

Date of interview: Tue, 20 Nov 2018

Venue: Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka

Name of group members: Hakam , Adib, Luqman , Hussein , Izzan , Athirah , Nadiyah & Dini

Name of person interviewed: Madam Zahra Aljunied

Age of interviewee:

Title of Story: Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka - The Oldest Mosque in Singapore

Story Content (minimum 750 words) Include photo(s)/story:

Walking along the Singapore's Central Business District, we could find Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka, a mosque situated in Keng Cheow Street, off Havelock Road. The mosque was built in 1820 by a pioneer Arab trader and a philanthropist, Syed Omar Bin Ali Aljunied.

We were fortunate to meet Madam Zahra Aljunied, who is the sixth-generation descendant of the Arab merchant and a philanthropist Syed Omar Aljunied during our visit to the mosque. Madam Zahra Aljunied gladly shared with us a few insights about Syed Omar Aljunied and the mosque.



Madam Zahra Aljunied began her sharing with a short introduction about herself. Highlighting that although her ancestor had built the Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah she had her education years at Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah. This was because during her time, Madrasah Aljunied was catered only for the boys.

Madam Zahra added that Mr Syed Omar Aljunied was originally from Tarim, a historic town situated in Hadhramaut, Yamen. Mr Syed Omar went to Palembang (capital of South Sumatra province in Indonesia) to trade before he came to Singapore in 1819. Madam Zahra further added that Syed Omar Aljunied was the founder of the Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka.

According to Madam Zahra, in the early years, the mosque was made up of timber with wooden planks with attap roof. The mosque had undergone several major renovations and till today, it has retained its original beams which are made of Chengal wood. (Chengal is considered to be the best type of wood and is classified as heavy hardwood of Malaysia). The roof of the mosque is of the Nusantara design while the double pillars portray the British traditional look. The surrounding structures of the mosque had changed overtime. She recalled that in the old days, the Ladies Praying Section used to be separated from the Main Prayer Hall. Thus, the ladies had no opportunity to perform iktiqaf (a practice in the Islamic faith; consists of a period of retreat in a mosque, for a certain number of days in accordance with the believer's own wish) in the mosque. Madam Zahra herself recollected that she did not get the chance to pray in mosque at that time as it was not the culture for ladies to go to the mosque unlike in the present day. In 2001, Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka was declared as a historic site by the National Heritage Board.

Madam Zahra's fond memory led her to cherish the beauty of seeing the mosque from the Omar Road, on which it was originally located. However, the road had to be expunged or closed to make way for modernisation. Hence, the current entrance of the mosque that we see today originally the back door of the mosque.

With regards to the graves beside the mosque, Madam Zahra told us that prior to existence of the grave, there was a piece of land which Syed Omar had donated for the purpose of Muslim burial ground near Jalan Kubor. However, few years down the road, the burial ground was closed as the government wanted to use the land for redevelopment. Since there were Aljunied descendents buried there, the Aljunied family fought hard for the



Changes throughout the decades

remains of their family members to be transferred and buried right beside Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka, which explained the reason behind the existence of these graves. Since it cannot be used for Muslim burial anymore, Syed Abdul Rahman built a Madrasah (an Islamic school) on the piece of land in 1927. Through the years, Madrasah Aljunied's reputation as a premier Islamic educational institution in South East Asia was solidified.

Madam Zahra ever visited Tarim in Yemen in recent years and found that Syed Omar's house was still there till today. There were many mosques in Tarim and each family would have their own mosque, which include the Aljunied's too.



Graves of the Aljunied ancestors

One interesting fact that Madam Zahra shared with us was that the Aljunied was originally known as "The Baharon". She recalled that it was a culture among the men in Tarim to convey the teachings of the religion or give out religious books such as Ratib Al-Hadad and Riyatus Sholihin to the worshippers at the mosque. Seeing the such noble and honourable activities in Tarim, Madam Zahra love to recall how such practices had spurred Syed Omar to carry on the tradition of coming and praying at the Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka and replicate the preaching of Islamic teachings to its congregation and to give out religious books just like the culture back in Tarim.

