

**MALAY KERAMAT, CHINESE
WORSHIPPERS:
THE SINICIZATION OF MALAY
KERAMATS IN MALAYSIA**

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Theoretically, kramats are supposed to be the graves of deceased holy men, the early apostles of the Muhammadan faith, the first founders of the village who cleared the primeval jungle, or other persons of local notoriety in a former age... [Even] so, the reverence paid to them savour a good deal too much of ancestor-worship to be attributable to an orthodox Muhammad origin.

[However], many of these kramats are not graves at all: many of them are in the jungle, on hills and groves, like the high places of the Old Testament idolatries; they contain no trace of a grave (while those that are found in villages usually have grave-stones), and they appear to be ancient sites of a primitive nature-worship or the adoration of the spirits of natural objects.

— W.W. Skeat, *Malay Magic*, 1984: 62.

The practice of *keramat*-worship is still an on-going phenomenon among the Malays in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Southern Philippines, and Southern Thailand. However, not many scholars of Malay Studies have researched on this area of Malay folk belief. In the past, Walter W. Skeat had written on the *keramat* in his magnum corpus, *Malay Magic* (1900), and Richard Winstedt had recorded some 50 cases of *keramat* sites and persons in his study (1924). The latter also made references to the *keramat* in his book entitled *Shaman, Saiva and Sufi: A Study of the Evolution of Malay Magic* (1925), which was subsequently revised, enlarged with an appendix in Malay, and retitled, *The Malay Magician: Being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi* (1961).

In his 1924 paper, Richard Winstedt classified the *keramat* sites and persons under six categories, viz.: (a) natural objects such as rocks, hill-tops, capes and whirlpools, (b) sacred tigers and crocodiles, (c) graves of magicians, (d) graves of the founders of settlements, (e) graves of Muslim saints, and (f) living Muslim saints. The religious basis upon which these sites and persons are conceived as *keramat* is the ancient belief in spirit and soul. In fact, these sacred places and persons may be classified under two main categories: animate and inanimate objects. Animate objects refer to animals such as tigers and crocodiles and holy men such as magicians and pioneers in

the indigenous tradition as well as dead and living Muslims saints such as the *sheikhs* and *sufis* in the Islamic tradition, while inanimate objects relate to natural objects, such as rocks, hill-tops, caves, capes, lakes, ponds, whirlpools, and so forth (Figure 1). Thus, we may actually trace both the animate and inanimate components of saint-worship to ancestor- and nature-worship, respectively, practised by the indigenous people in Malaysia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The salient feature underlying this pattern of belief is that both the components portray an admixture or intermingling of naturistic, animistic, and Islamic elements in one single cult institution.¹ This intermixture or syncretism also contains naturistic and animistic elements introduced by Hinduism and Islam.

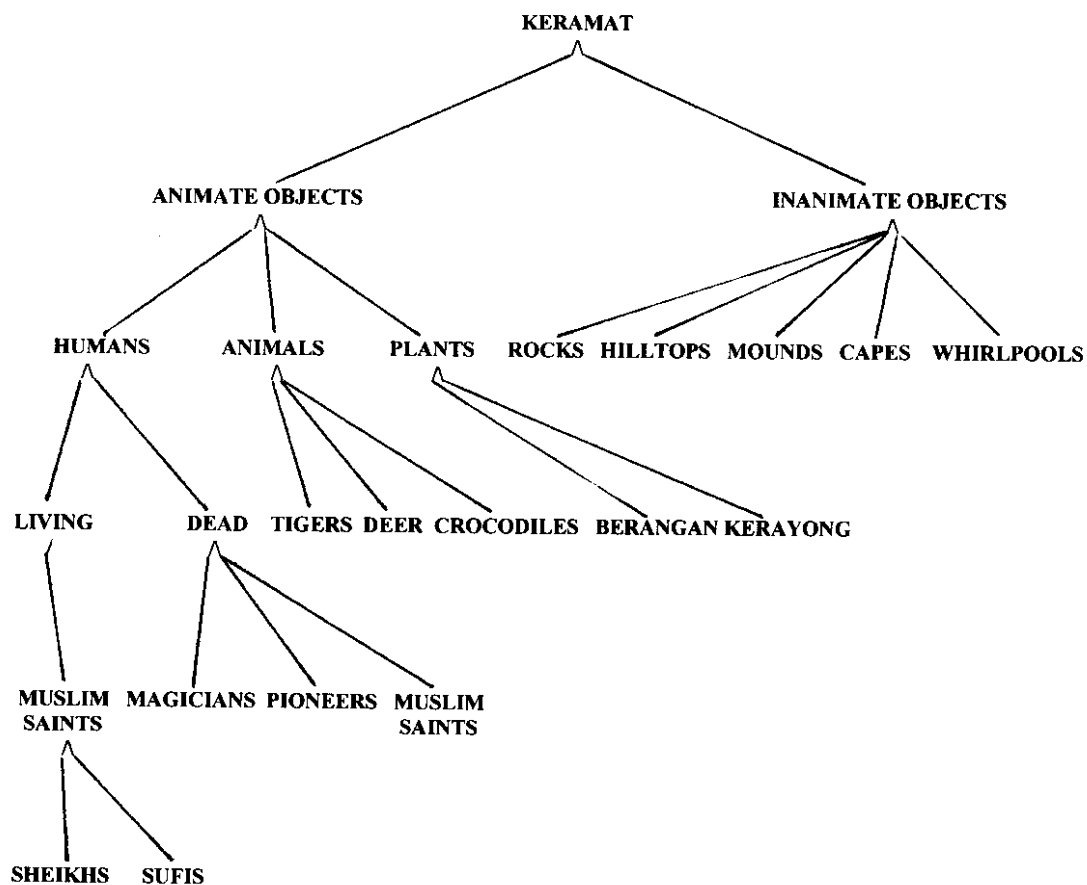


Figure 1: Simplified Classification of Keramats in Malay Folk Belief

¹ For a more detailed description of "cult institution", see Gustav Mensching, "The Masses: Folk Belief and universal Religion", in *Religion, Culture and Society: A Reader in the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Louis Schneider (New York: John Wiley, 1964).

In his paper, Winstedt pointed out that “the study of *karamat* had not received the attention it deserved”. What he said more than seventy years ago still holds true today. For, besides his study and that of Skeat’s (1900), and a few academic exercises (Mohd Zain 1959; Razali 1976; Baddron Asiqin 1988; Noriah 1991; Zuraihan 1992), hardly any serious work has been done on the *keramat*. Such a study, I believe, would help us gain insights into the significance of *keramat*-worship and its implication on Malay culture--in particular, the prevalence of Malay folk belief and folk cures. However, let this not deter us here.

In this paper, I intend to stand outside the pale of Malay society to examine how and why Malay *keramat* has been adopted by Chinese believers in Malaysia and how it has been adapted to the pattern of their belief system.² It begins with a brief discussion on the concept of “*keramat*”; how and why this concept has been reinterpreted and reintegrated by Malay folk believers; how and why *keramat*-worship has spread from the Malay to the Chinese community; how and why it has subsequently undergone the process of sinicization; and ends with a concluding statement highlighting Chinese community’s adoption of the Malay *keramat* and its implications, intrinsic and extrinsic.

The Concept Of “Keramat”

The term “keramat” in Malay is derived from the Arabic term “*karamah*”, which refers specifically to the *wali* (pl. *waliya* in Arabic), a close friend of God (Allah), or a pious person. It may be applied to the living saint (*sheikh*) but, more often than not, it is applied to the dead. In the Muslim world, Sufi masters are popular figures of sainthood. The veneration of Sufi masters continue posthumously at their tombs, especially on their birth anniversaries. In Tanta (Egypt), for instance, the autumn *maulid* (birthday) of Sidi Ahmad, the founder of a Sufi order, is celebrated as a huge

² I believe a detailed study of the *keramat*-worship among the Chinese in Malaysia would provide a fair indication as to its nature and function among the Chinese in Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Southern Philippines, and South Thailand although its significance would undoubtedly depend on the size of Chinese and Malay populations and their respective status and role in the social, cultural, economic and political structures obtain in the countries concerned.

agricultural fair. The Sufi may thus be a saint but the term itself does not imply that he is (Patton 1974) since not all saints are Sufi masters. In Morocco, for example, *marabouts* (warrior-saints), who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad and possession of thaumaturgic powers, are believed to preside after death over the territory around their tombs and bestow blessings through their descendants. Some of these descendants in turn become saints. The Moroccans believe that, through the *marabouts*, the *baraka* of the Prophet would directly touch the common people.

In the Malay tradition, *keramat*-worship is a legacy of early Sufi Islam or Islamic mysticism (*tasawuf*) which played an important role in the spread of mystical teachings through Islamic movements (Subhan 1960). The spread of *keramat*-worship, however, was viewed by some fundamentalists as having the tendency to divert Muslims from the mainstream Islamic movement, for the *keramat* movement directly placed emphasis on saint-worship rather than the true teaching of Islam *per se*. Others do not necessarily hold the same view.

