

BRANI

Memories of an Island

BRANI | *Memories of an Island*



*This book is dedicated to the islanders of Pulau Brani,
whose love for the island has touched our hearts and
showed us a different way of life.*

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B R A N I

Memories of an Island





*View of Pulau Brani in the 1920s. (Courtesy of the
National Archives of Singapore)*

brani /bra·ni/

adv. 1. to be brave

n. 2. an island about 3 km away from South of Singapore that was home to thousands of families up to the 1970s.

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Foreword

I remember the first of many conversations that spurred the idea of *Brani: Memories of an Island*. During a Mendaki Club event, I was chatting with other regular volunteers like myself when one of them, Nadjad, approached me and asked if my grandparents resided in Telok Blangah Crescent. When I nodded my head in agreement, he probed further and we realized we were both descendants of Pulau Brani islanders! A fraction of islanders resettled in Telok Blangah Crescent in the mid-70s, while others did so in neighbourhoods such as Bukit Merah, Buona Vista, Whampoa and Teban.

We started sharing our elders' memories, many of which were similar because our families were from the same *kampung* (village) called Telok Saga. This piqued our curiosity to find out if there were any differences between each of the four villages on the island and how deeply the resettlement affected morale of the islanders.

Eventually, Nadjad broached the idea of documenting memories of Pulau Brani islanders. He was aware that many of Singapore's younger generation consider the country to consist of only the mainland, Sentosa and Pulau Ubin. Few had knowledge of outlying islands like Pulau Brani, Pulau Sekijang, and Pulau Bukom – many of which were once

home to generations of families. A month later, Nadjad spearheaded the project with the application of the irememberSG Fund, and our project was off to a start.

In the first team meeting, I was introduced to Daniel, whose father was a familiar figure on the island. Daniel and Nadjad were from the same university programme and their conversation started out in a similar way to mine. Daniel brought with him a wealth of Pulau Brani connections through his father, as the small Chinese community on the island remained connected hitherto. Despite having resettled on the mainland for four decades, they still meet at least once a year to reminisce the good times.

After one year of interviews, research and hard work, the team is proud to present *Brani: Memories of an Island* – a collection of narratives made up of 23 interviews, countless anecdotal memories shared by islanders and descendants on social media, and conversations with extended family members at weddings. (You know when an island descendant gets married, half of the former islanders are invited!)

To former residents of Pulau Brani, please forgive us for any errors or omissions. We hope this book will serve as a conversation starter and a go-to book to reminisce island life.

To undergraduates of the NUS University Scholars Programme (USP), NUS History Society (HISSOC) and the secondary school students who were involved in Project Scribe, thank you for being an integral part of this journey. We hope you had a great time mentoring, being mentored, interacting with the elderly, and learning new skills in documentation work. We are also glad that HISSOC has taken on Project Scribe and continues to do good work in documenting stories of various communities in Singapore. To the design and editorial team, thank you for your patience, advice and for hanging in

there with us. With a tight timeline and ambitious ideas, we successfully produced this book together.

To our family members who recounted their memories repeatedly to help us re-orientate our thoughts and processes, thank you. This project is made possible because of your generous sharing.

To my team mates Daniel Lee and Muhammad Nadjad Abdul Rahim, thank you for asking me to be a part of this. Pulau Brani has gone from being home to hundreds of families, to serving as a navy base before being converted into a shipping port in the 1990s. There is talk that the island might be home once again to families, albeit for a different economic demography. Whatever the future holds for Pulau Brani, the idyllic lifestyle and unique demography on the Island of the Brave will always be an integral part of family conversations for past residents.

Izyan Nadzirah Nordin
Pulau Brani Committee Co-Chairman

PULAU BRANI

Evening, as an islander

Meandering through wooden homes on stilts are thin planks of wood barely 15 centimetres wide, known as *titi*. The houses are built close to each other, all the way out to sea. A gentle sea breeze wafts through open doors until the evening, when some islanders close their doors and windows for some privacy during the evening prayer.

The *kampung*, Telok Saga, is aglow with the sun's setting rays. Very soon, the call to prayer will be heard. Children rush home for fear of incurring their parents' wrath. The men also make their way home, balancing on planks like seasoned acrobats, after a hard day's work or after catching up with friends at the coffee shop.

In the next *kampung* of Masak Timah, a brisk 10-minute walk away, barracks of neat cement houses line the area. The landscape differs, but the scurry of families preparing for dinner and evening prayers are similar. As the sun sets, the omnipresent tin-smelting factory, owned by the Straits Trading Company, sees lesser activity as husbands and young adults return to the comforts of their home. Some say, due to their labour-intensive work, the villagers of Masak Timah are less sociable.

Right next door sits another *kampung* with a similar architecture, but smaller and closer to the sea. Named Spedo, an amalgamation of the words ‘spare dock’, the village is closest to the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) jetty, one of the main jetties on the island. Naturally, many men from Spedo work for the RASC. Their working hours differ, so the evening hustle is slower than that of other villages. Instead, the flurry of activity is concentrated at the jetty, where the last batch of mainland employees and students are alighting from the ferry.

At the other end of the island, a 10-minute walk from Spedo is Selat Sengkir. The village is located one-third at sea and two-thirds on land, with the houses made of wood like those in Telok Saga. Selat Sengkir lies in the outermost part of the island, with mesmerising views of the horizon. Night falls swiftest in this part of the island as the inhabitants’ minds drift towards a possible journey to Tanjong, a nearby fishing oasis despite its treacherous waters.

The calmness of the night slowly gives way to a flurry of voices as veranda windows and doors are thrown open once again. Residents sit with their legs dangling over the edge of their stilt houses while conversing amongst themselves across the water. They open their doors, welcoming anyone to stop by for a friendly chat. Daring teenagers meet and decide whether to brave the darkness and the infamous ‘monster’ that haunts the path from Selat Sengkir to Telok Saga and catch a movie at the open-air cinema, or to fish for seafood with their makeshift rods and nets.

The name ‘Pulau Brani’ itself is unique, just like the island’s quirks. Situated a good stone’s throw away from mainland Singapore, the island has two contestable histories regarding the origins of its name. The modern version is a result of the Straits Trading Company’s tin-smelting factory on the island. After smelting tin – *masak timah* in Malay – *besi brani* (magnet) is produced, which could have lent the island its name.

The other version, however, goes back centuries ago, when the Sultan of Johor still ruled some areas of mainland Singapore. With relatively sheltered waters, Pulau Brani attracted pirates to dock and rest on the island. Eventually a few settled down, bringing

with them their infamous boisterous ways. As time passed, people from other outlying islands around the Malay Archipelago and mainland Singapore moved to the island of Pulau Brani. Some were tasked to move by the Sultan to ensure that the island was not completely taken over by the pirates, while others sought better prospects. These people were called *berani*, the Malay word for ‘brave’.

Beyond its disparate origins, Pulau Brani had many characteristics that differentiated its islanders’ memories from those of other outlying islands within Singapore. The strong British presence brought more job opportunities for islanders, thus Pulau Brani was often perceived to be one of the richest offshore islands. Frequent interactions between islanders and the British residents helped develop a more sophisticated world view amongst the islanders, allowing them insights to life beyond Pulau Brani.

Portraits of the Brave

Over the course of a year, 23 former islanders of Pulau Brani were interviewed. They reminisced about the island, sharing their intimate thoughts and memories spanning from childhood adventures to idealistic thoughts as young adults. Some also expressed their worries and concerns during the resettlement period. Their sharing painted a colourful picture of the unique lives on Pulau Brani and these are their stories.



Mdm Hajah Halimah binte Omar's life centred around Telok Saga. The 81-year-old fondly recalled the nights when she dined with her family out on the veranda illuminated by the moon. Accompanied by the lapping waves of the sea, they chatted with their neighbours across the *titi* into the night.

Mdm Mustainah binte Hussein, 66, lived on Pulau Blakang Mati (present day Sentosa) but attended school on Pulau Brani. She married her late husband, a Pulau Brani islander and an ex-schoolmate of hers, then lived on the island for a few years. Her husband, a teacher, was posted to the mainland before the resettlement period in 1971 and the family followed. Having lived on two different islands, she has many memories to share about island life.





Mdm Hajah Nafisah binte Mansor, in her late 80s, was born and raised in Selat Sengkir. Memories of life on Pulau Brani remain fresh and vivid in her mind as she shared anecdotes of her wedding, which was seen as the most modern one in Pulau Brani during her time. Instead of the traditional Malay costume, she was dressed in a white wedding gown.

Mr Nasruddin bin Hussein, one of Hajah Nafisah's sons, shared long tales that adults used to tell children to keep them in line. The 'Penebok' was one famous character told to every child looking for an adventure across Pulau Brani. Rumoured to be armed with a sickle, he would wait in the shadows along the route between Telok Saga and Selat Sengkir. The 'Penebok' would behead children who did not listen to their parents and sneaked off into the night!



Her other son, Mr Mohammed Zaid bin Hussein recalls heading back to Brani even after moving to the mainland to watch films at the open air cinema without paying by squeezing through gaps in the fences. Once, they were almost caught and ran for their lives!



Mdm Azimah binte Abdul Aziz, in her 60s, was born in Bengkalis, Riau before her family moved to Telok Saga on Pulau Brani when she was a toddler. Her home was built on the water and with much laughter, she shared that a major advantage of living out in the sea was answering the call of nature. Going to the toilet was much easier as they happily flushed everything into the waters!

Her brother, Mr Abu Bakar bin Abdul Aziz, 80, has great respect for the security on the island. With a population of about 5,000 islanders, only one official policeman was enough to keep everyone in check.



His brother, Mr Ramlai bin Abdul Aziz, 58, remembered the boat race that took place every National Day. Participants would row out to the deep waters in their *sampan* (a small, flat-bottomed wooden boat), with a *layar* (sail) attached, and race to shore.

