

# Family Narratives and Abandoned Monuments of the May 13 Riot in the Sungai Buloh Leprosarium

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## **Abstract**

The May 13 riot, which broke out in the aftermath of the country's third general election in 1969, remains a defining moment in Malaysian politics. Malaysians are well aware that the riot took place even if they are vague about the details, but few are aware that a mass grave for victims of the riot, built 'by the courtesy of the Malaysian government', is located within the Sungai Buloh Leprosarium (SBL).

Historically speaking, a leprosarium segregated pathologized others from the general population, keeping patients out of sight and preventing outsiders from entering. The fact that the mass grave of political victims of the May 13 riot is found in such a space raises several questions. Why was SBL chosen as a burial site for the bodies of May 13 victims? If a cemetery is meant to allow the living to memorialise the dead, what does burying May 13 victims in a segregated space like SBL imply? How does the location of the mass grave affect memories and memorialisation of the riot and of those who died?

In this article I consider these questions by examining conceptual links between political violence, body management, the location of cemeteries and the politics of memory by critically reading the architecture and space of the May 13 mass gravesite. I also look at family narratives, which describe the difficulties families faced in finding out where their loved ones were buried, and show how the narratives serve as negotiated memories within the wider political dynamics of the country after the riot.

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## Introduction\*

...remembering violence does not require an elaborate tomb, a guarded gravesite or a lavish ceremony, much less a monument. What is needed is a space to speak and communicate freely and without fear, and a language that can encompass both those who would speak and those who would listen for wisdom. What is needed is a way to live together—or at least to survive side by side—with what can never be forgotten, with losses that can never be restored.

**Degung Santikarma (2005)**

A week-long riot broke out in Malaysia on 13 May 1969 in the aftermath of the country's third general election. The country had been governed since 1957 by a coalition formed by three major communal political parties, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), known collectively as the Alliance.<sup>1</sup> In the 1969 election, voters for the first time since independence denied the Alliance an absolute majority in Parliament. The rioting that followed has been a highly contested subject in the country's history, and the way it is remembered plays an important role in popular understanding of that violent episode and in Malaysian politics.

Many scholarly works treat the May 13 riot in 1969 as a major marker in the politics of Malaysia, but these studies deal mainly with post-riot institutional changes. In this article I re-examine the May 13 riot by exploring the connection between the location of the cemetery where the bodies of those who died in the riot were buried, social taboo, memory and political violence, and consider the significance of a mass burial site in the Sungai Buloh Leprosarium (SBL). Why was SBL chosen as a burial site for the bodies of May 13 victims? What are the links between medically-produced others and political others in such a space? If a cemetery is meant to contain monuments of the departed so that

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<sup>1</sup> The Alliance was later restructured and renamed Barisan Nasional (National Front) when more political parties joined the coalition in 1973. It has been the federal ruling coalition for six decades since independence.

the living can memorialise the dead, what does burying May 13 victims in a segregated space like SBL imply? How does the location of the mass grave affect memories and memorialisation of the riot? In this site-based research, which is a preliminary study based on a small number of interviews, I respond to these questions by reading the architecture and the space of the May 13 mass grave, and by investigating family accounts.<sup>2</sup> These narratives reveal the challenges these families faced in finding out where their loved ones were buried after the riot, and how they relate the riot and their post-riot lives to the mass grave. The aim of this article is not merely to seek truth, but to understand the conditions under which it becomes (im)possible for the victims' families to speak of experience of violence. Of utmost significance, family narratives and private memories, however fragmentary, do not simply provide missing pieces to the episode but call official state narratives into question.<sup>3</sup>

In the discussion that follows, I build on the narratives of events around the May 13 riot by exploring conceptual links between the political lives of dead bodies, the spatiality and locality of cemeteries, family narratives and memory management. Departing from earlier scholarly accounts of the May 13 riot, which generally focus on party politics and grand narratives of democratization and nation building, I explore the treatment of dead bodies through a reading of the burial space of the May 13 victims and the narratives of their families and other actors. Based on this material, I argue that the management of dead bodies and the siting of burial grounds have played a central role in controlling memories of the riot by limiting the production of non-governmental narratives surrounding May 13. Nonetheless, family narratives abound that subvert the official narrative.

The article contains five sections and a conclusion. The first section maps the contested memories of May 13 and scholarly debates on the politics of memory. I then explore conceptual links within the literature on body management, the locality of cemeteries and memory management, and relate this material to the May 13 riot. The fourth section uses personal accounts by a doctor and the families of victims to investigate and illustrate how the government controls information and manages memories concerning the May 13 incident. Finally, I explore how victims' families learned to live with their loss and negotiated a place for their memories in the wider political dynamics of the country after the riot.

