented before each of the three graves there. Oranges. Pineapples. Candles. Joss sticks. Even religious books, specifically, the *yaseen*. On some of the architectural beams, offerings of stones in plastic bags hang like ripening fruits. The spicy smell of burning incense smoke fill the nostrils.

Every inch of the yellow shrine's façade is conquered with writing. (Fig. 32 and Fig. 33) Mostly black felt tip marker scribbles of wishes of everything from wealth to health. The dark greens and browns of the trees surrounding the Keramat Kusu Island clash against the yellow of the shrine. And the trees are everywhere. Upon them, one sees objects hanging off the branches and stalks. Bags of stones. Yellow ribbons. They claim the trees, turning plant into living altar. (Fig. 29 and Fig. 30)

And the writings, which began from the shrine, creep down the yellow railings of the steps down the hill (Fig. 34), stretching and seizing more ground, one word, number and hope at a time.

The size and appearance of *keramat* graves do not remain constant throughout their lives. Over time, they may gain mass, or lose it. They may also change and transform. So, just like people, their lives may be marked by moments of growth and renewal. This chapter explores these aspects of the lives of *keramat* graves through the study of offerings. It plans to discuss some of the offerings found at the *keramat* graves in this research, focusing on their materiality and objectness. By describing their varied symbolic values, this chapter hopes to address the possible

meanings behind the “communications” from the worshippers to the *keramat* graves. This chapter will also discuss the nature of the accumulation (and in some cases removal) of these offerings, which contributes to the changing mass of these sacred sites; a changing mass that is not always a steady increase. It will also address the numerous renovations and structural facelifts that some *keramat* graves go through, many of which were made possible through offerings of money.

This chapter also hopes to show how the communities of responses of the *keramat* graves are numerous. And due to this—and there being no religious writings or texts dictating how to approach *keramat* graves—this chapter will refer to offerings from Malay, Chinese, Indian, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and Islamic traditions, as the worshippers of *keramat* graves in Singapore come mainly from within these communities. From there, I would posit reasons why the offerings listed in this chapter were chosen for *keramat* grave worship.

Offerings are often treated as secondary, in the study of religious art and objects, to the object of worship itself. This chapter hopes to encourage a rethinking of that perspective, especially in the case of *keramat* graves. It will suggest that offerings contribute to the identity making of a *keramat* grave; a perpetual process that may not be fixed to single moment in time and space.

Do note that not all forms of offerings presented in this chapter are used by all of the communities of responses of the *keramat* graves. A few of them are only available or used at a some or specific *keramat* graves in this study.

Communities of Responses and Adopted Traditions

Keramat grave worship is a practice without religious doctrine or texts that dictate the proper way to approach these shrines. Without such religious instructions, the worshippers or communities of responses of *keramat* graves—which come from many cultural and religious backgrounds and sometimes even different

countries¹⁹⁸—bring with them, to these graves, approaches and tools of worship already established in their own culture and beliefs, adopting these approaches and tools for their *keramat* grave worship. On top of that, each grave may also have their own collection of communities of responses.¹⁹⁹

As explained in the introduction of this thesis, a Keramat Kusu Island worshipper who identifies with Islamic approaches of worship, may choose to read Islamic prayers, while a worshipper who identifies with Buddhist approaches of worship may offer joss sticks instead. The *keramat* grave is an unprejudiced space that allows for many methods of worshipping it, from many ethnic groups and religious communities. Each method or approach, can be read as a kind of response to the sacred site, and thus, an “interpretive strategy” on the part of the worshipper, influenced and determined by their “cultural assumptions” of their respective community.²⁰⁰ And if an approach of worship is an interpretive strategy, an offering is its tool.

The fact that the *keramat* grave has worshippers from different communities with many diverse interpretive strategies to *keramat* grave worship—some sharing similar approaches, while others, remaining independent—it can also be argued that the *keramat* graves not only have multiple communities of responses, but also intersecting ones, when it comes to their worship.

Some of the “adopted” approaches and tools of worship have been used so long and often at *keramat* graves that they have become established traditions. So, as mentioned earlier, while there are no religious writings or texts on *keramat* grave worship, some objects have become traditional offerings at *keramat* graves in Singapore. There are also some offerings that may be found at some *keramat*

¹⁹⁸ As mentioned earlier, on top of Singaporean worshippers, Keramat Habib Nuh also receives worshippers from other countries such as Brunei and Indonesia, while Keramat Kusu Island, those from Myanmar, Thailand and China.

¹⁹⁹ For example, most of the worshippers of Keramat Habib Nuh seem to be Muslims and during the ninth month of the Chinese Lunar Calender, Keramat Kusu Island sees more Chinese worshippers.

²⁰⁰ Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 8-9.

graves and not at others, a reflection of the possible individual lists of interpretive strategies that are employed at each site.

Offerings: A Material Exchange and Sacred Communication

Offerings are objects often left by worshippers for religious purposes. They serve a number of functions, namely as objects of exchange for blessings or miracles, or tools that assist in the communication with the worshipped.

Asano Haruji gives a very elegant explanation of the role of offerings:

“Offerings, given to a deity for a ritual purpose, form a major element in the structure of ritual. They express the will and wishes of the devotees while also serving to communicate with the deity. All objects presented in formal offerings have symbolic value, just as the act of offering itself should be understood from the perspective of symbolism.”²⁰¹

I will thus address *keramat* grave offerings not simply as gifts to the worshipped but tools of communication with symbolic values. This is not an uncommon approach to studying offerings, of course. Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi has studied food offerings to Hindu deities through the lens of linguistics, proposing the viewing of offerings as language.²⁰² With this in mind, some of the objects and things highlighted in this chapter may not be commonly or traditionally viewed as offerings. However, they are included in the discussion as they serve as powerful tools of communications between the worshipper and the *keramat* graves.

Offerings at *keramat* graves may also be objects presented in exchange for miracle workings. As this is essentially a transaction—whether ultimately fulfilled by the shrine or not—it is possible, I would argue, to consider the things being exchanged (both the offering and the miracle) sharing the same “spheres of exchange”.²⁰³ They

²⁰¹ Asano Haruji, “Offerings in Daoist Ritual” in *Daoist Identity*, Ed. Livia Kohn and Harold D. Roth. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 274.

²⁰² Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, "Ritual as Language: The Case of South Indian Food Offerings" *Current Anthropology* 18, no. 3 (1977): 507-14.

²⁰³ Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” 71-72.

are thus exchangeable as they have been “made to be alike with respects to value”.²⁰⁴ The shared and comparable values here, between miracles and offerings, are symbolic ones. With regards to *keramat* grave worship, where the worshippers come from numerous religious and cultural backgrounds, and there being no instructions dictating proper ritual of worship, the offerings may then be studied through their already established symbolic values within these different cultural and religious traditions of the worshippers.

Some offerings at *keramat* graves are presented in groups of multiple elements. In addressing such groups of offerings and their symbolism, I will borrow Ferro-Luzzi’s approach in looking at how the differences, similarities and relationships between the different elements of a combination of offerings when presented together may provide newer and fuller meanings than they would individually. Combinations of contrasting offerings “add a meaning of totality to the offering which its constituents taken separately do not have”.²⁰⁵ Combinations of similar offerings or “redundant groupings add emphasis to the meaning of a particular type of offering”.²⁰⁶

Food and Fruits

One of the most common form of offerings in many religious practices and rituals is food. *Keramat* grave worship is no different.

The *pulut kuning* or yellow glutinous rice is one of the most popular forms of food offerings at *keramat* graves and often left by *keramat* grave worshippers from the Malay community. This rich glutinous rice dish is bright yellow and often served upon green banana leaves. It is often accompanied with meat, sometimes in the form of *rendang* (a Malay spicy meat dish) or curry. The meat may be poultry, beef

²⁰⁴ Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” 71-72.

²⁰⁵ Ferro-Luzzi, “Ritual as Language,” 508.

²⁰⁶ Ferro-Luzzi, “Ritual as Language,” 508.

or mutton. It may also be served with boiled eggs, which are sometimes with their shells dyed red.²⁰⁷

The *pulut kuning* is glutinous rice that had been soaked in turmeric and water before being steamed with coconut milk. It is a Malay dish often prepared for important or celebratory occasions, like weddings or births, or when someone completes the Quran for the first time.²⁰⁸ Noting that this dish is reserved for special occasions, specifically to the Malay Muslim community, it is unsurprising that it is presented as offerings in exchange for miracles. There are references to the leaving of the *pulut kuning* at *keramat* graves in many studies on the topic or Malay culture in general. Even newspaper articles mention the leaving of *pulut kuning* at *keramat* graves like the Keramat Habib Nuh.²⁰⁹

The colour of the dish holds extremely strong symbolism. The combination of the glutinous rice and the banana leaves provides the offering a union of two very important colours in *keramat* grave worship—yellow and green—each with its own significance, yet together possess a more powerful and complete symbolic value. The bright yellow colour of the rice is a result of the turmeric used in its preparation. As previously mentioned, yellow is extremely prevalent on most, if not all the *keramat* graves in this study. As stated earlier, yellow is believed to be the colour of royalty in the Malay tradition. Though not as common in Singapore as it is in, say, Malaysia, *keramat* grave worshippers from non-Malay ethnic communities have been known to use the *pulut kuning* as offerings as well.²¹⁰ Thus, it should be highlighted that the colour yellow is also, incidentally, important to the Chinese community.

²⁰⁷ The symbolic significance of the color red in the Malay culture, in this case is uncertain, however, it has been suggested that the dyeing of the eggs was done for practical reasons. The first, was to give them a more interesting or unordinary appearance. The second reason was to make them distinguishable from uncooked eggs. Ahmad Mohd Don, “Apabila raja sehari berkuda bak pahlawan,” *Berita Minggu*, 19 May, 1985, 5.

²⁰⁸ Shuhirdy Mat Noor, Nurul Aisyah Zakaria, Nik Mohd Shahril, Hamizad Abd Hadi and Mohd Salehuddin Mohd Zahari, “Pulut Kuning in Malay Society: The Beliefs and Practices Then and Now,” *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 9, No. 7 (2013): 32.

²⁰⁹ Sheikh Hassan Abdullah, “Keramat bukan tempat untuk sembuhkan penyakit,” *Berita Harian*, November 2, 1974, 12.

²¹⁰ Beng-Lan Goh, “Spirit Cults and Construction Sites: Trans-ethnic Popular Religion and Keramat Symbolism in Contemporary Malaysia,” in *Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Kirsten W. Endres and Andrea Lauser (New York, USA: Berghahn Books, 2011), 144-62.

Here, it is similarly associated with royalty and also gold.²¹¹ This could be expected since many visit these sacred sites in hope of fortune. The colour green, here in the form of the banana leaves, is often associated with Islam²¹² and is also found at most, if not all, of the *keramat* graves in this study, especially on the architecture of the shrines. An offering combination that includes these two colours in its presentation bears a fuller meaning that is symbolic of holiness, and thus, when offered at *keramat* graves, honours the sacred status of these shrines.

The *pulut kuning* is often traditionally served with boiled eggs. Eggs in many culture, including the Malay and Chinese culture, are associated with birth and fertility.²¹³ This could be connected to the fact that one common reason people go to *keramat* graves is to wish for a child or to conceive. Eggs are also used in many earlier Malay traditions that deals with divinations or magic in general.²¹⁴ This magical quality of eggs could be another reason why they are sometimes used as part of food offerings to *keramat* graves, alongside the *pulut kuning*, for the asking of miracles.

The third element is the meat dish. It may come in the form of *rendang* (a Malay spicy meat dish) or curry, containing meat of either chicken, mutton or beef. *Ayam pangang*, or spicy roasted or grilled chicken, is another example of a meat dish that sometimes accompanies the *pulut kuning* as offering to *keramat* graves.²¹⁵ I posit, all the food elements (glutinous rice, the meat dish, and on occasion, the eggs) as a combination of offerings, manage to express another fuller and more complex meaning. Within this combination, different elements of agricultural harvest may be represented. Rice from grain agriculture through the glutinous

²¹¹ Janet Lee Scott, *For Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 188.

²¹² Pastoureau, *Green*, 46-49.

²¹³ Boiled eggs, especially red-dyed ones, usually served with *pulut kuning*, are often traditionally presented as gifts to guests at Malay weddings. They are symbolic of fertility and expresses the wishes of the parents of the newlyweds to have grandchildren. Ahmad Mohd Don, "Apabila raja sehari berkuda bak pahlawan," *Berita Minggu*, 19 May, 1985, 5; In some Chinese customs, when a child is born, red eggs are given to relatives or is presented along with turmeric rice and chicken curry during the child's one-month birthday. This combination of turmeric rice, chicken curry and red eggs is very similar, it seems, to the combination of *pulut kuning*, chicken curry and red eggs given as offerings at *keramat* graves. Kog-Hwang I-Ling, *Symbolism in Chinese Food* (Singapore: Graham Brash (Pte) Ltd, 1991), 42-44.

²¹⁴ Skeat, *Malay Magic*, 535-537.

²¹⁵ Ibnu Ariffin, "Islam dorong umat-nya rajin membacha....," *Berita Harian*, March 5, 1965, 4.

rice or *pulut kuning*. Meat by slaughter through the *rendang* or curry. Egg from poultry through the boiled eggs. Here, in this more complete offering combination, by giving items which are symbolic of yields from different aspects of agriculture, worshippers offer a fuller sacrifice. Traditionally, these different elements could represent results that are hard-earned from manual agricultural labour, making the sacrifice much more meaningful and sacrificial, and thus worthy as exchanges for miracles.

These days at Keramat Habib Nuh, what I have noticed is that prepacked food or purchased food as offerings have become more common, probably reflecting the availability of food courts and coffee shops in Singapore. I have witnessed many worshippers bring with them food offerings to this *keramat* grave, packed in styrofoam containers or wrapped in paper, and carried in disposable plastic bags. One cannot help but wonder if the Singapore “takeaway” culture has entered *keramat* grave worship. However, what is even more interesting is what happens to these offerings once they are left at this *keramat* graves.

