Divine Resistance: Vivid Spiritualties in a Control Society

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Harimau menyembunyikan kuku
"The tiger conceals its claws" (Brown 1951)

Abstract
Commissioned to paint a political dignitary, a Muslim-Malay artist faced a dilemma of compliance over resistance. Previously, the Foucauldian turn in the anthropology of resistance traced the "hysteria" of women factory workers protesting factory discipline through spirit possession, to challenge earlier class-based explanations of everyday peasant resistance. A Deleuzian perspective on cultural resistance, applied to a hypermodern city-state, suggests a new hypothesis: where civil society is muted, vivid spiritualities (*spiritualités vivantes*) arise as cultural protest. Investigating divine art in control societies reveals vivid spiritualities as forms of cultural protest in circumstances where regular forms of resistance (free media, trade unions, opposition parties) have been effectively quashed.

Keywords
Control society, esoteric arts, marginalization, martial arts, resistance, vivid spiritualities

Introduction

This article presents divine art as a technology of resistance in what Gilles Deleuze (2005, 1992) called "Societies of Control." The main idea is that divine resistance operates in a sphere where all other avenues of protest are effectively quashed by the state.[1] Beyond formative theories of "everyday peasant resistance" in James C. Scott's (1985) *Weapons of the Weak*, and the possession or "hysteria" of female Malay factory workers to halt production reported in Aiwa Ong's (2010) *Spirits of Resistance*, a new hypothesis emerges – that divine resistance is expressed through vivid spiritualities in control societies when all other means of dissent are shut down (Roy 2010; Waters 2019, 155). Oliver Roy (2010) defines vivid spiritualties (*spiritualités vivantes*) as contemporary, highly personalized forms of religion, prioritizing subjective emotional experience over institutional dogma. Notorious for social conformity and the repression of political dissent, Singapore provides a case study of divine resistance expressed through vivid spiritualities.

Representing a response to the state from the Singaporean and Malaysian visual art worlds, the art of Mohammad Din Mohammad (1955-2007, henceforth Mohd Din) reveals the *spiritualités vivantes* of a Muslim-Malay artist pressured to 'sell out' the government. Pressure was increased through a commission to paint a senior politician. Yet summoning power from the unseen realm (*'alam ghaib*) – from the Arabic *al-ghayb* to refer to hidden, unseen, and invisible powers – enchanted artwork subverts conformist subjectivities, challenges fundamentalist ideologies, and resists authoritarian politics (Bubandt, Rytter, and Suhr 2019). In terms borrowed from philosopher Howard Caygill's book, *On Resistance*, a "resistant subjectivity" is embedded in the artwork for the gaze of "the living, the dead, and those yet to come" (2013, 183). Essentially, the artworks are what philosopher Yoshiyuki Sato calls "carriers of resistance" (2022, 261). In Alfred Gell's terms they are "traps" set by the artist for the viewer, or "patient/recipient" to spring (1998, 21-24; 1999). In Howard Morphy's (2009) terms the artworks catalyze a "mode of action", with resistance embedded in what Amazonian anthropologist, Carlos Fausto (2020) calls "art effects."

During our collaboration/friendship (2001-2007) the artist was commissioned to portrait a politician. Below, Mohd Din's assemblage sculpture, paintings, and a self-portrait are presented to develop an ethnographic analysis of the portrait. Gifted at an event lionized in the Singaporean press, the portrait was received with a mendacious political speech to deny Malay marginalization. At first glance a vision of conformity, on closer inspection the portrait's "hidden transcript" reveals the artwork's uncanny ability to preempt and counter political oration through a subtle manipulation of the gaze (Scott 1990). An important document in an historic encounter of Malay art versus state power, the portrait's disguised symbolism questions the meaning of unity in a racialized social contract where open resistance appears futile (Abu-Lughod 1990; Sato 2022; Goldberg 2001; Fernandez and Huey 2009).[2] Key ethnographic vignettes are presented below alongside paintings from the Malay art world to illuminate divine resistance to the authoritarian state (Neumann 1957).

To proceed, first the ethnographic terrain is set out alongside pertinent theories of resistance. Next

[1] This work was supported by the DFG *Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe*, "Alternative Rationalities & Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective", Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg.

[2] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out that "disguised symbolism" in art history pertains to "everyday objects that carry (largely esoteric) symbolism, beloved by artists of the Northern Renaissance, especially seventeenth century Dutch painters."

the research methods are presented. Vivid spirituality is revealed through ethnographic interpretations of artworks to build towards an understanding of the politician's portrait. The conclusion considers vivid spiritualties as divine resistance in control societies.

Singapore Control Society

Michel Foucault (1977) is credited with charting the shift from societies of sovereignty to disciplinary regimes defined "by the establishment of areas of confinement: prisons, schools, workshops, hospitals" (Deleuze 2005, 321). With his "Postscript on Societies of Control", however, Gilles Deleuze peers beyond Foucault's disciplinary societies – towards control societies – where the person is no longer merely confined to panoptic/disciplinary space but kept in a constant state of "modulation" shackled with endless, continuous assessment and "upgrades" in multiple spheres of life, employment, housing, and education (Deleuze 1992; Marks 2010, 55). The control society fits contemporary anthropological theory where states are no longer considered an entity 'out there' but interpenetrate the subject (Dundon and Vokes 2020). In *Masked Racism*, for example, Angela Davis and Chris Cunneen (2020) show that prisons are not external to American society; instead, they form its essence and core. As illustrated by Seth Tobocman and Devorah Brous in *Disaster and Resistance*: "For what, after all, is a nation-state, but a prison with a flag on top of it?" (2008, 105). During my nine years living in Singapore (1998-2007), the state's pervasive control materialized in an overcrowded, expensive, urban landscape – a relief to escape during fieldwork in Malaysia's *kampungs* (villages) and rainforests.

Singapore, a prosperous island nation between Malaysia and Indonesia, is a paradigmatic control society. The Malays, officially the indigenous inhabitants of an island once called *Singapura*, comprise the minority population in this majority Overseas Chinese city-state (Benjamin 2015a).[3] Notorious for repressing crime, deviance, and political opposition through litigation, fines, caning, imprisonment, and capital punishment, this dystopian surveillance state preempts resistance to quell dissent before it organizes into protest.[4] Yao Souchou's (2007) political history is ominously entitled *Singapore: the State and Culture of Excess*; an excess exemplified by William Gibson (1993) in "Disneyland with the Death Penalty." Protesting the death penalty in the marginalization of minorities, Singapore's Transformative Justice Collective admonishes the government to "rethink" and "reform" its authoritarian policies. In preparing the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) report, Marc Bossuyt points out the "gross disproportionality" that "while 13% of the population of Singapore is Malay … up to 84% of those executed [for drug trafficking] are Malay."[5] Despite the deadly drug policy some continue to smoke *ganja* in Singapore. Howard Marks (1998), a prolific cannabis smuggler, said that Singaporean weed was the best he ever tried.

