

# COMIC GEOGRAPHIES: HUMOR AND THE TRANSGRESSIVE CONFIGURATION OF ASIAN COMMUNITIES IN LAT'S *KAMPUNG BOY*

MARIA RHODORA G. ANCHETA

## Abstract

While there is a burgeoning study of the role that popular cultural forms play in the national cultures of Southeast Asian nations, there is a dearth of studies that inquire into how popular cultural forms across Southeast Asia create visions of community, a concept much valued and desired in the region, in that community as a social entity is seen to imply connectedness, collectivity, and non-competitive sharing.

This paper proposes, however, to study how formations of community and cultural identifications and belonging are complicated and challenged in contemporary Southeast Asian popular culture, specifically in these representative comic strips produced in Malaysia. By examining Malay communal life in Lat's (Mohammad Nor Khalid's) *Kampung Boy*, a cartoon strip in which Lat autobiographically depicts 1950's life in rural Perak in Malaysia, this paper will discuss how visual structuring and intertextual codes, the deployment of the carnivalesque and the humor of incongruity, the use of linguistic humor, and the comic reframing of the rhetorics of shared purposes and familiar traditions, serve to redefine community by questioning concepts of neighboring and by dis-locating strategies of cooperation and conflict, while continuing to mark and affirm Malay sensibilities.

## Configuring communities in a Malaysian context

If we are to begin to explore what, in Joseph Boskin's words, the "relationship between the historic moment and comedic forms" is,<sup>1</sup> we begin, too, to understand how the humor in these forms transcend mere entertainment to become vehicles of group definition and cultural cohesion. These are texts that illustrate so clearly and incisively the culture code that bind Filipinos, where the culture code is "a [devolution] from historic patterns... buttressed by basic folk values, [the code] is a nexus of communal awareness, the elemental factor in the structure of humor".<sup>2</sup> This text by Lat forges a national identity, creating a potent imagined community that "offers [itself] as focal point of shared interests and outlooks, magnets for loyalty and belonging... tak[ing] concrete form in the politics and institutions of the nation state... visualised and dramatised in symbol and ritual".<sup>3</sup>

In discussing Lat's *Kampung Boy*, a popular Southeast Asian cartoon strip, this paper intends to show how formations of community and cultural identifications and belonging are complicated and challenged. Furthermore, this paper will discuss how, in these comic strips' narratives, visual structuring and intertextual codes, the deployment of the carnivalesque and of the humor of incongruity, the use of linguistic humor, and the comic reframing of the rhetorics of shared purposes and familiar traditions, serve to redefine community by questioning concepts of neighboring and dis-locating strategies of cooperation and conflict, while continuing to mark and affirm Malay sensibilities.

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1 Boskin, *The Humor Prism in 20th Century America*, 17.

2 Boskin, *The Humor Prism in 20th Century America*, 19.

3 Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities*, 26-27.

## Community as tradition in Lat's Kampung Boy

*Kampung Boy* is Malaysia's most iconic cartoon, a work "published in several countries across the world".<sup>4</sup> Matt Groening of the long-running American animated show *The Simpsons* hails it as "one of the all-time great cartoon books". Its creator, Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid (better known by his pseudonym, Lat) is a well-acclaimed Malaysian cartoonist who has published twenty-six volumes of work. His cartooning career has been a long one as he has been publishing cartoons since the age of 13, when he published his first comic book, *Tiga Sekawan* (*Three Friends Catch a Thief*).<sup>5</sup>

Born in 1951 in Kota Baru, Perak, Lat helped augment his family's earnings by contributing cartoon strips to newspapers and magazines.<sup>6</sup> Thus began his "professional career... at the age of 13 when his cartoons were published in *Majallah Filem* and *Movie News*.... [His] first comic books, *Tiga Sekawan*, and 'Keluarga Si Mamat,' has [sic] appeared weekly in the newspaper *Berita Minggu* since he was sixteen in 1967".<sup>7</sup> He was paid twenty five dollars for the first cartoon that he submitted to a Penang firm.<sup>8</sup> And while he received modest success while very young, Lat failed to "attain the grades that were required to continue education beyond high school,"<sup>9</sup> and "upon graduating from high school, he sought a position in the art department of the largest English-language daily, *New Straits Times*, but instead was made a crime reporter".<sup>10</sup> By 1974, his artistic talent was recognized, and he became an editorial cartoonist of *The Times*.<sup>11</sup>

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4 Lat Digital Library, "History of Dato Lat."