### **Contested Memories of the May 13 Riot**

The official narrative characterizes the May 13 incident as a Sino–Malay clash caused by several undesirable forces, specifically the ethnic posturing and racialist campaigning during and after the election, the infiltration of communist agents and the subversive activities of secret societies. It was a sign of national unity breaking down which called for immediate state intervention, the suspension of

<sup>2</sup> I attended a public memorial, the first of its kind, at the grave site on 29 April 2017. There I met additional families of victims, and I have conducted more than 30 interviews since preparing the present paper, and will use this material in a future publication on this topic.

<sup>3</sup> Loh, Koh, & Thomson (2013).

Parliament and curtailment of democracy as a necessary remedies.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars and researchers, however, have contended that it was a palace coup within the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), used by aspiring leaders in the party to take advantage of the tense and chaotic post-election situation to oust their party leader and then Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in order to seize power.<sup>5</sup>

The May 13 incident is unquestionably one of the most contested episodes in the history of Malaysia. Indeed, managing the symbolic meanings and the memories of the May 13 riot has been a central political strategy of multiple political forces. 'The nation cannot afford another May 13', said the report of the National Operations Council (NOC), which was headed by Tun Abdul Razak and tasked to solve racial problems in the country in the aftermath of the riot.<sup>6</sup> The violent incident served as a justification for a series of post-riot policies to heal and rebuild the nation by upholding *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and narrowing interracial economic disparity. In various general elections since then, the spectre of May 13 has been repeatedly resurrected by many of Malaysia's race-based political parties as a reminder to all Malaysian voters, especially ethnic minorities, of the likelihood of recurring bloodshed if they ever voted the opposition party into power. It is an embodiment of what Veena Das has called 'the creation of [political] community through violence against the Other'.<sup>7</sup> In response, civil society leaders and rival political parties have been reinterpreting the riot as a palace coup within the ruling party and demanding that a Truth and Reconciliation Commission be set up to put the 'ghost' of May 13 to rest.<sup>8</sup>

It was not until four decades after the riot that a space opened up to allow a more diverse popular understanding of the incident. On 8 March 2008, Barisan Nasional lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament and lost three states to the opposition in the 12th general election, an outcome which closely resembled that of the 1969 election. Commentators viewed the absence of violent incidents immediately after the 8 March election as a sign that the country had successfully 'exorcised' the ghost of the May 13 riot. The fact that journalists, writers and artists became more vocal after the 2008 election in countering official narratives and reclaiming the meaning of the May 13 riot also suggests that people no longer fear that another May 13 will occur even if they vote for the opposition.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, arson attacks on churches in 2009 and 2010, and the rise of right-wing racist groups such as the Red Shirts, suggest a more complicated picture. New ways of understanding and remembering the May 13 riot have doubtlessly been gaining ground over the past decade, but the change cannot be taken as a sign of narrowing inter-ethnic divisions. Far from being eliminated, interracial tension is

<sup>4</sup> 'Demokrasi Malaysia Perlu Diperketat, Tun Razak Di Johor Baru', *Berita Harian*, 14 September 1960, p. 1; Comber (2009); National Operations Council (1969); Tunku Abdul Rahman (1969).

<sup>5</sup> Goh (1971); Kua (2007); Teh (2013).

<sup>6</sup> National Operations Council (1969: 80).

<sup>7</sup> Das (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Kua Kia Soong, 6 June 2013. 'Tanda Putera, Truth and Reconciliation.' [<http://www.suaram.net/?p=5636>, accessed 25 November 2016]

<sup>9</sup> Teh (2013).



slowly assuming the form of inter-religious hostility.<sup>10</sup> Just as in the past, various political actors and right-wing extremists are ready to exploit and take advantage of interracial tension even while other segments of society have been proactively learning to tolerate and celebrate difference.<sup>11</sup>

Despite differing interpretations, official and counter-official narratives share the same logic of rebuilding the nation, albeit offering distinct explanations of the cause of the riot and contrasting solutions for narrowing interracial socio-economic gaps and managing religious pluralism. Perceiving the violent incident as wounding the nation, both narratives aim to forge a collective identity by memorializing the incident. In other words, the riot paradoxically produced a tacit agreement that all discussion and narratives about the May 13 riot must serve the collective purpose of nation-building. The nation-building trope becomes what Farish A. Noor calls a 'sieve of present-day ideological correctness'.<sup>12</sup> Framing a violent incident within a nation-building trope is problematic because it forecloses a more diverse discursive space by homogenizing the interpretation of past events and subordinating individual experiences of political violence to the sacralized and impersonal objective of nation building.<sup>13</sup> Such foreclosure sustains epistemic violence by silencing dissent and grievances.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the healing of the nation denies individuals space for healing when a nation is conceived of as a homogeneous collective.

