

GROWING UP IN TRENGGANU

Awang Goneng was born at an early age in the house where he grew up in Kuala Trengganu. He was pushed into Sekolah Melayu Ladang where his father's teacher friend rather than his so-called precociousness got him a place as an underage pupil. This experience aged him quickly in time for proper school, first at the Sultan Sulaiman Primary School (SSPS)—where he nearly burned his class and classmates while trying to do a magic trick involving a box of Swedish *tandstickor* that were on sale in Trengganu at that time—and then later at the SSSecondaryS.



Then his parents moved to Kuala Lumpur and he to another school known as the Victoria Institution where he and a schoolfriend (who later became a judge in Singapore) involuntarily broke the school's medium distance record while fleeing a gang from a rival school near the Merdeka Stadium.

With this newfound talent for power running, Awang Goneng proceeded swiftly into subsequent chapters of his life: first through the doors of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) where he took a Law degree (from the Academic Registrar's office one night when the door was left open), and then through an academic career (briefly) and journalism (less briefly) during which time he interviewed, among others, Anthony Burgess, Barbara Cartland and Adnan Khashoggi. He now lives in London as a freelance writer.

By the same author

Selangor: A Celebration

(by Wan A. Hulaimi with photographer K.C. Loo)

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Awang Goneng



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*To Cik and Ayah
Who taught me more than they knew. Alfatimah.*

*To the lovely ladies in my life:
Zaharah Othman,
Rehana & Nona*

*And the lovely lads:
Hafiz & Taufiq*

A Note on Trengganu

Trengganu did exist once, as Terengganu does now. I grew up in the former and live now outside the latter, so in the title of this book and in the writings herein it is Trengganu for me, *tra-la-la*. If I want to be an argumentative sort of fellow (which I'm not) I will say that no one pronounces Terengganu Te-reng-ga-nu, as it is spelt. In that sense, the Jawi spelling is more faithful to the tongue, T- r-ng-ga-nu. In our family we just say Teganung, others say Teganu, while others still merely go for Ganu or Gganu, so it makes arguments about Trengganu or Terengganu sound rather academic, doesn't it? And so it does to these fellows, engaged in what was once known to men and elephants as the trunk call:

'Guane mung di Teganung?'

('How are you in Teganung?')

'Ggitulah sökmö!'

('As always, for evermore!')

Introduction:

The Man by the Door

If you're reading this in a bookshop while exchanging uncertain glances with the bookseller sitting there by the door, I'd advise you, in the language of Trengganuspeak, to take this book to the counter and *beli selalu*, a gesture that will be regarded as friendly by writer, bookseller and their starving families (though you may want to take a second look at that person by the door).

This book took shape over many years (I grew up very slowly), was written in many places and spent a good few years as rough drafts on the Internet where it was discovered by a handful of people who very kindly sent me emails or left comments that confirmed, corrected or added to what I'd written there. It is tempting, therefore, to put all this down to one ugly word: a *blook*, a book sired by a blog—well yes, so it is, yes and no.

Many writers I have spoken to have likened the writing of a book to the act of childbirth: slow, painful and driven by anxiety; but as they're all men I am reluctant to take them too seriously except in one aspect, and that is your book, once finished, is nothing less than your own child. The association doesn't just end there for me. I have used my blog notes of things that I suddenly remembered, that I wished to look at again and use later in a book that I had vaguely in mind, of my Trengganu childhood, to pass on to my children to remind them of a world that they never knew and in which their father grew up. I wrote it on the fly, often in internet cafés, sometimes very laboriously into the Palm PDA they gave me for my birthday, and which thankfully only crashed after I'd transferred the bulk of its information to my PC. This is my world as I knew and as I remember it now, a journey travelled through the mind's

eye, of places lived through and been to and many, sadly, now vanished.

Growing Up in Trengganu as a fascicule first appeared on 29 October 2003, numbered #306, followed by another on 27 November, numbered #9513. The last, at the time of publication of this book, had reached the lofty height of six digits, #373,123, reproduced here as *Bits of Old Paper* on page 221. The system of numbering was both spurious and purposeful: to escape the bother of having to remember all the numbers that had gone by and, more importantly, to signal that this was growing up *ad libitem*, *ad nauseam*. Of my small coterie of readers only one, a nice young man named Abidin, was puzzled enough to ask if there was method in this madness so, Abidin, this, for you, is the answer.