Keramat Habib Nuh is connected to the Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque and since *keramat* grave worship *may* be considered idolatrous by many Muslims, the caretakers of the mosque and *keramat* grave have found a way to circumvent this. A man, whom I believe is the *khadam*,²¹⁶ is seated next to the grave. You may sit with him, pass him your food offerings and he will pray on your behalf to God. However, despite this, I believe there are no doubts that the worshippers came for the *keramat* grave’s graces, as some of them have crossed oceans to be there. After you are done, the man will give you some other food to take back home. After witnessing a few rounds of this process, I began noticing that the man was simply giving the next worshipper the food that the previous ones had given him. A sort of recycling process was happening. The accumulation of the food offering at this *keramat* grave undulates between addition and subtraction of mass upon the space.

²¹⁶ “The tomb of Habib Nuh is taken care of by a *khadam* (custodian) who also recites the prayers of safety (*doa selamat*) or performs the prayer of intention (*doa hajat*) on behalf of the visitors.” Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 52.

It can be argued that this practice is similar to the Hindu tradition of *prasad*, where the food offerings given to deities are redistributed. In Hinduism, a worshipper honours the divine status of a deity by consuming *prasad*, which may be viewed as the leftovers of the gods. The act of consuming of leftovers of another may be seen as acknowledging the lower status of one's self in contrast to another.²¹⁷ I would argue that this may be a possible philosophy behind the above-mentioned food offering practice seen at Keramat Habib Nuh; a philosophy that may have been influenced by Hindu practices, specifically, *prasad*. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that many of the worshippers at the Keramat Habib Nuh are Indian Muslims. It is possible that vestiges of pre-Islamic Indian and Hindu culture still remain—whether still recognisable or not—in the practices of Muslims in Singapore, especially the Indian Muslim community. At some Islamic grave shrines or *dargahs* in Pakistan, food given as offerings are redistributed to worshippers, so such a practice is not unique to *keramat* graves in Singapore. The food given to these *dargahs* are believed to have received blessedness from being in the presence of the grave. Consuming the blessed food would allow for devotees to receive the imbued blessedness.²¹⁸ It is then, a possibility, that some worshippers of *keramat* graves such as Keramat Habib Nuh, also share similar perspectives. This accepting and distributing of objects have also been observed at other Islamic shrines. Richard Eaton describes how during an annual festival at the shrine of the saint-like figure, Baba Farid, the *diwan*—who not only serves as the shrine's caretaker but also seen as “Baba Farid's living representative”²¹⁹—receives offerings of turbans from the devotees or *murids* while he also distributes turbans to them. Eaton claims that distribution of these turbans to the *murids* by the *diwan* serves as the distribution of Baba Farid's grace.²²⁰ This could also be the case for Keramat Habib Nuh,

²¹⁷ Lawrence A. Babb, "The Food of the Gods in Chhattisgarh: Some Structural Features of Hindu Ritual." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 26, no. 3 (1970): 296.

²¹⁸ Richard Kurin, "The Structure of Blessedness at a Muslim Shrine in Pakistan," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1983): 312-325.

²¹⁹ Eaton, "Court of Man, Court of God," 235.

²²⁰ Eaton, "Court of Man, Court of God," 244

where the redistributed food, on top of being seen as blessed, is also seen as the dissemination of the *keramat* grave's and the *wali's* grace. Also, the role of the *diwan* at the shrine of Baba Farid, seems very similar the function the caretaker of Keramat Habib Nuh seem to perform.

Fruits are also sometimes left as offerings at *keramat* graves in Singapore. Oranges are very popular and, as I have observed, are presented mainly by the Chinese worshippers at the Keramat Kusu Island during its pilgrimage period. This could be because oranges are considered auspicious in Chinese culture,²²¹ as the Cantonese word for mandarin oranges, specifically, means gold.²²² They are also presented at Chinese temples as offerings. In Taoist tradition, fruit offerings, specifically fruits from tree branches, are especially important as they are considered pure and light.²²³ Oranges and tangerines are such fruits. On top of that, fresh fruits in general are symbolic of new beginnings in the Chinese culture.²²⁴

Pineapples are left as offerings as well, at Keramat Kusu Island. The significance of the pineapple could lie in its symbolism in Chinese culture. The Chinese words for pineapple (*ong lai* in Hokkien, *wong lai* in Cantonese) are homophones to the arrival of wealth or prosperity.²²⁵ Since many people visit these sites to gain wealth or win the lottery, the pineapple, in sharing the symbolic values with those material desires, would then be able to serve as objects of exchange for such monetary miracles. Apart from being used as offerings, the pineapple also features as decorations at Keramat Kusu Island. A pair of large plastic honeycomb pineapple decorations hang from the sign above the foot of the steps leading up to the *keramat* graves (Fig. 35).

Another fruit I found at some of the *keramat* graves is the banana, usually offered in a comb. Skeat had recorded a few Malay magical rituals which involved the yellow

²²¹ Janet Lee Scott, *For Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 185.

²²² Kog-Hwang I-Ling, *Symbolism in Chinese Food* (Singapore: Graham Brash (Pte) Ltd, 1991), 81.

²²³ Haruji, "Offerings in Daoist Ritua,l" 286.

²²⁴ Kog-Hwang, *Symbolism in Chinese Food*, 79.

²²⁵ "Fruit names that ring with good luck," *The Straits Times*, February 12, 1987, 5

fruit and its many different parts, including the blossom.²²⁶ This magical use or property of the banana could be why they are used in *keramat* grave worship even till today. Bananas are also used as offerings in many Hindu rituals, even in Singapore.²²⁷ I posit that, along with the pineapple, the yellow colour of this fruit could have a role to play in its importance and its use as offerings, especially at the *keramat* graves, for reasons mentioned earlier regarding the significance of the colour.

Flowers

Flowers are one of the only offerings that I have found at all the *keramat* graves in my research. (Fig. 14, Fig. 16, Fig. 18, Fig. 21, Fig. 36) This could speak to the universality of the offering of flowers as an approach of worship. They are used in many religious rituals and traditions, from Hindu *pujas*²²⁸ to the laying of flowers on Malay Muslim graves. Flowers offerings are used in some Buddhist and Taoist worship as well.²²⁹

Of the flowers I have observed at the *keramat* graves, most of them seem to be roses, marigolds, chrysanthemums and jasmines. The way they are offered may also vary. Some are sprinkled as loose flowers atop the graves in the form of buds or blooms and even petals, similar to how it is done at Malay Muslim graves, as mentioned. They are also offered in stalks and bouquets and there are often vessels available for them to be placed in. However, while *keramat* graves like Keramat Radin Mas Ayu have vases available for the flowers, (Fig. 36) in the case of Keramat Sharifah Rogayah, these vessels are made out of cut PVC pipes, forced into the ground before the grave. (Fig. 37) These pipes work just as well as the vases.²³⁰ Depending on the frequency of worshippers leaving flower offerings at the *keramat* graves, sprinkles of flowers can sometimes grow into mounds of

²²⁶ Skeat, *Malay Magic*.

²²⁷ Vineeta Sinha has wonderfully documented numerous Hindu religious rituals in Singapore involved the use of bananas as offerings. Vineeta Sinha, *Religion and Commodification: 'Merchandizing' Diasporic Hinduism* (New York, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2011).

²²⁸ Vineeta Sinha, "Flowers for Worship, Flowers for Sale: Straddling the 'Sacred' and the 'Secular'" in *Religion and Commodification: 'Merchandizing' Diasporic Hinduism* (New York, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 148-88

²²⁹ Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 375.

²³⁰ The use of readymade objects as elements of offerings or vessels for them is something that appears at some of the *keramat* graves in Singapore.

colours, petals and blooms while vases can become full and chocked with bouquets. However, the contribution of flowers as offerings to the growth of *keramat* graves, through their accumulation is not only visual, but also olfactory, with their scents bathing the *keramat* graves.

Some of the flowers have symbolic significances within the different cultural and religious communities that the different *keramat* grave worshippers may belong to. I posit that these symbolic significances contribute to these flowers being used at *keramat* graves.

One of the flowers offered at *keramat* graves is the chrysanthemum, usually of the variety with large and round flower heads of sun yellow florets. The chrysanthemum, is considered as one of the “four gentlemen of flowers” in certain Chinese traditions, especially painting, and is seen as symbolic of endurance through hardship.²³¹ The importance of the chrysanthemum is also due to its “near homophones.” The Chinese word for chrysanthemum sounds like the word for longevity,²³² a potent symbolic meaning in exchange for miracles, especially those pertaining to health and vitality. Another near homophone of the flower is the auspicious number nine, associating it with the Chinese Chongyang festival, which falls on the ninth day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar.²³³ The ninth month of the lunar calendar is extremely important to the Keramat Kusu Island as it is the annual pilgrimage period to this triumvirate of *keramat* graves, when pilgrims from China, and even Myanmar and Thailand, flock to the site to worship.

The jasmine is another flower often presented as offerings at *keramat* graves. This delicate milk white blossom is often presented as buds at the *keramat* graves. Sometimes, jasmine buds are presented in strings or garlands among other loose flowers. An interesting example, of the use of jasmine garlands, stated earlier, is when they are hung around the protruding feature of the Keramat Iskandar Shah,

²³¹ Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 364.

²³² Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 368.

²³³ Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 368.

(Fig. 21) much like how one would be hung around a statue of a Hindu deity. The jasmine is often used as offerings in Hindu *pujas*. It is believed to be favoured by the Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth,²³⁴ which (like aforementioned longevity and the chrysanthemum) is also a potent symbolic value in exchange for miracles, especially for fortune.

It is difficult to be sure if every worshipper is aware of the symbolic meaning of each flower and if, say, a Hindu worshipper would know the significance of the chrysanthemum in Buddhism. In fact, it may even be difficult to be certain if all *keramat* grave worshippers who identify as Buddhist may know it either, because we have to take into account other aspects of their backgrounds such as their ethnicity. However, this does not make the earlier mentioned symbolic meanings moot or irrelevant to the exchange process of offerings for miracles, as the different worshippers may still bring their own cultural or religious interpretations of these flowers. What it simply means is that, on top of these culture or religion specific meanings, there may be other symbolic values that need to be considered, values that may transcend the different communities of responses.

To understand these more universal significance of flowers as offerings, it is useful to consider them as groupings and combinations as we have done with the *pulut kuning* because the flowers at the *keramat* graves are almost always presented in mixtures of a variety of species, rather than individual types. These combinations offer “meanings” or “symbolic values” on two levels.

Firstly, flower offerings at *keramat* graves work as “redundant combinations” as they are mixture of numerous varieties of one thing: flowers. This emphasizes the significance of flowers—not just a particular flower—as objects used for worship at these sites, by articulating and stressing certain symbolic meanings and values shared by many, if not all, flowers. These symbolic values are very much tied or grounded to the physical and material attributes of these flowers, which could

²³⁴ Trilok Chandra Majupuria, *Religious & Useful Plants of Nepal & India* (Saharanpur, India: Rohit Kumar, 2009). 314.

account for why they transcend numerous cultures and religions. The first value is their connection with nature due to the fact that they are offerings retrieved from nature itself. Many religions and cultures attach significance to nature, a respect and reverence for its primordial power. In Buddhism, for example, flowers and flowering trees found themselves associated with nature spirits like the *yakshi*.²³⁵ Another significance of most flowers, which seems to be shared by many cultures and communities, is the opinion that they are symbolic of beauty. This beauty lies both in their appearance and scent; two biologically necessary features. Their colours and scents, which serve to attract animals and insects to assist in the pollination process, have also attracted the animal called man. Flowers are used in many religious traditions decoratively because of their aesthetically pleasing appearances and the scent of flower offerings is extremely important and emphasized in practices such as Hindu *pujas*.²³⁶ Flowers as offerings also satisfy the need for the act of sacrifice for worship without needing to spill blood.²³⁷

However, due to the variety of flowers presented together as offerings at *keramat* graves, they can be also analysed as contrasting combinations of offerings, where the contrasting attribute between the different elements is colour. When different flowers are present, many colours are represented. Rose red, marigold orange, chrysanthemum yellow, jasmine white. There are sometimes even other flowers of blues and purples. In fact, there seems to be a conscious effort, either by the worshippers or the shops the flowers were purchased from, to make sure that the flower offering mixtures contain as many colours as possible. The significance of the presence of many colours here, I would argue, lie in the use of flowers as offerings for the visual aesthetics and decorative quality they bring to the worship through their accumulation.

Flower offerings as combinations, thus, are pacific and decorative sacrifices of beauty, which invoke nature itself. The universality of these values makes it possible

²³⁵ Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*. 329.

²³⁶ Vineeta Sinha, "Flowers for Worship, Flowers for Sale," 148-188.

²³⁷ Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 332.

for many *keramat* grave worshippers to find flowers offerings familiar and comfortable to use—despite coming from numerous religious and cultural backgrounds—as these values are grounded not simply in cultural nuances like homophones and lunar calendars. Instead they are grounded in the visual and material characteristics of these flowers, like colour and scent. These more universal values are also very potent symbolic values that makes flower offerings worthy of being placed within a sphere of exchange with the miracles of *keramat* graves.