Elaborating on the activities the mosque had in the early years, Madam Zahra said the activities of the mosque had not changed since the early years and continued to be a place for worship and congregation such as Friday prayers, daily prayers and Islamic religious classes. In the past, when Singapore was a heavily used as a port of call for passenger ships travelling across the globe, there were also traders and businessman who spent the

nights at the mosque or gathered in the mosque while awaiting to board their ships. The numbers were even greater during the hajj period where pilgrims from the neighbouring Asian countries would gather in Singapore to board the ships heading to Mecca. Hence, many people who came to use the port in Singapore would patronised the mosque as their resting place.

Sharing with the future generation, Madam Zahra recollected the story of Syed Omar Aljunied and his uncle, Syed Muhammad Aljunied and how they had travelled, without families, across the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, all the way from Yemen to South East Asia by ship.



Activities in the mosque



Important values that we could learn from Syed Omar and others are perseverance, strong will, determination and sharing the teaching of Islam as one of their mission. A huge portion of the wealth they reap from their business was spent on the development of the welfare for the community.

Lastly, Madam Zahra also highlighted that the mosque is always in need of younger generation involvement at the mosque and in its activities. Madam Zahra further expressed her hope to see as well as welcomes the involvement and contributions of younger generation alongside the older generation in ensuring the continuity of the noble and honourable work and service carried out by the mosque to the nation, religion and community.

Ending her sharing with an analogy as to why we need foreign workers, Madam Zahra elaborated that we need these workers basically to fill up the work gaps that existed, to drive the economy forward. Similarly, the Arabs in Singapore too started off as foreigners who came to merely trade and contribute to the development of the commerce and economic growth as well as became citizens of the country. However, what is far more important is that the noble values these people brought with them, which in turn, shape Singapore to be what it is today.

Introduction to project members *(Please provide a group photo and a short description of each member of the project. No word limit.)*

A picture of us with Madam Zahrah Aljunied

Interviewer : Nadiah Hussein

Notetaker : Athirah Adib
Hakam Luqman

Recorder : Dini

Photographer : Hakam Izzan



What did you learn from this experience? (You could include lessons learnt or nuggets of information about Singapore history that you did not know before this. No word limit.)

1) The Arabs were among the key builders of early modern Singapore. Yes, it is true that Raffles created and opened the port of Singapore to the world but without the influx of Arab traders bringing in the spices and fabrics, as well as without the active and enthusiastic trading of the Arabs, we cannot for sure to say Singapore will become the bustling port it has become today.

2) Racial harmony has been a major factor to Singapore's advancement. Trade was able to be done, as there was no racial profiling. The Arabs traded with the English, the Malays worked with the Arabs and such acts of benevolence pushed Singapore to become what it is today.

3) Syed Omar Ali Aljunied with his values of hard work, perseverance, determination and selflessness is a true role model for us today to look up to. Syed Omar and the Aljunieds also reminded us the importance of giving back to the community with their contributions ranging from donations in terms of money or land for the building of public wells, mosques, madrasah to the construction of bridges and hospital.

4) Understanding and having awareness of what happened in the past will expand our thoughts of why some things are occurring in our present day. It also teaches us to be more aware of certain events that may have an impact towards the society. For example, issues such as immigration may result in inter-racial marriages.

5) Appreciating the past will remind us that success did not come easily and could be achieved without sacrifices. The efforts made by the early pioneers had resulted in us being able to enjoy the comfort in this modern day. Without their sacrifices, Singapore would not be able to attain what it has had in the modern day such as economic progress and prosperity, social as well as political stability. Hence, we need to learn and appreciate our history, our pioneers, their contributions and continue the legacy of our forefathers and the pioneers of the nation towards the development of the nation.

6) History allows us to know about the past and educate us through the application of the learning points. There is always a story behind everything, human thoughts and actions, and certainly so with regards to human's construction such as buildings, its architecture, its infrastructure, its designs, interior, its make etc. All these reflect the values, conditions, challenges etc of those times. Hence, history certainly serve as valuable source or piece of information and insights linking the past, the present and providing us with possible future opportunities.