

Piah Hitam

Nenek would take me with her whenever she entertained visitors and relatives in Gedung Kuning. I particularly remember sitting quietly with Nenek one afternoon. Nenek was talking to this tall woman with sharp features and piercing almond-shaped eyes. I remembered glancing around the room. I was searching for something.

Hmm... yes, there it was. I took a piece of cloth I found near the table. I must be very careful. I reached out for the tall woman's hands. I rubbed her hands with the cloth slowly.... The conversation stopped. In a hushed voice, the tall woman told Nenek,

"Look Cik Timah, your grand-daughter thinks my hands are dirty. She doesn't know I'm Black."

Nenek smiled and told her 3 year-old *cucu* to stop. She explained that the tall woman was dark-skinned and that her hands were not dirtied with charcoal. I was confused. She was not of the same skin tone as us? Was she not Malay? But she spoke such good Malay!

The tall woman whom I knew as Piah Hitam or Black Piah was *orang Habsyi*. She was from far away Ethiopia. Nenek had friends from foreign countries! What was Piah Hitam's story? When and why did she come to Singapore? Did she have any children I could play with? I wished I knew what happened to Piah Hitam after that visit...

I also remember whenever I quarrelled with my brother Hadi, I would tell him the reason he was so unrefined was because he was not Emak's son but Piah Hitam's son! And of course, the young Hadi bawled and asked Emak if he was really the son of an African... And Cik Idah would then get a scolding for being *judés* (cheeky).

Many years passed and when Alex Haley's *Roots* (Alex Haley traced his family history back to Kunta Kinte, an African who was captured by slave traders in 1767) was adapted into a popular television miniseries, I could not help but wonder if Piah Hitam's family were slaves. When I asked Emak about Piah Hitam's lineage, she said that Piah Hitam used to come to Gedung Kuning in the afternoons to help out with the domestic chores. Apparently, Piah Hitam's mother Umi Halimah was Hajah Aisah's servant in Mecca.

Many years later I read about *hamba orang* (slaves) in Vivienne Wee's PhD thesis on the Malays of the Riau Archipelago. Apparently these *hamba orang* were foreigners to Riau (a province of Indonesia, located in the centre of Sumatra along the Strait of Malacca) either as bought slaves or else captured in pirate raids. In particular, her informants mentioned two 'negro' slaves acquired by Raja Haji Ahmad in Mecca in the 19th century. Those two black slaves were said to be a Nubian and an Abyssinian. There were other 'negro' slaves in Riau, some of whom were described as being Hottentot (a tribal group in Southern Africa, near the Cape of Good Hope and Namibia), slaves who were short and dark. These slaves were considered the private property of individual aristocrats and

did not belong to the aristocracy as a class; Vivienne Wee's informants told her that ~~the~~ slaves were branded on their faces to identify whose property they were.

Interestingly, Vivienne Wee mentions in her thesis that in the early 1980s she had met in Singapore the descendents of a female Abyssinian slave who was bought in Mecca by the late father of a raja informant. Could they have been descendents of Piah Hitam? Or were there other *keturunan Habsyi* (of Abyssinian descent)? After reading about *hamba orang*, I was somewhat comforted by the fact that Haji Yusoff did not acquire any personal slave for himself when he could have easily afforded a few. On the contrary, the Gedung Kuning family treated Piah Hitam kindly and regarded her as a friend of the family.

I wished Emak and Nenek had talked more about Piah Hitam. It would indeed be fascinating to learn about Piah Hitam's past and of her voyage to Singapore. I hope it was not as nightmarish as Kunta Kinte's passage in the slave ship to America. Although there are no more slaves in present day Riau, I really wonder if the descendants of former slaves know about their ancestry and if they now regard themselves as Malay instead.