It has also been argued that flower offerings are items of worship that are not reserved only for the wealthy as it is affordable, unlike other grander approaches of worship, making it unprejudiced and accessible. As Jack Goody puts it, “with a flower all are equal as individual supplicants.”²³⁸ This could have further contributed to its widespread use as offerings by *keramat* grave worshippers. Vineeta Sinha also discovered that many of the flower shops in Singapore’s Little India receive customers from different cultural backgrounds—Chinese, Indian, Malay, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu—coming for flower offerings for their different forms of worship and rituals, including *keramat* grave worship.²³⁹

Incense

Incense offerings may be found at many of the *keramat* graves in Singapore and come in two forms. The first is the incense stick or joss stick. Joss sticks are common offerings in Chinese Buddhist and Taoist religious rituals in Singapore; religions which many worshippers of the *keramat* graves identify with. They are often offered in threes, something that seems to be also practised by other Chinese communities in other parts of the world.²⁴⁰ And in the case of Keramat Kusu Island where there are three graves and multiple points of worship, there is a system where worshippers move from one point to another, based on the hierarchy of these graves. Here, a wonderful pattern of repetition happens as the worshipper makes offerings, almost like a choreographed dance and placing joss

²³⁸ Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 336.

²³⁹ Vineeta Sinha, “Flowers for Worship, Flowers for Sale,” 187.

²⁴⁰ Hugh Baker, *Ancestral Images* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 350.

sticks in threes after threes after threes throughout the space. (Fig. 10 and Fig. 11) An interesting thing to note about Keramat Kusu Island is that, unlike the other examples in this research, worshippers may purchase the joss sticks and some other offerings from the *keramat* grave caretaker. There are often vessels readily available for joss sticks at the *keramat* graves in Singapore. Some of them, like at Keramat Sharifah Rogayah, are made from used tin cans (Fig. 37).

Incense offerings may also come in the form of resin, which when burned produces rising scented smoke. There are vessels for the burning of such incense at many of the graves in this study. They are mostly open and dish-like, and very often made of clay. However, I have found a metal bowl at Keramat Iskandar Shah, which had traces of burnt incense. The burning of incense is also part of many older or traditional Malay practices. Skeat had even recorded the burning of incense at a ritual performed at a "saint's tomb" in Selangor, Malaysia; a saint who was probably a *wali*, which could mean the tomb was considered a *keramat* grave.²⁴¹ The burning of incense is also part of Malay spiritual rituals performed by *bomohs* and *dukuns*.²⁴² The burning of incense in resin form is also practiced by other ethnic and religious communities that seem to be represented by the different *keramat* grave worshippers. For example, it is also used in Hindu *puja* rituals.²⁴³

The leaving of incense and their accumulation, especially in the form of sticks, contribute to the growth of the *keramat* grave. While the offerings of incense do add to *keramat* graves visually and physically, and sometimes in patterns of threes and also through the amassing of its ash, its biggest contribution through its accumulation is aromatic. When you enter a *keramat* grave site like Keramat Kusu Island, the scent consumes you. You enter a thick sphere as you go into the sacred space, an olfactory indicator that one is leaving the world of the profane. With the burning of the incense and their smoky release, these *keramat* graves are not only physical, visual, solid objects. They grow, becoming larger and capable of engulfing,

²⁴¹ Skeat, *Malay Magic*, 42-43.

²⁴² Carol Laderman, "The Limits of Magic" in *American Anthropologist, New Series*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (1997): 335.

²⁴³ Vineeta Sinha, *Religion and Commodification*.

because the air—their air—has become palpable, and is as much part of the material makeup of the *keramat* graves, as the wood or stone that may form their *batu nisan*.

While there are traditions and beliefs that suggest that incense as offerings may serve as gifts or even food for the worshipped,²⁴⁴ I posit that a key function and value of incense as offerings are as tools of communication, specifically, to invoke the worshipped so communication (of requests and wishes) can occur. In Taoism, incense may be seen to have the capacity to summon “gods to where they are to be worshipped.”²⁴⁵ In Javanese culture on the other hand—inherited by many Singaporean Malays in varying degrees due to their Javanese ancestry—incense is “used as a vehicle to connect their spirits to those of their ancestors as well as to their God.”²⁴⁶ Thus, the burning of incense as offerings at *keramat* graves may serve to open the connection between the worshipper and the grave, activating the site and space, allowing for the act of asking and requesting for miracles to be made and heard. Of course, it needs to be mentioned that this may only hold truth to *keramat* grave worshippers who use incense or are familiar with its use in their own religious practices outside *keramat* grave worship. There are *keramat* grave worshippers who do not use incense and would probably have different beliefs and logic with regards to connecting with *keramat* graves and being heard by them.

The burning of incense, specifically in the form of sticks, also add the element of time and duration. Throughout history, there have been cultures that have used incense sticks as tools for time measuring.²⁴⁷ Incense sticks offered by *keramat* grave worshippers continue burning and operating even after the worshippers have left. They are not static offerings. Also, when lit, like most other offerings, they become temporal. Flowers wither. Food spoil. Incense sticks burn out. They have lifespans that, it may be argued, play a role in determining when they stop being sacred and may be disposed of, to make room for newer (and future accumulations of)

²⁴⁴ James T. Siegel, “Images and Odors in Javanese Practices Surrounding Death” in *Indonesia*, No. 36 (1983): 12.

²⁴⁵ Baker, *Ancestral Images*, 349.

²⁴⁶ Harini Sangat-Roemantyo, “Ethnobotany of the Javanese Incense” *Economic Botany*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (1990): 413.

²⁴⁷ Silvio A. Bedini, “The Scent of Time. A Study of the Use of Fire and Incense for Time Measurement in Oriental Countries,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 53, No. 5 (1963): 1-51.

offerings; that moment, as Sinha explains, “when all ‘functionality’ and ritual value has been extracted” from them.²⁴⁸ With incense stick, this phenomenon could be discerned more obviously and gradually than the two earlier examples, through the progressive and steady burning of the stick. In a way, one can wonder whether *keramat* grave worshippers who use incense, view this open connection to these graves provided by their incense offerings as something temporal, and that when the “functionality and ritual value” has been fully “extracted”²⁴⁹ and the sticks burnt out, whether that connection closes, till another is lit.

As with many of the other offerings, especially flowers, I believe the fact that incense is used in practices within the varied communities of responses of the *keramat* graves, allow for it to be easily used in a space that accommodates many approaches of worship. This in turn is responsible for making *keramat* graves relevant to worshippers of different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Writing

Writings may not be what one would traditionally consider as offerings. However, when left by a worshipper, it does serve as the clearest tool of communication to the worshipped, to express wants and desires. Of all the *keramat* graves in this study, only Keramat Kusu Island seems to have this form of offering, where worshippers would write down the wishes they want the *keramat* graves to fulfil.

One way worshippers of Keramat Kusu Island can write their wishes is on tubular plastic bags with stones inside, provided by the caretaker (Fig. 38). They would then hang them onto the structure of the Keramat grave shelter and the offerings would just amass and grow as more and more wishes are asked. These plastic bags, seems to be similar to those used for *air batu*, a traditional flavoured ice deserts you may find in Malaysia, and, at one point, even in Singapore.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Vineeta Sinha, “Flowers for Worship, Flowers for Sale,” 184.

²⁴⁹ Vineeta Sinha, “Flowers for Worship, Flowers for Sale,” 184.

²⁵⁰ Once again like the flower and incense vessels at Keramat Sharifah Rogayah, we see the use of readymade or mundane objects being used in some form or another for worship at the *keramat* graves.

The other way the worshippers of Keramat Kusu Island write down their wishes is upon the exterior bright yellow walls of the site. (Fig. 33) Every inch is conquered by scribbled wishes, from passing exams to lottery numbers. Most of them seem to be written with felt tipped markers. More will get added as time goes by. In fact, the writings have begun invading the railings and the steps of the stairs leading up to the site, as if the Keramat Kusu Island is slowly creeping and claiming more ground. Due to the resilience of felt tip marker inks,²⁵¹ the façade of Keramat Kusu Island and the stairs leading up to it have become one perpetually updated archive of wishes. By leaving offerings on the walls and the stairs, the worshippers have transformed them into alternative altars, extending the sacred reach and boundaries of the *keramat* graves. So, while one would think that the fact that the nature of writing is two dimensional, the accumulation of this form of offering seems to be the most massive and ever expanding, as if through these writings, Keramat Kusu Island grows.

Through writing, worshippers can express exactly what they desire without the need for symbolisms or visual metaphors that many of the offerings may depend on for the exchange for miracles. Writing also allows for the use of numbers and this has allowed worshippers to write upon the walls of Keramat Kusu Island, the 4-digit lottery numbers they wish to strike big with. Often, once the wish is granted, worshippers would return to the *keramat* graves with additional votive offerings as thanks. So, the writing as offerings at the Keramat Kusu Island may also be viewed as serving as written contracts between the *keramat* graves and the worshipper-wisher.

Writing of wishes and leaving them at a space of worship or a shrine is not unique to *keramat* graves. Some of the Uyghur Islamic shrines found in Xinjiang, China, have “graffiti” on their walls, left by worshippers. They usually include the date,

²⁵¹ These felt tip markers are available for the worshippers to use. They are placed on a large table within the shelter of Keramat Kusu Island, among other offerings such as incense.

name of the worshipper, where they were from, and their wishes, such as “health and wellness.”²⁵² Another good example of writing as offering is the leaving of *ema* at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan. These are votive tablets where worshippers could “write requests, prayers and wishes to the deities.” Like the wishes of *keramat* grave worshippers, the wishes found on *ema* tablets seem to relate to the everyday issues, from fertility to passing examinations.²⁵³ Ian Reader describes these tablets as “mediums for sending messages from their writers to the spiritual realms... written expressions externalizing and setting out in concrete form the inner wishes and volition of those who write them.”²⁵⁴ Writing on the walls of the Keramat Kusu Island may allow for a similar process to happen. One that allows the worshippers to externalise and make concrete their desires, so it is clear to both themselves and the *keramat* graves. Reader describes this process as a cathartic one. He states:

“*Ema* thus provide a cathartic function, serving as an emotional release mechanism whereby those under duress can externalize their inner desires, fears, and worries, and can thus rationalize and place within a manageable framework events and situations that appear to be outside the normal control of the individuals”²⁵⁵

The medium and offering of writing found at Keramat Kusu Island may serve the same therapeutic function, an outlet for the worshippers to externalize their fears and concerns visually or textually, letting them out instead of keeping them in. I would also argue this act of writing also serves as confessions—opening up of oneself regarding one's lack and limitations—to something other which is more powerful. Also, because these writings are on the walls or on the hanging plastic bags and thus, visible to anyone, this act of confession is a very public one and would possibly involve a level of vulnerability on the part of the worshipper, which is a sacrifice in itself.

²⁵² Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 146.

²⁵³ Ian Reader, “Letters to Gods: The Form and Meaning of *Ema*” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1991): 23-50.

²⁵⁴ Reader, “Letters to Gods,” 25.

²⁵⁵ Reader, “Letters to Gods,” 44.

Reader also argues that the use of the medium of writing on *ema* tablets may have had some help from “the effects of universal education.” He argues that “Literacy removes the need to rely on figurative symbols and enhances the scope of self-expression.”²⁵⁶ Generations and generations of worshippers have visited *keramat* graves like Keramat Kusu Island and it may be possible that each generation may bring with them—much like the worshippers using *ema* tablets—different levels of education and literacy. The Compulsory Education act was passed by the Singapore Parliament in 1999, which makes it compulsory for children between 6 and 15 years of age to receive education.²⁵⁷ While this is not a clear determinant for level of education of the generations after the act was passed, it could suggest that levels of literacy may have improved. Also, it may be fair to assume literacy may have already been improving even before that and since *keramat* graves such as Keramat Kusu Island was first erected in 1816(?).²⁵⁸ So, while other kinds of offerings are still used at *keramat* graves, maybe writing is a practical form of offering for more literate communities of responses. It seems that Keramat Kusu Island welcomes communities of responses not only from different religious and cultural backgrounds but also education and literacy levels.

Money

Money is also another common form of offering. Most of the *keramat* graves have donation boxes available for worshippers, each with their own form of lock and security. Keramat Kusu Island even has plaques for major donors in English, Jawi and Chinese, and formal name sheets for worshippers to write their names after dropping cash into the box.

As Kopytoff explains, the “universal acceptance of money” allows it to be exchanged with many items and allows for a “merger of the separate spheres of

²⁵⁶ Reader, “Letters to Gods,” 34.

²⁵⁷ Ministry of Education, Singapore, “Compulsory Education,” [moe.gov.sg](https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/education-system/compulsory-education), accessed on August 18, 2018. <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/education-system/compulsory-education>

²⁵⁸ Rivers, “Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century,” 107.

exchange.”²⁵⁹ This universal acceptance of money as a form of exchange for many different things seem to have extended to miracles of *keramat* graves. The use of money in an exchange, within a religious context, is by no means unique only to *keramat* graves. In fact, Kopytoff gives a wonderful example of the sale of indulgences by the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages.²⁶⁰

While money may seem like the least symbolic form of offering, they are often the most important as they ensure the physical upkeep and even the existence of the *keramat* graves. For example, the caretaker of Keramat Kusu Island, informed me that the *keramat* graves under his care depend on worshipper donations to pay for the yearly fee to be allowed to remain on the government owned land. Without the donations, Keramat Kusu Island would cease to be.

The money is also used for renovations and some of these *keramat* graves have undergone so much structural facelifts that they no longer look like how they originally did, constantly changing when they can afford it. In 2017, the exterior of Keramat Bukit Kasita underwent a major renovation, allowing easier accessibility through the shelter that preceded the enclosed little cemetery. Metal gates were even installed for the protection of the space. In the same year, Keramat Habib Nuh too underwent restoration and upgrading work along with its adjoining mosque, after a six-year fundraising effort.²⁶¹ There are even plans to install lifts up the hill of the shrine for the elderly and handicapped. Keramat Iskandar Shah too has gone through major transformations. An early 1930s photograph of the shrine showed that it once had a bridge and moat and more modest than it is today (Fig. 39).²⁶² The colour of its structure was also brighter than the dark wood that shelters it today. In fact, this *keramat* grave has gone through at least three rounds of transformations, many of which were made by the worshippers.²⁶³ Keramat

²⁵⁹ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” 72

²⁶⁰ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” 75

²⁶¹ Yap Li Yin, “Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque reopens after \$1.46m revamp,” *The Straits Times*, July 21, 2017. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/haji-muhammad-salleh-mosque-reopens-after-146m-revamp>

²⁶² Braddell, *The Lights of Singapore*, 57.