Haji Salim bin Suleh, now in his 70s, moved to Telok Saga from his home along the Singapore River. His deep knowledge of the island and its people was evident as he recollected snippets of life in Pulau Brani in a two-hour interview session. He was very proud of the island's Darul Bahar Football Club, one of the best soccer clubs in Singapore in the 1960s.



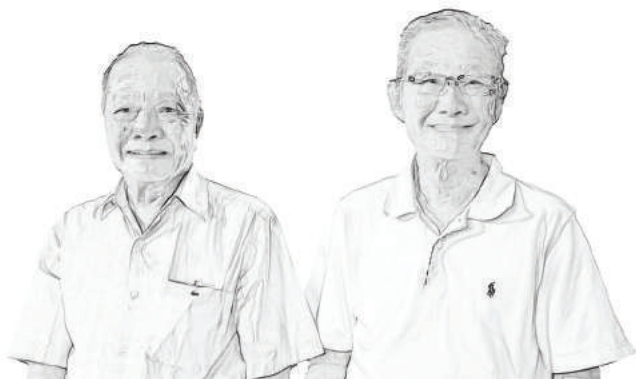
The childhood innocence of growing up in Pulau Brani remains etched in Mr Osman bin Haji Samad's mind. He remembered vividly watching tankers, ferries, and bumboats ply the open sea along the island from his home in Telok Saga. Mr Osman spent several evenings with his father and siblings reconstructing these marine vessels with recycled materials. He used these toys to play racing with his friends in the streams.



Mr Sauki bin Bujang, however, had a different childhood. Ever since he was able to make trips to the mainland to purchase items for the family, he became an entrepreneur, selling toys and unique food items from mainland Singapore to his fellow islanders in Selat Sengkir. Now 59, Mr Sauki recalled the adventures he had with his friends as a teenager in great detail.

Mr Abdullah bin Hamid, 62, excelled in swimming and represented his primary school as a competitive swimmer. He recalled how every islander seemed to possess swimming skills from birth, and shared the importance of constant vigilance when training in the open waters as there were poisonous eels that could grow up to a meter long.





Mr Michael Tan Yoke Lin, 73, and Mr Lin Yong Sheng, 77, remained close friends since their childhood days on Pulau Brani. Both of them went to Tai Chong School, the Chinese school on the island, which only had classes up till Primary Four. Thereafter, they continued their studies on the mainland. Both

of them agreed that nothing beats the clean waters of Pulau Brani. One could catch crabs and fishes easily, and the catch was always fresh and sweet. During the interview, Mr Lin confided that while resettlement was an easy transition for most of his family members, his mother felt like a fish out of the water as she had never stepped foot on mainland Singapore. He was worried about his mother, and it took her some time before she finally felt comfortable living in a flat.

For both Mdm Nor Hani binte Nordin, 62, and Mr Johari bin Hamid, 65, the married couple was reassured by the presence of the British on the island. They spent their childhood days as fellow islanders in the village of Spedo before



rekindling their friendship after the resettlement and eventually tying the knot. They respected the British for not exerting authority over the islanders, but worked alongside them to encourage education, discipline, and hygiene. Mr Johari shared how he would get to water ski once a week when the RASC's Commander-in-Chief arrived on the island in his high-speed boat.

Mr Lee Ah Huat, in his 80s, shared many funny anecdotes of his life on Pulau Brani. A hint of a smile often accompanied the memories he shared. Paired with a commanding voice, it was easy to be absorbed in his tales and imagine life on this island of the brave. A memorable phrase he shared was, “On Brani when the weather was hot, you could just jump out the window and into the sea. Now, you jump out the window, you say goodbye.”



Another former villager of Masak Timah, Mr Ishak bin Ali reminisced how simple his childhood was in Pulau Brani. He described the numerous activities that the village children played to pass the time, from traditional marbles and spinning top, to sports like badminton, rounders and football.

His sister, Mdm Aesah binte Ali, fondly shared her memories of the annual December high tides that caused water to enter the islanders' homes. She joked about the clean waters forming a natural wading pool in their home.



Mdm Asiah binte Hussein, 73, known affectionately as Arah, lived in Spedo before moving closer to Telok Saga after her marriage in 1961. She fondly recalled Kedai Kopi Jon, a coffee shop known for its coffee, tea, *kaya* and butter toasts. It is definitely not the *roti* Jon that Singaporeans refer to now!



At the age of seven, Mr Ishak bin Osman, now 78, moved from Rimba Terjun, Malaysia to Masak Timah. Growing up, he learnt *silat* (the Malay art of self-defence) at Telok Saga in the evenings after the dusk prayers. He remembered an incident when the Marine Police boat cruised by the island and observed their *silat* training at their teacher's home, which was by the sea. For fear of having their teacher's home being raided, they stopped the session.

The last interviewee was Ms Patricia Lee, 59, and her mother Mdm Mak Seet Cheng, 83. Mdm Mak set up a hairdressing salon on the island in the 1970s. She encountered numerous challenges, including making do without piped water and attracting customers. While both mother and daughter were not islanders, Ms Lee often visited her mother during the weekends and school holidays, and envied the youths who could easily dive into the waters during high tide without fear.



As you read through the book, you will find more interesting memories and anecdotes that will leave you yearning for a glimpse of the unique life on Pulau Brani. Like Mr Ishak bin Ali said, "*Kalau bikin balik Brani, kita semua pulang.*" (If Brani was opened to the public again, we would all return home.)

Welcome to Pulau Brani. Let's relive the memories from this island of the Brave.

PULAU BRANI

Island of the Brave

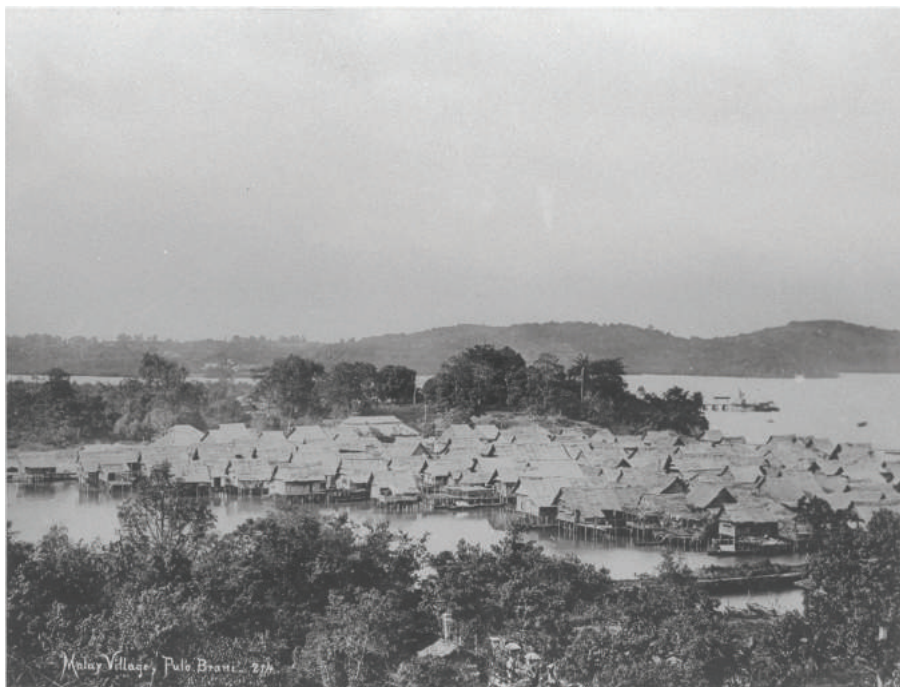
At 1.22 km², Pulau Brani is a very small island, occupied by a tight-knit community. Houses were close to one another, with the next house a stone's throw away. The four villages were each a 5 to 15-minute walk away from one another. Majority of the islanders were Malay, but there were Chinese, Indians, Javanese, and British as well, living harmoniously together. Many of the Malays of Pulau Brani lived on or near the sea, while the Chinese preferred to live inland.

Many remembered life on Pulau Brani as carefree and idyllic. It was not a life filled with modern conveniences, but the islanders were very happy. Everyone knew one another, which made the community seem like a very large extended family.

Pulau Brani was relatively self-sufficient. Each village had their own provision shops where the islanders bought daily

**“We were very
carefree on the
island and did
not have any
stress at all.”**

- Lin Yong
Sheng



*A view of the stilt houses of Kampung Telok Saga
in the 1900s.*

necessities such as vegetables and dried goods. However, meat was not sold on the island and had to be bought from mainland Singapore. The island was never short of stalls offering a variety of local dishes. Among them were Indian food stalls selling *roti prata* and fried noodles. Mdm Asiah remembered another popular food shop; the *mee rebus* stall of Mak Lebak. The *mee rebus*, a traditional dish of egg noodles with tangy curry-like gravy, was soupy and it always whetted appetites of the islanders, even those who were unwell.

One shop fondly remembered by many of the islanders was Kedai Kopi Jon (Jon's Coffee Shop) in Telok Saga. Jon's *Hailam* coffee was roasted with margarine and he could remember his regular customers' preferred cup of coffee. A typical meal at Kedai Kopi Jon was a cup of *kopi Jon* and a piece of *roti Jon* (*kaya* toast). This unique Singaporean toast was also affectionately known as *roti kahwin*, literally translated as "marriage bread."