As I progressed through my writing, and as the numbers reached even more ridiculous digits, the wife of a prominent figure in Malaysian society wrote in with a confession: that she'd been following my numbers with great interest and had been throwing away money on the three-digit lottery based on my digits. Which is a good point now for me to ask if you're still reading this from an uncomfortably upright position in a little bookshop somewhere. If so, then I'll let you know that I don't mind that at all as I'm now living very comfortably (thanks to the confessions of that society lady) from the proceeds of blackmail. But while I'm living comfortably from the earnings of that VIP husband and his guilt-ridden lady, I want you to cast a thought to that bookseller by the door throwing a furtive glance at you, and to his starving family. So if you go now and buy this book, perhaps I too may be able to stop living off the proceeds of blackmail and go back once again to a life of abject probity.

While recording the first draft in blogs I have been fortunate to have had so many people write in with their views. Many wore the cloak of anonymity but many more came under their *noms de guerre*. I love and value them all. Of these, two deserve special mention: Md. Adib Noh (Abedib) who started me blogging, and Pök Ku (Tengku Ali Bustaman), fellow blogger and talented writer; a man who knows more about Trengganu than I do. There are others too, like Maya, who kept urging me to 'do a book', and now that it is here, on her head now be it. Another person too deserves mention: Long Ladang, a true blue Trengganuer and a wanderer, I suspect, like me. He first made his appearance in my blog pages on 9 May 2005 and continued to add his amusing, insightful

and occasionally sad footnotes to my blogs for a short time. Then he disappeared completely, and his 'reappearance' was a day of tears. Please go to page 236 to read why.

Finishing a book relieves some burdens but increases others, and my debt spans the world: in Canada, to Chung Chee Min for the photograph on page 165; in New York, to John Storm Roberts for the Besut photos on pages 181, 182 and 183; in Malaysia to Wan Abdul Rahim Kamil for photos from the family album; Yahaya bin Mohd. Nor for the Al-Yunani photos, pages 73, 202 and 203; Wan Adnan Md. Noor and Athirah Azmi for the mausoleum photo on page 58; Dato Md. Noor Khalid (Lat) for the caricature of me; and to Adzakael for his Megat Panji Alam on page 139. In Britain I'm indebted to Kak Teh for her encouragement; to Dato' Yunus Raiss of Sels College, educationist extraordinaire, for those long conversations on Englishness and English grammar; and to Frederick Lees for his very comments. In New Zealand there's Nor Zarifah Maliki who occasionally helped with the identification of *ubis* and plants.

The contents of this book appeared as a first draft in my blogged notes over a few years (2004–June 2007). I have corrected many mistakes, rewritten many sentences and smoothed out many hurriedly written phrases. My bread and butter preoccupations—and laziness—meant that my notes were left out there to dry in cyberspace without the benefit of another look, and my readers were too polite to point out many mistakes to me.

A million thanks finally to Philip Tatham of Monsoon Books who, from out of the blue, sent me an email to ask 'if there's a book there'; to my editor Natalie Thompson for her patience and helpful suggestions; and to Blogspot.com for hosting my first drafts. I have already mentioned my wife and children in the dedication but I shall mention them again now with my love and thanks for their understanding and support and for their endless supply of shortbread and tea.

Please go quietly now to the man by the door and think of the starving families.

Awang Goneng
London 2007

A Community
on the Shore

Hangings From the Rafters

AT SOME POINT IN HER LIFE, Mother must've looked up to the rafters and decided that something was amiss. She ordered the best *lempok* that ever was stirred on this planet earth, put the whole big clump in a metal pot and hung it from a beam up there. This was a traditional Trengganu house which we lived in, and like other traditional Malay houses, it did not have a ceiling. So a view of the rafters, with the strutting beams, and the Senggora tiles that made the roof was clearly visible to a child lying below on a *mengkuang* mat. In some houses, a few tiles would have been taken out and replaced by a sheet of clear glass so that a beam of light could shine through into the house at any time of day. I remember waking in the night to the silvery glow of the moon shining through the skylight—an eerie thought considering that we'd been regaled daily with stories of nocturnal ghostly shapes emerging with legs straddling the beams above.

This encapsulates for me the essence of my Trengganu childhood: sweetness and light, *lempok* in the pot, pane in the sky.