### **Dead Bodies, Monuments and the Management of Memory**

According to a report prepared by Malaysia's National Operations Council, 196 people were killed in the riot. The report gives the following details about those killed; 52 died of gunshot wounds, 143 were ethnic Chinese,<sup>15</sup> and 103 victims were buried in Sungai Buloh Leprosarium.<sup>16</sup> Dead bodies can no longer speak; they

<sup>10</sup> Bong (2014). The landmark case of Lina Joy, a Malaysian woman of Javanese descent who applied for her conversion from Islam to Christianity to be recognized by the Malaysian court but was rejected in 2007, indicates the fusion and inseparability of ethnic and religious identity among certain ethnic groups in Malaysia. Though not all Muslims are Malays, Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia defines Malay, *inter alia*, as a person who professes the religion of Islam.

<sup>11</sup> "May 13 Rally Called Off", *The Sun*, 13 May 2010 [<http://www.thesundaily.my/node/143041>, accessed 25 November 2016]; Jacqueline Ann Surin. 16 September 2013. 'Wishing for Another 13 May.' [<http://www.thenutgraph.com/21366/>, accessed 25 November 2016].

<sup>12</sup> Farish (2014).

<sup>13</sup> Schramm (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Bong (2014).

<sup>15</sup> National Operations Council (1969: 88).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 68–9. Other researchers have speculated that the actual death toll was at least eight times higher (Kua, 2007; Teh, 2013). Whether or not the death toll as documented in the NOC report is accurate deserves further investigation but is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that at least 180 people were injured by firearms—125 ethnic Chinese, 37 Malays, 17 Indians and 1 Other; and 259 people were injured by other weapons—145 Chinese, 90 Malays, 9 Indians and 15 Others (National Operations Council, 1969: 89–91). Ethnic Chinese are clearly over-represented in calculations of the dead and injured.

are mute political subjects and a symbol open to a variety of interpretations. The contested nature of May 13 is a manifestation of the political lives and multivocality of dead bodies.<sup>17</sup> Yet, dead bodies as a symbol are immediately associated with corporeal annihilation or death, the evident materiality of corpse as decaying bodily existence evokes fear and arouses strong emotions. The management of dead bodies thus has a central place in handling violent clashes as each method of treating the dead bodies conveys a deliberate communicative effect.<sup>18</sup>

Exhibiting dead bodies is a practice common to societies past and present. Displaying a whole body or severed head is both a display of power or victory and a deterrent.<sup>19</sup> European planters in the late nineteenth century sometimes openly sentenced Asian coolies who rebelled against them to death and displayed their bodies to dramatize colonial power.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the concealment and destruction of dead bodies blocks public access to information about the violent acts, since dead bodies register traces of how death occurred and their material presence is an emotive cue to the living and the families of victims.<sup>21</sup> It is a method of managing memories of violent pasts.

The choice of a burial ground and the location of monuments are equally significant in managing memories of conflicts. They shape and are shaped by the ways violence is remembered.<sup>22</sup> Monuments erected in easily accessible spaces, such as the Tugu Negara,<sup>23</sup> are meant to attract attention and evoke respect, while those placed in secluded areas serve entirely different purposes. A secluded area provides a more personal space for grieving and memorialization, but it also keeps visual cues of a violent past out of public sight. Regardless of location, both monuments and cemeteries built for housing the dead are ultimately for the living.<sup>24</sup> The space and architecture of both connect the living with the dead and the present with the past, potentially evoking uncomfortable memories and discordant narratives.<sup>25</sup>

Outside of the government's own report, discussions of the management of dead bodies and the choice of burial grounds are largely missing from existing accounts of the May 13 incident. Why was Sungai Buloh Leprosarium chosen as the site for burying the bodies of the May 13 victims? How can we make sense of the way the victims' bodies were managed and buried, and how that has shaped memories of the riot? My response to these questions is based on my reading of the architecture and space of the mass grave site as an archive. It is useful to view a grave site as an archive because interment resembles archiving and vice versa. In an essay on the power of the archive, Achille Mbembe describes archiving as a form of interment which 'lay[s] something in a coffin, if not to rest, then at least to consign elements of that [passing] life which could not be destroyed purely and

<sup>17</sup> Verdery (1999).

<sup>18</sup> Fontein (2010); Korman (2015); O'Neill (2012).

