

The entrance to the shrine of Dato Syed Abdul Rahman before the fire, 2022. Courtesy of William Gibson.

# THE ORIGIN STORIES OF Keramat KUSU

Pilgrimages to the *keramat* on Kusu Island have been going on since the mid-19th century.

By William L. Gibson

In April 2022, a catastrophic fire engulfed the *keramat* (shrine) on the top of a hill on Kusu Island, off the southern coast of Singapore. Media coverage of the event showed the near-total destruction of the *keramat*.<sup>1</sup>

The *keramat* on Kusu Island is a popular pilgrimage spot with thousands of devotees making their way by boat to seek blessings from the shrine as well as the Chinese Tua Pek Kong Temple (龟屿大伯公宫)

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on the island. Despite its immense popularity, little is definitively known about the shrine. Delving into the records shows how the origin story of the *keramat* has changed over time.

Sunny Kusu Island – little more than a dome-shaped granite outcropping connected by a mud flat to a narrow rocky protrusion to the north, and surrounded by shallow reefs – was both an important navigation mark as well as a shipping hazard in the days of sail.

Around 1822, the British erected a signal on the island and as a result, the earliest maps of Singapore refer to it as “Signal Island”. The island was later renamed “Peak Island” and sometime in 1877, a brick obelisk harbour marker was erected on its south shore.<sup>2</sup>

The Malay name for the island is Pulau Tembakul, which means “mudskipper island”, either because mudskippers were once abundant on the mud flats or because in profile the island, with its bulbous head and narrow fin-like tail, resembles a mudskipper. “Kusu”, which means “turtle” in Hokkien, likely comes from the dome shape of the island resembling a turtle shell.



The shrine of Dato Syed Abdul Rahman before the fire, 2022. The phrase “Datok Kong” was repeated no less than three times here. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.



The Malay caretaker placing offerings from devotees at Dato Syed Abdul Rahman’s shrine, 1970. Image reproduced from Goh Tuck Chiang, “Picnic With the Harbour Gods,” *Straits Times Annual*, 1 January 1970, 66–67. (From NewspaperSG).

### Shrines and Temple

Remarkably, there is evidence that the Tua Pek Kong Temple and the *keramat* have been on the island since at least the mid-19th century.<sup>3</sup> This is based on a letter written by Cheang Hong Lim, a prosperous opium trader and head of the Hokkien community in Singapore, to J.F.A. McNair, Colonial Engineer and Surveyor General of the Straits Settlements, on 9 March 1875. Cheang protested the policy of using the island as a burial ground for the quarantine facility located on nearby St John’s Island.<sup>4</sup>