Apart from the food and provision shops, the island was also complete with amenities, including a clinic located within the gated premises of the Strait's Trading Company's tin-smelting factory. Islanders were allowed access to the clinic and referred to its doctor as the *dresser*. He prescribed medication for simple ailments such as headaches and coughs for a 20-cent fee. However, for more severe complications, islanders had to travel to the mainland for access to better treatment and medication. For those who preferred an alternative healing method, there was the island's *bomoh*, a spiritual healer. For example, if one was suffering from acute headaches, the *bomoh* would pluck a

**"Kedai Kopi
Jon was one of
the best on the
island. It was
very famous."
- Salim bin Suleh**

strand of hair from the person's head. Accompanied by prayers, the headaches would gradually subside.

Despite these amenities, being away from mainland Singapore meant that islanders faced challenges when it came to gas, clean water and electricity. Piped water was only available at the military barracks. Elsewhere on the island, clean water had to be carried over from wells. During the dry season, these wells on the island dried up and islanders with *sampans* would head over to Pulau Blakang Mati to collect water. Tin cans lined the front of the *sampan* as rowers manoeuvred their boats underneath a waterfall, catching water in the tins while getting drenched at the same time. When a rower returned during high tide, the loaded *sampan* cosied up underneath the houses and family members opened up a few floorboards. This allowed for easier transferring of the cans of water from the *sampan* to the house.

After the People's Action Party (PAP) came to power, upgrading programmes were carried out on all southern islands of Singapore in the 1960s, which included Pulau Brani. Water pipes and taps were installed in each village, making it convenient for the islanders. A boat, known as *kapal air* (water boat) by islanders, came to the island bearing clean water from mainland Singapore. This water was stored in a tank on top of a hill, supplying the entire island with clean water. Water collection from the centralised taps was a task often carried out by youths. Mdm Aesah remembered ferrying pails of water home, balancing the pails on her shoulders with a pole. She had to carefully manoeuvre her footing as she walked on the *titi* leading to her house on the sea. As part of the upgrading programme, the *titi* that connected stilt houses on the sea were also widened for greater safety.

Typically, most houses did not have electricity and families relied on kerosene and paraffin lamps. Villages such as Telok Saga, Masak Timah and Spedo, however, had their own generator which supplied electricity for a few houses. Villagers could only use the electricity until 10 p.m., when the generator was shut off. Similarly, gas supply also ceased at night, so islanders usually worked around these schedules in their households. Hajah Nafisah recalled a time when an electric company offered to install

light bulbs in her house, at the cost of two dollars per bulb. Most islanders agreed to it and paid the fee, supplying a more convenient light source to the households.

Islanders survived on limited gas and electricity supply, and much less on land transportation. While the roads on mainland Singapore were packed with vehicles, roads on Pulau Brani were quiet - almost devoid of any automobiles. Islanders could walk from one end of the island to another within half an hour. “We walked everywhere, there was no transportation. The island wasn’t too big. Each place was within walking distance of each other,” explained Mdm Azimah.

Instead, islanders relied heavily on water vessels to transport them from Pulau Brani to mainland Singapore and occasionally, the nearby Pulau Blakang Mati. *Sampans* were ubiquitous on the island. They could access many parts of the island easily and were able to reach all the jetties dotted around the island’s edge. This made it easier for islanders to reach villages like Telok Saga, which had a small jetty meant for small vessels.

Some rowers even used their small but sturdy *sampans* as “boat taxis”, ferrying islanders to the mainland and back. The fee was 30 cents for adults and 10 cents for children, a rather pricey option back in the day. A boat taxi would wait for six people to board before making its journey.

Sitting on a *sampan* was a rockier experience than boarding a ferry. The small boat was much more susceptible to the sea’s waves and it was common for passengers to get their

**“We walked
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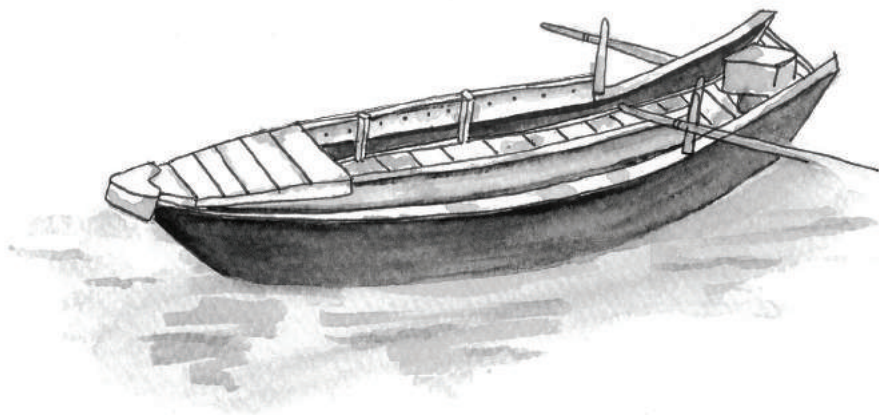
- Azimah binte
Abdul Aziz

feet soaked in water by the time they arrived at their destination. “Sometimes, the *sampan* would rock so much that seawater would enter it. It was a very scary experience for me as I did not know how to swim. I only travelled to Pulau Brani when my father was around because he was an excellent swimmer,” said Ms Patricia Lee.

Ferries were the *de rigueur* modes of transport between the island and mainland Singapore. Each day at 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. respectively, ferries docked at jetties in Masak Timah, Spedo and Selat Sengkir, ready to transport students, workers, housewives, and shoppers to Singapore and back. There were also British-owned ferries that could only be boarded by RASC employees, who only needed to show their staff passes to board for free.

“The larger ferries would dock at Masak Timah jetty, but that was only used by the army. There was another jetty at Selat Sengkir for workers who worked in the Navy. [The jetty at] Telok Saga was only for *sampans*,” recalled Hajah Nafisah.

Despite living without everyday conveniences like gas, electricity and land transportation, life on Pulau Brani was carefree. Islanders spent their free time swimming, fishing, playing and socialising. Food was readily available from the sea; they would catch their meal of the day and look for shellfish that typically ended up



in *sambal* (a spicy condiment made from chilli peppers and other ingredients such as ginger and fish sauce), *kuah lemak* (a dish of rich yellow coconut gravy) or *asam pedas* (a sour and spicy fish dish). Everything they wanted or needed was available on the island.

As Mr Nasruddin reminisced, “We used to fall asleep to the sound of the waves of the sea, and were woken up by tiny crabs that climbed up through cracks in the wooden floors.”

**“We used to
fall asleep to
the sound of
the waves of
the sea.”**

- Nasruddin bin
Hussein



*An islander carrying her child with the stilt houses of Kampung
Telok Saga in the background.*

THE FOUR VILLAGES OF PULAU BRANI

Telok Saga

Telok Saga was the largest village on the island, where one could find a bar, a hair salon, a laundromat, and a European-styled tailor. Wooden houses perched above seawater on wooden stilts. Weaving one's way between the houses required immense courage and excellent balance as the *titi* would wobble each time someone crossed over. During a high tide, the threat of falling into the waiting sea below was real.

Fresh challenges ensued during low tides, as the seabed was filled with potentially dangerous debris. When the waves receded, children scavenged for shells, coins, and various odds and ends. Mdm Azimah pointed out that this was the best time to hunt for personal belongings and objects that had fallen into the sea.

Islanders often helped one another across the planks, especially when relatives from mainland Singapore came to visit. Unfamiliar with the houses on stilts, many would walk slowly across, with the islanders ready to receive them on the other end.

"Once I was walking on the *titi* on my way home from school and I fell into the sea! All of my school books were wet!" Mdm Hajah Halimah laughed as she recalled her childhood memory.

**“Once I was
walking on the
titi on my way
home from
school and I
fell into the
sea! All of my
school books
were wet!”**

- Hajah Halimah
binte Omar

If the weather was warm, a quick jump out the window into the water would do wonders to cool down. It was also easy to catch seafood – all one had to do was hook a bait on the end of a makeshift rod and throw it out the window.

Unfortunately, the wooden houses of Telok Saga, which were exposed to seawater, required regular repairs and islanders rallied one another to help. It was also more challenging for those who lived further out at sea to obtain fresh water.

Two primary schools – Sekolah Melayu Telok Saga and Tai Chong School were situated near this village. Telok Saga was also home to the well-known Darul Bahar Football Club, which competed in soccer leagues on the mainland. Many communal activities like the *pasar malam* (night markets) and film screenings took place at the field near Telok Saga.

Selat Sengkir

Selat Sengkir was located on the other end of the island, separated from Telok Saga by two football fields. Both villages were only a 15-minute walk away from the other. While only a third of the islanders lived in stilt housings out at sea, all houses in Selat Sengkir were built from wood. Most men in the village worked as master attendants, servicing lighthouses and ships at the RASC.

Mdm Hajah Nafisah lived in the barrack quarters of the marine department of Selat Sengkir until she was married, before moving to a stilt house. “The *kampung* houses in Selat Sengkir did not have access to running water or electricity. They were only available in the barrack quarters. We collected water from wells and used gasoline lamps,” she explained.

A short distance away from Selat Sengkir was Tanjong, a prominent site for the village. It was an open secret that Tanjong had the best fishing spots despite its treacherous waters. Being at the furthest end of the island facing the open sea, islanders also barter traded with passing seamen in that area.

**“We collected
water from
wells and used
gasoline lamps.”**

**- Hajah Nafisah
binte Mansor**



A lady and her children with brick houses typical of inland homes in the background.

Masak Timah

One of two villages on land, the houses at Masak Timah were made of cement and built barrack-style. There was a tin smelting plant owned by the Straits Trading Company near this village. *Masak timah* translates to ‘tin smelting’ in the Malay language. The beaches of Masak Timah were said to be black because of the release of unwanted waste material from the tin smelting process.

This village was ten minutes away from Telok Saga and many villagers worked at the tin smelting plant or for the RASC. Two significant advantages of living in this village were the availability of clean water and the convenience of electricity.