A light from the past, sweetness of old. The *lempok* was stirring stuff, made from fresh durians thrown in a thick mass in a Trengganu brass pot, flesh and stone, and stirred and stirred with bonding and sweetening ingredients—and coconut milk, perhaps—to a beautiful crust. The resulting paste bore the thread of dreams, unlike the ersatz goo wrapped in cellophane now masquerading as 'durian cake'.

Mother had neither the patience nor the skill nor the manpower to make sweetmeat herself. She'd order her *lempok* from Batu Rakit, then the world centre for durian concoctions, and a sweet stick called *rökök Arab* from a lady living behind the walls of the Istana Maziah, this dream so perfect its maker had to be confined within a royal palace. The Istana Maziah was an old-fashioned *istana* with an imposing front. It stood at the foot of an old *bukit*, Bukit Putri (Hill of the Princess), among a colony of royals, servers and hangers on who lived in the back of the building.

It was—and still is, probably—a ceremonial palace, entered through an arch of old Malay design (the *pintu gerbang*) which, as word had it, had a little apparition straddling its legs from one side of the arch to the other, long after the sun had sunk in the horizon. Trengganu people had a predilection for apparitions like that.

Our *nasi dagang* came from only one woman, called Mök Song, who plied her trade at the crack of dawn and was already packing up to go by seven o'clock when her rivals were just about to break even.

I'm reminded now of Bukit Putri as it's Ramadan, a time when some Trengganuers would wax lyrical about its purpose—the hill I mean. Atop this hill is an old bell, cast by Trengganu makers from the sturdiest brass. It hangs on a bar in a small hut, not far from a shelter made from bricks, a mysterious place built perhaps by some old sultans as a spot to while away an afternoon while watching the *perahu besar*, the Trengganu junks sailing in laden with salt, Senggora tiles, rice and exotica from old Siam. Beneath this brickwork is a dark, deep cellar from which have emerged many legends. But back to the bell (the Trengganu *genta*) which was struck every day during Ramadan at *iftar* time, the breaking of fast. And then again and again just before dawn in a fit of boisterous chimes to mark the beginning of the day of fasting.

My father used to take me to the Masjid Abidin (White Mosque) after *iftar* to stand in the back row with other little boys for the *tarawih* prayer of many *raka'ats* performed only during Ramadan. The repetitive movements of the prayer were exhausting, but the atmosphere was filled with the sounds and feel of Ramadan.

One night, after prayers, I met the man who struck the *genta* in the *jama'ah* who insisted that my friends and I should see his place of work—an offer that was both cruel and kind. The footpath up the hill was unlit, and it cut through many wild bushes from which lurked many dark creatures of our imagination, and the quiet places of repose of people who had died in the distant past. When we finally reached the bell and the brickwork resting place where legends emerged from its darkest pit, Kuala Trengganu glowed brightly in the distance and there we stood, silently, apprehensively in the dark. The ringer shone his torch at the bell and then looked over to the other side. 'That's the old arch to the *istana*,' he said, 'and from beneath it hangs, every night ...'

'Oh do shut up!' we all said.

Far below at the foot of the hill, behind the *istana*, I saw a tiny light flickering from the window of a little house. And I was sure it was Mök Nöh making her famous *rökök Arab* and other scrumptious native cakes.

Diamonds From the Sky

ONE DAY, at the precise call for the noon prayer, there was a rain of *agar-agar* on our little community.

This was no ordinary *agar-agar* but of the finest variety. They were green, red, yellow and blue, crinkle-cut bite-sized diamonds. It sent Mother rushing out in her prayer shawl, punctuating her rapid movement with words that I still remember: 'My *beleda!* My *beleda!*'

This path to disaster began in the quiet hours when Mother was labouring over her hot stove, peering and stirring in a brass *kuali* that contained a transparent and bubbly goo. Trapped in the embers, like an elongated insect, was the long green leaf of the pandan tree. The scented, blessed pandan has a ubiquitous presence in Malay cookery.

When the mixture was to the desired viscosity, she poured the fluid in as many trays as she could pull from the kitchen cupboard (which wasn't many), and into any other tray-like things that'd serve her purpose. These being mainly old Huntley & Palmer biscuit tins, food-trays painted with a smiling Nyonya extolling the virtues of some local tea, or the lids of any old containers that could hold her gelatinous stuff in sufficient depth and quantity. Before pouring them out into the various trays, she'd mix in just the right amount of some magic drops to make the *agar-agar* glow in translucent gold, red, green or opal blue, filling the whole kitchen with the sweet scent of vanilla.