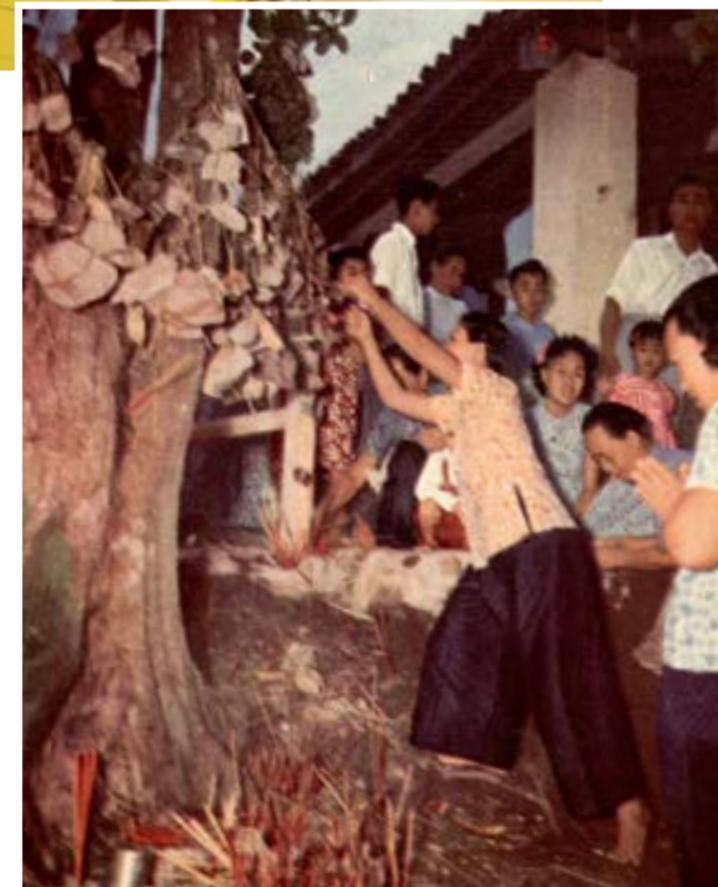
In the letter, Cheang petitioned for a title to the island. He wrote that the island had “for upwards of thirty years [c.1845] been used by many of the Chinese and native inhabitants of this Settlement as a place for them to resort to at certain periods every year for the purpose of making sacrifices and paying their vows to certain deities there called ‘Tua Pek Kong Koosoo’ and ‘Datok Kramat’, and as that place has lately, to the great prejudice of their feelings, been desecrated by the interment therein of a number of dead bodies”.<sup>5</sup> In the end, Cheng did not receive the land title but he did get a promise that quarantine burials would cease.

*Datuk keramat* (sometimes spelled as *dato*) are spirits who dwell within natural objects like trees, rocks, termite mounds and whirlpools. Also known as *datuk kong* (拿督公), these ancestor spirits of the



(Above) A Chinese couple at the shrine of Dato Syed Abdul Rahman, 1990. They are standing at the same spot as the group in the c. 1930 photograph on page 27. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection*, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Right) A Chinese woman hangs stones from a tree beside the *keramat*. Note the numerous joss sticks in the ground at the base of the tree and the white-washed columns of the shrine. Image reproduced from A.J. Anthony, “A Picnic... With the Harbour Gods,” *Straits Times Annual*, 1 January 1952, 26–27. (From NewspaperSG).



landscape are often represented by icons that resemble older Malay men. (*Datuk* is the Malay word for grandfather and is also a generalised honorific for an elder male, while *kong* is the Hokkien word for grandfather.)

Cheang’s letter refers to the practice of people visiting the temple and shrine on Kusu. The island was – and still is – thronged by pilgrims for the Double Ninth, or Chongyang Festival (observed on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month), during which it is customary to venerate graves of ancestors and to climb a high mountain.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that the rocky peak of the island jutting out of the water was a place to perform Chongyang rituals: both Tua Pek Kong (literally “Grand Uncle”, a deity unique to Malaya) and a local *datuk* spirit of the island would be treated as ancestors to be propitiated. (It is not unusual to find Tua Pek Kong temples and *datuk keramat* shrines close to one another.<sup>7</sup>)



The two plaques dated 1917 list the names of donors who built the shrine to “Dato Nenek Kusu” emplaced by Baba Hoe Beng Whatt, 2022. The top plaque in Jawi bears the same text as the bottom plaque in Baba Malay. The notice literally states that Dato Nenek Kusu came to his house in 1917, but the implication would be that her arrival brought a birth of a child. *Ada tiba di rumah* means “there arrived at the house”. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.

The *keramat* was especially popular with couples seeking to have children and for prognosticating winning lottery numbers and it received visitors year-round.

More early details about the pilgrims who visited Kusu come courtesy of a report dated 16 October 1894 in the Baba Malay newspaper *Bintang Timor*. It reads: “*Smalam dan hari Anam, banyak umbok umbok, baba baba dan orang Melayu dan segala bangsa ada pergi Koosoo bayar niat. Dia orang kata ini kramat ada banyak betul, dan dia slalu kasi apa dia orang minta.*”<sup>28</sup> [“Yesterday and on Saturday, many Peranakan women (*umbok*) and men (*baba*), Malays and people of all races went to Kusu to offer *niat* (supplication). People say that the *keramat* is honest and true and will give you what you ask for.”]