To ensure a docile and disciplined workforce, Singaporean social policy micro-determines religion, culture, art, education, work, housing, leisure, consumption, gender, sexuality, and the family. Recent decades of corporate-capitalist development in manufacturing, banking, and the service

[3] As Ho and Kathiravelu (2022) remark, Singaporean "superdiversity" is simplified in government classification as Chinese (74.3%), Indian (9,0%), Malay (13.5%), and Other (3.2%): https://bit.ly/3uDZ1u7 (last accessed September 30, 2025).

[4] "'Dystopian world': Singapore patrol robots stoke fears of surveillance state", *Guardian* 06/10/2021. https://bit.ly/3uVuFm1 (last accessed September 30, 2025).

[5] Source: https://bit.ly/3u609XR (last accessed September 30, 2025).

industry resulted in an intensive and extensive process of societal reorganization as Southeast Asian "tiger economies" competed for a share of the global market. The authoritarian state strives to manufacture, monitor, and control the agenda across the entire social spectrum for the different "races" in Singapore, creating a vast surveillance machine where social control is intricately fabricated to generate maximum output and profit. The mass development of the island through the Housing Development Board (HDB) forcibly replaced the wooden houses of the former Malay villages (*kampung*) with a concrete jungle of low-rise tower blocks where eighty-one percent of the population now reside (fig. 1) (see also Farrer 2012).[6]

Figure 1: "Istana Menanti (palace in waiting)." Photograph by author.

According to Singaporean anthropologist, Steve Ferzacca, Singaporeans are stereotypically "uncritical conformists, risk averse and compliant participants" to corporate and state regulation, trading their individual freedoms for governmental guarantees of low crime, high-quality healthcare, housing, and education (2020, 173). Under the People's Action Party (PAP), in power for six decades, the state declares itself essential for the Nation to thrive in competitive modern global markets, surveilling and muting all opposition to ensure island survival in a hostile runaway world. Shared values were

[6] Source: https://bit.ly/3KxV1AQ (last accessed September 30, 2025)..

promoted as Singapore's "national ideology" by PM Goh Chok Tong to ensure collective "Asian" resilience to perceived Western decadence (Yao 2007, 19-23, 68-71). The five "shared core values" are: nation before community and society above self, family as the basic unit of society, regard and community support for the individual, consensus instead of contention, and racial and religious harmony (Yao, 2007, 21).

Yao notes: "At the most ideal, Singapore will do away with the 'social contract' and the bargaining of citizenship rights and obligations. There is instead a 'national community' of Asian cultural values and postcolonial certitude under a guardianship of the PAP" (2007, 17). Hence in a "Fabian socialist" regime (Yao 2007, 114) conformity is the price of prosperity. Stuart Hall's terms in *Policing the Crisis* are apt: beyond the "coercive" stick of corporeal punishment the state affords the "consensual" carrot of prosperity (Hall *et al* 1978, 277). More cynically, under a regime where freedom is measured via the dollar bill, Singaporeans prefer shopping to political protest (Chua 2003). Nevertheless, in resisting suffocating conformity, Singaporeans are not at all entirely submissive, albeit their forms of "cultural protest" through vivid spiritualties may be difficult for outsiders to fathom (Fiddler 2019).

Methodology

While pursuing doctoral studies on Malay mysticism, I met Mohd Din, a spirit-healer, martial arts instructor (*guru silat*), and professional actor (see also Farrer 2008; 2009; 2020). Alongside participant observation, I took *in situ* fieldnotes, recorded in-depth interviews, photographed art-works, and filmed scenes from the artist's daily life. I attended nine gallery exhibitions with Mohd Din and have made three one-month repeat visits to Singapore and Malaysia in subsequent years. Upon his death, I was bestowed the artist's diary, a painting, his *songkok* (hat), and a remarkable folder of newspaper articles (fig. 2). This collection of newspaper articles is an invaluable aid to understanding the "art world" in Singapore and Malaysia (Becker 1982). The folder includes fifty-nine news clippings about the artist, five where he made the front page.

Figure 2: Montage of Mohammad Din Mohammad newspaper clippings. Photograph by author.

The Anthropology of Resistance

Historic examples of Malay cultural resistance include the murder of the British colonial resident J.W.W. Birch (1826-1875), counter-revolutionary and revolutionary insurgency during the Communist Emergency (1948-60), and the 1960s "race riots" in Singapore and Malaysia (Andaya and Andaya 2001; Joll 2021). Divine or occult resistance against feudal obedience is enshrined in Malay literature, social memory, art, and performance. According to Malaysian political scientist Shaharuddin Maaruf (2014 [1984], 76) Malay "magical warriors" said to have resisted British incursions include Maharaja Lela, Mat Kilau, Tok Gajah, Datuk Bahaman, and Dol Said. British philosopher Richard Bailey (2024) has documented how "selectively told" stories of warrior-heroes remain prominent in the Malaysian martial arts (*silat*) community. Another view is provided by Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006) in her book *Reclaiming Adat* to discuss feudal Malay heroes, Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat. A rich historical legacy of Malay cultural resistance keyed into power gave rise to pivotal studies that shaped the anthropology of resistance for decades (Scott 1985, 1990, Ong 2010). A full review of resistance studies is beyond this article's scope. Not to jump the gun, but to situate the reader, Scott's position on everyday resistance was challenged by Ong's Foucauldian turn, which in turn I challenge. Grounded in more recent ethnography, my perspective resonates with the Deleuzian notion of art as resistance and resistance as art in the control society (Deleuze 2005).

Arising from his fieldwork in Malaysia during the late 1970s, political scientist James C. Scott identified "everyday peasant resistance" as "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth" (1985, 29). Later articulations of everyday resistance drop the focus on peasant societies. For example, in the *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, John Gilliom and Torin Monahan state: "The central characteristics of everyday resistance are that they are unorganized, not explicitly tied to broader ideological critiques, and originate from direct concerns in everyday life" (2014, 405). Articulating an intellectual trajectory somewhere between Marxist, Gramscian, and anarchist perspectives, Scott suggested that everyday resistance is a form of class struggle that "typically avoid[s] confrontation with authority or with elite norms" (1985, 29).