The underlying factor which had contributed to the popularity of saint-worship among the Malays in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Southern Philippines, and South Thailand was that they had great regards for the pious one, such as the *sheikh* or the leader of a Sufi order (*tarikat*), not only as a repository of esoteric religious knowledge but also as an extraordinary individual endowed with *baraka* (or *berkat* in Malay), that is, semi-divine power acquired through religious devotion and piety. Some of them were believed to have achieved the *wali* or saint status and possess wonder-working capabilities or magical power. Ordinary Muslims regard the *wali* as a particular kind of friend of God, one whose special closeness to divinity mediated between ordinary faithfuls and that all-powerful and distant deity. They turn to such living saints “for advice in legal disputes or as to the success or failure of an enterprise or as intercessor for the sick or to get a child or to remove blight or plague or confound enemies” (Winstedt 1925: 47). Thus, a cult of saints which centred around the graves of deceased and, sometimes living men and women, grew up in traditional Malay society and served as the main focal points for laymen to become formally acquainted with Islam.

The deceased Malay *datuks* are believed to manifest themselves in the form of invisible spirits in particular localities, whose duty it is to ensure the general well-being of the residents who worship them. To the devotees, apart from the *sheikhs* and saints, persons who have done good deeds and contributed to the peace and prosperity of the community may also be remembered and honoured as *keramat* after their demise. This reminds us of Skeat's remark that "the reverence paid to them [the *keramats*] savour a good deal too much of ancestor-worship to be attributable to an orthodox Muhammadan origin", quoted at the beginning of this paper. In actual fact, the concept of *keramat*, or *karamah* in Arabic, has its origin in pre-Islamic Arabian tradition (Serjeant 1981). The term begins to incorporate the concept of holy persons, such as the *sheikhs* and Sufi masters, after Islam was instituted in the 6th or 7th century A.D. Epistemologically speaking, therefore, the concept of *keramat* and its practice claim no orthodoxy at all in Islamic origin.

As *keramat*-worship grew in importance in the archipelago, Islamic and pre-Islamic notions of divinity and the supernatural and superhuman came to dominate the Malay belief system. It is therefore not surprising to find that *keramat* objects range not only from holy men and women as well as their graves and relics but also to groups of boulders, huge trees, tigers, dead shamans, warriors, kings (Winstedt 1924), and legendary accounts like Puteri Mahsuri, Pahlawan Hitam, and the Wells of the Seven Sisters on Pulau Langkawi become important vehicles for the development of *keramat* (Ismail 1990; Baddron Asiqin 1988) and the sanctification of its natural environment.

Based on the above discussion, *keramat* in Malay may thus exist in two forms: material and non-material, or *kasar* and *halus* (Geertz 1969). In its material form, a *keramat* is "the bodily tenement or receptacle containing the soul of the departed saint or ancestor of the village" (Skeat 1984: 673). In non-material form, *keramat* means "sanctity" and "miraculous power" attributed to the soul of the departed saint or ancestral guardian of the village.³ It is generally used adjectively, being applied to

³ In some instances, the concept of *keramat* is used to refer to living saints. Under these circumstances, the material and non-material aspects of the *keramat* may have to take into consideration this aspect of Malay sainthood.

both animate and inanimate objects, including men, animals, plants, stones, earth mounds, whirlpools, and such like natural phenomena.

Because of this tendency, Islamic theologians and jurists were forced by popular consensus to recognize saints and to acknowledge their miracles. However, they did not condon pilgrimages to saints' graves and the practice of cultic activities there. This is because Islam preaches the existence of one God, and all pseudo-plural deities are non-entities and have to be repudiated, so that Muslims should have no other gods but God alone. The concept of the one and the only God (*tauhid*) is embodied in the Islamic confession of faith (*kalimah syahadat*): "*La illaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasul Allah*" (There is no god but God alone, Muhammad is the messenger of God). Any attempt on the part of believers to associate God with other pseudo-divinity is labelled "*syirik*". This in fact forms an important basis for devout Muslims' objection to *keramat*-worship. It also explains why the Islamic religious authorities in Malaysia, in May 1996, took the Shi'ites to task by issuing a *fatwa* (religious ruling or injunction), excluding them from the Malaysian Muslim community, a majority of whom belong to the Sunni sect, for adding to the Azan (calling Muslims to prayer) the clause that "Ali is the Friend of Allah".⁴

In principle, therefore, *keramat*-worship is not encouraged among Muslims. However, some Malays justify their belief in *keramat* by saying that they are making efforts (*ikhtiar*) permitted by God to bring them blessing, or that they are using an intermediary (*wasilah*) in approaching Allah. To their mind, humans are frail and unworthy to be in direct contact with God; they think therefore it is right and proper to seek a holy person as an intermediary to act on their behalf, so as to bring about immediate and positive result. This should not come as a surprise since Malays had long conceived of their ancestors as holy men richly endowed with the power to intercede with Heaven on their behalf before the coming of Islam. Thus, just as it was a model of religious reality, it had also become a model of cultural reality in Malay social life, wherein go-betweens had always played an important role in safeguarding

⁴ More than eighty percent of the Muslims in Malaysia belong to the Sunni sect. The Shi'ites represent only a very small minority. In Singapore, however, the Islamic religious authorities have taken a more liberal stand by openly acknowledging the Shi'ites as part and parcel of the Muslim community.

the novel, the bizarre, or the awkward aspects of human relations, be it within the context of family, community, or society at large. This etiquette is still practised, for example, in match-making, in overcoming matrimonial conflicts, in obtaining out-of-court settlements, in making sensitive bargains for private economic gains, in seeking special political favours, and so forth. It is therefore not surprising that, in religious rituals, some Malays still prefer to pray to Allah in the name of the Prophet, saints and other people who possess the *baraka* or *karamah* (blessing) from God.⁵ The belief in the efficacy of this ritual is still reflected in the popular practice of some Malays who visit shrines or tombs of saints to pray and to seek the blessing and intercession of the holy persons buried there. As time goes by, these places become sacred in the eyes of worshippers and they eventually become *keramats* where vows are made and offerings given (Mohd Nor 1985).

The tombs of Habib Noh in Singapore, Dato' Machap in Malacca, Mahsuri in Langkawi, Sunan Kalidjaga in Indonesia, and numerous other graves and edifices in the archipelago are still visited and worshipped by Malays although Muslim scholars (*ulamas*) of the Sunni sect have frequently spoken against such a practice. It is true that under the impact of the *dakwah* movement, the twin-process of industrialization and urbanization, and the rapid shift from agricultural and fishing activities to trade and commerce following the migration from the rural to the urban settings, more and more Malays, old and young, have found belief in *keramat* and *keramat*-worship irrelevant. However, it is an overstatement to say that the Malacca Religious Affairs Department has succeeded in "putting [*keramat*-worship] to a stop" in Malacca (Mohd Taib Osman 1985: xv); that only older Malays worship *keramat* at Pulau Langkawi (Baddron Asiqin 1988: 85); or that Malays only show reverence to the *keramat* but no longer practise *keramat*-worship in Singapore (Zuraihan 1992). My field surveys and interviews in Malaysia between 1990 and 1993 and in Singapore between 1995 and 1996 could not confirm the accuracy of these statements, for *keramat*-worship still goes on at night on Pulau Besar (Malacca), young individuals still perform propitiatory rituals for healing purposes on Pulau Langkawi, and votaries

⁵ The Malays, however, are not the only people who pray to God in the name of His Messenger. Christians also pray to God in the name of their saviour, Jesus Christ.

still perform worship rituals at the Tomb of Habib Noh in Singapore at appointed times unknown to researchers, strangers and observers. It is possible, in the case of Mohd Taib Osman's statement, that he has made the deduction on the basis of newspaper reports in 1983 (Cheu 1992: 402), and in those of Baddron Asiqin's and Zuraihan's studies, that the informants merely told them what they liked to hear, for after all it was in the informants' interests to do so, although it may not be in the researchers' interest to take their words at face-value. This explains why the technique of covert observation always has to be used in conjunction with that of overt observation in ethnographic research; otherwise ethnographers would see only half of the truth and leave the other half unrecorded.

Chinese Worshippers of Malay Keramats

Whatever may be the status and implications of *keramat*-worship among the Malay community, it is interesting to note that belief in the *keramat* is in a state of ascent among the Chinese in Malaysia. There, the Chinese worship the *keramat* in the form of Datuk Kong or *Nadugong*. Sometimes Datuk Kong is pronounced as *Na Tuk Kong* or *La Tok Kong* in Chinese dialects. The term "*Datuk Kong*" is composed of two synonyms, *Datuk* and *Kong*, meaning "grandfather" in Malay and Chinese, respectively. The second word "*Kong*" is redundantly used as an honorific title for the Malay *Datuk*, or holy person, who is worshipped as a *keramat* or saint. It may be interpreted as "the Grand One" or "the Reverend One" just as in the case of *Kuan Kong* (God of War) or *Toh Peh Kong* (Great Granduncle or Local Great Saint).