Spedo

Similar to Masak Timah, houses in Spedo were made of bricks and cement. The village had about 40 housing units. Nestled next to Masak Timah, residents enjoyed similar benefits such as access to water and electricity. Since the RASC jetty was situated closest to Spedo, many of the villagers worked for the British army. Spedo was also situated closer to the waters than Masak Timah.



*Children playing in the front yard of a house in
their school uniforms.*

GROWING UP ON PULAU BRANI

Childhood memories

Oh, to be a child in Pulau Brani! To wake up to the rolling waves of the sea, where nature's flora and fauna were your toys and games, when life was undeniably simpler, although not always easy.

That summarised Mr Sauki's childhood. Like many families on Pulau Brani, Mr Sauki's was far from wealthy – but they made do with what they had. As a child with remarkable entrepreneurial spirit, earning money was his top priority. "I was the one always thinking of ways to make money," Mr Sauki said with a gleeful smile.

One of Mr Sauki's money-making strategies was selling titbits to his friends and neighbours when they came over to watch shows on his family's television set. "My family owned a 20-inch television set, which was considered a luxury at the time. Whenever we brought our TV set outside our house, neighbours would bring their kids and hang around while waiting for good shows such as *Rin Tin Tin* and *Superman* to air. I started selling titbits to my friends and neighbours for more income," Mr Sauki fondly recalled.

“Whenever we brought our TV set outside our house, neighbours would bring their kids and hang around while waiting for good shows such as Rin Tin Tin and Superman to air.”

- Sauki bin Bujang

Mr Sauki was always on the lookout for ways to supplement his income. One of them was using his *sampan* to transport staff to and from the marine department to their homes. With a chuckle, Mr Sauki recalled, “When I came back from school, I just dumped my books and bag, grabbed my stick which I used as an oar, and went off with my *sampan* to earn money.” This part-time job allowed him to earn an additional 40 to 50 cents a day.

Mr Sauki also helped to sell his mother’s homemade ice-cream. He sold these at 9.30 a.m. before the school day commenced, and had to be back home by 11 a.m. for a shower before he headed for school at Pulau Blakang Mati. “I had to walk all the way to Telok Saga to sell the ice-cream. In Telok Saga, I had to balance on a pathway made out of one narrow plank above the seawater. It was really scary! If there were two planks, you were really lucky!” Mr Sauki exclaimed with a laugh. Navigating the unsteady *titi* of Telok Saga, walkways of Masak Timah and narrow homes of Spedo, he gained many friends from selling his mother’s ice cream.

Games that we played

For many children in Pulau Brani, purchasing new toys was a luxury only few could afford. Luckily, this was hardly a problem – owning toys was not necessary for them to have a good time. Nature, along with creativity and imagination, was all they needed to occupy themselves.

The children of Pulau Brani shared many games played by their mainland counterparts at the time. Traditional games such as marbles, rounders, *sepak raga* (kick volleyball played with a rattan ball), *batu serembat* (five stones), *congkak* (mancala) and *gasing* (spinning top) were popular during those days.

Beyond these traditional games, they made full use of their surrounding environment in their creative game play. Mr Osman vividly recalled how combat or war-themed television shows inspired young boys to create their own

**“We did not
have a lot of
money, so
we had to
be creative
at inventing
different
games.”**

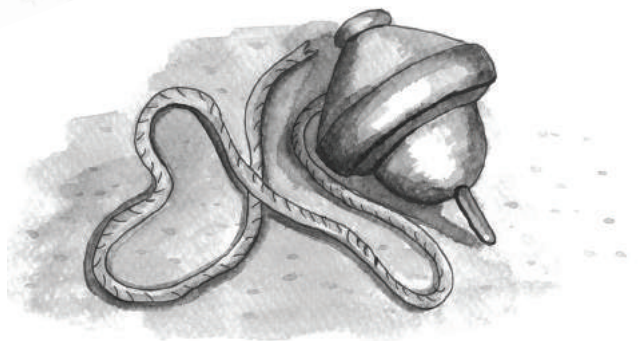
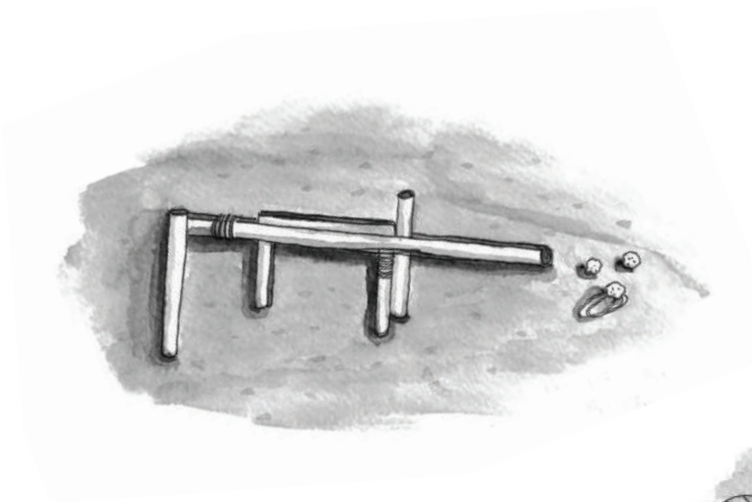
- Osman bin
Haji Samad



pretend war games with each other. “Back then, the kids were very smart and creative. We would pretend to be in a war mission, and played by the seashore or went waist-deep into the sea, armed with our own self-made weapons,” said Mr Osman with a smile.

The boys fashioned bullets using clay and loaded them onto handmade slingshots crafted with branches and rubber bands. When taking aim, they placed the bullet against the rubber band, pulled it backwards, and slung it off towards their “victim”.

When rubber bands were not used as weaponry, they became a tool for a different game. Mr Osman recalled how they balanced piles of the bands on top of each other, placed the stacks on a branch and firing another rubber band towards the stacks. The aim was to topple as many rubber bands as they could. The ones that fell off the branch would be won and kept by the children.



The children of Pulau Brani were well-acquainted with the changing seasons of vegetables. This determined the seeds they could collect and, in turn, use for their games.

“When it was the *biji asam* (tamarind seeds) season, the children collected the seeds to be used in their games. When one season ended, they would collect the seeds that were next in season, such as *biji saga* (red bead seeds),” explained Mr Osman. The different seeds served many purposes to the children’s games, such as substitutes for money when they gambled.

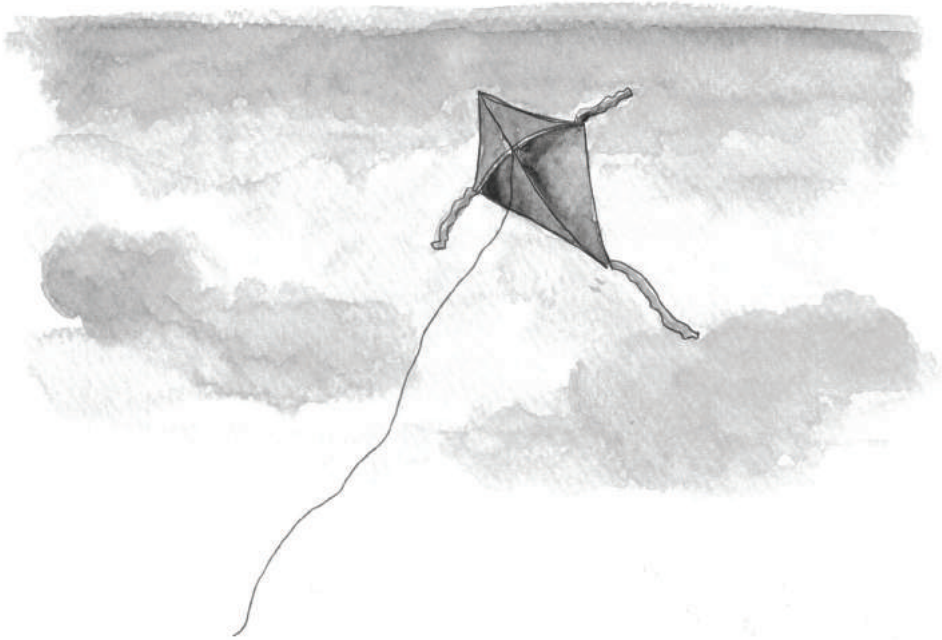
Sticks and branches were also used to play a popular game called *ketuk ayam* (literally meaning “knocking the chicken”). Two sticks of varying lengths were needed to play. The shorter stick would be placed horizontally over a hole, and a team would use the longer stick to fling the shorter stick over to the opposing team standing on the other side. If the opposing team managed to catch the short stick, they won that round of the game and the teams would switch sides.

Even living creatures could entertain the young ones. Mr Abdullah reminisced his time catching spiders at his primary school with his friends. The children were experts at seeking out the spiders’ favourite hiding spots. “We would look for two leaves that were closed over each other, where the spiders liked to hide,” he said.

No regular spider would do for a spider fight. Fighter spiders were usually small and their black bodies would be covered in bright yellow lines. Once the children had caught their

**“The games
that we played
on the island
often changed
according to
the seasons.”**

- Sauki bin
Bujang



**“Spider
fighting was a
favourite game
of the boys.**

**The owner of
the winning
spider would
get free food!”**

- Abdullah bin
Abdul Hamid

spiders, the fight would commence, with the owner of the winning spider being rewarded with free food of his choice.

Sometimes, kites would substitute spiders in these fighting matches. The abundance of open space in Pulau Brani made it an excellent location for kite-flying, and the children were particularly resourceful at making the best kites. “The most exciting part of making my own kite was looking for the bamboo that formed the kite’s structure, which often swept up onto the beach from the sea,” said Mr Abdullah. “We glued sharp objects, like glass fragments, onto our kites to cut our opponents’ kite strings.”