The *keramat* was enlarged in the early 20th century. There are two plaques on the site, one in Baba Malay and Jawi dated 1917 and the other in Hokkien Chinese dated 1921. The Baba Malay plaque is dedicated to “Dato Nenek Kusu” and was emplaced by Baba Hoe Beng Whatt, a Peranakan (Straits Chinese). It includes a list of Baba Chinese who donated money to erect the shrine. The 1921 plaque also bears the names of donors to the shrines, many of whom were the same people who had donated earlier. The text on the plaque mentions that the “old fairy of Kusu Island” (龟屿老仙女) visited Hoe’s house with a child. The second plaque indicates that the shrine was expanded again in 1921.

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### Fishermen’s Friends

A *Straits Times* report in 1929 offers one of the oldest descriptions of the origins of the *keramat*. The reporter spoke to an old man at Joo Chiat (the implication being he was Baba or Straits Chinese), who gave an account that deserves to be retold in detail:



(Left) The two female shrines as seen from Dato Abdul Rahman’s shrine (stations 4 and 5 in the order of offerings) before the fire, 2022. The plaques from 1917 and 1921 could be seen embedded in the columns; the 1921 plaque was beneath the number 5. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.

(Below) The sign above the grave of Sharifah Fatimah indicates she is the daughter of Dato Syed Abdul Rahman but also uses the phrase “*datuk nenek*”, which indicates a female ancestor spirit. Similar signage appeared above the grave of Nenek Ghalib, his mother. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.