The Datuk Kong is, thus, used as a generic term for the cult of a venerated deceased person, usually of Malay or native origin, or the spirit being guarding a particular sacred place, either known or unknown in local history or legend. The venerated deceased person may himself or herself assume the form of a spirit being. Generally the Datuk Kong is worshipped as a tutelary deity, believed to be in control of unseen forces in a particular locality. He is usually personified, worshipped, and propitiated in the belief that his power will prevail and ensure surveillance over the peace and security of the residential area or work-place in which his worshippers have carved

out a niche. Sometimes the spirit being is said to be able to transform itself and take the form of non-human or inanimate object. Hence, a tiger, a snake, a butterfly, or a rock, a tree, an earth outgrowth may be looked upon as a vehicle of the Datuk Kong spirit.

Chinese devotees worship the *keramat* in the belief that the spirit beings have the power to preserve peace, harmony and safety, not only in residential areas but also in places of work such as farms, timber camps, sawmills, factories, and construction sites. Many lumbermen and construction workers said they had to worship the *keramat* before going to work. Otherwise they would feel unsafe and oftentimes something untoward, such as vehicles breaking down, engines refusing to start, sawchains breaking, log chains snapping, timber logs rolling off the trucks, logs falling on workers, workers getting sick for no apparent reason, and such-like incidences, would happen. I have also known of cases where Indonesian and local workers in Keningau, Sandakan and Tawau (Sabah) refuse to clear a jungle or begin work at new timber camps or construction sites until their employers have secured a *pawang* to perform supplicatory rituals or sacrificial rites at the sites. Usually a *keramat* shrine is installed at the sites where workers could pay homage to the spirit being in control of the locality before beginning the day's work.

Worshippers believe that the spirits of the *keramat* can appear and disappear at will--sometimes manifesting themselves in the form of animate objects such as cats, tigers, and crocodiles, or in the form of inanimate objects such as stones, rocks, tree stumps, and earth mounds. These manifestations may be explained in terms of the theory of the transmigration of the soul, which makes it possible for the saint or spirit being to possess or be possessed by the spirit-medium, or for human souls to embody animals, or for human and animal souls to embody inanimate objects such as stones, rocks and earth outgrowths. This explains why a soul is capable of transferring its essence from one medium to another or between one object and another, animate or inanimate.

In Peninsular Malaysia, as a result of urbanization and perhaps due to the effects of ethnic politics and the *dakwah* movement, the Datuk Kongs have now spread to modern housing gardens and sometimes modern shopping complexes, as individuals

from rural and semi-rural settings set up small businesses like construction work, motorcycle and motorcar workshops, spare-parts stores, sundry shops, departmental stores, grocery stores, food stalls, and so forth. Being unpredictable in the outcome of their new ventures and investments or capital outlay, they erect Datuk Kong shrines at their work-sites or compounds where their business activities are carried out and where they perform worship rituals before sunrise and after sunset. This ritual organization of their person, time and conduct sets an orderly mental pattern for the organization of their business and customer service. When their business ventures prosper or are more successful than others, others without the Datuk Kong shrines tend to believe that their counterparts' success could have been attributable to the Datuk Kong's blessing and hence they also follow suit. This has contributed to the rapid increase in the number of Datuk Kong shrines in the urban settings. Hence, it is now increasingly common for businessmen to construct Datuk Kong shrines as adjuncts to their new stores, workshops, factories, restaurants, and other business concerns.

The erection of Datuk Kong shrines, however, is by no means restricted to small-scale businessmen. Some new entrepreneurs, including manufacturers, restaurant, hotel and transport operators, saw-mill owners, and poultry farmers with large capital outlay also erect Datuk Kong shrines at the compound of their business ventures. In the early 1980s, for example, a large Datuk Kong shrine was constructed at the building which housed the Jaya Supermarket in Petaling Jaya. However, with the change of management in the 1990s, the shrine has been demolished and a smaller shrine is now built at one corner of the compound.

In the past, Datuk Kong shrines were found only in slum and squatter areas. Most of the shanty Datuk Kong shrines constructed by the slum dwellers reflect the poor conditions of their own housing. Currently, as the upcoming business-class emerges in the modern housing and urban centres, the construction of Datuk Kong shrines is no longer confined to the residential areas and work-places of the living. Datuk Kongs have also made their influence felt at the abodes of the gods (Chinese temples and

Table 1: Beliefs and Practices in Malay Keramat and Datuk Kong

Beliefs/ Practices	Malay Keramat	Datuk Kong
Beliefs	<p><i>Divinity:</i> keramat as Muslim saints, dead magicians, and pioneers.</p> <p><i>Nature:</i> holy, being close friends of God, and possess semi-divine or miraculous or magical powers (<i>baraka/berkat</i>).</p> <p><i>Function:</i> act as intermediaries and intercede for ordinary lay persons, for advice in legal disputes, success or failure in enterprise, getting a child, healing, removal of drought, plague.</p>	<p><i>Divinity:</i> keramat as Muslim saints, including Sino-native saints.</p> <p><i>Nature:</i> divine being, possess miraculous or magical powers (ong or luck).</p> <p><i>Function:</i> answer prayers and vows and give blessings for health, peace and security, success in personal ventures, wealth and prosperity.</p>
Representation	Graves/grave-stones/boulders/whirlpool.	Mounds/boulders/mock tombs/spirit tablets/portraits.
Practices: Vow-making	<i>Vow making</i> in return for the fulfilment of believer's wish, entreaty, request. Hanging rags/stones as representations of vows.	<i>Vow making</i> in return for the fulfilment of believer's wish, entreaty, request. Submitting packets of digit numbers as tokens of request.
Offering	<p><i>Spiritual contact:</i> lighting candles (white or yellow), and burning benzoin (<i>kemenyan</i>).</p> <p><i>Entertainment:</i> betel leaf, arecanut flakes, lime paste, tobacco shreds, native cigarettes (<i>rokok daun</i>).</p> <p><i>Food:</i> saffron rice.</p> <p><i>Drink:</i> clean water.</p> <p><i>Gifts:</i> white cloth, emblems.</p>	<p><i>Spiritual contact:</i> lighting of josssticks. Candle-light signals the ritual centre. White or yellow candles signify vegetarian diet; red candles, non-vegetarian diet.</p> <p><i>Entertainment:</i> keramat ingredients, including similar items used in traditional Malay offering.</p> <p><i>Food:</i> biscuits, rice dumplings.</p> <p><i>Drinks:</i> Chinese tea, clean water, "teh tarik" or "kopi tarik" or both.</p> <p><i>Gifts:</i> walking sticks, songkok, suits, fruits and flowers. Pineapples signifying good luck used.</p>
Sacrifice	Slaughter of a goat or a chicken or more.	Slaughter of a goat or chickens. Burning of incense papers and prayer sheets.
Amnesty	Release of pigeons, fowls, etc.	Release of birds not observed in Datuk Kong festivals but commonly practised in Chinese Buddhist ceremonies.
Communal Feast	Thanksgiving after harvest or fishing activities, success in healing, etc.	Feasts on birthday anniversaries of particular keramat. Participation of Chinese deities.
Organization	Special rituals led by pawang/bomoh. Doa selamat led by community leaders at the beginning and end of ceremony. Wayang kulit/manora performed.	Ritual functions performed by spirit-mediums. Shrines and temples organised based on the model of traditional Chinese temples. Chinese opera/kotai/puppet shows staged.

shrines) and the burial grounds of deceased ancestors (Chinese cemeteries), where traditionally only *Tudigong* and *Dabogong* shrines were erected. Hence, I would not say that *keramat*-worship is essentially a class phenomenon since it is practised not only among the poor in the rural areas but also among the fairly well-to-do in the urban centres. I would rather view *keramat*-worship as a “folk phenomenon” or “cult institution” (Mensching 1964) in which folk religionists of diverse economic background participate.

I conducted a preliminary survey on the Datuk Kong between 1977 and 1979 when I did field-work on the Nine Emperor Gods spirit-medium cult in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand for my dissertation (Cheu 1982a). The findings of both studies were published in 1982b, 1983b, and 1988. Subsequently, I continued research on the Datuk Kong between 1982 and 1988, during which I surveyed about three hundred Datuk Kong shrines and interviewed some three hundred and fifty Chinese respondents of both sexes, belonging to different age groups, and receiving different levels of Chinese, English and Malay education. Background information on the *keramat* was provided by key informants of Malay and Indian descent. A detailed report on the Datuk Kong in Penang was published in Malay in 1989. In that report I made a comparative study of Malay- and Chinese-style Nadugong rituals performed in two Datuk Aceh Temples in Penang. A paper, entitled “The Datuk Kong Spirit Cult in Penang: Being and Belonging in Multi-ethnic Malaysia”, was presented at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in 1989 and subsequently published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* in 1992.