<sup>19</sup> Mazz (2015); Verdery (1999).

<sup>20</sup> Breman (1989).

<sup>21</sup> Korman (2015); Mazz (2015).

<sup>22</sup> Schramm (2011).

<sup>23</sup> The National Monument, built in 1966 near Parliament House in Kuala Lumpur, commemorates those who died in World War II and the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960).

<sup>24</sup> Fahlander and Oestigard (2008).

<sup>25</sup> Verdery (1999).

simply'.<sup>26</sup> Like archiving, burial leaves traces, on the dead bodies as well as the burial space, while removing the dead from the everyday realm of the living.

Nevertheless, a spatial work is different from a text; its complexity is fundamentally different.<sup>27</sup> A burial ground is a concrete physical space strategically located in a specific place; it does not exist in a social vacuum. Instead, it has a past and houses traces of the past. Yet, like an archive, it has 'no meaning outside the subjective experience of those individuals who, at a given moment, come to use them'.<sup>28</sup> While signs and traces of the past may be inscribed in a space, the meaning of a space is stored in people's everyday references to, and interactions with, that space, rather than in the space itself.<sup>29</sup> A contextualized reading of a space thus calls for an investigation of the subjective experiences of individuals who interact with the space in different ways. In the same vein, the meanings of the May 13 burial ground can be untangled and understood through the subjective experiences of individuals who are aware of the place, regardless of whether or not they have visited it or of the intentions of the government that decided to bury the victims there.

According to the NOC report, two burial grounds were selected to bury the victims based on the Ministry of Health's decision. One was located in Sungai Buloh (coordinates: 3°13'6"N 101°35'48"E) and the other in Gombak (3°12'52"N 101°43'9"E). They are northwest and north of Kuala Lumpur respectively, and about 14 km apart. A total of 101 non-Muslim and two Muslim victims rest in Sungai Buloh, and I trace the families of nine of them. I interviewed family members at the mass burial site in Sungai Buloh over three weekends, on 27 March, 2–3 April and 9–10 April, during the tomb-sweeping season in 2016. (The identities of those interviewed are not revealed in order to protect their privacy.) In Gombak, a total of 11 victims share one burial lot in Taman Ibu Kota Muslim Cemetery. My attempt to meet families of Muslim victims was unsuccessful. Unlike their Chinese counterparts, Muslims do not have a specific season for visiting tombs.

### **The May 13 Riot: Managing Dead Bodies and Memories**

The NOC report contains 22 chapters of which the 18th is particularly relevant to the discussion of managing dead bodies. The chapter is devoted to refuting 'rumours' claiming that 'victims of the riots were buried in secret and unmarked mass graves where they could never be identified'<sup>30</sup> by explaining how the government handled the victims' dead bodies. According to the report, 102 persons 'thought to be non-Muslims were identified and individually buried, with identifications over the graves, in Sungai Buloh on 18th, 20th, 21st and 22nd May [1969]', and one body which was discovered later was brought to Sungai Buloh for burial on 2nd June 1969.<sup>31</sup> Of the 103 persons buried in Sungai Buloh, 99 were Chinese, two were Muslim and two were Indian (Fig. 1). Another 18 victims

<sup>26</sup> Mbembe (2002: 22).

<sup>27</sup> Lefebvre (1997).

<sup>28</sup> Mbembe (2002: 23).

<sup>29</sup> Schramm (2011).

<sup>30</sup> National Operations Council (1969: 68).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*: 68–9.





**Fig. 1.** The May 13 mass grave in Sungai Buloh Leprosarium. All photographs were taken by the author unless otherwise indicated.



**Fig. 2.** Headstone for Harun Mohamad.





**Fig. 3.** Headstones at the Sungai Buloh mass grave site. From upper left (clockwise): Unidentified Chinese (M), Unidentified Malay (M), Francis Soosay; Samuthuram Appamah, Unidentified Chinese (F), and Saw Kok Hong.



**Fig. 4:** Taiping War Cemetery, in Bukit Larut, Perak where Allied personnel killed during World War II rest. Servicemen who died during the early post-war years are also buried here. The cemetery was erected, and is maintained, by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiping\\_War\\_Cemetery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiping_War_Cemetery)





Fig. 5. Reclaimed, repainted, replaced and decorated headstones.





Fig. 6. Damaged and broken tombstones.