Early in the morning, just as the sun was rising, I watched her use a serrated cutter to slice the jelly into inch-long shapes which she arranged neatly in two large trays to put out in the sun to dry. For the children, the *agar-agar kering* were the colours of the Trengganu Hari Raya, the feast of Eid to end the fast, the *bulan puasa* of Ramadan.

A window in our house looked out onto one aspect of the local

community, especially the *surau* that stood cheek by jowl with our house in the huddled way that *kampung* houses stayed together. Ours was a tall house, much taller than most, that literally looked down onto the daily life of the community. In the moonsoon months there loomed in our window a menacing sky, and the *belinjau* trees swaying from side to side looked extremely supple. As a child I stood for hours looking out from here, listening to the roar of waves on the distant shore.

Mother looked out of the window too but with a purview of shorter remit. It was the corrugated iron rooftop of the *surau* that she was interested in, especially as it was sloping gently past our open window, and easily within her reach. When she looked to the sky, her mind was set: it was a right, bright day for putting the *agar-agar* out to dry. Out went the trays onto the sloping roof, held in place only by their tenuous hold onto the protruding heads of the roofing nails. The midday heat would crystallise the *agar-agar* pretty quickly.

But with noon also came the call to prayer, and in Trengganu then (as now) it would start with the beating of what we called the *geduk*, a massive drum of cow hide whose long barrel hung from stout ropes attached to the lower end of the sloping roof in the back of the *surau*. Beaten with growing intensity, it preceded the muezzin's call, the boom-boom-booming sound that shook the rafters, awoke the dozy, and sent the trays tumbling down from the rooftop, *agar-agar* and all.

It happened to be in the back of the *surau* just when this technicoloured rain began to fall, sitting by an old curmudgeon who was a distant uncle. He was a *surau* regular who was quick on the draw with acid retorts about the slightest thing that irked him so. When my mother's distressed call was heard between the booms of the *geduk*, he deigned to give the briefest look at the scene of devastation then, without batting even an eyelid, he walked silently back to the inside of the *surau* to pray.

It was not the sight and sound of my poor mother in her prayer shawl that became the defining moment for me in this comical episode but rather the unbemused expression of the old curmudgeon who bothered to even look at all. You need to have lived on this earth for quite awhile to be able to look at diamond-shaped jellies of many hues showering down from the sky on a clear day, and be able to dismiss it without so much as a sigh.

Ice on the Gunny

ROSE SYRUP, sweet since the 1930s. By late afternoon the pavement in front of the *pasar* was lined with blocks of ice, some covered in sawdust, others wrapped in gunny sacks. The rasping sound of the sharp teeth of the saw meeting the shimmering face of the ice, making deep cuts in parallel rows in the ice block, then another line cutting the rows in half again in a cross-cut. Then a sharp hack with the cleaver down the clefts would break those smaller blocks free, to the delight of street urchins and errand boys sent out to buy this essential balm for the dry rasping throats of adult fasters; and ice too for the milky, syrupy drink that'd quench the thirst from a long day's *puasa*.

Children fasted too, but most of them were given special dispensation to eat at noon. In our household this was considered *infra dig*, so we braved it out with a full day's whine, salivating fiercely as the afternoon drew on when the aroma of the *akök* or the *bubur lambuk* bubbling in Mother's kitchen became just too irresistible.

This was Kuala Trengganu before the fridge became the precious white good for the plebs. Selling ice blocks by the roadside was a source of extra income for the boys for Hari Raya clothes, or for a jaunt after Raya prayers to the Capitol or the Sultana, two local cinematic fleapits that incessantly rolled out old films from the Shaw Brothers and the Cathay Keris stables.

By those ice sellers in the Tanjong market, as the shadows were lengthening and the sun was turning a different shade of yellow, came the *kuih* sellers. These were womenfolk who worked over their hot stoves from the break of day, incessantly stoking the fire with coconut husks or firewood, brows dripping with sweat and eyes ever watchful that the products of their labour were not burnt to a cinder. By five o'clock in the afternoon they'd be ambling out of their domestic workshops, round woven baskets balanced precariously on their heads, filled to the brim with veritable delights and fancy cakes. There were stalls and stalls for these sellers, all arranged in a row.