My survey in the late 1970s showed that the ratio of Datuk Kong shrines to Chinese houses in Ampang, Selangor and Ayer Hitam, Penang, was 1: 10 in the villages, including the slum and squatter areas, and 1: 100 in towns and urban centres. This ratio increased somewhat when I conducted a second survey in the early and mid-1980s in the same neighbourhoods. The rate of increase was higher in the suburbs of the west coast states of Peninsular Malaysia, where Chinese usually built their houses, factories and shophouses on both sides of the thoroughfares. In the east coast states of Peninsular Malaysia the construction of the Datuk Kong shrines was usually confined

to the compounds of Chinese temples so as to render it less offensive to the predominantly Malay population in those states.

My survey in the east coast states of Peninsular Malaysia and the West Coast Residency and the Labuan Federal Territory of East Malaysia (Sabah) in the early 1990s showed that the ratio of the Datuk Kong shrines to the Chinese houses was 1:500 in new housing estates and 1:1000 in urban centres. Similar shrines, however, were relatively few and far between in the urban centres of the Interior, Sandakan and Tawau Residencies.

Generally, the Datuk Kong shrines are found in Chinese residential areas and are therefore important landmarks for Chinese neighbourhoods, not only in the rural and semi-rural areas but also in the urban and semi-urban slum and squatter areas. In Sabah, since local Chinese are mostly Christians and do not regard Datuk Kong as part of their religious world-view, Datuk Kong shrines become accurate identifiers of Chinese migrants from Peninsular Malaysia.

Since modern housing gardens are points of convergence for the upcoming Chinese business class with semi-rural or semi-urban socio-economic background, the Datuk Kongs also make their presence felt in new housing gardens. Malaysian worshippers believe that the sites where they live today were formerly occupied by jungles where spirit beings had established their age-old sanctuaries. Consequently the more housing gardens were developed, the more jungles had to be cleared; the more jungles were cleared, the more spirit beings had to be deprived of their sanctuaries. This means more and more humans have knowingly or unknowingly offended the spirit beings by encroaching into their private domains.

According to respondents, spirit beings who are “understanding” or “benevolent” may be willing to shift to other places and give way to human advancement. However, some spirit beings are “obstinate” or “malevolent” and they refuse to budge. Such spirit beings may retaliate by bringing destructive influence upon the intruders. In order to appease them, residents believe that they have to construct shrines for the

retreat of these spirit beings, and placate them from time to time through offerings and sacrifices so that they may be able to live in peace in their new homes. It is common to hear local residents talk about Datuk Kongs visiting them in their dreams and beseeching them to erect shrines and honour them twice a day, i.e. before sunrise and after sunset, with special offerings on the first and the fifteenth days of each lunar month. While most Malays state that they normally perform rituals on Mondays and Fridays, some emphasize the need to placate these spirit beings on Thursday evenings, as, according to them, many of these spirit beings come out of their sanctuaries on Thursday evenings to chase away evil spirits who try to discourage faithful Muslims from participating in the Friday prayers and at the same time prepare themselves for the worship service at the nearby mosques.

Oral traditions have it that the Datuk Kongs possess certain characteristic personality traits. Some depict the Datuk Kongs as dynamic and benevolent. They are said to seek shelter in the shady places of residential areas and require simple forms of vegetarian offerings. Others picture the Datuk Kongs as malevolent, static (sometimes manifesting themselves in the form of boulders) and awe-inspiring. They wield power in the wild and demand blood sacrifices in preference to vegetarian offerings. To some respondents, the idea of awe does not necessarily mean that the Datuk Kongs are evil or malicious; rather, they are looked upon as strict and disciplinarian: a social characteristic shared by many a grandparent of patrilineal societies in Southeast Asia. To others, however, the idea of awe is real. Some developers and contractors levelling hilly or mountainous areas are wont to leave little “hills” behind as tokens of respect and deference to the spirit beings living there. Others claim that the little hills are left there to indicate the levelling jobs they have done in particular localities, thus implying that those “little hills” have nothing to do with their belief in the spirit beings.

In the Tawau Residency, it is customarily required that the *bomohs* or *pawang*s sacrifice black fowls for major lumbering and mining activities as well as road and bridge construction projects. Because of the emphasis on, and the frequency in, the use of black fowls for such sacrificial rituals, black fowls fetch unusually high prices.

Some informants said black fowls in Tawau may cost between RM100 (US\$40) and RM1000 (US\$400) each as, according to them, it is extremely difficult to get fowls which are wholly black in colour, especially when they are urgently required for the purpose of performing rituals either before or after the completion of the projects.

In the organization of the shrines, altars form an important basis. Usually a Datuk Kong shrine is represented by an altar, and an altar is often signalled by the presence of a censer. Each altar or censer embodies a Datuk Kong although some altars comprise more than one Datuk Kong. A number of the Datuk Kong altars in Ayer Hitam, Penang, for example, display five to seven censers. There is one altar which consists of as many as eleven censers. This phenomenon of multiple censers is found only in Penang and its practice differs from the traditional pattern of ancestor-worship in most households, which incorporate more than one ancestor in a single altar with a single censer. This pattern is observed even at altars with multiple Datuk Kong. For example, at the *Xiansi Shiye Gong* (Palace of the Xiansi Great Saints) in Semenyih, Selangor, only one censer is installed at the Datuk Kong shrine, even though its altar is dedicated to five Datuk Kongs and represented by five idols.

The Datuk Kong altars may be classified on the basis of the focal points in which the spirit beings manifest themselves, or on the basis of the vehicles of their manifestation. The common ones include the following: (a) the hills and mountains, (b) the tiger, (c) the trees and tree stumps, (d) the earth mounds, (e) the waysides, (f) the graveyards, (g) the construction sites, and (h) the residential areas. These are described in details in my earlier studies (1989, 1992).

The Malay Keramats and Chinese Local Saints

What then is the historical basis upon which the Datuk Kong cult has derived its form and meaning? As pointed out earlier, the Datuk Kong has its origin in the Malay *keramat* but its pattern of organization is essentially Chinese in character. That is to say, the Datuk Kong shrine is based on the format of traditional Chinese locality deities such as *Tudigong* (Earth Grandpa), *Dabogong* (Great Granduncle or Local

Great Saint) or *Fude Zhengshen* (Righteous Deity of Virtues and Prosperity) which perform more or less the same functions as the earth deities in traditional China. The Datuk Kong, however, plays a role which is distinctively different from that of traditional Chinese locality deities. It has to do with intercession in inter-ethnic relations, the legitimization of Chinese culture and community within the context of Malaysian culture and society, and the creation of cosmic balance between the Chinese and Malay spirit world.

To understand how Chinese came to worship the Malay *keramat* as Datuk Kong (*Nadugong*) and thus accepted it as part of their pantheon, we have to trace its development further back in time. Historical records show that Chinese had begun migration to the Nanyang before the time of the Qin (221-207 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) Dynasties. The evidence of early Chinese immigration was firmly established in the Song (A.D. 960-1279) and Yuan (1271-1369) times (Han 1940).

In the Ming period (A. D. 1368-1644), Zhang Xie's *Dongxiyang Kao* (Explorations of the Eastern and Western Oceans) mentions Chinese mariners and their deities, while *Qiongzhoufu Zhi* (Hainanese Records, vol. 8) cites a foreign deity temple (*Fanshen Miao*), whose deity being a Muslim banned pork offering. Although we are not certain whether this foreign deity temple refers to the Malay or Arab *keramat* shrine, it does give an inkling to the Chinese worship of the *keramat*. We have acquired a clearer picture through the Straits-born Chinese' participation in the worship of the *keramat*. This is vividly epitomized in the *Sam Poh Neo Neo Keramat* in Singapore (Ng 1983).

In the Sam Poh Neo Neo Temple, a basket with rattan handle and three pieces of wood, one on the topmost and the others on either side of the handle, is meted out to represent *Datuk Bakul* (Basket Granny). When a piece of cloth is slung over the basket with three pieces of wood protruding (the top represents her head and the left and right represent her arms), the image looks like a fat woman. The woods signify the skeletal remains of the fat woman, while the basket symbolizes bountiful harvest in farming or fishing activity. The fat woman is thus invoked for the conferment of wealth and prosperity.

The Basket Granny is said to be a symbolic representation of Sam Poh Neo Neo, a Hokkien equivalent for *Sanbao Niang-niang*, or *Datuk Puloh Besar* (the Granny of Pulau Besar)--Pulau Besar is an island off the coast of Malacca. The term “*Sanbao*” refers to *Sanbao Taijian* (the Great Eunuch Sanbao) who is none other than Admiral Cheng Ho (Zheng He). A Muslim himself, Cheng Ho is reported to have led several expeditions to Malacca during the Ming Dynasty and is popularly venerated as Sam Poh Kong (*Sanbao Gong*) in Singapore, Malacca, Penang, and Trengganu. In the outskirts of Ipoh (Perak), a cave known as *Sanbao Dong* is named after him. Salmon (1993) in her study on spirit cults in Java also mentions the existence of *Sanbao Dong* in Indonesia and Thailand. *Sanbao Dong* is found in Semarang (Java), on an island off Aceh (Sumatra), and in Bangkok (Thailand). It is likely that the Datuk Bakul at the Sam Poh Neo Neo Temple refers to the ‘consort’ (supposedly a Malay Muslim) of Sam Poh Kong. The Straits-born Chinese, the Baba, or the Chinese Peranakan, could have taken the lead in worshipping the Malay *keramat* before the later Chinese followed suit.