'who could be identified as Muslims, irrespective of racial origin, were buried in Gombak on 18th May',<sup>32</sup> while 'eight identifiable bodies of persons who originally came from non-sensitive areas were handed over to their relatives for burial'.<sup>33</sup>

The report further explained that 'police and hospital officials worked on the identification and recording of the bodies and buried them in such a way as to enable relatives and friends either to exhume the victims for reburial at some later stage or at least to know where they were buried'. The oral account of Dr Lim Kuan Joo, a final-year medical student in University of Malaya at the time of the riot, confirms part of this statement. Dr Lim, who was asked to help with burials at the Sungai Buloh Leprosarium, recalls that the government did identify and document the victims' bodies, but adds that they were buried naked without a single coffin:

A professor rushed to our tutorial class and asked a total of 10 medical students to help the police to empty a Black Maria, which carried dead bodies for burial but had gone into a ditch in Sungai Buloh and couldn't come out ... all the dead bodies has [sic] already been pre-identified [in the mortuary], each had a cardboard tag with name tied on its toe. Inspector Phang [Lian Tuck],<sup>34</sup> who was supposed to replace the cardboard tag with [an] aluminium tag on each body's toe and copy the number of the aluminium tag correspondingly to the name list of victims [before they were buried], was repelled by the smell of the dead bodies, so he asked me to take over his job. So I took over ... when we were in Sungai Buloh, the work was arranged as such that some [of us] went up to the lorry and used a 'cangkul' [a mattock-like hoe] to pull the bodies down, all were naked, while other people waited at the rear side of the lorry with metal stretchers made of iron to carry the bodies to the four-feet [sic] deep trench pre-dug by the leprosy inmates. We just carried and buried, carried and buried, carried and buried ... and the leprosy patients were in charge of shovelling and covering the trenches and the bodies ... that's all we did ... it took us about three hours to empty about 30 bodies from the lorry ... after that they pulled the lorry out.<sup>35</sup>

Even though the government claimed that all the bodies had been individually identified and tagged so that they could be exhumed and reburied, the fact that these bodies were buried without coffins or proper wrapping would have made claiming and exhuming the bodies extremely difficult.

Moreover, nowhere in the report is it indicated that the burial ground was actually located inside the Sungai Buloh Leprosarium. Why exactly was SBL chosen as the burial site for the victims? The NOC report has it that the decision was 'made by the Ministry of Health based on the relative absence of incidents

<sup>32</sup> According to the registration system of Taman Ibu Kota Muslim Cemetery, only 11 Muslim victims of the riots were buried in that cemetery.

<sup>33</sup> The total figure here is only 129 victims (103 in Sungai Buloh, 18 in Gombak and 8 handed over to the families), while Table 1 on page 88 of the NOC report indicates that the death toll was 196 persons. The report does not explain the discrepancy or how the other victims' bodies were handled.

<sup>34</sup> The NOC report indicates that Police Chief Inspector Phang Lian Tuck and Shamsuddin were in charge of supervising the burial of victims.

<sup>35</sup> Interviewed on 28 October 2016.

in these areas'.<sup>36</sup> Historically speaking, a leprosarium was a medically designed space for segregating the medically-produced subjects and the pathologized other since the colonial era. As a place for quarantine, SBL was gated to prevent people from moving in and out freely. According to Dr Lim, there were three gates in the leprosy settlement during the 1970s: the Gurkha Gate near the location of the traffic lights today, the West Gate at the entrance of the Sungai Buloh Hospital, and an East Gate near the Lay Superintendent's Office and the Police Barracks.<sup>37</sup> The segregation policy itself also created a strong social stigma associated with those afflicted with the disease, and the leprosarium evoked discomfort and fear among the public.<sup>38</sup> The history and identity of SBL made it a suitable burial ground for keeping the public away from emotive visual cues that a cemetery for victims of the riot would have provided. As it was no doubt necessary to prevent the riot from spreading in a highly tense situation like May 13, choosing a segregated space like SBL is perhaps not totally unreasonable. Nevertheless, SBL not only kept people afflicted with leprosy in, it also prevented the public from entering the area. The barrier made it difficult for victims' families to locate their loved ones and suppressed the potential for public memorialization of the riot. Their stories shed light on various obstacles they encountered in searching for their loved ones.

Chan Seng Huat was one of the victims. Seng Huat and his wife Ah Lan were running a small grocery store in Selayang when the riot broke out. The couple had two sons and two daughters; the eldest was seven years old and the youngest was two.<sup>39</sup> Despite the Emergency declaration on 13 May, residents of different races in the nearby areas continued to order and buy rice from the shop. Ah Lan asked her husband not to leave the house because of the rioting, but Seng Huat insisted on going out to deliver rice to his customers. He left on a motorcycle but never returned. During the first few days of Seng Huat's disappearance, Ah Lan hoped for his return whenever she heard the sound of a passing motorcycle. After several days, Ah Lan learned that she could go to the police station to ask about the whereabouts of those who had disappeared during the riot, and so she went to one of the police stations in Kuala Lumpur. The officer gave Ah Lan three or four albums to look through and asked her to identify her husband's photograph, which she did. She described her experience as follows:

Each album was full of photos of dead bodies, whose wounds and blood were not even cleaned up ... the police immediately stopped me from reading other photos of the album after I identified the photo of my husband. I noticed a gunshot wound on his right shoulder, his eyes were still open, a grin on his face. I read countless photos of other dead bodies, some were severed and wounded bodies, some full of blood, including photos of dead children.