Rejecting the logic of class struggle, however, Aiwa Ong (2010) implements a Foucauldian perspective to show a female workforce using the "hysteria" of spirit possession to protest the tyranny of emergent factory discipline. Ong (2010) argued that spirit possession occurs to protest continuous, extensive, and intensive gendered surveillance, and the ever-increasing pressures and demands to ramp-up production in Japanese and American semi-conductor component factories built in the grimy urban industrial zones near Kuala Lumpur. Possessed by spirits – ghosts (*hantu*), were-tigers (*harimau*), buried ancestors (*datuk*), birth demons (*pontianak*), or *syaitan* – the young female workforce scream, faint, and disrupt factory production. This "indirect tactic" was supplemented by "direct" tactics, "countless subversive acts" including vengeance, retaliation, and sabotage (Ong 2010, 210). Ong (2010, 210) prefixes "direct" and "indirect" to *tactics* of protest (*bantah*) to waylay the notion of *strategy*. She suggests: "These nomadic tactics [microprotests] operating in diverse fields of power, speak not of class revolt but only of the local situation" (2010, 213). Factory women's resistance, for Ong, is not a strategy of class or gender conscious movement, like the Suffragettes, but merely an unconscious reaction to the micro-dynamics of bio-power operative in the repressive discursive-practice of gender as the *kampung* transitioned to an urban environment. In my view, Ong's narrative of social change implicitly echoes

Ferdinand Tönnies' conservative (2017 [1887]) *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, to bemoan *kampung* community lost to industrial society.

Anthropological studies of resistance have continued the relentless Foucauldian turn. Gramscian, Marxian, and Maoist concerns with state power in colonized formations (Gellner 2007) have been supplanted by disciplinary theories of power (Dousset and Nayral 2019; Shanneik 2022). Much of the Foucauldian turn agonized over the dialectics of power and resistance where resistance acts as an accelerant to power, in which case the notion of resistance *per se* is ultimately an illusion. Eventually the Foucauldian dilemma led to an intellectual trend that displaced resistance for "resilience", the latter an ecological term now suddenly out of fashion for implicitly harboring conservative assumptions of continuity (Dousset and Nayral 2019).

A refreshing perspective on resistance appears in critical criminology to investigate the ability of civil society to resist state crime. Penny Green and Tony Ward (2010), for example, differentiate two types of civil society. The first, based upon a reading of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, conceptualizes "Civil Society I" as those institutions that act to buffer the individual and the state (trade unions, voluntary associations, religious groups) which serve to prop up a democratic society. "Civil Society II" results from East European scholarship where civil society is independent of the state and therefore capable of resistance (Green and Ward 2010, 30). In Singapore, Civil Society I does not exist independently of the state, yet Civil Society II appears through divine resistance in vivid spiritualities expressed in cultural dynamics across the state-defined Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. Nowadays, we could add digital society as Civil Society III, with the rise of the netizen or online citizen. Yet Singapore has been quick to roll out Online Safety ordinance to nip protest in the bud. In sum, it is difficult for civil society to openly resist the state in an authoritarian state.[7] However, as I argue below, resistance in control societies appears in a divine or occult guise, where hidden powers of resistance are unleashed in vivid spiritualities.

Scholarly accounts of social resistance in contemporary Singapore discuss drug subcultures (Abdul Nizam 1999), television (Tan 2008), and the Singaporean rock music scene (Ferzacca 2020). Following Herbert Marcuse (2002), Kenneth Tan suggests that "one dimensional" Singapore can be "defined as an industrialized and globalized capitalist society whose oppressions, repressions, exploitations, contradictions, tensions, and crisis tendencies have been contained, controlled, manipulated, and hidden by deeply entrenched authoritarian institutions, practices, beliefs, habits, and instincts" (2008, xi). Not everyone in Singapore, however, is one-dimensional. Steve Ferzacca, the lead guitarist of Straydogs, along with Jimmy Appadurai-Chua (who I had the good fortune to befriend in the UK), saw their hit song "Freedom" banned in 1970s Singapore. Ferzacca (2020), in his professional career as an anthropologist, presents a glimpse of "atypical" and "noisy" Singaporeans. Atypical Singaporeans congregate after hours to drink alcohol, smoke, and consume finger food while "talking cock" (masculine boasting) in The Doghouse, an underground mall guitar store doubling as an illegal after-hours bar (Ferzacca 2020: 176).[8]

[7] Recent allegations of repression and corruption have accompanied bitter family feuding among the ruling elite: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/22/son-of-singapore-founder-says-campaign-of-persecution-forced-him-to-seek-asylum-in-uk-lee-hsien-yang (last accessed September 30, 2025).

[8] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpEJKYmUdDY (last accessed September 30, 2025).

Like other artists subjected to censorship, Mohd Din had to respond to the authoritarian state's management of society, where the arts are "contested space" in Southeast Asian cultural and ethnic politics (Hoffstaedter 2009). During his lifetime Mohd Din made a precarious living from occasional sales to private collectors, banks, corporations, and museums. The artist cut an ambiguous figure, a harlequin that must appear to play the game with the authorities while fighting from within as he became recognized as Singapore's National Artist. To avoid his work being banned outright he disguised his politics in symbolism. His spiritual art is painted in a dreamlike state to combine Sufi techniques (*zikr*) with Malay white magic (*ilmu putih*). The concept of divine resistance helps to explain the popularity of vivid spiritualities in Singapore, the ubiquitous burning of joss sticks during Chinese hungry-ghost month, the Hokkien *tangki* spirit-medium worship processions, and Tamil fire walking during Thaipusam (Shaw 1976; Chan 2014, 25).

Crafting Divine Art

Mohd Din is among the foremost "miracle workers" (spirit-healers) to emerge in modern Southeast Asia (Sevea 2020). To better appreciate his art, it must be recognized that *guru silat* are fighters responsible for community defense in corporeal (*'alam ajsam*) and unseen worlds (fig. 3) (Ross 2019). In 1983 the artist fell down a cliff while riding a motorbike. Almost losing his foot to gangrene, he discharged himself from hospital to the care of Pak Hamin Bujang, who picked out the detritus with a stick and wrapped his foot in a poultice of spiderweb, turmeric, and wild yam. Mohd Din vowed to become a spirit-healer should he recover.

Left with a slight limp, the artist played the bad guy in an episode of Hawaii 5'O, performed as Laertes in a local production of Hamlet, and starred as the drug-dealer sorcerer in Abdul Nizam's (1999) surreal award-winning short film *Datura*, shot in the bars of Mohamed Sultan. Whereas Mohd Din talked in-depth about *silat*, he rarely performed. His life revolved around art as medicine to protect against misfortune, illness, and malevolent spirits.