The later Chinese migrated to the Nanyang in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A small number of them were first attracted to the *keramat*-worship during the colonial period (1874-1956). The number gradually increased after Independence (1957-1968). This culminated in the rapid spread and configuration of the *keramat* shrines after the May 13 Sino-Malay racial riots in 1969 (Table 2). It was also after this incident that the invocation of *Tangfan Nadugong* became common. More sophisticated forms of the *keramat* shrines with more Islamic elements, such as the invocation of Islamic names as well as the display of the star-and-crescent symbol in front of the shrine and the installation of the Datuk Kong idols in *haji* prayer caps in the 1980s, following Islamic resurgence in Malaysia. The resurgence, in particular, took the form of *dakwah* movement, the Islamization of the administrative system, and the institutionalization of Islamic agencies. The incorporation of Islamic ornaments in the *keramat* sites is by no means synonymous with Islamization, for the display of Islamic symbols has significance only in form and not in substance.

Before May 13 1969, the construction of the Datuk Kong shrines was rare and far between. In fact, most of the Datuk Kong shrines in the early days were based on natural earth outgrowths shaped like rugged mounds. Some informants said that these outgrowths were "ant-hills", but some said there were no ants in the "ant-hills". Many agreed that the earth mounds were sacred revelations of the supernatural. Often yellow cloths were seen wrapped over the mounds to signify their sacredness (Cheu 1982b).

These mounds are usually found in secondary forests and are believed to harbour two types of Datuk spirits: red and white, or the Red Datuk and the White Datuk. The Red Datuk is believed to be malevolent and children who play around it may incur his wrath and fall sick. The White Datuk is said to be benevolent and therefore more forgiving but there is a limit to his patience, for he will not tolerate unruly behaviour of any kind. A drumming sound can be heard from the mounds if an attempt is made to dig it with a hoe. Believers say the noise is made by the spirits when they are agitated. As the spirits residing in the mounds have to be appeased, altars are installed. Candles are lit and joss sticks and incense papers are burnt as offerings to these spirits to appease them or ask for forgiveness when a child has trespassed the spirits' sanctuary. Sometimes four digit-punters, too, try to solicit lucky numbers from these spirits.

However, there is nothing supernatural about these mounds as they are in fact colonies of giant termites. Four types of these termites, viz. *Macrotermes carbonarius*, *Macrotermes malaccensis*, *Macrotermes gilvus* and *Macrotermes ghmadi*, are commonly found in Malaysia (*The Star*, 13 June 1990). The first type is black while the other three types are reddish in colour. Thus, contrary to the belief that red and white 'spirits' reside in the mounds, they are, in reality, red and black termites.⁶ Some individuals dig the mounds not so much as to have special encounter with the Datuk

⁶ We do not overrule the possibility that Chinese believers may refer the white termites to a particular type of amino termites that may well appear as mutants among the black termites. Malays also sanctify crocodiles, deer, tigers, elephants, and crows which are white in colour. Other peculiar traits like the possession of a stunted foot, a broken tusk, and a split ear may similarly be used as marks of sanctity.

Table 2: Development of Malay Keramats among the Chinese in Malaysia

Period	Structure	Ritual Organization of the Malay Keramat
1500-1870s (Pre-Colonial)	<i>Divinity</i>	Natural objects: earth mounds, rocks, trees, etc. No shelters provided--exposed to rain and shine.
	<i>Rituals</i>	Candle and incense lighting. Vow-making and divination. (Blessing for health, safety, conferment of lucky numbers).
	<i>Phenomenon</i>	A rural phenomenon.
1870-1956 (Colonial)	<i>Divinity</i>	Earth mounds sheltered by wooden sheds with zinc roofs. Incense-urns and candlestands provided.
	<i>Rituals</i>	Candle and incense lighting. Vow-making and divination. Use of Romanized Malay invoking the name of the keramat.
	<i>Phenomenon</i>	A rural phenomenon.
1957-1968 (Post-Colonial)	<i>Divinity</i>	Spirit tablets installed in wooden sheds with zinc roofs. Structure painted red. Incense-urns and candlestands used.
	<i>Rituals</i>	Candle and incense lighting. Use of Chinese characters invoking the name of the Datuk Kong. Use of Chinese scrolls, charm papers, oil-lamps and divining blocks. Chinese tea served.
	<i>Phenomenon</i>	A semi-rural phenomenon.
1969-1970s (NEP - 1st Decade)	<i>Divinity</i>	Spirit tablets displayed. Incense urns, candlestands and incinerators provided. Chinese scrolls, charm papers, oil-lamps and divining blocks used. Bricks and concrete sheds painted red.
	<i>Rituals</i>	Lighting of incense and candles, worshipping and divining. Use of Chinese characters invoking the name of <i>Tangfan Nadugong</i> . Chinese tea served.
	<i>Phenomenon</i>	A semi-rural and semi-urban phenomenon.
1980s-1900s (NEP - 2nd Decade)	<i>Divinity</i>	Malay <i>keramat</i> portraits installed. Multi-coloured brick/tiled structure became common. Some shrines painted white or yellow instead of the traditional red colour. Shrines with Minangkabau rooftop design. Construction of full-sized <i>keramat</i> temples. Increasing use of Chinese characters invoking the name of <i>Tangfan Nadugong</i> . Wooden, plastic, porcelain, fibreglass idols donned in Malay costume and haji prayer caps installed. Malay <i>keramat</i> seated with traditional Chinese deities. Continued use of incense-holders, candlestands, Chinese scrolls, charm papers, oil-lamps, and divining blocks.
	<i>Rituals</i>	Lighting of candles and incense, burning of benzoin, and use of divining blocks. Offering of fruits, flowers, betel leaves, tobacco, quick lime, arecanut flakes, Chinese tea. Gifts offering include walking-sticks, <i>songkok</i> or haji prayer caps, paper costume, etc. Use of Chinese symbols invoking the name of <i>Tangfan Nadugong</i> .
	<i>Phenomenon</i>	A semi-urban and urban phenomenon. Organising committees similar to those of the traditional Chinese temples formed. Keramat festivals celebrated, participated by Chinese deities, patronised by local politicians. <i>Keramat</i> temples promoted as centres of tourist attraction.

spirit but to look for the queen termites which they prize dearly as a form of aphrodisiac. According to them, consuming the queen termites would provide the necessary ingredients to seal their bodies against cold and other elements of nature.

Most of the earth mounds measure about two to three feet high by two to three feet in diameter, gradually tapering off from the base to the top. Some earth mounds in the states of Penang, Kedah and Perak reach five to six feet tall. In many instances, the greyist or yellowist earth outgrowths, which bear the characteristic appearance of the earthclods ploughed up by termites, are often exposed to rain and shine. Devotees who have had their vows responded to after making offerings or sacrifices to the mounds, often erect “kennel-shape” wooden sheds as shelters for the terrestrial spirits. Some of these mounds bear the names of Malay *keramat*, the identities of which were revealed through the dreams of believers or spirit mediums (Chinese *tangki*, Indian *swami*, and Malay *pawang*) or trance rituals through the mediumship of these shamans. In some cases, especially in the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia, Datuk Kong shrines are constructed with artificial earth mounds built within. Some respondents share the sentiment that “if you want a favour, you have to go to the mountain; but with the terrestrial spirit’ blessing, you can bring the mountain to you.”⁷

There is nothing unusual about the use of the earth mound as a form of symbolic representation. The Winnebagoes in North America, for example, place a mound of earth to represent a bear’s cave for the grizzly-bear dance (Radin 1916: 347). In the dance, the performers take tobacco from the mound; as they do this, they believe that they are representing the bears. Similarly, the Warramunga in Australia fashion a long mound for their snake cult (Spencer & Gillen 1917: 234ff). The long mound represents a sandhill by the side of which the snake stands and the body of the snake is drawn upon it.

⁷ In a hierarchical subsistence-turned-capitalist society, this is an apt description of the worshippers’ inner feeling of their helplessness and powerlessness in the hierarchy of socio-political relationships. This is characteristically reflected in their philosophy of fatalism which culminates in the ultimate surrender and submission to the power and authority of the divine being just as they submit passively and resigningly to the jurisdiction of the legal and political system.

The mounds, as earthly abodes of the terrestrial spirits, may also be compared to those of the ancient Hindu godheads. Hindus believe that divine beings live on high places, for example, on Mount Mahameru, or, according to the local version, Bukit Siguntang.⁸ Viewed in this light, the mounds may be interpreted as the earthly manifestation of the terrestrial spirits just as the mountains in ancient times represented the sacred abodes of Siva-Shakti, the Divine King or Devaraja in India, and the four mountains associated with four bodhisattvas in four directions (east, south, west, north), and the five mountains associated with five Taoist saints in five directions (east, south, west, north and centre) in China.