The authorities never told her when she could collect her husband's body, nor was

<sup>36</sup> National Operations Council (1969: 69).

<sup>37</sup> Dr Lim Kuan Joo served as Deputy Director of the Sungai Buloh National Leprosy Control Centre from 1976 to 1987.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the history of Sungai Buloh Leprosarium and popular impressions of the place, read Loh (2009).

<sup>39</sup> Interview at Sungai Buloh gravesite on 10 April 2016.

she told where he was buried. She learned of the burial site in SBL by accident:

It was not until many years later, around the 1970s, that my friend who was a patient in the leprosarium informed me that the May 13 victims were buried in the leprosarium. I passed a photo of my husband and his full name to my friend, and my friend went to the cemetery to check the name on every single tombstone ... and my friend found my husband's name and asked me to come over here to confirm on my own ... it's a long way, I had to take bus to travel to Sungai Buloh to check the tombstone.

Another victim, Tan Ah Kau, a coffee powder vendor, was killed in the riot at the age of 29.<sup>40</sup> Ah Kau, together with his 25 year-old pregnant wife Siew Choo and two daughters, was living in the squatter area in Jinjang Utara new village when the riot broke out. Siew Choo was worried by her husband's disappearance after the riot. She thought Ah Kau might be injured and unable to come home, but she did not expect that he had died during the riot. Six days later, a friend of the couple spotted Ah Kau's burnt motorcycle near Tan Chong Motor in Segambut and informed Siew Choo, but she still hoped to find Ah Kau alive. She recollected searching for her husband:

There was a missing person registration counter near Dataran Merdeka. I registered the disappearance of my husband, but it was after twenty over days that I received a letter from the government, sent by postal service, informing me the where about of my husband, that he was already dead and buried in Sungai Buloh. [Before that] during the riot, despite the curfew and being pregnant, I visited so many different places ... my sister-in-law accompanied me, we went from one police station to another, and from police stations to different hospitals ... KL [Kuala Lumpur] hospital, UM [University of Malaya] Hospital, Assunta Hospital ... we all went, we wanted to find my husband ... [in the hospitals] people know we were looking for our family member, they brought us around the wards, [back then] we didn't know he died already, we were hoping to find him alive ... but we also looked into every single drawer [in the mortuary], still couldn't find my husband ... we even went to Kampong Bharu, [a predominantly Malay area] where the riot started, to look for him after the curfew was lifted ... we tried our luck in [the Malay settlement at] Kampong Bharu, because a friend, who was a lorry driver then, told us he saw my husband near Jalan Raja Muda, he invited my husband to hop on to his lorry but my husband told him 'I need to find my motorbike first'. We also went to Chow Kit area ... it was not until we went to the police station in High Street, which was then just a small police station, [that] we were told he died already, we were shown the death certificate and his photo ... photo of his blood-stained face ... he was already dead when the photo was taken, [he was] lying in a ditch, the photo was ugly, so ugly. I wasn't allowed to take the photo of my husband away with me, the police kept many albums, many photos of people who were killed or injured. It was on the same day that I received the official letter, sent by

<sup>40</sup> The story of Mr Tan Ah Kau is based on two interviews with Mrs Tan, one conducted at the cemetery on 9 April 2016 and another at her home on 13 July 2016.



postal service, informing me [of] the death of my husband ... by then I had already been looking for him for over twenty days. Because we hoped he was still alive, we were hoping to find him alive, we didn't want to believe that he had already died, so it took his sister and me a long time to find him, if we had already known he was dead, we wouldn't have visited so many places to find him, we wouldn't ... because we didn't want to believe he already died ...

[Back then] it wasn't as easy to go into the leprosarium to clean the tomb, because it was a security guarded place. We had to go through three gates, at the first gate, we had to show our ID card, and then the second gate, it's easier to move around once passing through the first two gates. My sister-in-law's husband used to ferry us to the leprosarium during tomb-sweeping season, but he wasn't always available, sometimes he couldn't make it, then I had to pay an old friend twenty ringgit, he would ferry us all the way from our home to the leprosarium.