²⁶³ John N. Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea*, 219.

Radin Mas Ayu, on the other hand, now has concrete steps and a fairly open shelter, painted bright yellow and green, and complete with tiles, florescent lighting and electrical fans. It is also protected by a gated fence. The 1959 film, *Raden Mas*, however, gives us a brief glimpse of the shrine when it was younger. A small hut, enshrined and trapped under roots of trees, and the space within it, dark (Fig. 27 and Fig. 28). No gates. No concrete steps. No tiles. No florescent lights. No electrical fans. Keramat Radin Mas Ayu has definitely aged well.

These transformations undergone by these *keramat* graves required money. While in some cases, they received some money from the government or MUIS. Keramat Habib Nuh and its adjoining mosque, Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque, received a small portion from MUIS, for their renovation works in 2017, through the Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund. The remaining had to come from fundraising efforts.²⁶⁴ While it will be difficult to confirm, it would not surprise me if some of the money raised came from worshippers of Keramat Habib Nuh, in hope of miracles or in thanks for them. Thus, the accumulation of money offerings, in a way, contributes to the ever-changing appearance and the constant renewal of these *keramat* graves.

Chapter Conclusion: Keramat Grave Offerings and Religious Art Making

Offerings are tools of worship and may communicate the desires of the worshippers to the divine and serve as items to exchange for miracles and blessings. This chapter has shown that because of a lack of scriptural instruction or direction to the correct way to worship *keramat* graves, offerings that are familiar and already established within the many cultural and religious traditions of the worshippers—the multiple communities of responses—have been adopted for use at the *keramat* graves in Singapore. The different objects' symbolic values, that are already established in these different traditions, determined by their colour, form and materiality, are also adopted and are responsible for them being comparable to the symbolic values of the miracles asked at *keramat* graves in Singapore. This, then

²⁶⁴ Yap, "Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque reopens after \$1.46m revamp."

makes them exchangeable for these miracles and placing miracles and offerings within the same sphere of exchange.

I would argue that there is a method in which these adopted offerings and approaches are selected. The communities of responses used tools of worship from their own cultural and religious backgrounds that are reserved for practices dealing namely with the invocation of the worshipped, the asking of miracles, and the approaching of the dead or graves. In a sense, *keramat* grave worship has acquired approaches and tools of worship that are relevant to itself, a grave that may be invoked for the fulfilment of miracles. Many of these “adopted” offerings, due to their constant use in *keramat* grave worship, have found themselves becoming more established traditions within this practice.

However, like any other traditions, “adopted” or not, their meaning may be lost over time. Throughout my few years working on these sites, I have seen worshippers at the *keramat* graves in Singapore come from many different generations, young and old. Parents sometimes bring their children. One thing I notice, and discovered through interviews, is that some of these children—some of whom are in their twenties—are simply repeating the rituals that their parents enact. The symbolic value of the offerings that have been discussed in this chapter, may be unbeknownst to them. The offerings they give these graves are chosen because of familiarity or routine and habit, rather than understanding of meaning. It begs the question, if offerings are tools of communication of one’s desires to the *keramat* graves, is communication still communication without knowing the meaning? Or does one simply hope the message is good and received by the *keramat* graves, despite one not knowing the symbolic value of the offerings? Or does earnest intentions on the part of the worshipper matter more than the meaning of the offerings? Whatever the case, offerings are still continuously left at these sites. And maybe, this is why Keramat Kusu Island employs writing as a form of offering, where meaning and intentions can be clear.

The offerings also contribute to the changing mass and appearance of the *keramat* graves. They add bulk to these shrines as they accumulate and the bulk is removed as they are disposed of or redistributed, giving the *keramat* graves a form that fluctuates in size and mass. Monetary offerings on the other hand, provides for the *keramat* graves and allow them to renew themselves, undergoing restorations and reconstructions. In essence, the offerings contribute to the growth and renewal of the *keramat* graves in Singapore.

In the study of religious art, offerings are often treated as secondary or less important to, say, the image. This hierarchy could be rethought. Not for all cases but for some. I believe the *keramat* grave is one such case. As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, the *keramat* grave's identity as 'keramat grave' (a venerated object, a shrine) is not a given. Its first identity and role is that of a grave, a site of burial. Its identity as a *keramat* grave can only occur if the grave is worshipped. This means the worshippers are extremely important because the identity of the *keramat* grave is partially, if not largely, determined by the acknowledgement from the worshippers that this grave is *keramat*, miraculous and holy. This is a validation of the grave's power. This acknowledgement has a physical, ritual and material aspect and manifestation: the offerings left by the worshippers. In short, the offerings are part of the making of a *keramat* grave.

So, what I propose is to rethink the process of religious art making and consider that the making of a religious art, image, object is not always fixed to a single moment or occurrence. It could instead be a continuous, and possibly perpetual, process in which worshippers serve as collaborators, making and sustaining not only the object's form, but also its sacred identity. This is not without precedent. In contemporary art, participatory art is not out of the ordinary. These are instances where the audience or the public are part of the art making process. "The artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations... while the audience... is now prepositioned as a co-

producer or participant.”²⁶⁵ Many participatory art engages communities and the public, in the art making process where the tradition of a “single authorship” is replaced with a “collective” one.²⁶⁶ This perspective may be adopted to the study of religious art too, where objects continue to transform and change through the actions of their worshippers. *Keramat* graves are such objects. The role of worshipper here would go beyond simply as donors to the process of religious art making. Donors suggest contributions, often financially, for the making, upkeep and preservation of a religious art, yet with little to no role to in the actual making process. The example of *keramat* grave worshippers giving monetary offerings may fall into this donor role, where the money received from worshipper donations will be used to pay contractors for the renovations of the *keramat* grave shelters.²⁶⁷ The worshippers, here, were not involved in the renovation process itself. However, with some of the other examples of giving offerings at *keramat* graves, which, as explained earlier, are physical, ritual and material aspects of worshippers conferring the object’s identity, worshippers transcend the role of the donor. On top of that, they may change the appearance of *keramat* graves through this process or ritual of leaving and giving offerings. When worshippers write their wishes onto *keramat* graves walls or lay flowers upon them, they add to and embellish these objects. Here, the worshippers act as makers, by further transforming the form of the *keramat* graves, through the accumulation of their offerings, doing their part in that continuous and perpetual process of the making of the religious object. This is similar to how the public participants of participatory art may change them. *A Stitch In Time*, for example, was an artwork where artist David Medalla exhibited a “large swathe of fabric suspended across the gallery, onto which the public were invited to embroider designs and slogans.”²⁶⁸ The form and appearance of the work changes as each participant engages with it, much like *keramat* graves and their worshippers. Thus, borrowing from the study of participatory art in contemporary art, and through the

²⁶⁵ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 2.

²⁶⁶ Bishop, *Artificial Hell*.

²⁶⁷ For example, professional contractors seem to have been hired for the renovation of the exterior of the Keramat Bukit Kasita in late 2017.

²⁶⁸ Bishop, *Artificial Hell*, 185.

studying of offerings, the field of religious art could begin challenging the traditional and segregated roles of artists/artisans/producers, worshippers and patrons. The blurring of the lines delineating those roles might add another dimension to the already complex relationship between the worshipper and the worshipped.

CONCLUDING CHAPTER

THE LIVES OF KERAMAT GRAVES PAST AND PRESENT, AND THE FUTURE OF KERAMAT GRAVE RESEARCH

Keramat Iskandar Shah sits on Fort Canning. The journey to it requires quite a bit of climbing. Miracles and blessings do not come easy. Its shelter is roofed with clay coloured shingles. The shelter is supported by twenty wooden pillars, some of which are carved ornamentally. The grave, in the middle. Upon this structure, the grave's identity as a *keramat* grave is cemented with a plaque and inscriptions: KERAMAT SULTAN ISKANDAR SHAH. Fort Canning is now a park managed by the National Parks Board (NParks), which oversees the parks and nature reserves in Singapore. Despite the area being cared for by NParks, the *keramat* grave still has a team of caretakers, each one taking turn managing its cleanliness. The pigeons that flock at the site make the task a little more difficult with their occasional droppings.

It is strange to think of *keramat* graves—objects created upon death—possessing lives, and yet they do. And throughout its long life as a *keramat* grave, Keramat Iskandar Shah, its appearance and architecture have gone through numerous physical changes. A photograph from a 1934 publication captured a moment in the life of the shrine. Then, it had a more modest shelter and was surrounded by a moat, crossed by a bridge.²⁶⁹ An image of the shrine from some time in the 1960s showed it with a more open shelter with a green roof. Yellow fabric may be seen billowing from within. The moat on the other hand, seems to have disappeared. By the 1980s, it had lost its shelter completely, though a fenced and gated boundary guards it. Then, by the 1990s, it had received the pavilion-like architecture we see today. Who knows, another decade, it might change again.

²⁶⁹ Roland Braddell, *The Lights of Singapore*, 57

This thesis looked at the *keramat* graves through the methodology of the lives of objects. This prevents prioritising the moment of creation of these objects which are ever-changing and ever-transforming, and are still being worshipped and cared for by communities that may be vastly different from the ones that built them. As Davis warns, when focusing on “material creation, this perspective has the effect of restricting our sense of the meaningful possibilities of an object and it draws our attention away from the object’s participation on the ongoing social life of its communities.”²⁷⁰ This approach suggested by Davis is also useful because, many of the *keramat* graves have gone through so many renovations, they may have very few materials upon them, which were present when they were built.²⁷¹ The *keramat* graves we have looked at in this thesis, through their form and materiality, manage to influence the way they were approached by their communities of responses. This in turn, may affect and transform their appearances and their lives. They can thus be argued to exhibit a level of agency—“secondary agents”, as Gell describes it²⁷²—in their identity making, their relationships with their worshippers and their location, and their ability to grow and change.

Keramat graves are objects with multiple identities. Grave. *Makam*. *Keramat* grave. These identities are rarely fixed. Some people—a number in the Muslim community—may deny these graves their identities as *keramat*. Yet this does not mean they cannot be *keramat* graves to others. As explained earlier in this thesis, the *keramat* grave’s identity is one that is very dependent on the person—and communities of responses—approaching the grave and their relationship to it. Yet these graves are not passive in their identity making. The first and obvious way is to make miracles. However, they also employ their form and materiality to persuade these communities to approach them in some ways and not others, ways reserved for sacred objects. These forms also sometimes serve the sacredness of graves, much like how many religious buildings and architecture

²⁷⁰ Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 263.

²⁷¹ Miksic describes how “All traces of ancient architecture, including those [of Keramat Iskandar Shah] which Crawford saw [in the 1930s], have been obliterated.” Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea*, 219.

²⁷² Gell, *Art and Agency*.

would function to separate the sacred from the profane, allowing worshippers to navigate and approach some of these graves much like these said religious buildings and architecture.

The lives of *keramat* graves are lives full of vital relationships. They built relationships with their location, which supports and legitimises their sacredness. They in turn, sometimes accumulate the sacredness of their locations, using elements of the place as part of their worship. And trees may become altars. In many occasions, the fate of the location is the fate of the *keramat* graves, so they are bound and married to each other. Land development is one of the biggest risks to *keramat* graves, so if the land is to be converted for housing, the graves may be destroyed. This thesis could only briefly explore the dynamic between *keramat* graves and governmentally led land development and reclamation. However, there is room for further research into this; why some *keramat* graves have evaded exhumation or demolition for the country's progress, besides magically preventing them. Understanding how these *keramat* graves managed to accomplish this may help save them from future and similar threats, and ultimately, aid their conservation and that of the practice of *keramat* grave worship.

However, the relationship which keeps the *keramat* graves relevant and still existing is the relationships they have with their worshippers and visitors. This is the relationship, through the rituals and offerings from the worshippers, that not only retains the identity of these graves as *keramat* graves but also contribute to their change, growth and renewal. They may go through numerous changes physically from these offerings. By being open to many tools of worship and worshippers from many ethnic and religious backgrounds, the *keramat* graves ensure that their worshippers are not limited to a specific community. This also allows them to become spaces of interreligious and intercultural interaction, instead of a sacred space or architecture, like mosques, which are utilised by only a single religious community. This thesis pulls research and knowledge on multiple cultures and beliefs, in hopes of better understanding the complexity of *keramat* grave worship.

In doing so, it suggests that *keramat* grave worship is part of larger traditions such as grave worship in Southeast Asia and the Islamic world. I hope this thesis adds to, or spurs, future research on religious spaces that are shared by numerous communities of responses.

While this thesis focuses mainly on the *keramat* graves themselves, there is room for future research focusing on the relationships between these graves and their many communities of responses, through the perspective of their worshippers; one I hope to embark following this study, and which may span a few years, so as to be able to also determine any decline or increase in the number of worshippers at each grave. It would involve more fieldwork to conduct deeper and fuller surveys and interviews with the worshippers. Throughout my research, especially at Keramat Kusu Island, where wishes are written visibly and easily read, I cannot help but wonder about the lives of these worshipper-wishers. What are the circumstances and backgrounds of their lives that are determining their wishes and desires, and their devotion to these *keramat* graves? Do they only visit a specific *keramat* grave or do they visit a few? How did they enter this tradition of *keramat* grave worship? Was the practice inherited? Are they passing it down to another generation? A study focused on these people, with a more social and ethnographic approach may help address these questions. This would also include a documentation of as many, if not all, of the written wishes found on Keramat Kusu Island, to provide a survey of the different concerns of the different people who worship there. There have been studies done from the perspective of *keramat* grave worshippers.²⁷³ They have managed to explore some of these areas. However, they rarely explore how *keramat* grave worshippers interact with other worshippers from different cultural or religious backgrounds to them, when sharing these graves as objects of worship. I hope to also explore their personal beliefs and religious interpretations—both Muslims and non-Muslims—and possibly plot a—or a series of—coherent cosmologies of *keramat*

²⁷³ Isahak's research only looks at the Singapore Muslim community and *keramat* grave worship, and avoids looking at the non-Muslim worshippers of these graves. Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions*.

grave worship, or a series of them. How does the *keramat* grave fit into the belief system, of say a Taoist Chinese worshipper? Once again, this may contribute to understandings on interreligious sacred spaces and how they operate. Also, while this thesis is concerned largely with the role of *keramat* grave worshippers as religious art makers and contributors to the identities of these graves, there is still room to consider other roles they may also fill, such as patrons and donors.