Mohd Din was not only painting but was also performing magic as part of the making process, and the power thus imbued into the work persists in the object, ready for a viewer to summon.[9] Sweat pouring down his body, Mohd Din applied acrylic paint directly to the canvas with his bare fingertips. Incorporating strokes from *silat* he painted spiritual art, that is, art manifesting power from the *'alam ghaib*. Chanting *zikr* and occasionally imbibing tea or the herbal smoke of *kecubung* (Datura, nightshade) the artist painted with *techniques du corps* used in *silat* (Mauss 1979; Rashid 1990). Following Malaysian anthropologist Razha Rashid (1990) in *Emotions of Culture*, it is understood that *silat* players in the past took on the martial persona of legendary warriors such as Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat through the intermediary of tiger (*harimau*) or white crocodile spirits (*buoya putih*).

Ritually danced by male guests for the bride and groom at weddings, *silat* is learned for self/community-defense. Legends tell that *silat* first came to an abused wife at a waterfall. Flowers spiraling in the pool revealed the secret of combat, so she went home and beat up her husband who became her first student (Sheppard 1972, 140). Malay anthropologist Wazir-Jahan Karim (1984) reports on midwives (*bidan*) and spirit-healers (*bomoh*) that acquire their permission to practice (*ijazah*) through dreams, *menurun*, or "witchcraft." *Menurun* is also used to refer to the spontaneous bodily

[9] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this clarification.

movements of Javanese trance-dance (*kuda kepang*) (Hardwick 2014). *Silat* is similarly transmitted from master to pupil and acquired through dreams, visions, and spontaneous bodily movements (*ilmu penggerak*/*gerak*) (Rashid 1990). Styles were crafted via familiars appearing in dramatic ritual ordeals during seclusions in caves and waterfalls, nights spent in open graves, and during weeks submerged underground in wells or pits.

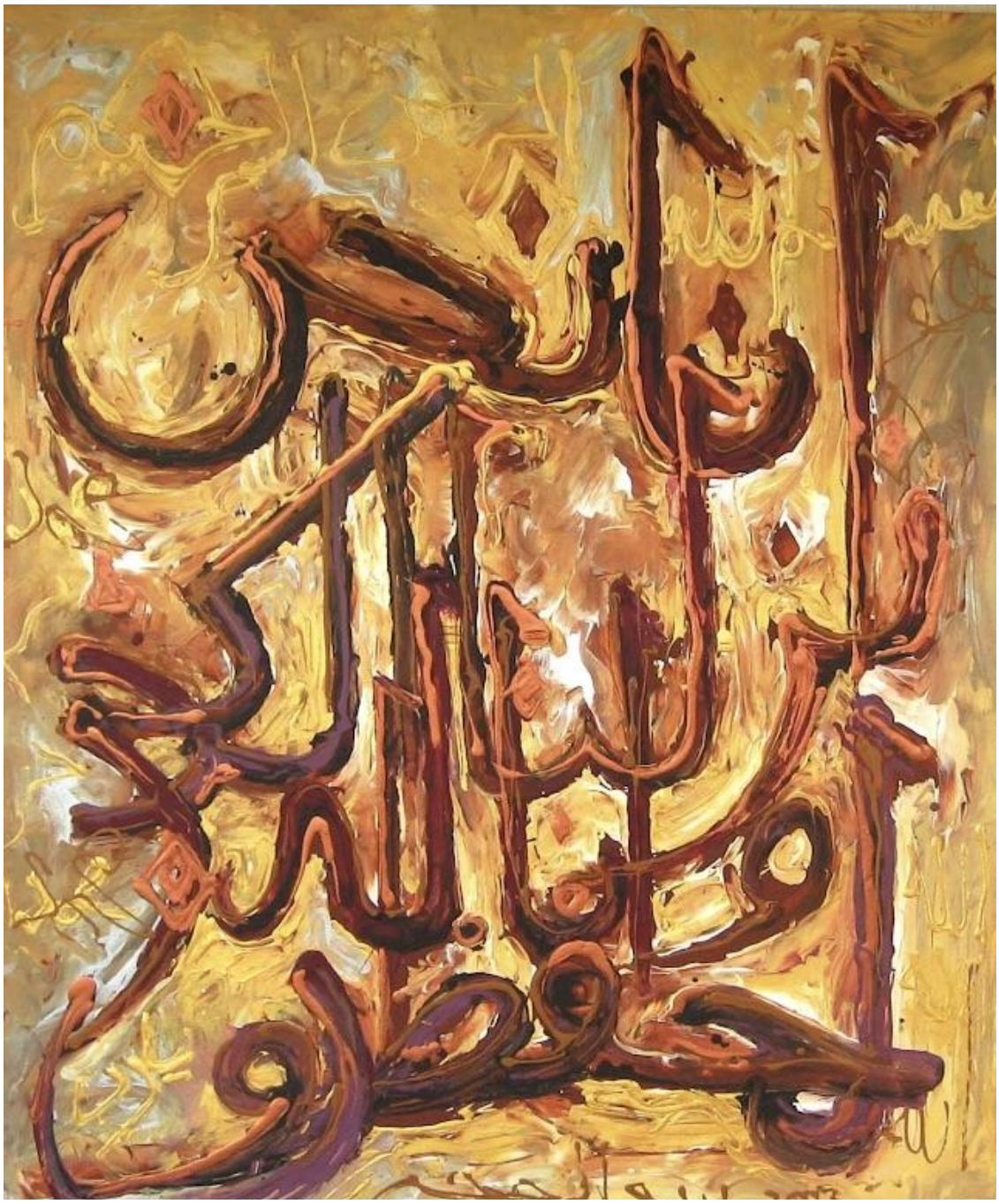

Figure 3: "We Will Protect 1", Mohammad Din Mohammad, acrylic on canvas (2003, 126×97 cm). Photograph by author.

From the standpoint of art history, Mohd Din's portfolio exhibits three primary art types: abstract, representational, and assemblage, which all tend towards some degree of abstraction. He was a *guru silat* – Malay martial arts master – which is the key to understanding his fingerpainting. The artist used his bare fingertips to transmit the inner power (*tenaga dalam*, *ilmu batin*) of *silat* into his art. His earlier representational work including sketches, portraits, paintings, and sculptures that made use of the techniques of Western classical and modern art. Later, he sometimes questioned this formal training. As recorded in my fieldnotes (2003), Mohd Din said: "I should never have gone to art school. That was the worst thing I ever did. I spent fifteen years trying to work with a brush and a knife and then realized that I had to do something completely different ... to paint with the fingers and not the hands."