Pulau Brani was truly a land which provided for its islanders in many ways, even for the children. Its natural surroundings were enough to provide hours of play and laughter. Equipped with creativity and imaginative minds, nothing could stop them from having good fun.

Passing time

Away from the hustle and bustle of the city, life slowed down in Pulau Brani and islanders enjoyed a simple life. Both adults and children had an affinity for the sea. There was never a wrong time to go swimming, fishing, or shellfish-hunting. The children of Pulau Brani took to the sea like fishes. Mdm Hajah Halimah, who grew up in Telok Saga, was a true island girl. Her wooden *kampung* house sat just above water, so her life revolved around the sea. Swimming was second nature to her and many other children. When the tides were high, they jumped in for a good swim.

Mdm Hajah Halimah remembered swimming up to the front of her house as easily as walking. “Once, one of the floorboards of my home came loose and I fell into the sea. But all I had to do was swim to the front of the house and climb back up. When the tides were high, water levels rose all the way up and into our houses. But when they were low, I could walk on the seabed,” she recalled.

Fishing was one of her favourite past times throughout her growing-up years and after marriage. “I used to love fishing. In the past, [my late husband] and I would row out to the middle of the sea on weekends to fish. It was so easy to catch *ikan lebam* (baronang fish). They would come out jumping! Because we didn’t have refrigerators, we would store the fish in baskets and hang them from the rafters of our house,” she explained.

**“Every
morning before
school, my
brother would
jump into the
sea for a swim.”**

- Hajah
Halimah binte
Omar



Young men after a session of swimming in the sea.

Fishing was a hobby indulged by many not just to relax, but also because it formed part of the islanders' livelihood. Mr Johari, who lived in the barracks, fondly reminisced the times when he swam and fished with his relatives and friends. "Brani is a great place for fishing. Everywhere we went, we could find fresh seafood. We could catch 20 kilograms of prawns, and 10 kilograms of good fish in one day. You can't find seafood like that in Singapore," he said.

Catching worms as baits was another activity altogether. One would sprinkle rice water onto the sand, wrap the forefingers with bandages, and grab the sea worms as they emerged and tried to nibble at them. After a successful fishing session, the day's catch was cooked into mouth-watering dishes, and the freshness of the seafood was unforgettable. During December's monsoon season, high tides enabled islanders to fish right from their houses!

The sea was not the only place to catch good seafood. Mdm Asiah recounted her journey to Air Brani every day with her aunt and cousins to look for shellfish. Air Brani was a cemented pond situated near the beach, behind a small hill housing the RASC quarters overlooking Keppel Harbour, nearest to Telok Saga. "We would stay from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. and we would come back with so much shellfish. If the tide was low, we could get many varieties and we would boil them to eat," Mdm Asiah said.

Football was another well-loved activity in Pulau Brani and matches were usually played on the RASC compound, or on the field at the marine department barracks. Without boots and only equipped with an obsessive passion for the

**"Brani is a
great place
for fishing.
Everywhere
we went, we
could find
fresh seafood..."**

**You can't
find seafood
like that in
Singapore."**

**- Johari bin
Hamid**

**“Many famous
Singaporean
footballers
hailed from
Pulau Brani.”**

- Mustainah
binte Hussein

game, islanders played football barefoot for hours on end. Many of Singapore’s football legends including Ahmad Yusof and Ismail Yusoff had their roots in Pulau Brani. The island’s football team often took part in matches against other local and international teams, regularly scoring wins reported in the local newspapers. Mr Osman shared how the sport was also used as a means to raise funds for the children to attend school.

Aside from sports, watching movies was another popular activity amongst islanders. There were two open-air cinemas on the island. One was solely for the British within the RASC compound, while the other catered for other islanders. The screening continued regardless of the weather, as shared by Mr Nasruddin. When it rained, the islanders hurried towards the only available shelter at the rear of the cinema.

Mr Ramlai grinned as he recalled the islanders’ excitement when the first open-air cinema opened its doors in Pulau Brani. It was the first cinema within the southern islands of Singapore. Many residents from neighbouring islands visited Pulau Brani during weekends to purchase food at the *pasar malam* by the open-air cinema, before settling down on woven mats and pillows to watch a film. The movies were screened from 7 p.m. to 9.30 p.m., and 9.30 p.m. to midnight. While genres varied, crowd favourites were Bollywood flicks, P. Ramlee classics and Cowboy-themed English movies. Long after a movie ended, youths would still be discussing its plot and children would re-enact scenes from the movie.

Still, it was not always easy to watch movies for Mdm Asiah. Her family was poor and they had no money to

purchase tickets, which cost 30 cents for adults and 10 cents for children.

She was grateful for a friend who had a trick up his sleeve. He would purchase a ticket, enter the cinema, borrow tickets from the patrons already seated, and pass them to her so that they could reuse it and watch the movie!

Other children also found creative ways to enter the cinema without paying. As Mr Sauki recalled with a laugh, “If you knew the person in charge of selling the tickets, you could go in for free!”

After the show, islanders visited the *pasar malam* nearby, where snacks like *kacang puteh* (roasted or sugar-coated nuts wrapped in paper cones) and goodies were sold to cinema-goers.

**“My brother
and I used
to sneak into
the cinema by
going through
the back
fences. Once,
we were caught
and had to run
for our lives!”**

- Mohammed
Zaid bin
Hussein



School children of Telok Saga Malay School.

Islanders' education

A number of Pulau Brani islanders received only primary school education. In those days, that was sufficient as they stayed home and tended to the greater needs of their families. Girls were actively involved in housework, while the boys took on jobs to support their family. Some boys had the opportunity to further their studies on mainland Singapore too. Most islanders attended Sekolah Melayu Telok Saga (Telok Saga Malay School) or Tai Chong School, a Chinese primary school which had only three classes. Though relatively unknown to many, there was a British army school located next to Buller Jetty, which provided primary education for the British children living on the island.

Sekolah Melayu Telok Saga was a single storey structure built on a block of cement posts. Below the flooring of the school, there was an opening where chickens and cats entered and frolicked underneath. Sometimes, school children crawled through the opening and looked for eggs. The perimeter of the school compound was fenced with sharp wrought iron. Sekolah Melayu Telok Saga only had four levels in the curriculum, from Standard I to IV and as the school's name implied, lessons were taught in Malay. Boys attended school in the morning from 7.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m., while girls did so in the afternoon from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. All subjects for each level were taught by one teacher and it ranged from basic reading and writing to history and arithmetic.

**“Whenever
my friend
from school
was sick,
her mother
would pass her
homework to
me as I walked
by their house
to give to the
teacher. We
were in one
village, we were
like family.”**

- Asiah binte
Hussein



*A prize giving ceremony with the school children
of Pulau Brani.*

Mdm Hajah Nafisah was a student of Sekolah Melayu Telok Saga up till Standard IV. In the mornings before school, she looked after her younger siblings and completed her homework. Just before school started in the afternoon, she changed into her uniform - a white top and a pair of blue bottoms - and headed to school. It was a five-minute walk from her house in the marine department's barracks at Selat Sengkir.

Mdm Hajah Nafisah was given a certificate for her studies when she completed Standard IV. Unfortunately, she was unable to further her education. "To continue my education till Primary Six, I would need to go to the mainland, but I did not get a chance due to the Japanese Occupation," she said.

To some of the islanders, furthering their studies was a challenge due to circumstances such as family commitments, financial issues and at times, discrimination. As Mdm Hajah Halimah explained, "I wanted to continue my studies after primary school but my parents wouldn't allow it." Her parents had told her, "What for? You'll end up in the kitchen anyway."

Mr Sauki faced similar obstacles in his academic journey, but persevered and emerged triumphant. He first started schooling at a primary school on mainland Singapore, and was transferred to Blakang Mati Primary School when tensions between Singapore and Malaya heightened in the early 1960s. Shortly after, Mr Sauki and a few others were transferred yet again, this time to Telok Saga Malay School. Given their previous educational background in English-streamed schools, they faced constant sarcasm from teachers and students as Malay was seen as the *lingua franca*. At that time, Singapore was still part of Malaya and English was not seen as important.

**"The principal
and teachers
looked down
on the students
from English
schools, saying
that we had
nowhere to go."**

- Sauki bin
Bujang

Mr Sauki shared how his English teacher Mr Toh, who was from mainland Singapore, encouraged his friends and him to do their best and prove the naysayers wrong. The group worked hard with determination, and eventually passed their primary school education.

On the other hand, Mr Tan Yoke Lin, who attended Tai Chong School, recalled that schools on the island did not discriminate amongst different races. “Everyone was accepted, even if you were Chinese and wanted to go to the Malay school,” he said. However, it was more common for children from Chinese families to attend Tai Chong School, which held classes in Mandarin.

Education on Pulau Brani was not limited to secular subjects. “In the morning, I would attend school and in the afternoon, I would go for my religious classes,” recalled Mr Ishak. He explained that the *ustaz* (religious teacher) would come from the mainland to impart religious knowledge to the children.

There were a good number of islanders from Pulau Brani who made their daily commute across the sea to further their studies. Mr Salim, who went to Telok Saga Malay School, wanted to continue with secondary school education. However, his family was not well-to-do and their finances prevented him from doing so. As luck would have it, he took part in a swimming competition in 1962 and won a consolation prize of \$18, which went towards his education fund. The money enabled him to purchase his school uniform and textbooks. Soon after, he continued his education at Kallang Malay Secondary School at Clifford Pier, a two-hour journey by ferry and bus from Pulau Brani.

WORKING ON PULAU BRANI

When the children of Pulau Brani completed their education, a variety of jobs awaited them, either on the island itself or mainland Singapore. The majority of jobs on the island were offered by either the Straits Trading Company or the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC).