The *keramat* graves have other relationships, unable to be addressed in this thesis, that deserve exploration. There is a group of people who need more recognition when studying *keramat* graves. I for one wished I could have included them more in this thesis, and tried to whenever possible and relevant. They are the caretakers of the *keramat* graves. Very little has been done in studying and researching this very unique vocation. Many of them serve these *keramat* graves voluntarily. Some inherited the role from the previous generations in their families. Some work tirelessly to raise funds for renovations of their *keramat* graves. Yet, they often function more than just people who upkeep these sites. They sometimes guide and advise worshippers, especially on prohibitions. I hope this would also lead to research into the craft and vocation of caretakers of other small shrines in Singapore.

Keramat graves sometimes have interesting relationships with certain animals as well. This is something I hope to delve into in future research into the topic. Pigeons, for example, are found in many of the *keramat* graves, often in flocks.²⁷⁴ There are often flocks of pigeons near Keramat Habib Nuh. It is believed that pigeons flock to graves of *awliya*.²⁷⁵ Keramat Iskandar Shah too has its own flock, often roosting within the shelter of the *keramat* grave. Besides pigeons, other animals too seem to be found near these graves. The caretaker of Keramat Bukit Kasita cares for stray cats and they often seem to patrol the area of the *keramat* graves. This seems to be reminiscent of the story of the three-legged tiger which

²⁷⁴ Yahya, "Singapore's Keramats," 16.

²⁷⁵ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 44.

once protected Keramat Radin Mas Ayu.²⁷⁶ Other than the feline and avian, there was a cobra that was said to have fed off the offerings of Keramat Maliki, which was once located at Siglap, Singapore.²⁷⁷

The study of *keramat* graves in Singapore, or even in the Malay world, through the lens of art history still has avenues for possibilities, by adding to what has already been worked on, but this time, with a focus on form, materiality and objectness. For example, relationships between *keramat* graves and maritime histories and the Indian Ocean have already been suggested. However, comparing the visual and material similarities of the shape, form, locations and offerings of venerated or worshipped Islamic graves—*keramat* graves and even *dargahs*—found along maritime routes, including those in Singapore, may add weight to these perspectives.

It has to be addressed however, that not enough work has been done to examine the *keramat* grave's place in the study of post-colonial and even contemporary Singapore. *The Sufi and the Bearded Man* is an example of such a rare approach.²⁷⁸ I hope this thesis, in looking at the lives of the *keramat* graves and their relationships with the land and their worshippers have added to this endeavour as well. The *keramat* grave's seemingly lack of attention in the histories of Singapore may be due to several reasons. The first is the government's large focus on "economic and practical viability", specifically tourism, when it comes to heritage and its conservation,²⁷⁹ where "essentialist notions of ethnicity" are often employed "to translated heritage sites into commodities of cultural tourism."²⁸⁰ This is especially visible in the conservation of heritage spaces like Kampong Glam, Chinatown and Little India, where these districts have been

²⁷⁶ Ibrahim Tahir, *A Village Remembered*, 166.

²⁷⁷ Yahya, "Singapore's Keramats," 16.

²⁷⁸ Sevea, Mustafa and Rashid, *The Sufi and the Bearded Man*.

²⁷⁹ Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Lau Wei Peng, "Historic District, Contemporary Meanings: Urban Conservation and the Creation and Consumption of Landscape Spectacle in Tanjong Pagar," *Portraits of Places: History, Community, and Identity in Singapore*, eds. Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Lily Kong (Singapore: Times Editions Pte Ltd, 1995), 51; Imran Bin Tajudeen, "State Constructs of Ethnicity in the Reinvention of Malay-Indonesian Heritage in Singapore," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlement Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2007).

²⁸⁰ Tajudeen, "State Constructs of Ethnicity," 9.

“divided according to ethnic themes”²⁸¹; Malay, Chinese and Indian, respectively. Such endeavours inevitably remove nuance and diversity that were present at these spaces. Traces of the influences of the Chinese community in Geylang Serai, for example, have been avoided for a simpler and more homogenous and less multicultural representation of the area as a Malay district.²⁸² This is then marketed as such, for the consumption of tourists.²⁸³ However, to put *keramat* graves within singular ethnic or even religious themes may prove difficult, as they are spaces with worshippers from different ethnic and religious communities. Even if it is decided that, since it a tradition found in the Malay world and the word *keramat* is Malay, that the ownership is given to the Malay community, this might raise further problems. The Malay community is largely a Muslim one, as and mentioned earlier, MUIS and many in the Muslim community are opposed to the practice of *keramat* grave worship and so they may not be open to this ownership or be connected to something they view as heretical. On top of that, to do so would be to disregard the non-Muslim worshippers, which, at sites like Keramat Kusu Island, seem to have more presence than the Muslim ones.

The lack of attention from such conservation efforts—albeit problematic ones—does not help in the prevention of future demolition of *keramat* graves in Singapore. However, some may find this a lesser of two evils. The caretaker of Keramat Kusu Island had told me he does not wish for government organizations like the National Heritage Board to be interfere or be involved with the *keramat* graves, and this includes conservation efforts. Lily Kong, while speaking with Hindu worshippers discovered that some of them are not in favor of their temples being used as heritage sites for tourist attractions, as they feel this undermines the sanctity of the space.²⁸⁴ This could be views also shared by

²⁸¹ Tajudeen, “State Constructs of Ethnicity,” 9.

²⁸² Tajudeen, “State Constructs of Ethnicity,” 24.

²⁸³ However, intentions aside, such endeavors might not prove successful as it seems, tourists tend to avoid spaces like the Malay Village at Geylang Serai. Tajudeen, “State Constructs of Ethnicity,” 22.

²⁸⁴ Lily Kong, “Negotiating Conceptions of 'Sacred Space': A Case Study of Religious Buildings in Singapore,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1993): 347-348.

the *keramat* grave caretakers and worshippers as well. The caretaker of Keramat Bukit Kasita, for example, is extremely vigilant about the people she lets in to approach the *keramat* graves, constantly making sure no one photographs anything. Such resistance to tourism or the treatment of *keramat* graves as an attraction, may have led these sites to be visible only to their worshippers or those in the know.

As Imran Tajudeen points out, conservation efforts to preserve places like Kampong Glam have obscured some of its more important historical significance for a simpler representation of the culture of the space. For example, at the Istana Kampong Glam, now the Malay Heritage Centre, “shelter was provided by the royal household for the wounded during World War II”.²⁸⁵ Such historical significance can only be rediscovered through research and study. Keramat graves may benefit from such work, to ascertain their place not only in Singapore’s national history and narratives, but local, neighborhood and alternative ones, as these are just as important.

As for the contemporary significance of *keramat* graves in Singapore, and how they can economically and practically viable, especially when it comes to tourism, I would argue a change of perspective may be useful here. Firstly, let us not assume that *keramat* graves have never been part of the tourism culture here in Singapore in the traditional sense. In the collection of the National Museum of Singapore are several postcards from the early twentieth century and from the 1960s-1970s featuring Keramat Habib Nuh (Fig. 40, 41 and 42). These charming souvenirs must have been purchased by tourists of that time. Secondly, yearly, Keramat Habib Nuh (during the *haul* of Habib Nuh) and Keramat Kusu Island (during its pilgrimage period) receive thousands of worshippers from many other countries.²⁸⁶ Through these *keramat* graves, Singapore could begin considering

²⁸⁵ Tajudeen, “State Constructs of Ethnicity,” 20.

²⁸⁶ According to the Singapore Land Authority, thousands of devotees partake in the Kusu Island pilgrimage, which includes worshipping at both the Island’s temple and Keramat Kusu Island. The 2017 Haul for Habib Nuh, on the other hand, had attracted over 7000 people. Audrey Tan, “Keeping alive Kusu Island pilgrimage.”

religious tourism as part of its tourism initiatives, and the graves in turn, may see another day to change and grow.

Keramat Iskandar Shah is possibly the oldest *keramat* grave in Singapore. Yet it has outlived many of the younger ones. It even survived attempts by the Raffles Museum in 1921 to “open” it.²⁸⁷ However, such inspiring fate is not meant for all the *keramat* graves, it seems. In April 2010, the *keramat* grave of Siti Maryam was exhumed and removed from its home in Kallang, Singapore.²⁸⁸ Other *keramat* graves too seemed to have disappeared from Singapore or have been forgotten. Keramat Panjang. Keramat Siti Khatijah. Keramat Sayid Yasin. Keramat Syed Ismail. Keramat Maliki.²⁸⁹ Who knows, which one will be next. Yet with the possibility of destruction, there is a possibility of creation. As shown in this thesis, there are many things that may contribute to a grave being conferred the identity of a *keramat* grave, from the right individual being buried beneath it, the right location and proximity to nature and water, to its flow of worshippers and the miracles it may offer them. P.J. Rivers, in his wonderful study of *keramat* graves, mentions “new” *keramat* graves “sprouting”.²⁹⁰ So, who knows, in the future, Singapore may find itself being home to another new *keramat* grave, one whose life is just beginning.

The Straits Times, November 9, 2017, accessed November 20, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/keeping-alive-kusu-island-pilgrimage>; Masjid Haji Muhammad Salleh @ Maqam Habib Noh. 2017. Facebook, January 30, 2017.

<https://www.facebook.com/imosque.sg/posts/10155098199890992>

²⁸⁷ In 1922, the Raffles Museum had received permission to “open the old Malay tomb” however they were unable to find brave enough contractors who would do it. “Raffles Museum,” *Malaya Tribune*, October 31, 1922, 2.

²⁸⁸ Sevea, “Listening to Leaves,” 11.

²⁸⁹ These are just a few examples. Many from the impressive list of *keramat* graves in Singapore that P.J. Rivers had compiled, I have been unable to locate or have been removed. The locations of Keramat Panjang and Keramat Khatijah, which used to be in close proximity to each other, for example, are now condominiums. Rivers, “Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century.”

²⁹⁰ Rivers, “Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century,” 117.

IMAGES



Fig. 1. Exterior of Keramat Habib Nuh at Mount Palmer.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 2. Keramat Habib Nuh at Mount Palmer.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 3. Keramat Sharifah Rogayah at Duxton Plain Park, Outram.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 4. Keramat Iskandar Shah at Fort Canning.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 5. Exterior of Keramat Radin Mas Ayu at Mount Faber.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 6. Keramat Radin Mas Ayu at Mount Faber.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 7. Keramat Kusu Island at Kusu Island. I
images © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 8. Illustration of Keramat Bukit Kasita at Bukit Purmei.
Image © 2018, Faisal Husni. Illustrator: Shirin Rafie.



Fig. 9. Keramat Tok Lasam at Siglap. Based on the shapes of the *baut nisan*, we can infer that the grave on the right is that of Tok Lasam and the one on the left is that of his wife.

Image © 2018, Faisal Husni.



Fig. 10. The grave of Syed Abdul Rahman at Keramat Kusu Island.

Images © 2018, Faisal Husni



Fig. 11. The graves of Nenek Ghalib (left) and Puteri Sharifah Fatimah (right) at Keramat Kusu Island.

Images © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 12. Offerings of stones in plastic bags, tied to the architecture of Keramat Kusu Island shelter. Wishes of the worshippers have been written on the bags.

Images © 2017, Peh Yang Yu



Fig. 13. Detail of Keramat Habib Nuh, with flower offerings.
Image © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 14. Detail of Keramat Habib Nuh, with flower offerings.
Image © 2018 Faisal Husni



Fig. 15. Detail of Keramat Habib Nuh, with flower offerings.
Image © 2018 Faisal Husni



Fig. 16. Keramat Sharifah Rogayah at Duxton Plain Park, Outram.

Image © 2018, Faisal Husni

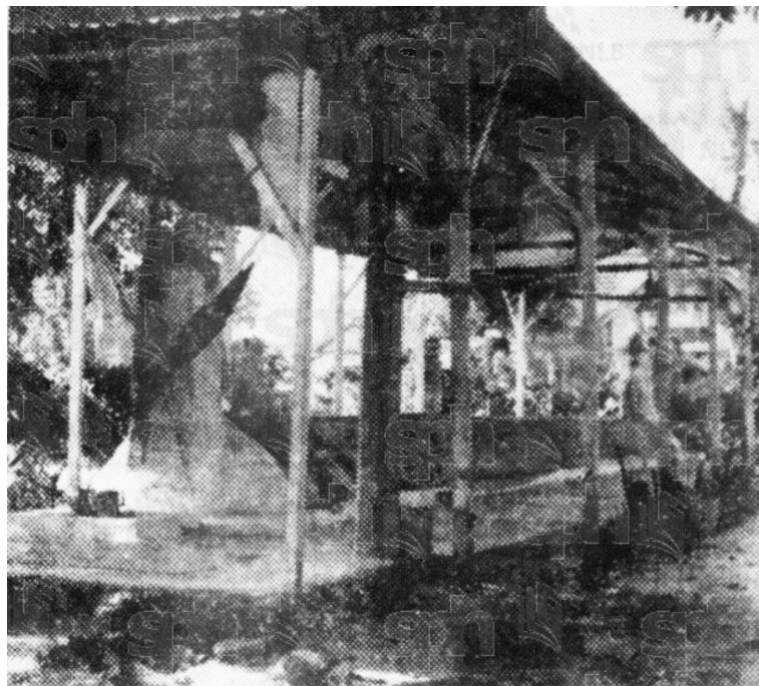


Fig. 17. A 1959 Photograph of Keramat Panjang at Ringwood Road.

