

Khairat

Kita

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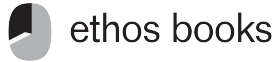
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A History of Malay/Muslim Mutual Aid
in Singapore

BY Fauzy Ismail, Zakaria Zainal and Zaki Jumahri

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 6 |
| Malay/Muslim Mutual Benefit Organisations in Singapore: A History | 10 |
| Timeline of MMBO activities | 38 |
| From the Kampong to Public Housing Kesatuan Kebajikan Khairat Kematian Kampung Ayer Gemuroh | 42 |
| From the Ground Up at HDB Badan Kebajikan Khairat Kampong West Coast Singapura | 48 |
| From the Quarry to Public Housing Badan Kebajikan Bukit Panjang | 58 |
| Documentary Stills | 64 |
| From the Office The Muslim Community Benevolent Association of Singapore | 68 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| From Kampong Gelam, 100 Years Later Persatuan Kemajuan Kebajikan Islam | 74 |
| From Tradesmen to Neighbours Persatuan Kebajikan Warga Perpaduan Singapura | 82 |
| Map of MMBOs | 86 |
| Active and Dissolved MMBOs | 88 |
| A Conversation on the Future of MMBOs | 95 |



An archive photograph from Kesatuan Kebajikan Khairat Kematian Kampung Ayer Gemuroh

Introduction

A MALAY/MUSLIM MAN once reached out to a Chinese Mutual Benefit Organisation. To their complete surprise, he asked for their help to assist with arranging his mother's funeral.

They declined his request, highlighting that the services that they provide are different from the services he required, and that he should approach a Malay/Muslim Mutual Benefit Organisation (MMBO) instead.

Such an anecdote would have been unheard of some three to four decades ago. This was a time when MMBOs were an integral and established part of the Singapore Malay/Muslim community.

Yet, this anecdote, as told by Milah Binte Haji Bakri, secretary of Persatuan Kemajuan Kebajikan Islam, speaks volumes about the general lack of awareness in today's Malay/Muslim community regarding such organisations.

When a loved one passes, who do you turn to?

This book documents and addresses this knowledge gap by

showcasing the rich history of MMBOs, or badan khairat kematian as they are popularly known to the community. In Singapore, they have been around since the late 19th century.

These community-focused organisations are volunteer initiatives led by deeply respected community leaders who play an integral role in their members' lives in the cultural, social and spiritual spheres.

Some of these organisations were founded with memberships based upon the same occupation, a geographical location or from a specific community/ethnicity. Most were location-specific, based in and limited to the residents of specific kampongs or housing estates in Singapore. For others, they were ethnic-based such as the Persekutuan Jawa al Masakin, originally known as Jawalol Masikin. It registered as a society in 1901 and catered to Javanese migrants.

In the early days, these informal collectives helped to organise funerals for their members and

families and collected money to offset the funeral expenses. Back when opening a savings account or buying an insurance policy was uncommon or non-existent, MMBOs helped to fill the financial gap their members faced.

More importantly, they provide community support when arranging funerals. Death, and who arranges your burial, is an important aspect of a Muslim's life.

In the following chapter, the book lays out a comprehensive historical, social and legal overview of the trajectory of these organisations. This spans their early days in the late 19th century to their heyday in the 1970s and '80s, before finally outlining their current diminished status in the 21st century. An infographic timeline of key events in their history is laid out in the following chapter.

Next, the book profiles six existing organisations through interviews, archival material and present-day photographs.

The stories of Kesatuan Kebajikan Khairat Kematian Kampung Ayer Gemuroh, Badan Kebajikan Khairat Kampong West Coast Singapura, Badan Kebajikan Bukit Panjang, The Muslim Community Benevolent Association of Singapore (formerly known as “The Singapore Customs and Immigration Muslim Staff Benevolent Association”), Persatuan

Kemajuan Kebajikan Islam and Persatuan Kebajikan Warga Perpaduan Singapura are notable not just for their different starting points but also the different paths they have taken since their establishment. Their stories demonstrate the organisations' spirit, perseverance and commitment to the community.

The two chapters after that present a map of Singapore MMBOs and also a list of all active organisations. The book ends with a conversation discussing the future of MMBOs, especially in light of their recent struggles to remain relevant in a constantly changing society like Singapore.

Like all other contemporary projects that were launched in early 2020, the arc of this research on MMBOs has been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Limited access to archival material and microfilm newspaper articles due to archival and library closures were not the only challenges. Plans to record and document these organisations' activities were shelved due to government restrictions on gatherings as well as to ensure the safety and well-being of the elderly leadership and members of the MMBOs.

Often we relied on individual interviews, as well as the few archival images which they kept. As this project received funding through

public grants, the team had to satisfy the deliverables and still needed to continue to try documentation work since it was unclear how these organisations could recover from the impact of Covid-19.

It is a time-critical project as it is difficult to predict how much historical and archival knowledge will be retained within MMBOs in the future. Even at this stage, for certain MMBOs, we were unfortunately unable to gain more direct access to certain older and more knowledgeable members given their poor health.

Interestingly, the pandemic saw the resurgence of mutual aid initiatives. Individuals realised that the less fortunate—those who fell through the cracks—needed help swiftly and without bureaucratic red tape.

They would pool resources to match urgent needs. This is highly similar to the spirit of what MMBOs were doing for decades. The spirit that ‘I am my brother’s or sister’s keeper’.

Although the circumstances for this book were less than ideal, it was written with the hope that it encourages further empirical research into this subject area and is a humble record and documentation of the MMBOs in Singapore.

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