The Straits Trading Company owned one of the most prominent buildings on the island - a tin smelting plant, which was one of the largest tin refineries in the world at the time. It had a sprawling compound with a factory and quarters for the staff, which consisted of Pulau Brani islanders as well. High walls surrounded the property, with glass shards at the top to prevent intruders. Tin ore was transported from the mines of Malaya into the factory. The molten tin would be cast into bars, and eventually loaded onto ships to be sent all over the world. Within the compound itself stood the island's community centre and a police post.

The RASC had their maritime base on the island with quarters for the staff and their families, as well as a sizeable football field. There was also a training school offering a two-year course to become skilled seamen and marine engineers, taught by both British



An islander of Pulau Brani in his work uniform.

officers and trained Malay instructors. During the course, the trainees attended lectures on maritime navigation, learnt the use of the marine engine, and carried out practical work in repairing and maintaining the crafts. Many islanders who worked for the RASC resided within the military barracks with their families.

“My late husband worked as a technician, repairing lights and generators. Every time he had to fix a light out at sea, there would be five or six others on the boat with him. It would take at least four hours [to get the job done],” recalled Mdm Hajah Halimah.

Even schoolchildren worked part-time to earn pocket money for themselves. “My parents were shopkeepers but after school, I worked as a storekeeper with the British army. I looked after the store, received goods and issued them to the respective departments,” described Mr Tan.

Within the tin smelting plant’s compound was a police post for a single policeman. Together with some volunteers, he managed the island’s law and order. Generally, the islanders lived amicably and harmoniously. In fact, no one locked their doors in Pulau Brani. Even during the time when racial riots erupted on mainland Singapore, the islanders were still living peacefully together without the need for a curfew. When there are disagreements on the island, the police officer and volunteers would work closely with the *tok penghulu* (village leader) to resolve them.

The *tok penghulu* had considerable power on Pulau Brani. He oversaw most matters on the island and was the only one

**“On the
island of
Brani, there
was only one
official police
officer.”**
- Salim bin
Suleh

“My old employees [from the mainland] did not want to work on Pulau Brani.”

- Mak Seet Cheng

capable of resolving disputes. As Mr Salim put it, “Whatever he says goes.” The *tok penghulu* had to be very well-educated and conversant in English. He was also well-respected within the community. When ministers from mainland Singapore visited Pulau Brani, they would first pay him a visit, and the same went for British tourists who visited the island from time to time.

While many Malays worked at the tin smelting plant or with the RASC, the Chinese on the island were mainly shopkeepers. One of them was Mdm Mak, the owner of a hair salon in Pulau Brani. Mdm Mak had previously operated a hair salon near Thomson Plaza on the mainland, but had to close it down when her husband decided to move the family to town. She set up her business on Pulau Brani when she learned that the existing hair salon had closed down. She worked from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. throughout the week, and only had Sundays off.

Recalling the difference in operating a hair salon on Pulau Brani versus on the mainland, Mdm Mak shared how her hair salon did not have piped water. She had to fetch water using pails to her shop from the centralized tap, but eventually managed to have a cold water tank installed. Finding employees was also another difficulty she faced. “My former employees [from the mainland] did not want to work on Pulau Brani as it was inconvenient [for them] to travel. They also had the impression that the island was secluded and life would be too quiet there,” Mdm Mak recalled.

Despite these challenges, she persevered and her business thrived on Pulau Brani. Every weekend, Mdm Mak took a

sampan back to mainland Singapore to see her family. During the weekdays, she stayed on the island with a family of her husband's friend. This family had helped her build connections and gain the islanders' trust, enabling her to build her clientele.

In those days, it was more common for the men to be the family's breadwinner while the women stayed at home and looked after the household and children. However, some of the women contributed financially as well, working for the British families as *amahs* (domestic helpers).

There were also others who travelled to mainland Singapore for work, like Mr Abu Bakar, who had stayed on Pulau Brani since 1945. He grew up on the island and after completing his studies, applied for a job as a postal officer. The general post office was in mainland Singapore, so he took the boat owned by a master attendant daily to go to work.



The residents of Pulau Brani often travelled to mainland Singapore for festivities like the celebration of Mawlidurrasul (Prophet Muhammad's Birthday).

AN ISLAND'S CELEBRATIONS

Festivals

Among the festivals celebrated, Hari Raya (a religious festival celebrated by Muslims to mark the end of Ramadan, or fasting month) was most fondly remembered. On Pulau Brani, they celebrated *Malam Tujuh Lekor* (27th night); a minor celebration leading up to Hari Raya. Three nights before Hari Raya, every household would organise a *kenduri* (a get together for prayers accompanied by a feast). Hari Raya cookies and food would be laid out by the doorway. Doors were open till late into the night and after the prayers were over, everyone from the young to the old would bring food home.

Mr Sauki recalled with a teary-eyed smile his memories of this important night, "Do you know what our parents encouraged us to do? They said, 'Take whatever you can.' But our pockets were already filled to the brim with food! One of my uncles then took off his *songkok* (traditional

**"During the
eve of Hari
Raya, all of
the houses
had new
curtains put
up. The whole
island became
very festive."**

- Aesah binte Ali

“Everybody grabbed the food, packed them, then went on to the next house.”

- Ramlai bin Abdul Aziz

Malay headgear), stuffed some food inside and put it back on his head.”

This “challenge” of taking as much food as they could during *Malam Tujuh Lekor* was echoed by Mr Ramlai. Since there were too many houses to go to, visiting each house became a “dash-in, dash-out” affair. “People visited every house that held a *kenduri*. But they didn’t eat! Everybody grabbed the food, packed them, then went on to the next house,” recalled Mr Ramlai. This became the ritual with every house they visited.

Hari Raya was one of the few occasions when the islanders would splurge on different types of meat like beef, mutton, and chicken, a treat and welcome change from their seafood diet. Hence, special dishes like *rendang* (a spicy meat dish made with coconut milk) was only eaten during Hari Raya and weddings.

Beyond feasting, the locals also enjoyed performances held during the festivities. “Any gatherings or performances during Hari Raya were always held at the school. People from all over the island would come to watch the free performances,” recalled Mdm Asiah.

As a multi-cultural community, Chinese New Year was celebrated on the island as well. Mr Ramlai remembered that all the shops were closed during this occasion, hence the islanders would stock up on their basic necessities beforehand. There were firecrackers, lion dances, and a Chinese *wayang* (street opera) to ring in the Lunar New Year.



*The site where many performances were held during
special occasions.*

Similarly, Christmas was also celebrated. Pulau Brani was a welcome getaway for the British who lived on mainland Singapore. During Christmas Eve, many of them would take the ferry to the island to celebrate. They would set up five to six tents to hold a mini carnival on the island.

In true Pulau Brani spirit, everyone was welcomed to the Christmas carnival – British or local. Each household was given tickets to claim goodies from the tents that were set up. “At each tent, you just show your ticket and you would get some goodies,” said Mr Sauki. “The most popular part of the carnival was the wrestling ring [for anyone to try their hand at wrestling], but I wasn’t interested [in that]. I only wanted to know what goodies I would get,” he laughed. “Sometimes I would get titbits. Those who were lucky received toys.”

There were also clothes for sale during the festival, which were between 20 to 30 cents, as well as sweets and desserts. Amongst the many attractions at this festival was a lucky draw that the islanders participated in. “The first prize winner received a four or five-tiered cake, which was elaborately decorated and came in different flavours,” recalled Mr Abdullah.

Mr Johari, who used to live in Spedo and loved to swim, recalled how some of the visiting British would play a game with the islanders swimming nearby as they crossed over from the jetty near Spedo. “When they spotted us swimming, they would throw coins at us! It was a game we really enjoyed. If we caught the coins, we would hold them up to show them. It made them very happy, so they would throw more coins and we would dive for them. And we did the same with every group of British who crossed the jetty!” laughed Mr Johari.

This activity was also witnessed by Ms Patricia Lee. She remembered feeling jealous of the children of Pulau Brani and their swimming prowess when she first visited her mother during the school holidays.

On New Year’s Eve, all the boats available on Pulau Brani ferried islanders to Johnston Pier for a celebration. The festivities started at 9 a.m. and lasted well into the night.

During the day, a game was played where a flag was tied to the top of a pole, and the first person to grab the flag would be the winner. However, the pole was covered in grease and antics to reach the flag incited laughter and cheers from the crowd. At night, before returning to Pulau Brani, everyone crowded around the pier to witness fireworks lighting up the night sky and usher in the New Year.

During these festivities and celebrations, an event which took place regularly was *jong* racing, a popular sport amongst islanders that drew great crowds. The *jong* is a sea craft of about two meters with sails and a free-standing mast. The *jong* was usually made from available scraps of timber, typically beach debris, and the sails were of white cotton cloth bearing the hand-painted name of the particular *jong*. Participants would wade out waist-deep into the sea, pulling their *jong* behind them before starting the race, usually from Pulau Brani to Pulau Blakang Mati. *Jong* racing required great skill and was highly competitive. Winners of these races were highly regarded.



Love stories and island weddings

**“The villagers
called us the
‘king’ and
‘queen’ of
Pulau Brani.”**

- Asiah binte
Hussein

Arranged marriages were common practice for the islanders of Pulau Brani. Mdm Hajah Nafisah did not know her prospective husband prior to their engagement despite living in the same village. Typically, the suitor’s parents would visit the girl’s parents to ask for their daughter’s hand in marriage. The first time she met her husband was during their engagement.

Of course, not all marriages in Pulau Brani were arranged. Mdm Asiah met her husband when she was 15 years old and living in the barracks at Spedo. “My husband worked at the British army compound as a driver, which was located near the Spedo barracks. He was always looking over. Who would have thought he was looking at me?” Mdm Asiah laughed, cheekily nudging her husband sitting next to her. “He was hooked.”