This is the roll call of Trengganu comestibles: *nekbak*, *apang ssakör*, *berönök*, *perut ayam*, *wajik*, *lömpat tikam*, *asam gumpal* and, of course, the *putri mandi*, the princess in a bath of shaved coconut and palm sugar.

In this age of the fruitcake, who remembers them all now? Recently, while sampling the Turkish Imam Biyaldi, so good as to make the *imam* faint, I was reminded of the Trengganuesque Cik Abas Demam, a culinary product so good that the eponymous sampler (Cik Abas) ran hot and cold.

But not everything was sweet and sickly. There was *röjök betik*, a Trengganu salad of green papaya shaved into thin strips, covered with a sauce of fish, chilli and coconut sugar mixed in vinegar. Then there was, of course, the famous Trengganu *röjök kateh*, not strictly a salad, but a chilli-hot vinegary preparation of cows' trotters. Also the *ceranang*, a true salad of blanched vegetables (mainly *kangkong*), bean sprouts and tofu covered in a thick dollop of peanut sauce.

Just before sunset—before lilting cries of the muezzin came forth from various little prayer halls in the community, before the cannon roared from distant hills, before the Trengganu bell rang out its doleful chimes from Bukit Putri by the harbour to mark the time for *iftar*—the kids would roll up their gunny sacks for the day, stash the day's takings in a Milo tin and head for home to unravel a fierce weapon, the *bedil buloh* that fired volleys of carbide power, much to the consternation of elderly village women who'd be shocked by the booms into fits of uncontrollable verbal assault (mostly pertaining to the pudenda).

To *melatab* is a peculiarly Malay and Eskimo affliction, and is recognised as Eskimo hysteria. All that ice on the pavement couldn't have cooled down the distemper.

Noises on the Ether

EID DAY OR HARI RAYA would suddenly come with the pealing of the *genta*, followed by a sudden shift in tone in the Masjid 'Abidin from *tarawih* prayers to the *takbir*, then perhaps an announcement on the radio.

We had a radio with a lit-up dial that carried the names of many cities of the world. A long needle moved across its face to pick voices that came from distant parts: New Delhi, Ljubljana, Moscow, Warsaw, probably even Gdansk and Timbuctoo. From each stop came ghostly voices from afar, but mostly they were just high-pitched gurglings across the ether.

On Radio Malaya came the awaited report of a moon sighting in the sky skies above Teluk Kemang. It was the earliest glimpse of the Eid month of Shawwal. Teluk Kemang was the best place for moon sighting in all of Peninsular Malaysia.

As soon as the news settled in, Mother would hasten to the kitchen to boil a huge pot of rice which she'd put aside to cool awhile. Then, when all her other work was done, she'd dollop the rice out onto a mat of banana leaves, pull the edges of the leaves to the centre to bind the rice into a wrap, then cover this wrap with another wrap of *batik* material. Then it was time for her to call out to us to help her lift the *batu giling* to place atop the huge parcel. And there it'd stay till Eid morning, the rice snugly encased in sarong and banana leaves. Then, before our very eyes, she'd unravel a miracle. The rice under the weight of the *batu giling* had compacted into a massive cake of *nasi kapit*, to be diced and dipped in peanut sauce on the morning of Raya.

The *nasi kapit* is de rigueur for Hari Raya in Trengganu, as is the *ketupat pulut*, glutinous rice wrapped in *palas* leaf triangles, then fried in coconut oil. There was also another *ketupat* wrapped in little parcels woven from the long shoots of the coconut tree. Raw rice was poured into the woven containers, then boiled in a pot until the rice fluffed out and pressed itself into a cake under the pressure, just like the *nasi kapit*.