The government's purpose in choosing SBL as a burial location seems to have been to prevent the riot from spreading and intensifying by keeping the bodies and the cemetery out of sight, but the decision had the unintended consequence of making it difficult for the families to find the burial ground. It also erased traces of violent death.

At the gravesite, only about 27 tombstones show traces of prayer. Ah Lan's story and the fact that only about one-quarter of the tombstones show signs of praying raise several questions. Did the government take any comprehensive efforts to inform the families of victims who had been identified? How many families received formal notice from the government regarding where their loved ones were buried? Given that official documents pertaining to the May 13 incident have never been declassified, oral accounts of Dr Lim and the victims' families, and traces at the gravesite, constitute important sources of historical record. Taken together, they give us an impression of how the government handled the dead bodies. The management of the bodies made it difficult for family members to access the corporeal and documented traces of their dead loved ones by disallowing family members from keeping the photograph depicting their dead relative, and by limiting information on the whereabouts of the bodies and the burial site.

The government's reluctance to allow families to claim the victims' bodies is even more obvious in the case of Harun Mohamad, the only identified Muslim Malay in the same gravesite. The religious authorities turned down an appeal in 2006 by Harun's family to exhume and transfer his body to a Muslim cemetery (Fig. 2).<sup>41</sup> The grounds for this decision are unclear, but it is possible that if Harun's family had been allowed to take this step, other families might have made similar appeals, creating public awareness of the government's handling of the bodies. By rejecting the request of Harun's family, the government avoided the possibility that unearthing these bodies might bring to light information about the May 13 riot that would alter public memories of the riot and challenge the official state narrative. Harun's case shows that, regardless of race and religion, all are equal in

<sup>41</sup> 'Jais siasat jirat ada nama Islam: Identiti Harun Mohamad akan disemak di JPN', *Berita Harian*, 28 June 2006.

front of a regime determined to maintain the status quo and limit memorialization of the riot.

### Ghost Tales as Counter-narratives

As mentioned in the previous section, there are 103 tombstones in SBL: 18 belong to 'unidentified' persons, among them 10 Chinese males, 5 Chinese females, 2 Chinese whose sex is unknown and 1 Malay male (Figs. 1, 3). The tombstones are all grey and identical, each inscribed with the name of the deceased, the date of passing and a brief acknowledgement which says 'BY THE COURTESY OF THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT'. There is no information about the family members of the deceased, details an ordinary tombstone would usually display to show that the person was loved and missed.

The uniformity of these tombstones strips the victims of their individuality and identity, and reduces them to mere victims of violence. The uniformity at the May 13 mass grave is different from that at the Taiping War Cemetery in Perak (Fig. 4). Segregated in a hidden corner and overgrown with grass, many headstones in the May 13 burial ground are left uncared for with some even broken into pieces. The headstones in the Taiping War Cemetery, by contrast, are symmetrically arranged, regularly spaced and well care for. The uniformity in this Commonwealth War Grave conveys a solemnity, dignity and respectability that the dilapidated May 13 gravesite lacks. It was not until early 2017 that the mass burial site in Sungai Buloh attracted popular attention, when the media widely covered a jungle-clearing activity in the nearby area which was purportedly for the construction of a car park.<sup>42</sup> Civil society groups mobilized the public to clean up the gravesite, appealed to the government to preserve the place as a heritage site, and organized the first memorial ceremony, eventually giving the gravesite a new meaning and a sense of solemnity and dignity it previously did not have.

But why does a mass grave have headstones? Is this really a mass grave? Does not the presence of a headstone for each victim interred in Sungai Buloh indicate that the government shows respect for the victims and keeps records of their deaths? Lim Kuan Joo's oral account already confirms that it is indeed a mass grave. The fact that the headstones are so tightly arranged also suggests that it is a mass grave. As to why headstones were erected, it is probably because 'various state actors were aligned differently in relation to the violence'.<sup>43</sup> But how do families relate to this mass grave site and the headstones? What does the way they relate to the gravesite tell us about how they deal with the historical trauma?

Despite facing various difficulties in finding the bodies and tombs of their loved ones, some victims' families reclaimed the identities of their loved ones by rebuilding or decorating the headstones. Other attempts to reclaim their loved ones include rebuilding and replacing the stones erected by the government with new ones; flanking the stones with deities such as the 'Earth God'; colouring the

<sup>42</sup> 'Sg Buloh May 13 cemetery won't be cleared: MPS', *The Star*, 1 May 2017. <http://www.thestar.com.my/metro/community/2017/05/01/effort-to-gazette-cemetery-as-heritage-site-continues-conservationists-working-hard-to-ensure-mass-b/#TxPagtr98hU12Yvy.99> [accessed 30 June 2017].