Source: Hammonds, Kenneth, "Riddle of S'pore's 40 ft.-long grave," *The Singapore Free Press*, 13 July, 1959, 4, NewspaperSg, accessed on August 19, 2018,

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/freepress19590713-1.2.49,>



Fig. 18, Grave of Syed Abdul Rahman at Keramat Kusu Island.

Images © 2017, Faisal Husni

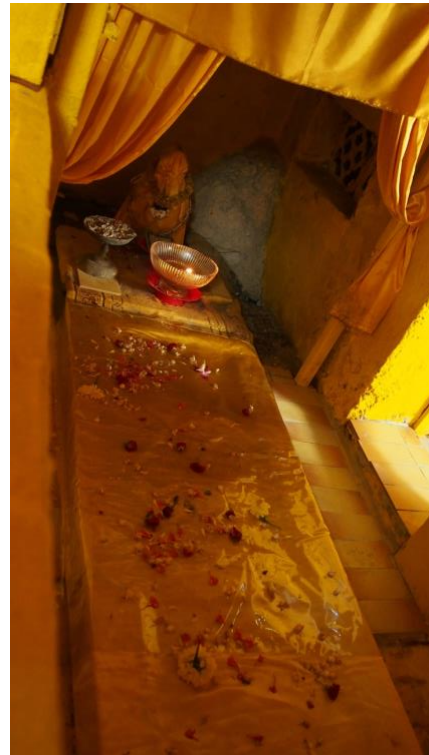


Fig. 19 and Fig. 20. The graves of Nenek Ghalib (left) and Puteri Sharifah Fatimah(right) at Keramat Kusu Island.

Images © 2017, Faisal Husni.



Fig. 21. Keramat Iskandar Shah at Fort Canning.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni.

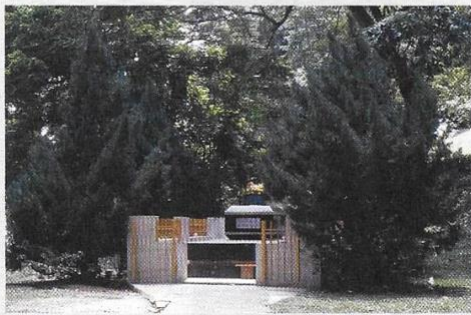
Keramat Iskandar Shah



0.08 1950s



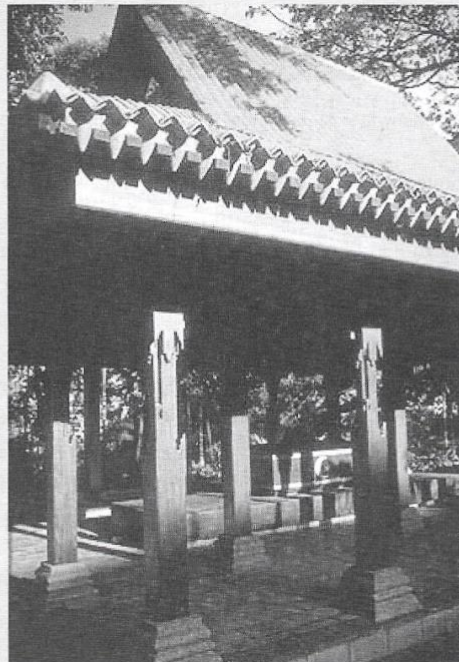
0.09 1960s



0.10 1980s



0.11 1990s



0.12 2008

Fig. 22. A series of photographs of Keramat Iskandar Shah over the years, from *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300-1800* by John Miksic.

Source: John N. Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300-1800*. Singapore: NUS Press and National Museum of Singapore, 2013.



Fig. 23. Detail of Keramat Habib Nuh, with flower offerings.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni

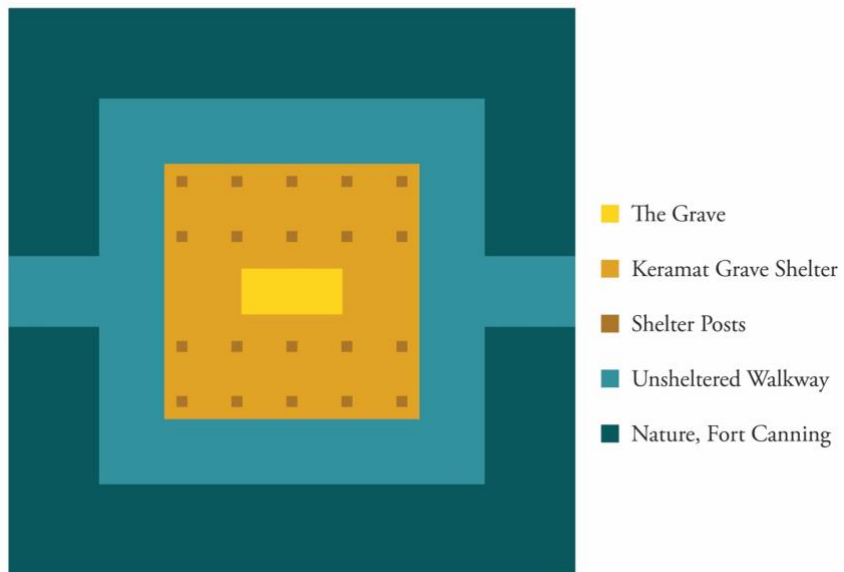


Fig. 24. Illustration of spaces formed by and around the Keramat Iskandar Shah, creating layers of sacred boundaries. Image © 2017, Faisal Husni

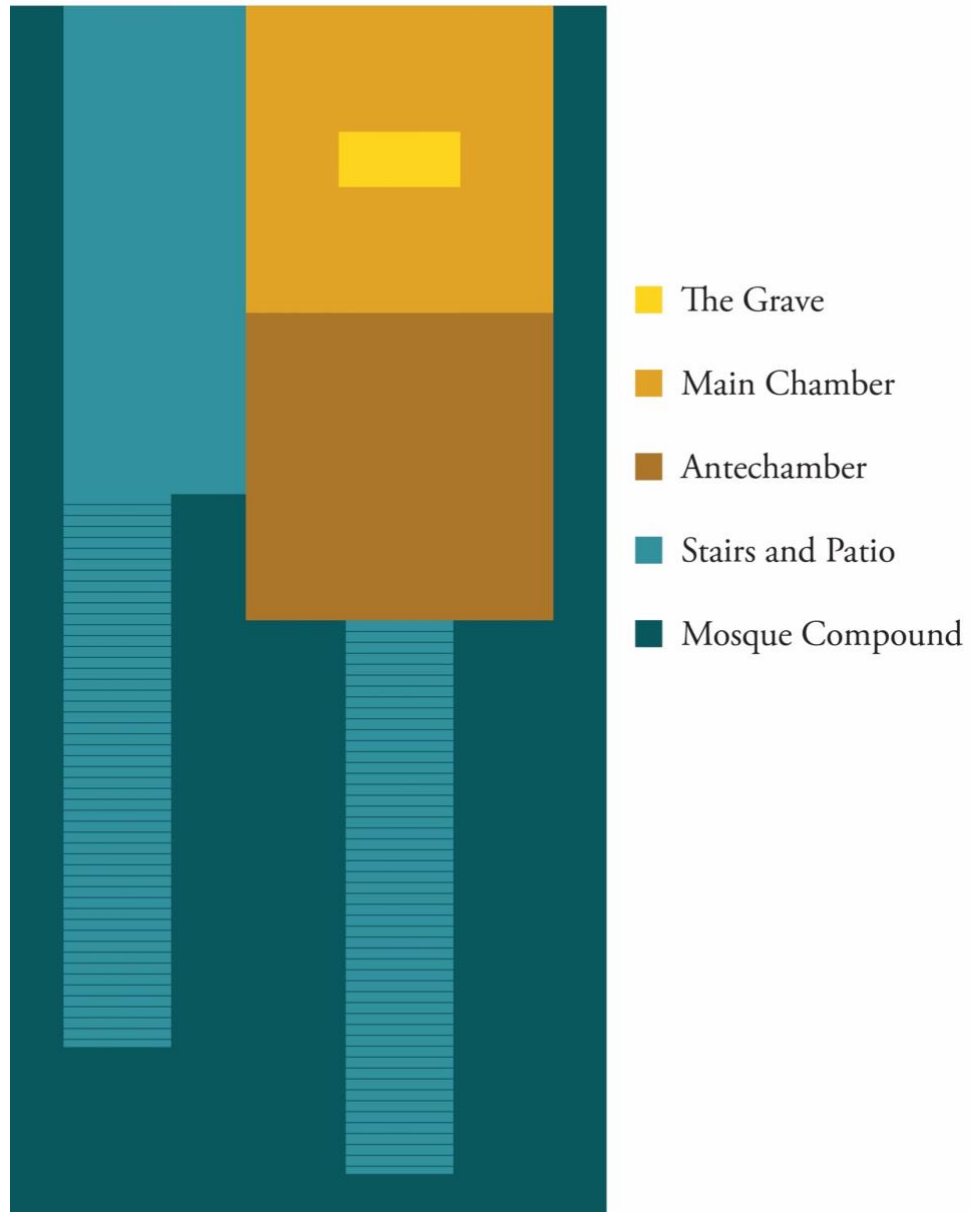


Fig. 25. Illustration of spaces formed by and around the Keramat Habib Nuh, creating layers of sacred boundaries.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 26. Exterior of Keramat Radin Mas Ayu at Mount Faber.
Image © 2017, Faisal Husni.



Fig. 27. Still from the 1959 film *Raden Mas*, by director, L. Krishnan.
Source: *Raden Mas*. VCD. Directed by L. Krishnan. Singapore : Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd. : Comstar, 2003.



Fig. 28. Interior of Keramat Radin Mas Ayu from a still from the 1959 film *Raden Mas*, by director, L. Krishnan.
Source: ed LOkfc. "Filem Melayu Klasik (Latifah Omar) RADEN MAS (1959) Full Movie." YouTube Video, 1:56:09. March 27, 2015.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7qQ5ffHo8w&feature=youtu.be>



Fig. 29. Offerings on branches of trees around Keramat Kusu Island.
Images © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 30. Offerings on branches of trees around Keramat Kusu Island.
Images © 2017, Faisal Husni



Remaining Keramat Graves:

- 1 Keramat Iskandar Shah
- 2 Keramat Sharifah Rogayah
- 3 Keramat Habib Nuh
- 4 Keramat Bukit Kasita
- 5 Keramat Radin Mas Ayu
- 6 Keramat Kusu Island
- 7 Keramat Tok Lasam
- 8 Keramat Sheik Ali

Demolished Keramat Graves:

- 1 Keramat Siti Mariam
- 2 Keramat Habib Syed Ismail
- 3 Keramat Panjang & Keramat Katijah

--- Singapore Shoreline Before Land Reclamation

Fig. 31. The locations of the *keramat* graves in Singapore. Note that there are a few still to be determined to either still be around or have been demolished. This is an ongoing endeavour.

Base map image source: Google My Maps. (2017). *Google My Maps*. [online] Accessed on May 8, 2017. Available at: <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1XVz3Pg0pcbQSGJewsVmiT2Rsi-w&ll=1.34753270500374%2C103.76766560179158&cz=12>



Fig. 32. Writings on exterior or Keramat Kusu Island.

Images © 2018, Faisal Husni



Fig. 33. Details of writings on exterior or Keramat Kusu Island.

Images © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 34. Writings on railings leading up to Keramat Kusu Island.
Images © 2018, Faisal Husni



Fig. 35. Steps leading up to Keramat Kusu Island.
Images © 2018, Faisal Husni



Fig. 36. Flowers at Keramat Radin Mas Ayu.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 37. A tin can used as a joss stick vessel, and a PVC pipe used as a flower holder, at Keramat Sharifah Rogayah.

Image © 2017, Faisal Husni



Fig. 38. Offerings of stones in plastic bags, tied to the architecture of Keramat Kusu Island shelter. Wishes of the worshippers have been written on the bags.

Images © 2017, Faisal Husni.



Fig. 39. A photograph of the bridge and moat at Keramat Iskandar Shah from *The Lights of Singapore* by Roland Braddell, first published in 1934.

Source: Roland Braddell, *The Lights of Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Oxford University Press, 1982).

Image courtesy of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, Singapore.



Fig. 40. A postcard from the early twentieth century, depicting Keramat Habib Nuh, in the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

Image: Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board



Fig. 41. A postcard from the 1960s-1970s, depicting Keramat Habib Nuh, in the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

Image: Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board



Fig. 42. A postcard from the 1960s, depicting Keramat Habib Nuh, in the Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

Image: Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

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APPENDIX A

THE INTERRED: AN EXPLORATION OF THE CATEGORIES OF INDIVIDUALS BURIED AT THE KERAMAT GRAVES IN SINGAPORE

As explored earlier in the thesis, the identities of *keramat* graves in this study as a ‘*makam*’ and a ‘*keramat* graves’ are dependent on many things. One of them is the individuals buried beneath the graves. This appendix to the thesis will discuss further the different categories of individuals whose graves have been considered *keramat* graves or *makam* in Singapore, which had been referred to in the main thesis. They include *awliya*, royalities, community leaders or village founders, individuals who suffered violent deaths or martyrs, and miraculous corpses. This appendix will also explore the different traditions and beliefs that may have contributed to the veneration of these categories of individuals. In doing so, it hopes to show why their graves have been conferred the identities of *makam* and *keramat* graves.

i. Wali

One of the groups of individuals whose graves in the Malay world that have been considered *makam* or *keramat* are *awliya*. As explained in the thesis introduction, a *wali* (plural, *awliya*), sometimes referred to as *wali* Allah, is a saint-like figure in the Islamic tradition. They are believed to be closer to God than ordinary mortals. This is probably also connected to the fact that the word *wali* also means friend,²⁹¹ so, the term “*wali* Allah” would mean, friend of God. *Awliya* are figures that appear all over the Islamic world and tradition, and some of them have been known to have lived in Singapore. They are figures of great piety and because of this, they serve as “the conduit through which the barakat [blessings]

²⁹¹ *Oxford Arabic Dictionary*, 910.

of Allah is transmitted.”²⁹² This allows for the *awliya* to be capable of acts of miracles, often in service of the community.