Arts of Divine Resistance

Mohd Din's artworks in his Zikr and Nature Series can often be read and spoken via inherent or overwritten Kufic script. Inducing lucid and night dreams, the artworks are portals to the unseen realm. The Ninety-Nine names of God chanted in *zikr* provide the means to traverse the realms in a convergence of Sufi, Malay, and Orang Asli ontological principles.[10] Cryptic captions that accompany each piece provide essential clues as to their "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990). The artworks present images *and* soundscapes to trigger conversation, rumination, memories, and dreams of the unseen world. In the anthropological parlance of Alfred Gell (1998), they are "traps", "technologies of enchantment", "volt sorcery" to perceive and summon "agency." In Muslim-Malay terms the artworks are *keramat* (marvels).

Manifestation of Greatness – Nature

Mohd Din's art folds and refolds the threads of Islamic, Tantric, Malay, and Orang Asli enchantment for the multiple strands to become '1' (one), symbolized by the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, the upright figure, *alif*. Rendered in Kufic script, *alif* is homologous to *wayang kulit* figures and *keris* divination techniques, where magical daggers stand upright, unassisted on their points (fig. 4). *Allahu Akbar* (God is Greatest) appears on the "Manifestation of Greatness – Nature" painting (fig. 4). At first glance "Manifestation of Greatness – Nature" satisfies the conservative Islamic eye, yet even at his most pious Mohd Din renders sacred verse like graffiti. Dark Kufic script overwrites a green, blue, and yellow background. Hooked upright *alif*s flank the coils of a dragon seething in motion. Beneath the script, *Allah*, this might be the Uroboros, the snake that eats its tail and surrounds the globe in pre-Islamic Malay mythology (Skeat 1984 [1900]). In his diary (2003, 65), the artist wrote: "My overall concept has always been appreciating God's creation on this planet/earth .... observing and experiencing nature from the point of its creation." He articulated, "a universal ... appreciation of peoples, places, and natures [to] reach out to the world." In the era of climate destruction, Mohd Din situates Nature with God, sacred, to be protected above all.

[10] Mohd Din was with the Al-Ghazalia Sufi Order (contra Sevea 2020, xviii).

Figure 4. "Manifestation of Greatness–Nature", Mohammad Din Mohammad, acrylic on canvas (2006, 124 ×96 cm). Photograph by author.

The Bull

"The Bull" assemblage sculpture combines bull horns, horseshoes, *keris* hilt, and wooden Nias figures. Anathema to conservative Muslims, the sculpture presents a graven image of a fabulous animal, a bull suspended above a plinth of horseshoes. The eyes appear doubled, with one pair in horseshoe spectacles. I asked a key Singaporean-Malay interlocutor what the sculpture means, whether this a horse or a bull? She said: "The Bull acts as a power in its circle of friends, [and represents] dictatorship."[11] Bluntly put, "The Bull" critiques political ideology as "bullshit." The bull-horse exhibits a double identity, a splitting that comprises a major theme in the ontology of the shadow (*bayang*; *wayang*) (figure 5).

Figure 5: "The Bull", Mohammad Din Mohammad (*2003, mixed media assemblage*). *Photograph by author.*

[11] WhatsApp 12/10/21.

Split* [*NFS*] *Personality

The two known self-portraits of the artist are both entitled "Split [NFS] Personality." "NFS", it was said, means "not for sale." In these paintings the eyes contain images of the artist's wife and daughter. As the kin are reflected in the pupils of the artist, so the image is reflected in the eyes of the viewer. The self-portraits alert the viewer to look into the eyes, to reflect upon self-in-relatedness-to-other, and consider the inalienable, love, family, identity. In Malay ontology the sevenfold soul (*semangat*) includes the homunculus, a miniature reflection of the person in–the eyes of another (Endicott 1970). What is reflected in the eyes is the *karamah* (marvel) of *semangat* (Al-Hudaid 2020). In the self-portrait (1999) the colours are subdued yet vibrant. The strokes conjure wild change, the temporal uncertainty of being and existence. Here is the were-tiger (*harimau*) spirit familiar (figure 6).

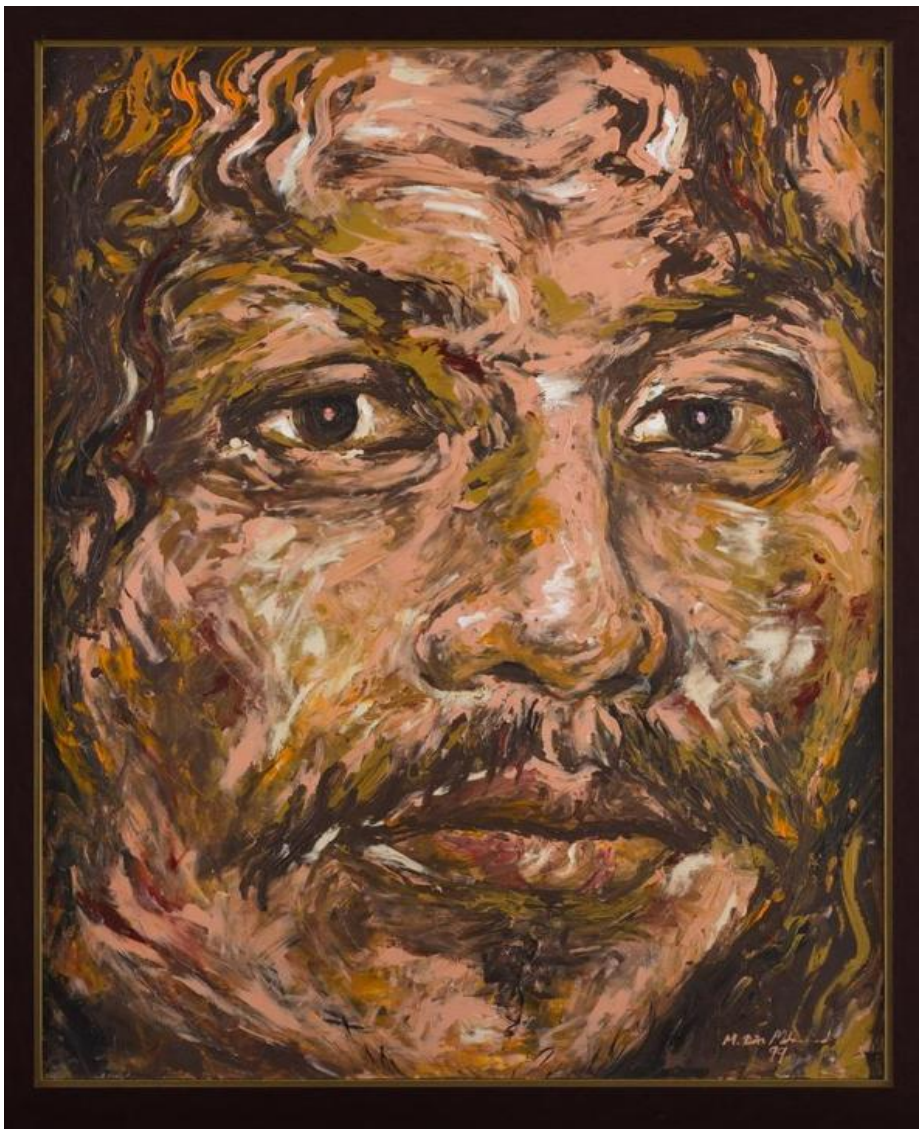

Figure 6: "Split (NFS) Personality" (1999), Mohammad Din Mohammad, acrylic on canvas (128×102 cm). National Gallery collection, Singapore. Photograph by author.