The Japanese also believe in mountain divinities: the *yama no kami*. They believe that these divinities may descend from the mountain to become *ta no kami* (divinities of the paddy fields) in Spring and ascend to the mountain after harvest in Autumn. Due to Buddhist influence, the mountain divinities have come to be regarded as manifestations of Amitabha Buddha and other bodhisattvas (Kitagawa 1987). The Japanese refer to the mountain as a resting place of the souls of the dead. To choose a burial site is “to choose a mountain”. The funeral procession refers to the process of “going to the mountain”. The Chinese also use the expression *chushan* (going to the mountain) to relate to the funeral procession.

Parallel beliefs in the sacredness of the mountains can also be found among the Kadazans, Kedayan and Murut in Sabah and among the Ibans, Bidayuh, Melanau and Kenyah in Sarawak. Many of these natives still hold the view that mountains are the abodes of the dead or the paths from which the dead ascend to heaven. The Dusuns and Kadazans, for example, believe that the spirits of the dead make their last journey to Mount Kinabalu, the highest mountain peak in Southeast Asia, where they are united with their ancestors. Climbers have to make an offering or sacrifice, usually a white fowl, an egg, or both, before ascending the mountain, for fear that little imps

⁸ Mount Mahameru, the Hindu Olympus, is believed to be the centre of the universe where divine beings from heaven and earth meet. Such beliefs are incorporated in myths found in many Malay classics such as *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, and others.

and stranded spirits on the lookout for substitutes of their souls might lead them astray or cause them to slip and fall into the ravine.

To the early Chinese settlers, these earth mounds did not constitute something unusual. In ancient China, indeed, earth deities were represented by pointed stones, and ancestor spirits were signified by the character *zu* (ancestor) whose left or right radical derives its significance from a phallic pictograph. Belief in the ancestor spirit was developed after the conception of the earth spirit, both came to be represented by the phallic symbol. In this connection, it may be recalled that the spirits of the mountain, the hill, the tableland, and the mound all formed the prototypes of earth deities worshipped by the Chinese. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that both the earth and ancestor spirits derived their significance from the primeval essence, life.

The character *shan* (mountain) evolved from the shape of a mountain just as the character *zu* representing the ancestor spirit derived its origin from the shape of a phallus. The phallus was conceived to be the primeval source of procreation, fecundity and life. Both coincide in their symbolic significance and fuse with each other to produce the same representation for the earth deity (*she*) and ancestor (*zu*). In fact, both the earth deity and ancestor were represented and worshipped at the *sheji* altar. The representation of pointed stone-slabs in some of the Nadugong shrines is another case in point which supports the view that the earth deities are kin or non-kin ancestral spirits.

It is not difficult to understand how this came about if the concept of the spirit is viewed in its proper perspective. A human soul, according to Chinese belief, is basically made up of two components: *hun* and *po*. In theory, *hun* represents the *yang* principle, the benevolent spirit, which on death ascends to Heaven and becomes *shen* (deity), the *yang* spirit, whilst *po* represents the *yin* principle, the malevolent spirit, which on death descends to earth and turns into *gui* (ghost), the *yin* spirit. Through the performance of ritual and offering to the ancestral spirits, worshippers believe that they would continually activate the *yin* (earthly) and the *yang* (heavenly) elements, thus enabling earth deities to embody both the gross and the natural as well as the

refine and the divine aspects of the soul. Hence the *yin* (negative or gross) and *yang* (positive or refined) aspects of the soul are relative to the deceased's kin and non-kin relatives. The soul of a deceased may be an ancestor to his kin or descendant but a ghost to other members of the community (Jordan 1972).

In practice, however, it is the good spirit, embodied in the form of a *shen*, that is deified and propitiated. The Datuk Kong represents merely a form, a vehicle, of this spirit. His duty it is to placate evil forces in a particular locale and bring forth blessing to all inhabitants therein. The substance of the spirit, however, manifests itself in the form of a mound, a mountain, or a phallus: the symbol of procreation, fertility, ancestry, life, and plenitude. There is therefore a symbolic relationship between ancestor and earth deities and their significance in the conception of fertility cults.

Hence it is logical to use the same phallic symbol to represent the earth and ancestor spirits and venerate them as such in the form of a mound or a mountain. Mountains, after all, are the source of spring and river, which are themselves sources of fertility and life. Indeed, the phallic symbol is the referent of, and significant for, the mounds found in the earlier forms of Datuk Kong shrines. Early Malay, Indian and Chinese settlers performed rituals on these mounds to acknowledge the "sacredness" of their revelations. Similar cult-forms can also be traced to the worship of Sivalinga or Rajalinga (Kulke 1978; Mus 1975; Mabbett 1969; Coedes 1968; Filliozat 1965).

The Sivalinga or Devalinga was a popular cult worshipped by the Hindu rajas in Indonesia, Khmer and other "Hinduized" states of mainland Southeast Asia before the coming of Islam. Langkasuka (Patani) and Kedah formed the ancient spotlights of Hindu kingship in the first millenium A.D. This shows that fertility cults had already formed an important component of the Hindu tradition among local residents. Vestiges of this belief can still be found in Southeast Asia. Early Chinese and Hindu settlers in this part of Southeast Asia had actually joined the early natives in their worship. Chinese and Indian ritual participation in the *keramat* cult on Pulau Tikus (Penang), Pulau Besar (Malacca), and Pulau Kusu (Singapore) is a case in point.

Most Malays, after their conversion to Islam since the 15th century, discontinued their worship of the phallic cult. A number of the traditional Malay peasants, however, continue to espouse its significance in the form of *keramat*. News reports in the 1980s indicated that this cult was very much alive among the Malays. On Pulau Besar, for instance, the number of the *keramat* shrines maintained by the Malays had increased from nine to fourteen (*Utusan Malaysia*, 25 October 1982). It is forecast that this number would increase to 44 in times to come (*Utusan Malaysia*, 12 November 1982).

Reports also revealed that an increasing number of Malays frequented the shrines for the fulfilment of vows (*nazar*) and performance of rituals related to the practice of traditional medicine, the art of self-defence, trance, spirit-possession, divination for lucky numbers, procreation, and other this-worldly concerns. Linda Kimball, who has done field research among the Malays in Brunei, shares her view that Brunei Malays also believe in the *keramat* and that the *keramat* as a benevolent spirit is in many ways akin to the Chinese Datuk Kong (personal communication). As more Chinese settled in Malaysia, the local mound-worship became incorporated into their tradition by early settlers. The late comers instituted the use of ancestral tablets either as adjuncts to or substitutes for the earth mounds and worshipped them under the guise of *Nadugong* and later *Tangfan Nadugong*.

Similarly, the later Hindu settlers continued to worship Siva-Shakti in the form of a cylindrical black stone (representing the *linga*, the male genital) protruding from another adjoining block of flat-topped and round black stone (representing the *yoni*, the female genital), together with Ganesha as the tutelary deity. The cylindrical black stone and the flat and round black stone, as representations of male and female genitals, resemble the menhirs and dolmens uncovered in prehistoric sites of mainland and island Southeast Asia as well as the Pacific regions. Similar stone structures representing the fertility cult can be seen in practically every Hindu temple in Singapore and Malaysia. Most Sikh temples, too, still retain the Siva-Shakti (*linga-yoni*) symbol in the foreground, with minimum alteration in its structure: for example, instead of the black cylindrical stone, a flagstaff bearing the Sikh emblem is erected.

Among the Indian folks living in rubber and oil-palm estates, rectangular concrete stones or tridents are worshipped as representations of the guardian spirit of the earth, colloquially known as Muniandi or Munisvaran.⁹ As a Hindu folk tradition, the taller stone is said to represent Muniandi, the elder brother, while the shorter stone, Munisvaran, the younger brother; both are reminiscent of the Ganesha and Muruga sibling complex of the Sanskrit tradition. I found four Muniandi-Munisvaran shrines in the rubber and oil-palm estates of Broga, Selangor. It is interesting to note that a Muniandi shrine now forms part of the *Xiansi Shiyegong* Temple at Broga. Xiansi Shiye here refers to the two friends whom Captain Yap Ah Loy deified (Gullick 1955: 107; Choo 1968: 197; Middlebrook 1951: 22). One of them is Sheng Mingli and another is nicknamed “Black Smoker” (Opium Smoker). Shrines to these deities are found at *Xiansi Shiye Gong* at Jalan Bandar (former High Street), Kuala Lumpur; at the Yap Association, Jalan Sir Tan Cheng Lock, Kuala Lumpur; at the *Xiansi Shiye Gong* (Palace of Xiansi Shiye) in Semenyih; and at the *Xiansi Shiyegong Miao* (Xiansi Shiyegong Temple) in Broga, Selangor. Not only the Chinese worship the Hindu deity at the Xiansi Shiyegong Temple but occasionally Indians also perform rituals there for luck and blessing.