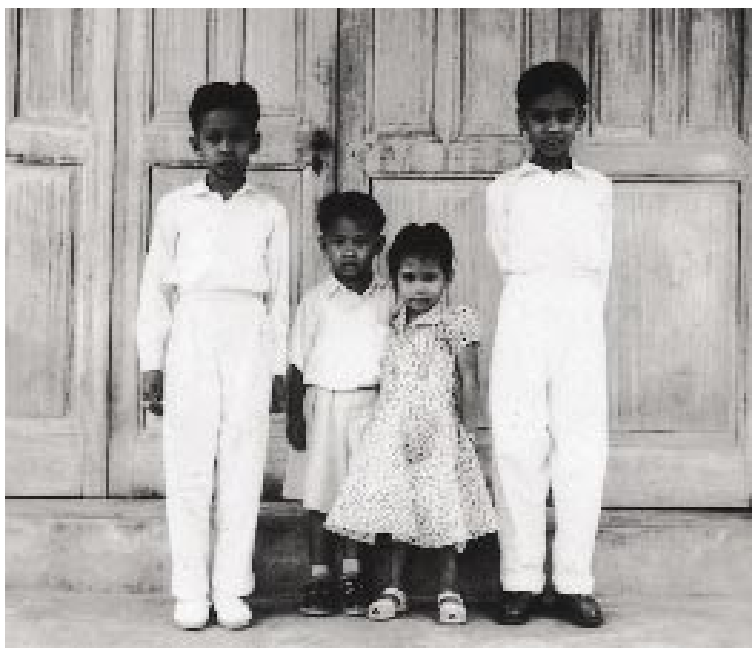
Uncertainty about when it would end because it depended on the moon sighting added to the excitement of Ramadan, but preparations for it were made well in advance. Cakes were ordered from the specialist makers: *putu kacang* or *apit-apit* that rolled into crisp cigar shapes from the hot griddle. We used them as edible straws for hot Milo. *Rökök Arab* was my favourite, ordered from Mök Nöh who lived behind the walls of the *istana*. *Rökök Arab* was *apit-apit* with a college education—rolled like *apit-apit* but solid as cigar. It was greased with Trengganu *ghee*, our *minyök sapi*, smothered in Mök Nöh's devotion and love then fried to the consistency that would transport you to another world.

Around the middle of Ramadan, Mother would assemble ingredients of pandan leaves, sugar and *agar-agar*, magic dyes in little bottles and the merest hint of the essence of vanilla. She'd stir them all together in a thick brass pot over a wood fire until they blended into the right consistency for her to pour into a tray. This was the beginning of the diamond-shaped

beleda that was put out in the sun to dry into a myriad of colours: sugar-coated shapes of green and red and golden yellow, shining translucently like glass crystals.

On the Day of Raya

ON THE MORNING OF HARI RAYA we wore hats and folded our *samping* tight around our waists in case it dropped when we stood to pray. We took what little money we got from Father and hoped there'd be more along the way. This normally came in the shape of coins—normally ten sen, rarely twenty—wrapped in tubes of rolled up newspaper, broken open by men who stood before a pleading crowd as they either handed them out piece by piece to everyone or showered them all on the crowd. Coin showering was a favourite activity among our local benefactors during Hari Raya, but we never got more than a few coins to hold.



Me (right) standing with my siblings on Hari Raya.

On Hari Raya the *genta* clanged, the cannon roared and the sound of the *geduk* came booming down from the tower. Even *tèksi* pedallers wore their best clothes, but we hastened on foot through Kampung Dalam Bata, out on the long road through Paya Tok Bèr, then a right turn into Kampung Hangus, joining the throng already moving towards the mosque known as Semejid Putih in our lingo. The towers had voices coming down from them: ‘*Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!*’ We knew them to be the voices of Bilal Said or Bilal Deraman, friends of Father and fathers of friends we had at school.

It was the smallness of the community in Kuala Trengganu that gave it the hi-you-there-how-are-you kind of atmosphere. But even then most of the people we found there on Hari Raya were complete strangers, albeit well dressed in Trengganu *söngkèt* when the *söngkèt* was still very affordable. There were all those men in flowing robes, and so many women in prayer shawls moving in a dazzle of white at the women’s side of the mosque by which I entered on Fridays and normal days. There was Pök Ku Haji Ambak with his *serban besar bakul*—turban the size of a basket, as my late elder brother so succinctly put it—and there were Hajis who wore stiff, square *igal* on their heads to keep their headcloths from going astray.

Hari Raya was a special day, and woe betide anyone on that day who went to sea. Shops were closed but people milled about everywhere, and there was something merry in the air. This was the day after the night that taught me melancholy from watching the last drops of oil flickering their last dancing lights around the wicks of our home-made *pelita*; after all the children had gone home with the lights doused from their *tanglongs*, and the shops were all closed and quiet from row to row, with not a flicker left of the life that had given so much joy barely an hour before, except for the occasional movement of rats that slid below the shops to nibble on the merchandise while the shopkeepers were away.