For the same interlocutor, above, "split-personality" refers to the Muslim-Malay ontological division where "every character has two sides: the good, saintly, learned in scripture, angelic (*wali*, *ulama*, *malaikat*), and the bad, ego, animal, demons, or devil (*nafs*, *jinn*, *syaitan*, *Iblis*)."[12] This important comment juxtaposes the divine with the occult, and is why 'divine' may be used interchangeably with 'occult' resistance. Second, split-personality signifies the divided self in artistic production, where paint flows as the spirit-medium takes control. Third, Mohd Din resisted commodification, refusing to sell out to the system. Thus 'split-personality' refers to art as a business – even "divine painters" must earn a living.[13] And fourth, while the artist was raised and schooled in Singapore, and was adopted as their national artist, he never gave up his Malaysian passport.

The divided self reflects internal divisions of the soul, external distributions of the person, and social, religious, and economic fractals of cultural biography over time (Strathern 1988). In the current context, splitting speaks to the social fragmentation of people in control societies that may only be overcome through the unity of the Commons.

Unity or Prosperity?

Born in Malacca, Mohd Din favored the 'feudal' rebel Hang Jebat over the deferential Hang Tuah, promoted the revolutionary Commons over the State, and rejected blind obedience to absolute rule (Maaruf 2014 [1984]; Khoo 2006).[14] With Gell (1998), an ineluctable hypothesis arises: while the painter appears to obediently serve power in painting the PM, does the artwork exert 'agency' to resist political appropriation? In his book *Art Effects* on Amazonian art, anthropologist Carlos Fausto astutely shifts the problem: "The question is not how 'subjectivity' or 'agency' is attributed to a solid and static artifact but how the mask displaces the attribution of subjectivity, how it evokes an other presence" (2020, 124). Below I regard *Sejahtera Bersama* (United Together) as a theatrical device that evokes the "unseen presence" of state control (Benjamin 2015b). The translation "united together" belongs to the artist and provides a cryptic clue to the meaning of the portrait, as we would expect the translation to be "prosperous together."[15] Linguistic transpositions using riddles are a characteristic of Malay folk tactics to veil defiance in everyday resistance.

One Friday night, Mohd Din visited my apartment in a state of high excitement tinged with anxiety. He explained the politician's commission, which he felt he could not turn down, to ask, "How am I supposed to paint a dictator?" We discussed how Sir Thomas Hobbes depicted absolute rule (figure 7). From my bookshelves Mohd Din borrowed the *Leviathan* (Hobbes 1982) and Howard Caygill's *Art of Judgement* which explains the front piece engraved illustration of power in the *Leviathan* as a "catoptric anamorph" (Caygill 1989, 20). "Anamorphic art" is where a shift in the viewer's perspective changes the image perceived, for example, the elongated skull in Hans Holbein's 1533 painting of *the Ambassadors*. A "catoptric device" is a Seventeenth Century mechanical apparatus that uses mirrors to present the

[12] Personal communication, 22/10/2020.

[13] "The Divine Painter: Sharifah Hamad Visits Galeri Zikr for a Look at the Spiritual Works of Artist Din Mohammad." *The Sun,* 18/12/2001.

[14] In the legendary battle between two friends at the foundation of the Malay state, Hang Jebat rebelled against the sultan to revenge Hang Tuah's alleged execution. Hang Tuah, however, had secretly been imprisoned. Upon condition of release, he killed Hang Jebat (Khoo 2006).

[15] Roxana Waterson, personal communication, 2022.

illusion of moving images. Applying the notion of the catoptric anamorph to the engraving: "In terms of political philosophy", says Caygill, "they [the multitude depicted] are at the moment when they renounce their authorities to the sovereign person and are reconstituted as subjects" (1989, 25).

Figure 7: Engraved illustration of the Leviathan (cover, Hobbes 1982).

In Hobbes' engraving the bodies of the multitude all face inwards, while in Mohd Din's painting, shown below, everyone faces outwards (fig. 8). The personage of the *Leviathan* is unknown and could be Oliver Cromwell, Charles I, Charles II, or Hobbes himself (Caygill 1989, 21). Whereas the body of the *Leviathan* is made up of the bodies of the subjects, in Mohd Din's painting the body of the Prime Minister is comprised of their souls. These swirl around as red flowers encapsulated in a sea of yellow. Just as the *Leviathan* engraving is a theatrical mask, so too Mohd Din depicts a *wayang* puppet. Therefore, this painting provides a glimpse of a Malay "aesthetic theory", of a "sociology beyond the canon" (Adorno 2013; Alatas and Sinha 2017). With the souls swirling around the PM, red splattered upon royal yellow, Mohd Din inverts the *Leviathan* engraving (where subject's bodies construct the sovereign) to suggest as reverse Leviathan – power fragmented, not consolidated.

Mohd Din appears in the top right-hand corner of the back row, sporting a beard, mustache, and cocked left eyebrow. Other figures include the artist's wife, students in Sufi doctrine, and me. In a symbol of racial and religious harmony, at the rear a mosque is depicted on the same level as a Chinese temple. The backdrop is composed of skyscrapers obscured in haze, where haze symbolizes the unseen realm in Sufi art. Above the artist the Esplanade Theatre complex appears shaped like bug eyes. The audience look straight ahead, gazing out towards the present and future viewers. Why does the PM look askance? *Jeling* (a sideways glance) denotes disapproval or flirtation. Yet this sideways glance appears neither

disapproving nor flirtatious. Instead, in terms borrowed from Geoffrey Benjamin (2015b), the figure looks towards someone off stage, towards the "unseen presence" of the State.

Figure 8: "Sejahtera Bersama (United Together)", Mohammad Din Mohammad, acrylic on canvas (2001, dimensions unknown). Photograph by author.