Xianshi Shiye temples, however, are not the only places where non-Chinese deities find a niche. At Taman Ganzheyuan (Sugarcane Plantation Garden) in Sungai Petani, Kedah, a Nadugong altar in the foreground of a Nine Emperor Gods Temple incorporates the images of two Hindu deities, Ganesha on the left and Krishna on the right, and the *Nadugong* at the centre. These are new additions of Hindu deities to the older ones, such as the Hanuman who became *Shun Wukong* (the Monkey Deity); Maritchi who became *Zhunti*; Avalokitesvara who became *Guanyin* in the Chinese belief system--not to mention Buddha and numerous other bodhisattvas and arhats through the spread of Buddhism to China and the incorporation of Indian deities in Chinese Buddhist temples in Malaysia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Similarly, through contact and interaction with the Siamese community in the northern states of Kedah, Penang, Kelantan and Trengganu, some Chinese adopt the Siamese Datuk into

⁹This kind of symbolic representation is not unusual. E.E. Evans-Pritchard observed similar kinds of representation among the Nuer in Africa, where worshippers for instance used cucumbers to represent cattle in sacrificial rituals.

their belief system as well. Sometimes special *wayang* or *manora* opera was staged in honour of the Siamese Datuk.

The above examples illustrate that Chinese incorporate not only the Malay *keramat* but also, to a lesser extent, Hindu and Siamese guardian spirits into their belief system. However, Chinese are not the only ones who worship the *keramat*. Some Hindus too believe in the Malay *keramat* just as some Chinese believe in Indian and Siamese Datuk (*Jining* and *Xianluo Nadu*). In the Ampang village, for example, one of the Datuk Kong shrines was dedicated to Mimisan, who is worshiped as a Hindu Datuk. According to the shrine owner, the name of the Hindu Datuk is inscribed in gold in Tamil characters. In Penang and elsewhere, Hindu and Malay devotees sometimes join the Chinese in divining lucky numbers at the Datuk Kong shrines.

In the states of Malacca and Negeri Sembilan, black stones shaped like snake-heads have been found in jungle fringes. These finds represent the relics of the ancient Vaisnava phallic cult, supposed to have been brought over by early settlers from Sumatra and Java, or believed to have remained as artifacts of the Funan empire. The relics themselves provide concrete testimonies to the worship of ancient Hindu godheads which existed alongside the mounds worshipped by devotees in the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia. There is little wonder that in some Datuk Kong shrines, pointed stone slabs are represented as particular Datuk Kong's skeletal remains. Some farmers, vegetable and fruit growers in the hillocks of Ayer Hitam, Penang, also worship peculiar pieces of stones in open spaces in the vicinity of the *Dabogong* and *Nadugong* shrines.

The stone relics or megaliths resembling the shape of a round shield, a sword, a spoon and a rudder found at the tomb of Sheikh Ahmad Majanu at Sungai Udang, Pengkalan Kempas, Negeri Sembilan are worshipped as *batu hidup* or "living stones" (Evans 1921; Kloss 1921; Van Stein Callenfels 1927; Chandra 1973; De Casparis 1980). Similar "living stones" are also found in the Alor Gajah district of Malacca and in the neighbouring districts of Kuala Pilah, Rembau and Tampin in Negeri Sembilan (Adi & Abdul Jalil 1982). Datuk Kong believers approach these stones with feeling of awe

and respect. Chandra, for example, points out “the *batu hidup* ... are regarded as part of the cosmos traditional Malays believed about the supernatural” (Chandra 1973, 1978). The local people, Malays and others alike, insist that the megalithic sites are ancient “graves” and that some of the stones, especially where they are found in complete isolation, have been known to devour people who venture too close or who commit some offence against the stones (Chandra 1978: 129).¹⁰ Be that as it may, it is not impossible or unlikely that individuals who disappeared in isolated places where these stones are found could have been ‘devoured’ by quick-sand.

Many *keramat* legends are woven around the themes of peculiar rocks which shape like humans, junks, or boats in Malaysia (Maxwell 1911; Gullick 1949; Douglas 1949; Nik Daud 1952; Zakaria Hitam 1989). Many genres of the Mount Ophir legends on the fairy guardian are also in circulation among many Malaysians (Winstedt 1925; Wilkinson 1899; Staley 1912; Zainal Abidin 1951; Zakaria Hitam 1989). Pulau Langkawi is full of landmarks which form the motifs of many legendary tales (Ismail 1990; Baddron Asiqin 1988). The name of Mount Kinabalu in Sabah is related to a legend, which recounted how a Kadazan woman with her baby slung over her back every now and then climbed up the mountain peak to watch out for her husband’s ship in the South China Sea but one day extremely cold winds turned her into a rock. The rock looks like a woman carrying something on her back; it now forms part of the summit of Mount Kinabalu. The term “Kinabalu” means “Chinese’s widow”.

The mounds, stones and rocks are representations of the mountain and phallus, which are symbols of fecundity, fertility and life. It symbolizes the burial ground of the dead. Fustel de Coulanges (1956), for example, postulates that ancestral spirits live in the earth. In the Datuk Kong worship, the mound in reality may be an anthill but, in theory, may represent the shrine, the earth, or the spiritual world in which spirit beings live. It may also represent a community of worshippers who believe in the spirit beings in the Durkheimian sense (Durkheim 1965). Indeed, the roof of the shrine may symbolize the sky; hence a mosquito-net or a light frame and canopy or a palm-

¹⁰ It is believed to be offensive to use such objects as sticks, knives, spears or axes to strike at the stones. Passing urine or excreting on or near the stones is equally offensive.

thatched roof, under which lamps or candles are lit, is fixed over the tomb or shrine of a *keramat* (Winstedt 1925: 147), for example, on Kusu Island off Singapore and Mollucas and Sulawesi (Celebes), Indonesia. In Vedic rituals, the sacred mound represents the universe; the bottom of the mound, the earth; and the sacrificial fire, the navel of the earth (Hocart 1970: 228). Indeed, the Hindus regard materials like granite, laterite and marble, used in the construction of a temple as comparable to human skeletons. They also regard the sanctum sanctorum as the abode of human soul and this is signified by the idol.¹¹

Just as earth mounds are symbolic of the mountain and phallus, stones and rocks also form part of the symbolic representation of temples and shrines. Chinese, for example, worship *Shigandang*, or Stone of Bravery, in the belief that it could resist all forms of evil influence in the vicinity. A *Shigandang*, for example, is found at the foot of the Penang Hill. Sometimes a milestone-like structure, measuring three and a half feet by one and a half feet, is erected by the roadside or road junction with the invocation *Nanmu Omi Tuofo* (Hear me, Amitabha Buddha!) inscribed in red to keep the locality from inauspicious forces which local residents believed to be the cause of fatal accidents. I saw similar stone structures erected by the roadsides during my visits to Seoul, South Korea, in 1990, 1992 and 1994.

The use of stones and rocks is by no means exclusive to the folk tradition, for stones and rocks are often used as sacred symbols in many a great tradition. Besides the Old and the New Testaments, Christian hymns for example also use rocks to symbolize Jesus and his Resurrection. Such hymns as “O Safe to the Rock” (*Hymnal*: 214), “Rolled Away” (*Hymnal*: 362), “The Rock That is Higher Than I” (*Hymnal*: 227-228), and “The Solid Rock” (*Hymnal*: 216) imply that Jesus’ love and righteousness are as assuring, steadfast and lasting as the rock.

From the above descriptions, one may deduce that the mounds, just as the stones and the rocks, represent not only the microcosm of the macrocosmos, but also the macrocosmos itself. It is through the performance of rituals that devotees find

¹¹ Hence, it is not uncommon for Hindus to make this kind of remark, “the temple is where the heart is”.

themselves at peace with the microcosmos as it is with the macrocosmos. In so far as these beliefs are concerned, the Chinese just as the Malays, the Indians and other communities in the world may be said to be very down-to-earth indeed.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that the development of the *Nadugong* and *Tangfan Nadugong* is based on the format of *keramat*, the origin of which is traceable to the pre-Islamic tradition of the Arabian civilization.¹² The Chinese' readiness to accept Malay *keramat* as their spirit pantheon is facilitated by their ertswhile belief in earth deity and ancestor. The development itself signifies an attempt on the part of the Chinese to reinterpret the Malay locality cult and reintegrate it into their belief system. The reinterpretation and reintegration are effected through the process of sinicization rather than assimilation. Here, one sees an interesting paradox in *keramat*-worship: while *keramat* cult is on the decline among the Malay Muslims, especially under the impact of the *dakwah* movement, it is gaining ascendancy among the non-Muslim communities in Malaysia.

A respondent once said, "the Chinese formerly bought durians from the Malays because the latter grew durians; now it is the Chinese who sell durians to the Malays because the latter have stopped growing durians." Similarly, as less and less Malays worship the *keramats*, it is likely that more and more Chinese would adopt them. Chinese votaries believe that they have done the Malays a great service for adopting the *keramats*. They explain that "the *keramat*, once worshipped, should never be forsaken"; otherwise, they would become orphan spirits and cause havoc to the general well-being of the Malay community and, consequently, the Malaysian society at large. Some even claim that Malaysia's economic growth and prosperity is, in part, attributable to their devotion to the *keramats* which the Malays have abandoned.