<sup>43</sup> Das (2007).

inscription on the stones with paint; adding Chinese names, birthdays and dates of passing based on the lunar calendar; and adding dialect identities and portraits of the victim to the stones. Traces on the gravesite suggest that families of at least 27 victims have come forward to sweep or clean these stones (see Fig. 5).

Some of the reclaimed tombstones are broken and left uncared for. For example, there are two tombstones for Chong Seng @ Chong See Seong: one is the original stone erected by the government and the other is a rebuilt stone inscribed with his Chinese name and portrait (see Fig. 6). Both stones are badly damaged and broken into several pieces. Why do some previously reclaimed stones now seem abandoned? This is possibly because some victims died young and unmarried, and following the passing of their parents or siblings, no one is left to care for their grave stones. Some families arrange to care for the tombstone by assigning a godchild to the victims posthumously to prevent the neglect of graves of family members who died young and single. For example, Tang Yee Ong's story is one such example. The youngest among his siblings, he was engaged but not yet married when the riot broke out. His mother made his brother's son his godson to ensure that his tomb would be cared for after her passing.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to reclaiming tombstones, re-telling one's loss in ghost stories is another way some family members reconnect with their loved ones. Yun Yong Kong's younger brother said the May 13 cemetery was a haunted place, 'full of ghost[s] of those whose lives were wrongly taken'.<sup>45</sup> Yun Yong Kong, like many other victims, died young and unmarried. He was a member of the community patrol team tasked with guarding the Setapak new village when the riot broke out. Tan Ah Kau's daughter also told a ghost story about the cemetery. 'We know he [our father] is buried here, but we don't know where exactly his body is, we are just worshipping a stone with his name ... this place is a scary place, my husband once came here before the sun rose, he said he felt something wrong in this place, because this place is full of 'yun wan [Cantonese: ghosts of those whose lives have been wrongly taken]';' said Ah Kau's eldest daughter. 'We bring a lot of joss sticks every time we come to sweep my father's tomb, not just for my father, but also to place the extras on other tombs. Many tombs are not taken care of, we pity them, so we always bring extra joss sticks, so that we have extra to place on other tombs ... we don't hate any particular race, it's the political party and politicians that we dislike, not any particular race,' said Ah Kau's youngest daughter, who was born posthumously. The presence of ghosts speaks of unresolved grief and loss.<sup>46</sup> Ghost tales are a vehicle for ordinary folks to express how deeply they were affected by the violent and terrifying episode in history. These tales reveal as much about how the families cope with the loss of a loved one as they do about the lack of a safe and legitimate space for segments of Malaysian society to articulate their alternate experiences of a defining moment in the country's history. It is noteworthy that the 'ghost' in the folk tales of family members of victims plays a different role from the 'ghost' of the same riot as repeatedly resurrected by the ruling coalition. The former is an expression of loss and a sense of injustice, while the latter is used as a tool to evoke fear and to threaten voters.

<sup>44</sup> Peter, Tang Yee Ong's nephew and godson, was interviewed on 10 April 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Interviewed on 2 April 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Carsten (2007).



## Conclusion

While the state has a role in determining what kinds of memories are transmitted and what not, the nation-building narratives adopted by some segments of civil society have also shaped memories of the riot. Moving away from the nation-building narrative, this article reconstructs the history of May 13 through oral accounts of people involved in burying the victims and of families who suffered the loss of their loved ones.

I have argued that the government considered the treatment of dead bodies and the placement of the cemetery as important to prevent the May 13 riot from spreading. Intended or otherwise, the location of the cemetery and the way the bodies of victims were treated created obstacles and difficulties for the families who wanted to claim their bodies or to access the cemeteries where their loved ones were buried. Taken together, these stories suggest that the current regime in Malaysia is inclined to keep the country's violent past buried and classified. Both the treatment of the victims' bodies and the siting of the burial ground are instrumental in controlling public access to significant information about the violent episode and in managing memories of the incident.

Even though the victims have been stripped of their identity, as indicated in the uniformity of all tombstones erected by the government, some families have managed to reclaim the identity of their loved ones by decorating or replacing the headstones. Reinterpreting the burial space through ghost tales is another way that families deal with their trauma and loss. While further investigation remains to be done to put together a fuller picture of the May 13 riot, oral histories of victims' families have unsettled and partially undercut official state narratives. Their narratives demonstrate how these historical actors learned to live with their loss and negotiated a place for their memories within the country's wider political dynamics.

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