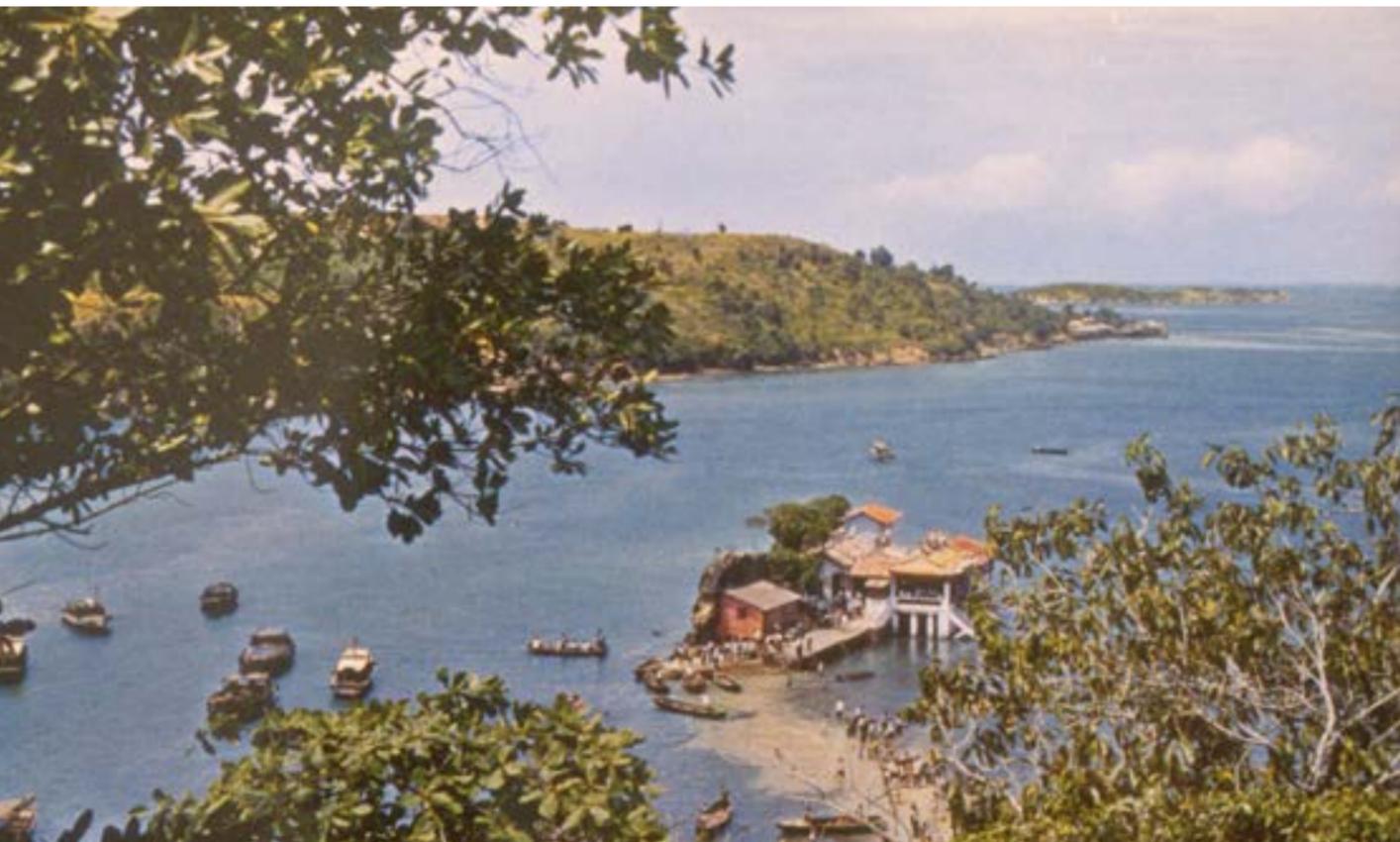
“Years and years ago there was a hilly spot, opposite the Police Station at Tanjong Pagar [Bain Hill, where another *keramat*, that of Syed Yasin, was located]. The coolies who were employed to level this hill more often than not had to pay with their lives. Many of them died after doing a day’s work. Those who were responsible for the work then resorted to the use of dynamite to break up the hill, and on the same night it happened that a sampan took across four or five Arabs in the direction of Kusu. Before the sampan man had actually arrived at the island, to his great amazement he found that his passengers had disappeared. He took the hint that they were the gods of this hilly spot who were removing to Kusu, and said nothing of the news until a few days after.

“In the meantime, the sampan man became rich and prosperous, being well-compensated for his trouble. This news was favorably received by the people, and pilgrimage to the place commenced. A Malay man who heard of it went to the island and led a hermit’s life until he died there. A Chinese who thought that such an island should have a temple erected one, so that those who visit may worship its gods.”<sup>9</sup>

A lengthy article about Kusu in a 1932 *Straits Times* report introduced new elements to the story. It noted that some time in the “olden days”, a Chinese fisherman who felt unwell was put ashore and, “in accordance with his dying wishes”, was buried on the deserted island by his friends who also erected a tombstone for him. Not long after, a Malay fisherman died on the island was also buried there. Friends of the

two fishermen became rich after dreaming about the deceased fishermen and began paying their respects to the spirits.<sup>10</sup> This version of the story forms the basis for the “legendary” version of Kusu Island that most of us are familiar with today in which the two men become sworn brothers.<sup>11</sup>

In the early days, the *keramat* was not associated with any particular named individual. The 1932 article describes the shrine as two small “sheds” of concrete. “One covers the grave of the Malay fisherman. The other is also supposed to be the graves of other Malays but no stories, so far as I can gather, are told concerning them.” The article adds that on a nearby *keramat* tree, “strings of stones” were hung. “When a man has his wish fulfilled, he recalls his vow, goes back to the island, hangs up the stones and takes them down only when he has discharged his debt!”<sup>12</sup> The hanging of stones was once common at other *keramat* in Singapore renown for powers of granting children, such as Iskandar Shah and Habib Nuh. While the tradition is no longer continued at these *keramat*, yellow ribbons are still tied on the trees around the *keramat* at Kusu.



