

Cik Idah's Mango Tree

There is a Malay saying "*Tanah tumpah darah*", which literally translates as "the place where blood was shed at birth". In an era when most of my peers were born in hospitals, Emak 'shed blood' in Gedung Kuning in giving birth to me. Hence, I forged a close bond with Gedung Kuning, my 'birth soil'.

When I was born, my family was especially overjoyed because I was Emak's first child. Poor Emak had suffered a few miscarriages. Emak told me that she chose to give birth at home. She believed in the local urban myth that babies were often swapped in hospitals. Apparently, babies were switched by certain mid-wives who stood to profit from families who preferred having a child of the opposite gender to the one that God bestowed upon them. Emak wanted to see her newborn child with its umbilical cord intact at birth and to bear witness to Abah, my father, whispering the *azan* (the Muslim call to prayer) into the baby's ear. She trusted that Nenek would make sure nobody would take her baby from her.

As Emak was Nenek's only daughter, my birth was much anticipated and rejoiced. Nenek called me *Cik Idah* (Miss Idah) just like how Emak, whose real name was Asia, was called *Cik Yah*. To commemorate my birth, Nenek planted a mango seed in the garden in Gedung Kuning. This seed grew into a tree that bore sweet mangoes that were shared with friends and neighbours. Nenek proudly proclaimed to everyone, "*Ini mangga Cik Idah!*" (These are Cik Idah's mangoes!).

I am reminded here of a Persian saying "Even in the driest deserts, date trees still grow." The date trees have long had a special meaning in that culture, and even modern day Iranians still like to plant a date tree whenever a child is born; the fruit from the tree, it is said, will be sufficient to nourish and sustain the child for the rest of his or her life. During the Bam earthquake in Iran in 2003, none of the date trees were uprooted by the calamity. These trees stood firm amidst the rubble, and for most Iranians, this symbolised hope in the face of devastation.

Nenek probably never heard of the Persian saying, but it is interesting how similar some cultural practices are. I sometimes wonder why in my case the mango fruit was chosen. Why

not other fruit? The soil of Gedung Kuning was fertile, a rambutan or *jambu* (rose apple) tree would have grown just as well and would have tasted just as sweet. Whatever the reason, I was touched by Nenek's kind gesture.

It is also interesting to know that Kampong Glam derives its name from a tree. In olden days, the *gelam* or *glam* tree (*Melaleuca leucadendron*) grew in abundance in the area. The *glam* tree was extensively used by the Malays to caulk boats, making them watertight. The well-known cajeput or *kayu putih* oil used to treat muscular aches and respiratory problems is also derived from the *glam* tree. Ah, what a giving tree! Perhaps just like the valuable *glam* tree, Nenek had hoped I would be as giving as my mango tree. Even though I no longer live in Gedung Kuning, my mango tree is still there. And just like the date trees of Iran, my mango tree stands strong and firm, a symbol of undying loyalty to my birth soil.