One of the most famous *wali* of Singapore is Habib Nuh²⁹³ bin Muhammad Al Habshi, whose grave or *makam*, is the Keramat Habib Nuh. He was born in 1788 in either Penang or Kedah.²⁹⁴ However, a version of the tale of his birth involved a touch of the miraculous. It tells of how his parents were aboard a ship when his pregnant mother went into labour. This coincided with a forming of a storm that threatened the ship and its passengers. His mother pleaded to the Lord to save them while his father made a vow to name his child Nuh, in honour of the flood-surviving prophet Nuh. The storm subsided upon the birth of the child.²⁹⁵ From then on, his life was embroidered with miracles. He grew up in Penang and migrated to Singapore in 1819, where he lived for 47 years.²⁹⁶ He was a figure who was often described as generous, compassionate and occasionally eccentric.²⁹⁷ He was also known for imparting religious knowledge and giving advice to members of his community, a teacher, for want of a better word.²⁹⁸ His immense piety also manifested in his religious rituals. For example, he would visit “Muslim graveyards in the middle of the night and there would recite the holy verses of the Qur’an there until daybreak.”²⁹⁹ Another fascinating characteristic of Habib Nuh was his appearance. He was sometimes seen walking about daily shirtless, contrary to what one would expect a divinely-touched person to look like, and viewed as being of “unsound mind.”³⁰⁰ He passed away in 1866 and a *makam* was built at the top of Mount Palmer, a spot he was known to have gone to perform *kehalwat*, a form of worship “by means of invocations (*dzikir*) and contemplation, in seclusion.”³⁰¹

²⁹² Newby, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, 211.

²⁹³ Sometimes spelled, “Habib Noh”.

²⁹⁴ This contradiction was explained as being due to the fact that Penang was under the rule of the Sultan of Kedah. Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 30.

²⁹⁵ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 30.

²⁹⁶ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 33.

²⁹⁷ He was famously known for taking sweets and money from shops, then giving them away to children and the less fortunate. Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 33.

²⁹⁸ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 33.

²⁹⁹ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 33.

³⁰⁰ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 34.

³⁰¹ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 34.

His hagiography is also filled with examples of his miracles, and they are plenty. One of the most famous of his *karamah* was to be able to, to put it simply, teleport. He was able to travel instantaneously to Mecca for every Friday prayer and travel back home the same way after.³⁰² Another famous *karamah* of his was his ability to walk on water.³⁰³ He was also capable of healing the sick. An example of this was a story of how he healed a child's broken leg with prayers and holy verses. There are many other examples of stories that link accounts of his gifts from god and his habit for charity, because through him the grace of the Lord touches others, and that seems to be the nature of *karamah*. And there are other amazing tales, from walking through prison walls to bringing rain through prayer.³⁰⁴

Considering all these examples of his *karamah*, it is no wonder that his grave is not only considered a *makam* but also a *keramat*. In fact, many of the roles of providing impossible and miraculous assistance he had offered his community, is now inherited by his *keramat* grave. People are still, for example, visiting his *keramat* grave to be healed of illnesses, much like those who had gone to him when he was alive.

Another example of a *keramat* grave of a *wali* within this study is Keramat Syed Abdul Rahman, which is one of the three *keramat* graves making up Keramat Kusu Island. There is no singular version of the life of Syed Abdul Rahman. However, more than one source agree that he was an ascetic. One version describes how he and a Chinese ascetic had travelled to the island, now known as Kusu Island. When the Chinese ascetic found himself hungry, Syed Abdul Rahman, simply gestured to the sampan they had travelled on, upon which food had miraculously appeared. And when they decided to return mainland upon the sampan, the vessel travelled without needing them to row. The two would return to the island numerous times, assumedly for meditation or religious purposes.³⁰⁵ Syed Abdul

³⁰² Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 38.

³⁰³ Rivers "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century."

³⁰⁴ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 37-45.

³⁰⁵ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 107.

Rahman is believed to have died on island in 1816³⁰⁶ and his grave now sits at the peak of the island's hill along with those of his mother, Nenek Ghalib and his sister³⁰⁷, Puteri Sharifah Fatimah.³⁰⁸

The status of *wali* can be conferred on both men and women. While their existence is even sometimes denied,³⁰⁹ there are accounts of female *awliya* within the Islamic world, some whose graves are considered *makam* and even *keramat*. There are sadly very few examples remaining of *keramat* graves of female *awliya* in Singapore. One of the last was that of Siti Maryam Al-Aydarus, who died in 1854. It was exhumed in 2010. In the publication for *The Sufi and the Bearded Man*, Sevea describes how Siti Maryam had been viewed in her lifetime:

“... throughout the historical memory of Siti Maryam's life, she figures as the magical healer of illnesses, facilitator of healthy climate or weather, securer of employment and trade and markets, and protector of various groups such as fishermen, sailors, travellers and coastal communities in Singapore, Malaya and the Nusantara (Indonesia) through interceding with God on their behalf through her 'sea knowledge.'”³¹⁰

Other examples beyond the Malay world include Rabi'a al Adawiyya, who is renowned for her immense piety, asceticism, and was once a slave; a reminder that anyone may become a *wali*.³¹¹ Sharifah Rogayah, who died in 1891,³¹² is considered a *wali* by many and her *keramat* grave—Keramat Sharifah Rogayah—is one of the last remaining Singapore *keramat* graves which are of female *awliya*. Unlike her grandfather, Habib Nuh, she does not possess laborious hagiographies and stories

³⁰⁶ This is difficult to determine. Rivers included a question mark after 1816. Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 107.

³⁰⁷ Rivers interestingly states that Sharifah Fatimah was Syed Abdul Rahman's Daughter, instead of Sister, while most other sources state that she was his sister. Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 107.

³⁰⁸ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 107.

³⁰⁹ Many in the Muslim community, especially in Singapore, are of the opinion or belief that only men can transcend to become a *wali*. However, numerous examples of women throughout history that have been considered *awliya* disagrees with this.

³¹⁰ Sevea, "Listening to Leaves," 12-14.

³¹¹ There are numerous tales of the miracles decorating her life. One describes how, on her way to Mecca, the Ka'ba had met her halfway into her journey. Margaret Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics: The Life and Work of Rabi'a and other Women Mystics in Islam*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001).

³¹² Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 33.

about her life. We simply know her as his granddaughter. In fact, as mentioned in the thesis, the identity of the person buried beneath the grave has been up for debate, with a few sources claiming her body is laid to rest elsewhere.³¹³ Yet stories retold by visitors and worshippers, along with plaque upon the grave with the words “Shrine of Sharifah Rogayah” challenge these claims, ensuring the *keramat* grave still continues showing signs of being worshipped.

While Syed Abdul Rahman, Habib Nuh and Sharifah Rogayah are widely accepted to be *awliya*, the status of *wali* or the process of being given the title, is not simple and sometimes unclear. Unlike canonization of saints in the Christian tradition, there is no clear process and recognition when it comes to *awliya*. Yet it seems, there will often be, like the two first examples, sufficient consensus among members of the community—in this case, the Muslim community in Singapore—that may establish these figures as *awliya*. That said, sometimes it is difficult to determine if the accolade is given during the person’s lifetime or posthumously. This process of elevation of status is very similar to—or could even account for—the way the identity of *keramat* is given to *keramat* graves. It is highly dependent on the communities approaching these graves to provide the identity of *keramat* and continuing to acknowledge this to ensure the identity persists.

The tradition of *wali* worship or veneration exists in many parts of the Islamic world. The shrine or *dargah* of the Shahul Hamid Nagori in Nagore, India is one such example.³¹⁴ Yet even within certain Islamic bureaucracies and a portion of the Islamic communities, especially those in Singapore, there are some who find this practice potentially idolatrous, and in contradiction with their interpretations of Islam.³¹⁵ Despite this, however, the tradition undeniably exists. The examples of such traditions in the Malay World—such as the famous *keramat* graves of the Wali Songo in Java—confirm this as well. Many credit Sufism for the proliferation of *wali* worship across the Islamic world as it introduced the practice through a

³¹³ Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 33.

³¹⁴ Asher, “The Sufi Shrines of Shahul Hamid in India and Southeast Asia.”

³¹⁵ Müller, “The Bureaucratization of Islam.”

“belief that “the saints of god die not, they merely depart from one habitation to another.””³¹⁶ Richard Winstedt suggests that the Islamic “worship of saints [in the Malay world] countenanced the continuance of time-hollowed offerings at the graves of ancestor, ruler and teacher”, a practice that had already existed in the region before the introduction of Islam.³¹⁷ It needs to be noted, that the worship and reverence of saint-like figures or pious individuals does not only occur within Islam and Sufism. In Thailand, there is a Buddhist tradition of worshipping the relics of renown monks, who, just like *awliya* of the Islamic world, are known to be capable of astounding miracles.³¹⁸ An example is the monk, Somdet To, who was known to be able to heal the sick and close wounds, and many still believe his amulets are also capable of miracle workings,³¹⁹ much like Habib Nuh and his *keramat* grave. This universal tradition—to worship extremely pious and saint-like deceased—which exists in many cultures, could account for why *keramat* grave worship, especially of the graves of *awliya* in Singapore, are practised by not only the Muslim community, but also other religious communities such as the Hindu and Buddhist communities.

ii. Royalty and Community Leaders

The graves of royalties are extremely important in the Malay world and are often considered as *makam*. Some are also considered *keramat* and are worshipped or asked of wishes from. The grave of Sultan Iskandar Shah, for example is considered a *makam* and *keramat* grave. The fourteenth-century ruler was the last of five kings of Singapore³²⁰ and was described in the Malay Annals as being the son of Paduka Sri Maharaja, the king connected to the tale of the *Attack of the*

³¹⁶ John A. Subhan, *Sufism: Its Saints and Shrines: An Introduction to the Study of Sufism with Special Reference to India* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1938), 106.

³¹⁷ Richard Winstedt, "Indian Influence in the Malay World," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 2 (1944): 191.

³¹⁸ Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*.

³¹⁹ McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*.

³²⁰ John N. Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea*, 219.

Swordfish.³²¹ His reign was significant to the “evolution of Malay culture because Islam was introduced” to it during this period.³²²

As previously mentioned, Winstedt suggested that there were pre-existing traditions of “leaving offerings” at the graves of rulers, before the spread of Islam to the Malay world. He proposes that it could be connected to the Hindu belief of the divinity of kings; possibly the concept of the *devaraja*.³²³ It has been argued that, with the propagation of Islam, this Hindu concept of *devaraja*, in the Malay world was replaced with a similar concept of kingship being blessed by God or Allah.³²⁴ Just like the worship and reverence of holy and pious individuals, the worship of royalties is not unique to Hinduism or the Malay Culture. It has been suggested that the worship of King Chulalongkorn in Thailand, is a form of *devaraja* worship.³²⁵ I posit, as with the earlier example, this universal form of worship—royalties as the focus of the worship—allowed for *keramat* graves of royalties to be worshipped by communities of different beliefs and cultural backgrounds.

Apart from simply a religious or religious-led reverence that may lead to the worship of the graves of rulers such as Sultan Iskandar Shah, a sense of cultural pride within the Malay community may also have a role to play in the tradition persisting. In an interview with one of the caretakers of Keramat Iskandar Shah, at Fort Canning, on 31st January 2018, I couldn't help but be aware of the pride he felt for this Malay King of Singapore, crediting the monarch for the “opening up” of Singapore to the rest of the world. Whether factual or not, I gathered his aim was to reclaim the Malay agency in the making of Singapore, in a post-colonial—maybe even anti-colonial—effort. The issue of race and ethnicity is a difficult topic in Singapore, and its population often walk a fine line between homogeneity and ethnic/racial/cultural identity, the line referred to as racial harmony. So, it would be unsurprising if some

³²¹ *Sejarah Melayu: The Malay Annals (Trans by Dr John Leyden)* (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2012), 56-59.

³²² Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea*, 153.

³²³ Winstedt stated how some Malay royalties were approached and treated much like Hindu deities. Winstedt, “Indian Influence in the Malay World,” 186-196.

³²⁴ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, “The Impact of Sufism on Muslims in Pre-colonial Malaysia,” 485.

³²⁵ Peter A. Jackson, “Royal spirits, Chinese gods, and magic monks: Thailand's boom-time religions of prosperity,” *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1999): 245-320.

from the Malay community—an ethnic minority community—would revere or even worship a Malay King that has made contributions to history.

Graves of community leaders within the Malay community are also sometimes considered *makam* or *keramat*. This could be another manifestation of the king or royalty veneration or worship, extended to other roles of leadership. Keramat Tok Lasam is one example. Lasam was one of three brothers from the house of Pontianak, who had migrated to Singapore Harbour during the time of Sultan Husain (1809). As they landed on a clearing a great storm appeared, bringing with it darkness, so they named the place “Siglap”, or “Si Gelap”, the dark one. Immigrants from Riau and Lingga began settling down at Siglap. The English appointed Lasam the *penghulu* (chief) of the village. Lasam was also credited for the capturing (and recapturing) of Wak Biak, a man who had ran amok and killed several people. People had viewed him as holy and upon his death, his corpse turned the colour of saffron.³²⁶ While his holiness undoubtedly played a role in his grave being considered *makam* and *keramat*, I speculate that his role as a village leader, a *penghulu*, and a founder, too contributed to it. While not as significant as a king or sultan, his leadership and capabilities was proven better than the English during the Wak Biak fiasco. It is possible that in such examples, veneration and worship reserved for royalties and kings, may be bestowed to deserved community leaders. An example was provided in the thesis, regarding the grave of the late Singapore President, Yusof Ishak, who may be viewed as a community leader. His grave can be considered a *makam*, however, is not viewed as a *keramat* grave; as of now, at least.

iii. Tragic or Violent deaths

Some of the individuals whose graves are considered *makam* or *keramat* are those who died violently or tragically. I believe this contributed to their veneration, especially as *keramat* graves.

