ON HOMEGROUND

BIDADARI & BUKIT BROWN

MORE THAN JUST FOR THE DEAD

In Thomas Gray’s famed ode “Elegy written in a County Churchyard”, he contemplates the serenity and tranquillity of a cemetery in the English countryside. Singapore’s older cemeteries are also places of contemplation and activity, and are popular with local residents and nature-lovers.

In “Twilight for Bidadari”, Goh Si Guim recollects many happy hours spent there. Bidadari is now slated for housing development. In her “elegy” to Bukit Brown, Liz Mckenzie shares her enthusiasm for the bygone days of this pre-war Chinese cemetery and some of its “long-term residents”.

A Jade Girl” in Qing dynasty costume, Bukit Brown Chinese Cemetery.

The Tomb of the Priestess, Bidadari Cemetery.

Spotted Wood owls, Bidadari Cemetery.
In the early days after the founding of Singapore, its small population was confined within the city environs in the south of the island. The only Christian cemetery at that time was situated on Fort Canning Hill. It was soon deemed that cemeteries should be sited far away from the more populated areas. New cemeteries were created, first at Bukit Timah, and later, at Bidadari. Soon after, the burgeoning population began to spread throughout Singapore. Many plantations and the associated residential enclaves sprouted. In recent decades, the rapid pace of redevelopment have seen many old and disused cemeteries transformed into public housing estates and commercial developments.

Progress has committed its latest coup, encroaching upon Bidadari Cemetery. Like many cemeteries before, it, too, has to give way to the need for living space.

Having lived nearby for more than 20 years, since the mid-1970s, I travelled regularly along this scenic stretch of Upper Serangoon Road. I remembered being mesmerised by glimpses of the cemeteries while on the bus. The greenery was certainly a welcome relief after passing long stretches of built-up areas and congested city roads. The countless tombs stones would be all aglow in the evening sun. But, there was never the inclination of stepping into the cemeteries, perhaps the idea seemed strange then.

My first venture into Bidadari’s Christian Cemetery took place only in the early ’90s. Having seen people using it regularly for exercise, I, too, overcome the “fear” of cemeteries. I found the undulating grounds suitable training ground in my preparation for my Army Reserve in-camp training. As I jogged along the winding roads, I marvelled at the elegantly carved tombs stones. Calls of birds and the occasional butterflies were constant pleasant accompaniments.

As my interest in Nature grew, I began to wonder if this picturesque wooded landscape could be a haven for wildlife. Many visits were made to uncover its natural richness. These trips were rewarding, revealing that there was a wealth of wildlife in this peaceful oasis. The grounds are covered with ornamental shrubs and grasses grown wild. Together, they create an “island of greenery” in Bidadari, providing many suitable niches for wildlife to flourish. Not surprisingly, this relatively undisturbed verdant realm sustains a remarkable diversity of wildlife.

More than 90 species of birds have been recorded here. Woodpeckers, starlings, bulbuls, kingfishers and orioles are a common sight. Migrant species were not lacking either. The rare resident Spotted Wood-owl was a very recent discovery. Other animals include Changeable Lizards, Monitor Lizards, Black Spitting Cobra and countless insects. With numerous tall and magnificent old-growth trees, this place is like a small open forest. Viewed from a hill flat in Potong Pasir, the lush greenery covering this part of Upper Serangoon Road is evident. Chief among the mature trees are Tembusu, Sea Apple, Albizia, a variety of Fig trees, Pong-pong and Acacia. Other important trees include the Jacaranda, Golden Shower, Mexican Lime and Franzipani.

There was one early visit which left me with deep impressions that this place was tranquil for more than the obvious reasons.

I had started my walk in the late afternoon from the Christian Cemetery to the Muslim Cemetery. As I came to rest on a small stone bridge over a drain, the sun was gradually setting over the horizon. The sky slowly turned intense orange and then started to darken. At this twilight hour the Slaty-breasted Rail become active, emerging from under the thick cover of grasses to forage. This bird is very shy and secretive and will only appear in the open when there is little disturbance. It is absent for most of the day, preferring to rest hidden in tall
grass or thick undergrowth. I have also encountered them several times feeding amongst the tombstones. Ever alert, they are easily startled, often giving out a rapid series of "clack" calls while dashing for cover.

A family of White-breasted Waterhens also emerged under the cover of darkness. The chicks were being led into the drain for a bath. The adults got into the drain effortlessly with a few flaps of their wings. Their black chicks, however, tumbled awkwardly into the water. The ripples they created scattered the sun's golden rays with dazzling effects. In this relatively safe abode, the family had a delightful bath amid shimmering lights. Sadly, the building of the Northeast MRT Line will bring about extensive development along its corridor. Bidadari will have to go, replaced by a concrete jungle. The proposed Woodleigh Station would sit astride the Christian and Muslim Cemeteries, but this would not be so until a critical traffic volume justifies its operation.

In a study by Yuen (1998/1999)* on this cemetery, several insights were made regarding land utilisation in Singapore. This transformation of burial ground to other usage represents the government's pragmatic approach of devoting a smaller quantity of land for the dead and dedicating a larger proportion for the living. Usage of land for burial is controlled, so that sufficient land is kept to meet essential economic development such as industries and housing. Over the years, cremation was widely promoted and has gradually gained popularity.

From surveys conducted of people living near and further away from the cemetery, it was deduced that, if given a choice, the majority would like to see the Bidadari Cemetery developed into a heritage or recreational park rather than having it exhumed for other developments. In fact those who live nearby do not feel that they are cemeteries but recreational parks. They use these places for recreational activities such as strolling, jogging, cycling, enjoying fresh air, relaxation and nature appreciation.

Hopefully, when the new housing estate stands on these grounds, the original landscape is not totally obliterated. Some relics of the old place should be incorporated into a park that would serve to inform the new occupants of its history. The concept is similar to what was done at Fort Canning. New residents could become familiar with the background of the place where they would make their homes. Indeed, the housing authority plans to devote some space for a park within the new housing estate.

In the Bidadari Christian Cemetery are graves of some prominent people. One of these is that of the late Dr Lim Boon Keng, who played a key role in the early days of colonial Singapore. Boon Keng Road was named in his honour. Some other roads in Singapore were named after the people who were buried here. There is also a row of graves of the victims of the 1954 airplane crash at the old Kallang Airport.

At the back of the Muslim Cemetery is a sector allocated to the Hindus. Here lies the tomb of a venerable Hindu "Priestess". It sits magnificently under the shade of an old, sturdy and over-arching strangling fig tree. Tied around this sacred tree is a red saff. The inscription beneath the statue states that the 85-year-old woman had attained Vaikundam, Sanskrit for "enlightenment". This and other significant features should not be lost in the development as they serve as valuable recreation and educational resources.

Whenever I think of Bidadari, I will always have fond memories of the waterhen chicks silhouetted against a backdrop of scintillating light. And the loud haunting calls at dusk of the wood-owls. Writing this is put to permanent record the existence of this charming and rustic place. Such are places that are becoming increasingly scarce.

It is a pity that my close association with this place has only been a little more than a decade. I am glad that at least we know a bit more about this cemetery than those earlier ones, on which we are clueless. Had we had a chance to explore them, we would have probably discovered they were rich in Nature and history too. IW

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