The couple was known as the king and queen of Pulau Brani because they looked like two well-known celebrities of that time. After knowing each other for a few years, they were married in 1961 when she was 18.

On Pulau Brani, word-of-mouth was the best way to spread news of an engagement. This was the fastest and most convenient way of letting islanders know about any ongoing relationships and upcoming wedding ceremonies.



*A bride and groom on their wedding day on a pelamin
(wedding dais).*



The villagers of Pulau Brani demonstrating the gotong-royong spirit during a wedding ceremony.

Wedding ceremonies were extremely large communal affairs. Each ceremony was an opportunity for the *kampung* to get together and help with wedding preparations from food to decor. This spirit of *gotong-royong* (working together as a community) was always evident amongst the islanders. Each islander contributed whatever supplies they could, so the wedding host did not have to spend much. It may take a village to raise a child, but in Pulau Brani, it takes a whole island to make a wedding happen.

Mdm Hajah Nafisah shared how her fellow islanders brought gifts of rice, sugar and other necessities for a feast prior to her wedding. Her wedding ceremony was hosted at the barrack quarters and lasted for two days. The bride wore a wedding gown and the groom was decked in a suit, which was considered very modern in those days. The newlyweds were also accompanied by a *kompang* (traditional Malay percussion) procession, which is a necessity for every Malay wedding even to this day.

Wedding preparations often began one month before the big day. For islanders who lived on houses built on the sea like the ones in Telok Saga, a tent had to be built on land. “We went to Pulau Blakang Mati to find long bamboo sticks for the tent’s structure,” said Mr Ramlai.

The wedding ceremony was attended by people of different races. Relatives and invited guests arrived from mainland Singapore via *sampan* and ferries. The wedding meal was special but simple, usually *nasi minyak* (savoury ghee rice), *rendang*, curry and *acar* (pickled vegetables).

**“News of our
engagement
spread via
word-of-
mouth. That’s
how everyone
knew we were
off-limits!”**

- Nafisah binte
Mansor

“Everyone helped during the ceremony. For example, they would form a human chain to pass plates of rice from the kitchen to the wedding venue.”

- Ishak bin Osman

The spirit of sharing amongst islanders was evident. “The wedding food was prepared and served in a *dulang* (large tray). Each *dulang* was shared between four people,” explained Mr Ramlai.

Unlike Hajah Nafisah’s two-day wedding, Mr Ramlai recalled how most weddings lasted for three days. The first day was the *berinai* ceremony, which involved decorating the couple’s hands and nails with henna. The second was *akad nikah* (solemnization ceremony), and finally the third day was the reception when guests were treated to a wedding feast. Entertainment for the guests came in the form of live bands or singers from the mainland such as A. Ramlie, a popular singer in the 1960s and 1970s.



*A wedding party from the mainland arriving in Pulau Brani
on a ferry.*

THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

Note: Many of the anecdotes in this chapter were recorded interviews retrieved from the National Archives of Singapore (NAS), and has been reproduced with permission from the NAS. References for these interviews are included as footnotes at the end of this chapter.

The Japanese Occupation during World War II was one of the worst tragedies in Singapore's history. Since Pulau Brani was located between Pulau Blakang Mati and mainland Singapore, the island was caught in the middle of attacks between the Japanese and British army.

Mr Rahmat bin Haidin¹ arrived at Pulau Brani in 1937 from Central Java. As he recalled, when the tin smelting plant was destroyed by the British in the early hours of the morning, the villagers were directed to a nearby shelter. However, this shelter was above land and did not offer much protection. They decided to abandon it and head to a nearby drain that was deep and large enough to serve as a makeshift bunker.

During the early days of the Japanese Occupation, the islanders saw the bloated and decomposed human bodies floating on the waters. The bodies would come so close to the *kampung* houses that the islanders had to push them back to the sea using bamboo poles.

Pulau Brani was not spared from the invasion of the Japanese army. Mr Abu Bakar Ali², who was born on the island in 1928, remembered witnessing the Japanese army's planes flying so close to the island that he could clearly see the pilots. The next morning, the islanders woke up to the frightening sight of Japanese soldiers invading their villages, armed with guns and taking anything they fancied.

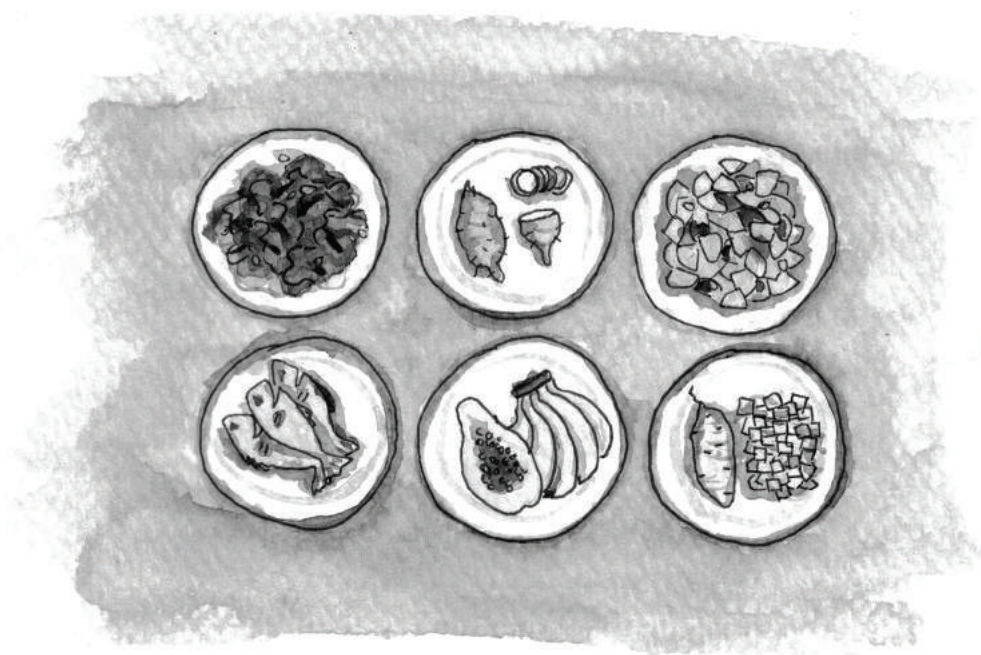
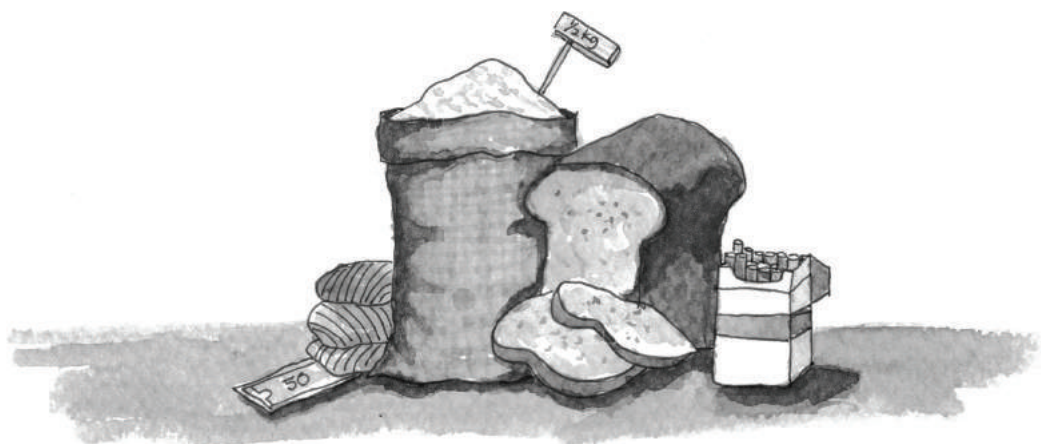
Mr Rahmat, who lived in Masak Timah, remembered the Japanese soldiers entering the village to look for chickens and eggs. However, chickens were not reared in Masak Timah and as a result, the islanders were kicked and harrassed by the soldiers.

The British on Pulau Brani were particularly in danger after the fall of Singapore. Some of them attempted to disguise themselves by putting on traditional clothing of local residents, but their European features would give them away. They were eventually captured by the Japanese soldiers and were either killed on the island or taken away as prisoners.

Survival was extremely difficult during the Japanese Occupation. The islanders were forced to work with the Japanese in order to make a living for themselves. Some of them laboured in the workshops of Japanese shipyards on Pulau Brani. There were two shipyards on the island, *Ichi Koba* (first workshop) and *Ni Koba* (second workshop).

The shipyard workers were given weekly rations consisting roughly of half a kilogram of rice, yellow noodles, bread, and a pack of cigarettes. In addition to the rations, the labourers were paid 50 cents a day, which at the time could feed a family of four or five. The islanders sought other forms of sustenance as well. Anything in their surrounding natural environment such as fruits, edible leaves and roots, offered the possibility of food.

"Although Pulau Brani wasn't as affected by the Japanese Occupation as the mainland was, the islanders were still fearful and anxious. Some decided to move to other islands that did not have a Japanese presence," remembered Hajah Nafisah. "Basic provisions generally became more expensive, especially rice. Most of the time, we ate tapioca when rice was not available."