³²⁶ R. O. Winstedt, “Karamat,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (92) (1924): 272; Rivers, “Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century,” 113.

Legend has it,³²⁷ Radin Mas Ayu was the daughter of Pangeran Adipati Agung, a prince from court of Kediri, in East Java. Pangeran had fallen in love with a beautiful dancer and they married despite the King's objections. The couple had a child and named her Radin Mas Ayu, or "golden princess". The King's wife, unhappy at the defiling of the royal lineage, ordered Pangeran's palace to be burned in his absence, while his wife and child were still in it. Pangeran returned in time to only save his daughter. His wife did not survive. He left the kingdom with his child and settled on an island called Karimun and lived as a fisherman. Radin Mas Ayu grew into a beautiful woman. One day, she found herself in the royal gardens of the Sultan. Her beauty attracted envy from the Sultan's daughter, Tengku Halijah, who decided that her guards should give the young woman a beating. A stranger, as fate would have it, arrived just in time to end the assault. He then demanded audience with the Sultan regarding this abuse of power. Pangeran, upon returning from fishing, learned that his daughter had been taken and rushed to the Sultan's palace. The stranger turned out to be a warrior from his home kingdom, Radin Diar, and the man informed the Sultan of Pangeran's true identity. In an attempt to avoid further embarrassment, the Sultan arranged for Pangeran to marry Tengku Halijah. They wed and were blessed with a son, Tengku Chik. One day, the Sultan declared that he and his court make a trip to the Island of Temasek—now known as Singapore—establishing themselves at Telok Blangah. Time marched onwards, yet Tengku Halijah continued to be envious of Radin Mas' beauty and also her relationship with her father. All this led to her striking her stepdaughter to unconsciousness. Pangeran saw this and the couple argued. To conceal her abuse of Radin Mas, she accused her own husband of wanting to kill their son. This led to the Sultan imprisoning Pangeran in a dry well. The Sultan then ordered that Radin Mas marry one of the court princes, Tengku Bagus. However, on the day of the wedding, fate, once again, brought Radin Diar into this story. During the ceremony, when Radin Mas was asked where her father was, Tengku Chik ruined his mother's machinations when he exclaimed that he had

³²⁷ This is just one version of the story. There are many renditions of the tale of Radin Mas Ayu.

seen Pangeran in a well. Radin Diar rescued Pangeran and the wedding became a royal inquisition. Enraged, Tengku Bagus made an attempt at Pangeran's life, with a *keris*. This was when, Radin Mas Ayu, ran between the blade and her father, sacrificing her life.³²⁸

Another individual who died violently is Sayid Yasin. His grave was considered a *keramat* grave but it seems to either have been exhumed or have been forgotten. Rivers mentions the *keramat* grave among his list of *keramat* graves in Singapore.³²⁹ Sayid Yasin is featured in a dramatic episode in the *Hikayat Abdullah*. The events that transpired on 11 March 1823 began with debt. Sayid Yasin was a trader from Pahang, who does trade between Pahang and Singapore. He had owed a man, Pengeran Sharif Omar a sum of \$400. Determined to be paid, Pengeran Sharif took out a summons against Sayid Yasin. Colonel William Farquhar had looked over the issue and was in favour of Pengeran Sharif. Pengeran Sharif refused to agree to a postponement of the payment and Sayid Yasin, being unable to pay—or refusing to pay—was imprisoned. However, the man managed to smuggle a *keris* with him and also gained a temporary release, in guise that he was going to meet Pengeran Sharif to negotiate a postponement for the payment. He was, however, to be accompanied by a Hindu constable. When they reached Pengeran Sharif's home, things escalated quickly. Pengeran Sharif locked himself in his home after seeing the debtor with a *keris*. In a moment of quick thinking, he left his home by the back and headed to Colonel Farquhar's home. Now, the constable accompanying Sayid Yasin, noticing that it was getting dark, told him that they should be heading back. Sayid Yasin attacked him and killed him by the gate of the house. Talk regarding a man running amok soon spread. Colonel Farquhar and his men headed over at once to Pengeran Sharif's home. They had difficulty finding him. The colonel then decided to inspect the outhouse. As he was investigating, prodding a stick into the floor, a hand emerged and grabbed him. A *keris* blade sank into his chest. Sayid Yasin had been hiding beneath the outhouse. Crimson

³²⁸ Ibrahim Tahir, *A Village Remembered: Kampong Radin Mas 1800s – 1973* (Singapore: OPUS Editorial Private Limited, 2013), 49-52.

³²⁹ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century."

gushed out of the colonel. Andrew Farquhar, the colonel's son, with his sword, swiped Sayid Yasin, slashing him from mouth to ear; a gaping bleeding stretching half grin. Soldiers arrived, thrust and stabbed him with their bayonets till he died. When news broke of the fact that Colonel Farquhar was attacked, "white men" appeared, stabbed and butchered the corpse till it was beyond recognizable. At this point, about three or four hundred armed soldiers surrounded the Temenggong's, assuming that the attack was an assassination plot against Colonel Farquhar by the Temenggong. Malays were also chased away from the scene by the soldiers. The soldiers waited, ready to fire when told. Stamford Raffles, after hearing the colonel was attacked, came to the man's side. He too had assumed the whole fiasco could have been politically motivated. And since the body of Sayid Yasin was so disfigured, it was difficult to be certain who the attacker was, and if he had connections with the Temenggong. It was only after finding the body of the constable that everything came to light. The following morning Raffles met with the Sultan Husain Shah, the Temenggong, their ministers and elders, "all the white merchants and thousands of other races." Raffles had asked the Sultan Husain Shah, in Malay law, what kind of punishment would befall a person convicted of treason. The sultan told him, the person and his family would be killed and their homes uprooted. Raffles, thinking this was too cruel a punishment for the innocent family members decided that the English approach was best; that the person be hanged—dead or alive—and his wife and children will be given an allowance till she remarries or her children are old enough work. Yet he wasn't done with Sayid Yasin. He had the body strung up on a gibbet and in a metal cage-like structure for ten days at Tanjong Malang for people to see. The Sultan then requested for the body and Sayid Yasin was given a proper burial ceremony.³³⁰ His grave, which, according to Rivers, was located at Tanjong Pagar and became considered a *keramat*.³³¹

³³⁰ Hill, "The Hikayat Abdullah, 149-154.

³³¹ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 106.

Both Radin Mas Ayu and Sayid Yasin had different lives, however, they were both killed rather violently and tragically. I believe that this contributed to the veneration of their graves. And especially in the story of Radin Mas, her end was one of immense and pointless tragedy. Within Southeast Asia alone, there are examples of individuals who have suffered tragic deaths and hence receive worship. One that comes to mind, is Mae Nak in Thailand. Mae Nak was a woman who died giving birth, while her husband was away at war. When he returned, his wife and child were waiting for him. Unbeknownst to him, they were ghosts. When he discovers the truth, he flees them. In her anguish, she terrorized villagers and was finally captured by an exorcist. Today, the shrine of Mae Nak is still worshipped.³³² Another example of a good person killed violently—interestingly enough, another woman—is Mahsuri of Langkawi, Malaysia. She was known for her unparalleled beauty and was believed to have died in 1819.³³³ When her husband was off to war, a malicious rumour was spread claiming that Mahsuri had been unfaithful in her husband’s absence. The residents of her village took it upon themselves to punish her for the supposed crime of adultery. She was killed with her family’s *keris*. When the executioner plunged the blade into her, milk white blood flowed from her wound, marking her innocence. With her last breath, she cursed the Island of Langkawi that misfortune will plague the lands for seven generations.³³⁴ Her supposed grave is considered a *makam* and till today, it still draws visitors.³³⁵ Some also consider her grave a *keramat*.³³⁶ There is evidence of worship occurring at her grave.³³⁷ It is my opinion that the tradition to venerate or worship such individuals who are good, innocent or undeserving of tragedy (which Mae Nak was before she died) whose life ended tragically, is one that is similar to the death in a state of purity, which is highly regarded, especially within the Malay Muslim community.

³³² Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*.

³³³ Ooi Giok Ling, “Mahsuri’s Curse: Globalisation and Tourist Development in Pulau Langkawi?” *GeoJournal*, Vol. 66, No. 3, Heritage, Politics and Identity in Southeast Asia (2006): 199-209.

³³⁴ Bella (D.M.) Bird, *Langkawi - From Mahsuri to Mahatbir: Tourism for Whom?*, (Selangor, Malaysia: INSAN, the Institute of Social Analysis, 1989), 7-8.

³³⁵ It is uncertain if it is truly the site of her grave as it has been relocated numerous times. Ooi, “Mahsuri’s Curse,” 199.

³³⁶ While doing an initial research on Mahsuri’s grave online, I came across a few self-published testimonials on websites and blogs labelling it “Keramat Mahsuri.”

³³⁷ Ooi, “Mahsuri’s Curse,” 206.

Growing up in a Malay Muslim community, and having encountered numerous deaths, I often hear people remarking how dying in state of purity or sinlessness is ideal. Such examples that would be given would include the death of a newborn who is without sin—and thus would be certain for heaven—and a person who dies during or right after prayers or after they have taken their ablutions.

It is my opinion that the tradition to venerate or worship good and innocent individuals whose life ended in tragedy, is one that is similar to martyr worship. The only difference is that the tragic and violent deaths of martyrs are often connected to or for the purposes of religious faith or political beliefs. Christianity has numerous martyred individuals who have been canonized as saints, and many of them suffered unimaginably violent deaths. In the Islamic tradition, the worship at the graves of martyrs is not foreign either. In Kerala, South India, Islamic ceremonials known as *nerccas* are conducted at tombs, some of which are those of Muslim martyrs.³³⁸ In some way, Sayid Yasin fits the role of martyr well. Charles Buckley, in *An Anecdotal History of Singapore* even suggests that Sayid Yasin became a saint-like figure and his grave, a pilgrimage site, because he “killed a Fakir (the Hindoo) and wounded a Nazarene (Colonel Farquhar).”³³⁹ His death may then be seen as a religious martyrdom, a belief further fanned by the way his body was displayed. However, I am of the opinion that he was more of a political martyr than a religious one, to the eyes of the community who worshiped his *keramat* grave. This was an individual, who dared to attack a colonial. In fact, the writer and teacher, Munshi Abdullah Abdul Kadir, in his autobiography, took great care in highlighting the different ethnicity and, sometimes, religion of the players in this dramatic tale; often drawing a divide between the “white men” and the other races, especially the “Malays”.³⁴⁰ It is hard to imagine that this was not done on purpose. Also, while, by today’s standards, Raffles’ beliefs to not punish the family of a political traitor was more

³³⁸ Dale, and Menon, "Nerccas."

³³⁹ Charles B. Buckley, *An Anecdotal history of Singapore, Volume I* (Singapore: Fraser and Neave, Limited, 1902). 100.

³⁴⁰ Hill, "The Hikayat Abdullah, An Annotated Translation," 149-154.

humane, it could have been seen as another way the colonial leaders forced their laws onto the local community, and disregarding local culture and law. In essence, Sayid Yasin became a symbol of anti-colonial rebellion. This anti-colonial sentiment would echo some of the sentiments of people like that one caretaker of Keramat Iskandar Shah; an attempt to reclaim Singapore from colonial subjugation through worship.

iv. Miraculous Corpse

Miracles during the life of an individual might make their grave a good candidate for being considered a *makam* or *keramat*. However, sometimes, posthumous miracles that may occur to the body of the individual might also contribute to this.

Tok Lasam is a good example of this. Upon his death, his body is said to have turned to the colour saffron, a yellowish orange. This was seen as a miracle. He was already regarded as pious and holy, this phenomenon further cemented that belief.³⁴¹ The tradition of the worship of miraculous corpses or relics is one that appear in many traditions. In Thailand, for example, there are Thammayut monks who, “as a sign (nimitta) of their level of meditational achievement... after they die[,] often their bones crystallize.”³⁴² Such magical transfiguration of the body serve as indicators to would be worshippers that the individual is holy or sacred and deserving of veneration. Moreover, the colour yellow as explained in the thesis, is extremely important in *keramat* grave worship. So, the saffron colour of Tok Lasam’s body may have allowed for similar symbolisms of sacredness to be applied onto him.

There are many categories of people whose graves have now been conferred the identities of *makam* and *keramat* graves. The term ‘*keramat* grave’ denotes a grave with a miraculous nature or is worshipped. While the term ‘*makam*’ also includes graves of other respected individuals such as national leaders. As explored, there

³⁴¹ Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 76.

³⁴² McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, 38.

are so many cultures and traditions that may have influenced these categories, like the concept of divine kingship within the earlier Malay culture or the reverence of *awliya* in the Islamic tradition. However, I believe that at the core of all these forms of veneration and worship of significant individuals—that may have contributed to *keramat* grave worship—are beliefs that are shared by many communities of responses of the *keramat* graves. These are more universal beliefs of the venerating and worshipping of the holy or saint-like, the royal, the innocent, the martyr and the miraculous (both person and corpse). This thus, allows the *keramat* graves in Singapore to be approached and worshipped by worshippers from many cultural and religious backgrounds, even those who may not be from the country.