Father had a brother living next door to the mosque in a large wooden house that’s now been packed up and half rebuilt elsewhere due to the government’s recent effort to ‘clean up’ Kuala Trengganu. This uncle was a much-travelled man who took us on our first ride in a luxury car. After the Raya prayers, we all gathered in his house and sat on the deep sofa as I looked up to his overhead bookshelves that housed a two-volume set of

Winstedt's *Unabridged Malay Dictionary*. I used to look through it as my finger travelled through words that became such delights by dint of their being defined by an outsider. From my uncle's window I could look out to reminders of mortality and of people basking in the joy of a holy day. Closest to the house was a burial ground that had many tall and quaintly shaped grave markers, and next door to it was a house called the *marja'* which, by name, meant the place for consultations (presumably with the *imam*), but which I knew was used by the mosque stalwarts for sleeping, dining and for appointments with the mosque barber. The *marja'* had a quaint smell: a combination of the sap of the papaya tree in its backyard, of trimmed hair and of the sleep of people after a heavy meal.

Hari Raya was one day that relieved us of the ennui of living in a town that sat on the edge of an open, rough sea. Everything looked different on that day for a child: the shops were closed but there were faces of joy, the adults were still tall but they stooped for you to hand out a nickel and there were food and cakes aplenty. The town was awash, it seemed, with *akök*, *buöh ulu*, *nasi kapit* and slices of fruitcake made by a foreign woman called Big Sister.

We slipped out when the adults were feeling dozy and looked for fresh avenues in an old town after it came alight on the morning of Hari Raya. This was after we'd visited all the *toks*, cousins, uncles and aunties who lived in Seberang Takir. With nothing better to do, pockets jangling with a bit of silver, we normally headed for the Capitol to see Minggu, the doorkeeper, dressed in his Hari Raya *baju* made in the same pattern as his *kain pelikat* below. I think even Pök Mat of the lower, bug-ridden class wore a *söngkök* for this day. Next door, at the Sultana, Mat Ming put on his special self on this special day—but was still aloof to children and grumpy as grumpy could be. He was no relation of the then screen star Mat Aming but because of his prominence, this cinema was more Panggung Mak Ming to us than Panggung Sultana. This was before the word *pawagam* had been invented by P. Ramlee.

There was little chance of our getting tickets for any of the shows on that day. For one thing, the doorkeepers who were amenable to our approaches on other days became more reluctant on Hari Raya. For another, the cinema owners, for reasons of personal satisfaction, made the ticket booths accessible only through little holes cut out of a broad mash

of steel. Queuing was an uncommon practice in the Kuala Trengganu of my day, so bidders for tickets piled themselves in one huge heap in front of the wire mesh, exposing themselves to the danger of losing an arm or a leg, or of having their glass eyes crushed and delicate parts mangled in the *mêlée*.

The sad thing about Hari Raya was that it came and went all in a day. And the sadder thing about it was the way it dropped us again with a plop into the middle of everyday reality. Father had a way with Hari Raya based on the state of his economy: he'd buy us only shoes that we could wear again daily to school, so our shoes were mostly white Bata, and the same too applied to the colour of our shirts so, in parts, we were in our Hari Raya outfit throughout the year.

Sounds From Afar

THE SOUNDS YOU GROW UP WITH always remain, no matter how far you've travelled, how changed your life may be.

I grew up in Kuala Trengganu to the sound of Singaporean beauties waddling duck-like in the afternoon sun, sultry women of light ebony that made heads turn, followed maybe by wolf-whistles. They came in a lyrical adulation, straight out of a blaring horn-shaped speaker that was placed in the upper-storey window of a coffee shop named Bhiku, the meeting place in our community of fishermen and market vendors, petty clerks from government offices and the occasional Hajis with their skullcaps wrapped in tailed turbans. Children were there too from the neighbouring houses, but my parents were of the strict type who'd never countenance this business of being at a loose end around the marble-topped table of the café Bhiku. My visits there were short and business-like, mostly early in the morning to do the family errand of buying the *roti canai* that were lifted piping hot from the griddle and rolled up in pages of yesterday's news, most likely the Jawi *Utusan Melayu*.

Some afternoons I'd walk past the Bhiku coffee shop to do other errands and would hear those songs again, sung by R. Azmi in his enormously popular, teasing tone.