View of the Tua Pek Kong Temple from the *keramat* at the top of the hill, 1969. This was before reclamation works in the 1970s. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

### Keramat Stories

By 1940, the Malay fisherman at the *keramat* had been transformed into a family, though still anonymous. A *Singapore Free Press* article in 1940 reports that the shrine was supposedly “built over the graves of two Malay girls whose father is also buried nearby”. The reporter who visited the shrine saw “one or two Malays up here but they were surrounded by Straits-born Chinese women in bright sarongs, and many young girls in flowered blouses and trousers”. She spotted a woman seeking lottery numbers and several more seeking sons. “There are many stones suspended from the old gnarled trunk, and the women who paid homage there were given little scraps of yellow cotton and flower petals wrapped in newspaper to take away with them to ‘bring them luck’.”<sup>13</sup>

The name associated with the *keramat* today, Dato Syed Abdul Rahman, first appears in a 1948 *Straits Times* article. It mentions that the shrine of the dato consists of a “spiral-shaped tombstone, covered by a wooden shanty” that was joined to a “smaller hut containing the similar tombstones of two of the Dato’s female ancestors, Naik Ralip and Siti Fatimah” (his mother and his sister respectively). A caretaker named Chik bin Embee, who claimed to be a direct descendant of the *dato*, cared for the tomb with his two sons and daughter.<sup>14</sup>

In 1952, an article in the *Straits Times Annual* notes that the *dato* was “supposed to have had miraculous powers and to have died well over a hundred years ago”. The article mentions that only a few Muslims would visit the *keramat* as it was “not a shrine that is popularly accepted and revered among the Malays. Its fame depends almost entirely upon reverence among the non-Muslim Chinese”. Chinese visitors would show respect to the *dato* by abstaining from pork for the entire ninth lunar month and that the “usual Chinese divining blocks” would not be used at the *keramat*. However, occasionally “a Chinese woman can be seen tossing a couple of coins surreptitiously to obtain the desired effect”.<sup>15</sup>

A 1973 article in *Asia Magazine* adds a new, important twist to the origin story, based on an interview with the then caretaker of the shrines, Pak Besar. The man told the magazine’s reporter a variation of the tale of the Malay and Chinese fishermen that 140 years before, “two ascetics, an Arab named Syed Rahman and a Chinese named Yam”, travelled to Kusu to meditate. “The two hermits paid other visits to the island, and then died on it”, although Pak Besar, insisted they were still spiritually alive. “They just left the world,” he said. Later, the body of the Arab’s mother, Ghalib, and his daughter, Sharifah Fatimah, were brought there for burial and shrines were erected over their graves.<sup>16</sup>



The earliest known photograph of the *keramat*, c. 1930. The white-washed brick-and-mortar pillars seen here survived the 2022 fire. *Photo by Lim Lam San (Oct 1902–Sep 1990). Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Ghalib is an Arabic name usually used for men; the mother’s name on Kusu is perhaps an echo of the Malay *ghaib*, which means “something hidden or unseen”. The earlier spelling of Naik Ralip is likely a transliteration of Nek Ghalib from an oral source, suggesting the names were not written on the tombs. The sister of the *dato* had also become his daughter instead.

Photographs from this period show the formerly white-washed walls painted dark green – a traditional *keramat* color. Only later were they painted bright yellow, the colour of *datuk kong* shrines in Singapore (in Peninsular Malaysia, they are often red).

In the 1970s, Kusu, along with the other Southern Islands, came under the management of the Sentosa Development Corporation which had been set up, as the name implies, to develop what was then Pulau Blakang Mati and adjacent islands into the resort destination of Sentosa.