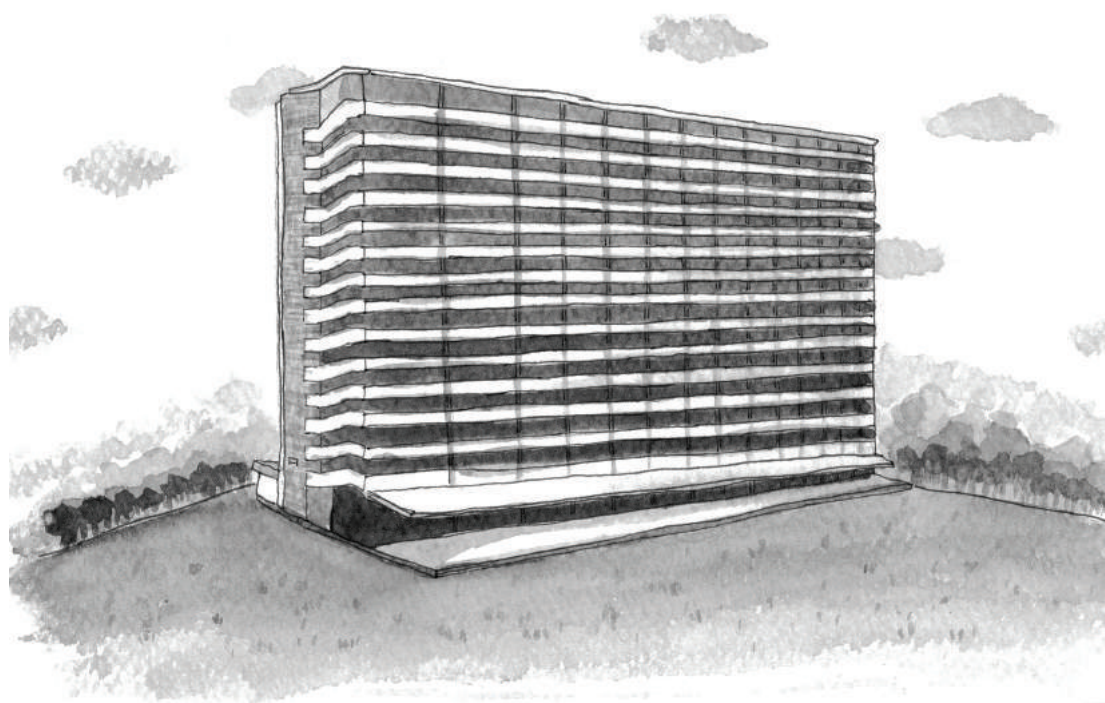
The end of the Japanese Occupation was a momentous occasion for the British. When he was at Victoria Dock, Mr Abu Bakar remembered seeing the British prisoners marching and singing while dressed in new uniforms. On his journey back to Pulau Brani, he saw various British army ships fully occupying the area surrounding neighbouring islands. Two days after the Japanese Occupation ended, the Japanese in Pulau Brani were brought to mainland Singapore.

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¹ Interview with Mr Rahmat bin Haidin, Courtesy of Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore.

² Interview with Mr Abu Bakar Ali, Courtesy of Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore.



RESETTLEMENT

News of relocation

Sleepy villages by the sea gave way to naval base development in 1971, when islanders were given notice of their resettlement to mainland Singapore. The announcement was made by the *tok penghulu*. While some disagreed with the government's decision, most were in support of the move.

The resettlement was not without compensation. Each unit or household received \$500, and about \$15 for each tree they owned that lined the roads or surrounded their compound. While it proved a windfall for those whose houses were located on dry land, it also meant that those who lived on the water like in Telok Saga received less. Still, the islanders made do with the amount they received and prepared for the move.

The government made housing arrangements for all of the islanders in areas such as Bukit Merah View, Telok Blangah Rise, and Telok Blangah Crescent. They could choose to buy their own HDB unit or rent an apartment.

"I decided to rent a flat instead of buying as I had some anxieties and hesitation. It was my first time living in a concrete house and I was worried about the finances of my

**“It was my first
time living
in a concrete
house and I was
worried about
the finances of
my family.”**

- Ishak bin
Osman

family – what if I was fired? Who will pay for the house and look after my children? But there were others who took the gamble and bought a flat,” explained Mr Ishak, who saved for three years before eventually purchasing his rented one-room apartment in Bukit Merah.

Though the government designated the housing location for each family, he recalled that they could submit an appeal if they preferred another location.

1971 - 1976: The moving years

Relocation was done in phases concurrent with the naval base redevelopment. As mentioned by Mr Lin Yong Sheng, “We still had to wait for the Housing Development Board (HDB) to build the new flats.”

Eight lorries were transported to Pulau Brani via a Ramped Cargo Lighter (RCL) provided by the Port of Singapore Authority during each stage – one for every household to load their belongings bound for the mainland. Also known as a Landing Craft Transport vessel, the RCL was designed to carry heavy loads, including vehicles and even tanks during World War II. While these barge-like boats visited Pulau Brani from time to time for industrial purposes, they were rarely used as a mode of transport for islanders, except during the moving years.

From 1971 to 1976, the RCLs carried lorries across the water to Pulau Brani for the residents’ use - it was one of the rare moments that lorry wheels drove on the island’s dirt paths. On moving day, each family loaded their possessions into one lorry. Afterwards, the vehicles were driven to the edge of the island where it rolled atop the RCL’s ramp and then shipped across the sea to mainland Singapore.

“We did not bring much to the mainland as we led a very simple life - most of us just brought our clothes,” recalled Mr Abdullah.

**“In Telok
Blangah, I
sat inside my
home feeling
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I was even
scared to take
the lift as I felt
like I wasn’t
standing on
solid ground.”**
- Hajah Halimah
binte Omar

The RCLs then brought the lorries and respective families to Tanjong Berlayer in Labrador where they alighted and made their way to their new homes.

Post-relocation, former islanders considered themselves lucky if they kept in touch with their former neighbours and fellow islanders. The once tightly-knitted community was scattered across Singapore, strangers in their own country.

As with all change, adapting to modern city life proved a challenge for many. While some quickly adapted to their new environments, others struggled. Claustrophobia settled in for islanders who grew up accustomed to the freedom of open spaces. Although the size of their *kampung* on Pulau Brani were comparable to their new flats, Hajah Halimah, who moved to Telok Blangah, pointed out that on the island, one could just as easily “make space.”

“We were quite happy in Singapore, because the difficulties of kampung life were gone - to be replaced by bills.”

- Aesah binte Ali

“Just spread a mat and you could sleep outside. It was easy. Our friends were nearby. We could just sit at the veranda and talk to each other. But in Telok Blangah, I sat inside my home feeling like a caged bird. At first, I was even scared to take the lift as I felt like I wasn’t standing on solid ground,” she explained. Hajah Halimah took several months to get used to riding the elevator.

For Mdm Aesah, home was a three-room apartment shared between 11 family members. Nevertheless, her family quickly adapted and grew accustomed to their new way of life.

“We were used to the *orang bandar* (city people) when we frequented the mainland to shop,” she explained.

“[Otherwise] we were quite happy in Singapore, because the hardships of *kampung* life was gone – to be replaced by bills.”

Mdm Aesah’s family was not the only one who struggled financially. For years on Pulau Brani, islanders could survive off their land and the surrounding sea. Nature took care of their basic needs – seafood was free, as was drinking water and the land on which they set up their homes. Yet in Singapore, amenities like water, gas and electricity came with bills. Everything had to be paid for. For these free-spirited islanders, working and earning money suddenly became an obligation instead of a choice.

“In the past we were so free. If we wanted something, we would go and get it. But in Singapore, we needed to work to earn money before we can get what we want,” said Mr Johari.

“No money, cannot eat!” quipped his wife, Mdm Norhani.

On the mainland, islanders felt they had lost the sense of family and kinship which held the community together.

“Back then, everyone knew each other, from the younger generation up to their grandparents. But living in flats, we hardly knew our neighbours,” remembered Mr Abdullah.

“In Pulau Brani, we had a lot of freedom. We could go out at any time. Even though there were many people on the island, we were like one big family staying in one house. [But in Singapore], it was very restrictive,” added Mr Ramlai.

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- Abdullah bin
Abdul Hamid**

**“I organise
gatherings so
that we can
bring back the
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here.”**

- Lin Yong Sheng

Despite the challenges of resettlement, life in Singapore had its advantages.

“I felt sad at first, but in hindsight, it was definitely easier living in Singapore. In Pulau Brani, the gas would be switched off at 10 p.m. In Singapore, all the necessities like gas, electricity and water are readily available, so it does feel easier and I am grateful,” said Mdm Asiah, who relocated to Bukit Merah View in 1972.

Within her neighbourhood, she reignited the *kampung* spirit that once burned bright in Pulau Brani. “The environment at my new neighbourhood was always good. We made it like our own *kampung* - chatting with neighbours at the door. Our gates were always open,” she said.

After their resettlement, many of Pulau Brani’s former islanders returned to pay the island a visit in the 1970s, until it was closed to the public in later years. The islanders continue to organise gatherings to this day and try their best to keep in touch and up to date with news of their fellow islanders. As highlighted by Mr Lin Yong Sheng, “I organise gatherings so that we can bring back the *kampung* spirit here.”

For the bubbly Mdm Mustainah, although her stay on Pulau Brani was brief, she vividly recalled the *gotong-royong* spirit as though it was just yesterday. When the islanders relocated, she was glad for communal occasions like weddings and *marhaban* (recital of prayers or supplications to bless the occupants of a household) to meet up with fellow islanders from Pulau Brani and Pulau Blakang Mati.

Despite the big move that took place forty years ago, there is an islander in the heart of every person who once resided in Pulau Brani. Memories of the carefree island life remain as vivid in their minds as the clear crystal waters. Like many will say, despite the comforts of city life, nothing quite compares to the serenity and simplicity of island life.

“I definitely miss life in Pulau Brani. I miss the harmony of island life,” reminisced Mr Abdullah.

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Ishak bin Osman

Johari bin Hamid

Lee Ah Huat

Patricia Lee

Mak Seet Cheng

Michael Tan Yoke Lin

Lin Yong Shen

Mohammed Zaid bin Hussein

Mustainah binte Hussein

Hajah Nafisah binte Mansor

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Nor Hani binte Nordin

Osman bin Haji Samad

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