Now it should be pointed out that Mohd Din had a massive shadow puppet (*wayang kulit*) collection; his art is steeped in the lore of Javanese and Malay theater. *Wayang* means shadow, which is *bayang* in Malay, and is fundamental to the ontology of *silat* as I have expressed elsewhere (Farrer 2006; 2009). The portrait demonstrates a Sufi artist take on the master of political puppets. Note the unclenched open hands of the PM and the claws of the boy next to him. This is no father clasping hands with the little children. Their hands are frozen open as if bound to invisible sticks. The yellow shirt hangs like a ghostly sheet in the foreground. In Malay tradition yellow was reserved for royalty. Only the Sultan was permitted to wear a yellow shirt (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 51). The cultural meaning is royal power usurped, colonized. The shirt is splattered with pungent red flowers (frangipanis*, kemboja*) that give off a scent associated with graveyards. Mohd Din grew three varieties of frangipani in his garden in Melaka, used in *silat* initiation rituals. Albeit this portrait is made in a representational style, painted with a brush, the *kemboja* are clearly painted by the artist with his fingertips. The fingerpainted flowers indicate magic in this artwork, as does the weird mist and disjointed multidimensional layers at the top, which points to the influence of the unseen realm. Surely it is not a coincidence that the same number of people appear in the painting as the blood-stained flowers on the shirt. Whether these uncanny details are political allegory or magic is for the viewer to decide.

In 2001, the Prime Minister was allegedly freely and spontaneously gifted with the portrait to celebrate ten years in power (the "public transcript") (Scott 1990). Yet here we must remember the "hidden transcript", and "The Bull" sculpture described above. The portrait was planned, commissioned, and paid for. The PM's office supplied five photographs from which the artist had to work, photographs that had be returned upon completion. At the Malay community event where the painting was gifted, the PM gave a speech denying Malay marginalization. A centerpiece photograph of the artist presenting the portrait appeared on the front page of the *Straits Times* under the headline: "Not marginalised, say Malay MPs", with the subheading, "Meritocracy has not worked against the community." A side-header says: "Poem depicts PM as torchbearer, in evening of kudos." Below appears the sub-header: "Malays here compare well with Malaysian-Malays."[16] The front page of the Malay newspaper *Berita Harian* featured a color photograph of Mohd Din passing the painting to the PM to celebrate "Malay achievement."[17] Now impossible to locate on the Internet, after the event the painting was hung out of public sight in the Istana (presidential palace).

Malay marginalization is an explosive topic, accusations of which the Singapore government made haste to dispel. At the time, accusations were reported as voiced from political media inside Malaysia, itself undergoing political turmoil in the run-up to a general election (Mandal 2003, 194). To counter, Singaporean politicians defined marginalization through income and educational attainment, indicators of "community progress" showing Malays better off in Singapore than those in Malaysia. Reading the newspapers over coffee, my colleague Phillip Davies, a sociologist with a doctorate on MI6, protested that Singaporean-Malays were not compared to the Singaporean-Chinese, but only to Malaysian-Malays, a dubious statistical ploy raising more doubts than it dispelled. In a broad frame, marginalization could be shown across the social spectrum, in poverty, welfare, housing, military service, and the criminal justice system. Grossly overrepresented in arrest, conviction, incarceration,

[16] "Not marginalised, say Malay MPs." *The Straits Times,* 22/01/2001.

[17] "*Bukti pencapaian Melayu S'pura*." *Berita Harian,* 22/01/2001.

and execution, the precise number of Malays put to death for drug offenses in the establishment of Singapore's highly centralized governance is unknown. Leaving statistics for other scholars to unpick, the ethnographic fact of the matter is that the politicians took advantage of the gift to further their political agenda. Yet, what remained hidden was the art gift's chthonic power to resist manipulation. Anthropologist of art Roger Sansi sums up the situation neatly in *Art, Anthropology and the Gift*, to say, "things are not just objects of property, resources, or goods, but co-participants" (2015, 110).

To prevent 'corruption' the Singaporean Prime Minister is the highest paid politician in the world. Fostering the state's "authoritarian pragmatism" the opposition party were crushed under the weight of litigation, fines, and the incarceration of its leadership (Chua 2003).[18] No Malay incumbent has ever been Prime Minister of Singapore, the office being held under the People's Action Party by Lee Kuan Yew (LKY) (1959-90), Goh Chok Tong (1990-2004), LKY's son, Lee Hsien Loong (2004-2024), and most recently by Lawrence Wong (2024-present). The *de facto* kingship inheritance by LKY's son led to acrimonious disagreements over nepotism in the establishment of an Overseas Chinese dynasty. From the ethnographic perspective, the sideways glance was towards LKY, who stepped aside only to become "Senior Minister." The artwork depicts PM Goh as a placeholder puppet politician merely holding the dynastic baton to be passed from father to son (then Deputy PM). Whether the Lee dynasty is over now with the election of PM Lawrence Wong remains to be seen. In any case, the PAP remain in power.

From the ethnographic perspective I have articulated, the eyes glancing to the side in the PM's portrait capture power as incapable of looking the future audience in the eye. Instead of unity, the sideways glance depicts political deception, mind games, subterfuge. The artist agonized over the background images that "should be able to reflect Mr. Goh's character and also the aspirations of the community in the future."[19] Mohd Din's philosophy of unity in resistance rose above petty racialized politics. I remember his gravelly voice singing along to "One Love" and to "War" by Bob Marley and the Wailers as we sped towards an exhibition in Kuala Lumpur past the endless palm tree plantations that have displaced the 130-million-year-old rainforest.

Visiting the artist at home in Singapore while he was painting in 2001, he asked me three times if I knew "the true meaning of NFS." When I replied: "Not for sale", he asked me again, and yet again. As I said goodbye, tired of riddles in the dark, Mohd Din relented with the teasing, and with raucous laughter said: "NFS means [that we are] not flipping stupid!" The artist said that: "It took me ten nights to complete the portrait, instead of one, for a measly S$1,000." The irony of this career-defining moment is the portrait sealed his downfall in the eyes of Malaysian-Malays, as 'sold out' to Singapore. Malaysian PM Mahathir Mohamad cancelled his scheduled portrait.[20]

Those who would ask if the Singaporean-Malays and the party apparatchiks understood the meaning of the sideways glance should consider the artist's "NFS" comment above. Beyond their dollar price, some of the paintings have a 'use value' to call for spiritual aid, depending on who needs what help and why. Another divine property of the artworks is to lead their own independent lives as "carriers of resistance" for marginalized people stripped of agency (Sato 2022). And finally, the magic of the PM's painting is to reveal what is hidden in the unseen realm.

[18] A situation ameliorated by welcoming the Workers Party into opposition in 2020.

[19] *"Darah gemuruh' ketika ilhamkan potret bagi PM." Berita Harian,* 22/01/2001.

[20] PM Mahathir Mohamad was the architect of the *Bumiputera* policy (Malay positive discrimination).