Land reclamation enlarged Kusu from 1.2 hectares (12,000 sq m) to 8.5 hectares (85,000 sq m) at a cost of around \$3.9 million. The development work included the construction of a new jetty, water supply

system, modern toilet facilities and footpaths. The *keramat* and temple were preserved as tourist attractions, and major renovation works carried out at both in 1976 included concreting and adding guardrails to the steps up to the *keramat*.<sup>17</sup> The new changes may have altered the original shape of the island, but they proved popular with visitors.<sup>18</sup>

A 1979 *New Nation* article reports a visit to the “Kramat *Datuk Khong*” that commemorates a pious man, Haji Syed Abdul Rahman together with his wife (rather than mother) Nenek Ghalib, and daughter, Sharifah Fatimah. The three of them, all “living in the days of Raffles” had climbed the hill and simply vanished without a trace, possibly by supernatural means. Syed Abdul Rahman’s “kinsmen were later advised in dreams to build a shrine for the three departed ones”. Visitors to the shrine were women seeking children and “numbers to instant fortune”, and the tradition of tying stones to the trees continued.<sup>19</sup>

Photographs from this period also show that other than cosmetic changes, the shrine looked much as it did until the fire in 2022.



(Above) The entrance to the stairs leading up to the *keramat*, 2022. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.

(Below) Lottery numbers are scrawled over the painted rocks at the entrance to the *keramat* at the top of the stairs, 2022. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.



## Fire and Reconstruction

The pilgrimages to Kusu continued unabated over the decades and a routine had been established. Pilgrims would first visit the Tua Pek Kong Temple to seek blessings, before climbing the steps to the *keramat* on the top of the hill. There are several waypoints within the *keramat*, and numbers have been printed and pasted at the different spots so that devotees would know the order in which to visit the different stations.

The blaze on 17 April 2022, however, threatened to put an end to the rituals. The fire broke out on a Sunday evening, at about 6.20 pm, and was eventually put out by firefighters after about an hour, aided by heavy rain. While no lives were lost, the *keramat* was almost completely destroyed. The fire's cause was not determined, but lit candles and incense are often left unattended there.

A month after the conflagration, it was announced that the *keramat* would be rebuilt at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars, in time for the Double Ninth Festival.<sup>20</sup> In early September 2022, the *Straits Times* quoted the shrine's caretaker, Ishak Samsudin, as saying that the *keramat* was about 70 percent rebuilt by then, and would "likely be ready" in time for the pilgrimage season at the end of September. Ishak told the newspaper that he had financed the reconstruction with donations from friends and companies.<sup>21</sup>

I returned to the site in November 2022. It had been rebuilt in time for the Ninth Month celebrations, but it was still not complete. A temporary marquee had been erected to provide shade and burned debris still littered the hillside beneath the shrines. The shrines were reconstructed in almost exact replicas with some of the original material, such as the concrete altars, left intact.

Unfortunately, the 1917 dedication plaques were badly damaged and poorly restored. However, by burning off decades worth of accumulated jerry-built material, the catastrophe revealed previously hidden artefacts. At the back of the altars for the two women are stone mounds commonly seen in *datuk* nature shrines. More intriguingly, a worn *batu nisan* (grave-stone) placed before one of these mounds is inscribed with a Jawi phrase that mirrors the 1917 plaque. The phrase "Datuk Nenek" is legible, which suggests that a shrine-grave was erected here during the 1917–1921 renovations in honour of the female *datuk* of Kusu Island. During my visit, several worshippers passed through, marking their devotion with prayers and incense as the sea glittered below. ♦

The author thanks Hikari D. Azyure and the Urban Explorers of Singapore. To see more photos of the *keramat*, including photos of what it looks like after the fire, visit <https://go.gov.sg/shrines-keramat-kusu> or scan this QR code.



The fire revealed previously hidden artefacts. At the back of the altars for the two women are stone mounds commonly seen in *datuk* nature shrines. Courtesy of William L. Gibson.

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