¹² Serjeant points out that Hud and other pre-Islamic prophets of Hadramawt were worshipped as saints or *karamah* before the time of Prophet Muhammad (see R.B. Serjeant, *Studies in Arabian History and Civilization*, London: Variorum Reprints, 1981). The veneration of Sheikhs and Sufi as Muslim saints after the advent of Islam may thus trace its origin to the pre-Islamic tradition.

Without their worship, they say, the *keramats* would have caused an about-turn in the economic well-being of the Malay community.

Nonetheless, the Chinese attempt to develop the Malay *keramat* in the neighbourhoods has not been a smooth one, for it has encountered resistance in some urban centres, where the *Nadugong* or *Tangfan Nadugong* shrines were known to have been demolished to give way to development, including the construction of roads, buildings, and other infrastructures. In some isolated cases, the shrines were razed to the grounds for the simple reasons that they have encroached into state land, or that no one claims ownership of the shrines, or that they bear Muslim names--similar measures were taken in the 1960s to dismantle signboards displaying Chinese characters larger than those of Malay. However, there are numerous stories of how local authorities were prevented by the guardian spirits from demolishing some of the shrines. This explains why some of the shrines continue to reign supreme in some strategic spots in the urban centres in Peninsular Malaysia.¹³

The difference in the conception of, and participation in, the *Nadugong* or *Tangfan Nadugong* outside Chinese homes, but within the Chinese neighbourhoods or residential areas, is particularly sharp in that it is emphasized or deemphasized according to the degree and extent of their interaction or cultural identification with the local communities. The greater the degree and extent of interaction with the non-Chinese communities, the greater are the Chinese likely to worship the *keramat* in the Malay neighbourhoods. The lesser the degree and extent of interaction with the non-Chinese communities, the lesser are the Chinese likely to worship the Malay *keramat*, and the greater are they likely to worship *Nadugong* or *Tangfan Nadugong* and other traditional Chinese locality saints.

Sometimes the organization of the *Nadugong* or *Tangfan Nadugong* may differ in space and time, perhaps, to render the transition more acceptable to the worshippers. In Penang, for example, almost all of the *Nadugong* altars are dedicated to the Malay

¹³ One case in point is the Datuk Kong shrine located by the side of Jalan Maharajalela (former Loke Yew Road), Kuala Lumpur. Another is the dome-shaped *keramat* shrine situated at the centre of old Klang town in the state of Selangor.

keramat. Only occasionally may one encounter altars dedicated to the *Tangfan Nadugong* in new housing gardens. Since the design of these altars is similar to those found on the peninsula, one may surmise that migrants from either the mainland or Penang island could have brought them over. The design bears close resemblance to the spirit tablets used in ancestor-worship. This kind of design, however, is conspicuous by its absence in the old *keramat* or Datuk Kong sites in the former Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca and Singapore), Pulau Burung in Sarawak and Labuan in Sabah, as well as in the *keramat* or Datuk Kong shrines located in timber camps, or the earth mounds and boulders found in the wilderness.

In the sinicization process, changes in the larger community often lead to further changes in the innovation and adaptation of the locality cult. A new trend began, for example, in the 1980s, under the influence of Islamic resurgence and the business motives of manufacturers, when idols made of porcelain, wood, fibreglass, and plastic (complete with Malay *songkok* or *haji* prayer caps) were incorporated. Some of these shrines were designed to look like traditional Malay huts, with horn-shape or Minangkabau-style rooftops, but Chinese characters are written on the top and bottom as well as on the left and right of the shrine panels; they were found not only in Chinese villages but also in towns. One of these designs, for instance, was used in a Datuk Kong shrine located behind a Chinese school in Kajang, Selangor, and another at Jalan Berangan, Off Jalan Raja Chulan, Kuala Lumpur. Increasing numbers of these fabrications are produced by manufacturers and are steadily replacing the wooden tablets in Peninsular Malaysia as well as in Sabah and Sarawak. It is difficult to say whether this development is the consequence of *keramat* worshippers' earnest desire for religious devotion or the result of culture elites' motivation for material rewards.

In recent years, many larger Datuk Kong shrines are constructed to replace wooden or zinc shrines built before the New Economic Policy (1971-1990). In the first decade of the New Economic Policy era, many brick and concrete shrines emerged. In the 1980s, many older shrines in the urban centres and modern housing estates were renovated or reconstructed. Sometimes organizing committees along the line of traditional Chinese temples were formed under the patronship of local politicians. Toward the end of

1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, larger concrete shrines became common. Some Datuk Kong shrines began to have red, blue or green tile-roofs with inner walls and floors made of luxurious glazed tiles. Several Datuk Kong shrines were painted white or yellow instead of the traditional red in Sabah and Peninsular Malaysia.

During the New Economic Policy era, too, several full-size Datuk Kong temples were built: for example, the Datuk Kong Temple at Tanjung Piandang, Parit Buntar, Perak; the Datuk Aceh Temple at Jalan Weston, Penang; the Datuk Kong Temple at Tuaran, Sabah; and the latest and the largest Stone Datuk Temple at Broga, Selangor. The Datuk Kong Temple at Tanjung Piandang and the Datuk Aceh Temple were built on less-than-one-acre plots of land. The Datuk Kong Temple in Tuaran was built on a one-acre plot of land. The Stone Datuk Temple was built on a two-acre plot of land with prospect for further expansion to incorporate the adjacent piece of land.¹⁴ Based on observation, it is likely that the Stone Datuk Temple at Broga may set the trend, if not the pattern and design, for the future development of Datuk Kong temples in Malaysia, especially for the purpose of promoting tourism.

While many unprecedented changes have taken place in the adoption and sinicization of Malay *keramat* (1995), one wonders whether they have also brought about revolutionary change in Chinese religion. When we say change, we essentially refer to development and progress, i.e. change for the better in quality and substance. It is undeniable that the sinicization process has brought about change and innovation. This change and innovation, for example, has enabled believers of different dialect groups to cross one another's cultural borders. The innovations have also enabled non-Chinese, such as the Indians and the Siamese, to cross the boundaries of Chinese spirit world. The sinicized non-Chinese locality cults have spread from the rural to the

¹⁴ The organizing committee of the Stone Datuk Temple has plan to purchase the adjacent piece of land of about three acres in area which happened to belong to a Christian landlord. The Christian landlord has categorically refused to sell the land to the "pagan" temple and is planning to sell it to a private individual. The temple organizing committee, however, expresses confidence and faith in the power of the Stone Datuk that it would eventually own the land by offering the right price to the new owner.

urban centres, from Peninsular Malaysia to Sabah and Sarawak. The spread is extensive, expansive, and impressive. The Datuk Kong shrines have also become larger in size, more complex in organization, more colourful in symbolic representation, and more ornate in architectural design.

However, the change involved is largely spatial and therefore circular and involutionary in nature in the Geertzian sense (Geertz 1971). That is, although there is movement, intra-ethnic as well as inter-ethnic contact and interaction, there is very little progress in the vertical growth of religious and philosophical ideas. Although the organization of these locality deities has become more elaborate, ornate, and differentiated, the intellectual tradition upon which the Chinese belief system is based remains stagnant and largely unchanged. It is not 'shared poverty' which Geertz talks about in the processes of ecological change but 'shared enrichment' through the exchange and interchange of animistic beliefs donated by multi-ethnic cultures--no attempt being made to raise the horizon of their age-old intellectual tradition beyond that of animism and naturism.

Nonetheless, these spirit cults have served as a medium through which Chinese become acquainted with local cultures and beliefs. The mutual support and participation in the innovation of individual traditional spirit cults among the various dialect groups and ethnic communities have increased the frequency of inter-dialect and inter-ethnic contact and interaction. This has to that extent contributed to a greater sense of "communitas" (Turner 1969) in the multi-dialect and multi-ethnic social system. Thus, although the sinicization of local Malay *keramat* is internally circular, horizontal and involutionary in nature, the practice and ritual participation among the various Chinese dialect groups and non-Chinese ethnic communities, is externally vertical and dynamic in character.

Be that as it may, one still wonders whether the adoption of the non-Chinese locality deities like the Malay *keramat* would pose a threat to the existence or survival of their own traditional deities. Contrary to most monotheistic believers, Chinese devotees and religious practitioners do not consider this as a threat but rather regard it as a

mechanism by which their traditional guardian spirits may be recharged with new vigour for their adaptation to the local socio-cultural milieu. Neither do they regard the incorporation of non-Chinese deities into the Chinese belief system as an intrusion or an affront to the sanctity of their traditional pantheon. Rather, they consider the incorporation of the Malay *keramat* and other Indian or Siamese Datuks as an enhancement of, and an alternative to, traditional spiritual power. It also reflects the spirit of liberalism, freedom of religion, autonomy and democracy which non-Muslim communities prize in their existence as a globalized human community.

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