Epilogue

Anthropological research on Malay cultural resistance has presented us with everyday peasant resistance, weapons of the weak, and hidden transcripts (Scott 1985, 1990). Scott's approach to highlight class struggle was rejected by Ong (2010). Ong's Foucauldian turn dismissed outright any thought of class consciousness and presented Malay women's resistance to the imposition of factory discipline as occurring through spirit possession. In contrast to blind protest, the Singaporean art world reveals a Malay "sociology beyond the canon" in the divine art of Mohammad Din Mohammad (Alatas and Sinha 2017). Civil society is limited in an authoritarian state where trade unions were banned alongside Jehovah's Witnesses, free association and free speech restricted, and political opposition tied up in the courts. In the control society, divine resistance unfolds through *spiritualités vivantes* – cultural modes of protest forged where authoritarianism stifles dissent (Fiddler 2019; Roy 2010; Deleuze 2005, 1992). In Singapore, *spiritualités vivantes* emerge as coded dissent in divine art, haunted aesthetics, fire rituals, and hungry-ghost festivities.

While scholars have turned their attention from resistance to resilience (Dousset and Nayral 2019), the big problem is that of compliance. Populations acquiesce to global inequalities, surveillance, unjust laws, and state violence epitomized by Singapore's authoritarian pragmatism (Zuboff 2019). Resistance might appear futile in control societies, where resilience in the face of economic hardship is the best people can hope for (Fernandez and Huey 2009). One reason people submit is that control societies are "total institutions", an extension of the prison-industrial complex (Goffman 1961; Davis and Cunneen 2000). Because control societies are now ubiquitous, anthropology must chart a course beyond earlier theories of everyday peasant and factory worker resistance (Scott 1985; Ong 2010). Singapore provides an exceptional case study of overwhelming compliance (Tan 2008; Yao 2007; Gibson 1993) where the resistance of the Straydogs is all the more remarkable (Ferzacca 2020). Beyond atypical noisy Singaporeans, vivid spiritualities in Singapore are manifested in divine Malay art, Chinese spirit possession, Tamil fire walking, and hungry ghost festivities (Shaw 1976).

Singapore self-identifies as a 'conservative society', championing Asian values against foreign interference. Harsh penalties, canings, and hangings are commonplace. Meanwhile, Triad-run prostitution persists on a massive scale in Geylang, where the flesh trade is only semi-regulated. Washroom signs everywhere order people not to squat on the toilet seats. No spitting, no jaywalking, no gay male sex (until 2022), no vandalism, no chewing gum, no cannabis, and no Jehovah's Witnesses. Harsh penalties offset whipped-up fears of descending into the out-of-control society, typified by the British colonial abandonment during the Japanese invasion of WW2, and the 1960s race riots. A paranoid desire for public safety necessitates the acquisition of ever-expanding economic returns to secure 'the future' of this island nation, a self-conscious minnow in the global *warre of all against all* (Hobbes 1982). Thus, pragmatic Singaporeans, in a 'better the devil you know' mindset, accepted the Lee dynasty as necessary.[21]

Mohd Din taught that we must reject "the bull", resist climate destruction, educate ourselves, refuse to sell out. The artist's life was an effort to resist Malay marginalization on a personal and national

[21] The Lee family 'own Singapore' with holdings in major supermarkets, taxi firms, law firms, telecommunications (Singtel), Changi airport, biotechnology, etc.

level by the insertion of Malay art into a global space. His primary adherence was to heal society through divine art. He regarded the state as power usurped, an entity to be resisted rather than blindly obeyed. Art historian Janet Owen-Driggs commented: "This Malay attitude is perhaps as interesting as the idea that the artworks themselves are an act of resistance, not least because it rejects the modernist concept of an artwork/state as an 'independent object': a holder of inherent meaning that is unchanged by context, or the viewer's subjectivity."[22] Mohd Din's "resistant subjectivity" embedded in the artwork alerts us to the "split-personality" of compliance and resistance: the artist needs to make a sale, yet must not sell out (Caygill 2013, 183). Beyond "everyday resistance", *spiritualités vivantes* reveal how marginalized communities weaponize enchantment.

Against ideological lip service to unity, Malay marginalization is countered by Mohd Din's portrait. At first glance the portrait of the politician is striking in its conformity. Overall, the painting seems to exude peaceful, friendly co-existence. The politician's gaze to the side is the *punctum*, the "sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice" in a photograph of a portrait composed from five photographs (Barthes 2000 [1980], 27). While different interpretations of the sideways glance are possible, the ethnography indicates a critique of the 'social contract', where conformity is the price of security, acquiescence that of prosperity. The sideways glance, the puppet-like, cartoonish imagery conjures an interpretation from theater. Similarly, Caygill (1989, 25) interprets the *Leviathan* engraving as a theatrical mask. Otherwise, in the presence of the King, the subjects would doff their hats. The master of puppets looks to the side, his strings pulled by a hidden presence.

Deleuze (2005, 332) questioned the "mysterious relationship" between a work of art and an act of resistance, where all art is somehow resistance, and all resistance somehow art. Deleuze (2005, 323-324), who did not travel much, did not claim to know the answer, which he concluded rests with "future people" yet to exist. The future people must unite across differences in nationality, class, race, religion, gender, and sexuality to establish a society run by and for the Commons. That a vivid spirituality may bring these future people together as 'one' Commons may seem like wishful thinking in our divided, fragmented world. Yet one of the key functions of art is to make people think beyond the realm of the impossible. Mohd Din entered the lion's den when he accepted the commission to paint the politician. Upon receipt, fishy statistics were regurgitated in a political spectacle touting meritocracy to deny Malay marginalization, a slap in the face to the gift (Sansi 2015). That the artist "got in the first punch" (his words) against political manipulation demonstrates remarkable premonition. Hence this article narrates the story of a revolutionary artist who dismissed the control society with a sideways glance.

[22] Personal communication 05/31/2021.

Acknowledgements

This article analyzes cultural resistance as a theoretical phenomenon in anthropology, not as a call for political reform. The author respects Singapore's sovereignty and the complexity of its governance challenges. I wish to thank the Office of the President, senior administration, former colleagues, staff, and students at the National University of Singapore for their support of my research on Malay mysticism. I am grateful to the many Singaporean, Malaysian, and Indonesian artists, *guru silat*, and spirit-healers that have contributed to my research. Resistance is a difficult subject to write about. I am grateful to the editor and peer reviewers at *Praxis-Knowledge*, and to scholars too numerous to list here for reading and criticizing earlier drafts. For institutional affiliations I gratefully acknowledge The University of Exeter, The University of Ottawa, and Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. Finally, it should be emphasized that the ethnographic perspective expressed here is mine alone.

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