5 Fernandez, et al., "Illustrating Childhood," 1; Lat Digital Library, "History of Dato Lat."

6 Lat Digital Library, "History of Dato Lat."

7 Mohamed and Nor, "Lat's *Budak Kampung*."

8 Lent, "Of 'Kampung Boy' and 'Tok Guru,'" 57.

9 Lat Digital Library, "History of Dato Lat."

10 Mohamed and Nor, "Lat's *Budak Kampung*."

11 Lat Digital Library, "History of Dato Lat."

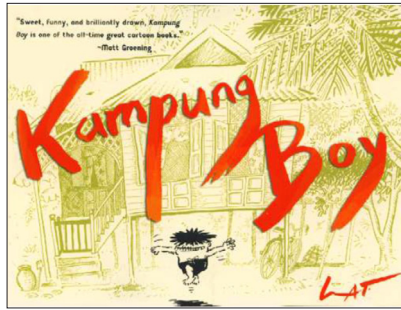


Fig. 1. *Kampung Boy* cover

John Lent hails Lat among the major influences in the development of Malaysian comic art,<sup>12</sup> “an inspiration for all those who aspire to be cartoonists”, who has “elevated cartooning to the level of ‘high visual arts’ through his social comment and ‘construction of the landscape’”.<sup>13</sup>

Lat’s own influences were the leading artists of the Golden Age of Malay cartoons, Rejab “Rejabhad” Had, Raja Hamzah, and Halim Teh.<sup>14</sup> In an interview, he elaborated:

At one time, I was a bit jealous because my father was always laughing at Rejabhad’s cartoons... and a relative would say, “You should draw something that is local (like Rejabhad), not your stories about boys and girls with jeans.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to Rejabhad, Lat cites cartoons by Ping in *The Straits Times*, which his family read in the 1950s and ‘60s, foreign comic strips such as “the Gambols strip [and] the *Tarzan* and *The Cisco Kid* strips”, and British comics such as *The Beano* and *The Dandy*, which “his father, army clerk Mohd Khalid Mohd Noh, would buy him second-hand—by the kati or catty [one kati is about 605g] at Ipoh’s weekly night market....”<sup>16</sup>

12 Lent, “Of ‘Kampung Boy’ and ‘Tok Guru,’” 56.

13 Jir, qtd. in Lent, “Of ‘Kampung Boy’ and ‘Tok Guru,’” 56.

14 Cheong, “Lat’s take on his life.”

15 Lat, qtd. in Cheong, “Lat’s take on his life.”

16 Cheong, “Lat’s take on his life.”

It is not surprising, then, that Lat would later write for *The Straits Times*, taking on the pen name “Lat”, [which] is the truncation of “bulat”, Malay for “round”.<sup>17</sup> His works in national newspapers such as the *New Straits Times* and *Berita Minggu* featured his life experiences of rural and urban life, which exhibited how he viewed Malaysian life and the world. Lent narrates that Lat’s initial efforts at writing funny stories is a reaction to “gangster and warrior comics” that proliferated at the time.<sup>18</sup> Lat drew *Si Mamat* for the *Berita Minggu* when he was 17, and by 1974 became a fulltime cartoonist. In the mid-1980s he would leave the *New Straits Times* to create his own company, *Kampung Boy Sendirian Berhad*.<sup>19</sup>

### **Kampung Boy**

Fernandez, et al., as well as many other Lat scholars, have commented on the chronology of *Kampung Boy*: “*Kampung Boy* tells the story of Mat’s birth right up to his tenth year of life, covering the important cultural milestones for a Malay boy including his enrollment in religious school to learn to pronounce the Quranic verses in Arabic, and his circumcision ceremony.”<sup>20</sup> Lat’s *Kampung Boy* was published in 1979, and its autobiographical bent is affirmed by Lat, who states:

*Kampung Boy* is about... early childhood in a Malaysian village. I drew the pages in 1977, ‘78... and it got published in 1979. We had become city rats and I wanted to tell people about our origins. I didn’t have a dateline for it... I just drew when I had free time at home.<sup>21</sup>

The early life of Mat, as much as it is a remembrance of his youth, is really a configuration of a Malay community as “a primordial and integrative world that fades with the coming of modernity”.<sup>22</sup> In detailing Mat’s everyday life, “playing, going to school, interacting

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17 Cheong, “Lat’s take on his life.”

18 Lent, “Of ‘Kampung Boy’ and ‘Tok Guru,’” 57.

19 Lent, “Of ‘Kampung Boy’ and ‘Tok Guru,’” 57.

20 Fernandez, et al., “Illustrating Childhood,” 6.

21 Lat and Campbell, qtd. in Mohamed and Nor, “Lat’s *Budak Kampung*.”

22 Delanty, *Community*, 31.

with family, friends and classmates, doing chores and getting up to mischief with the Meor brothers (labeled the troublemakers by Mat's parents), ending finally with his passing the examinations required for him to be accepted into the boarding school in Ipoh and leaving home",<sup>23</sup> Lat re-maps the kampung as a "recoverable community", in which "tradition and the organic unity of state and society" can be redeemed.<sup>24</sup>

This recovery of the kampung as community positions itself in nostalgia and manifests through the gentle humor that Lat employs in the narrative of *Kampung Boy*. Humor in *Kampung Boy* is not itself side-splittingly comic, and is mildly mirthful to, at most, naughty. The narrative is straightforward, and is punctuated by his illustrations of kampung life:

I cannot truly recall, of course, what happened in the first few years of my life. It was not until I had learned to speak and been able to conduct conversation with my mother that I found out about my early days. I was born in a kampong in the hart [sic] of the world's largest tin-mining district—the Kinta Valley in Perak.

According to my mother, I was borne [sic] at about ten o'clock on a Monday morning in our house. The task of delivering me into this world fell to my own grandmother. She had been the official midwife in the kampong for many years. I was Mum's first child. My father's memory of this day was also quite clear. According to him, he was under the house waiting anxiously when my grandfather called: "Come and cradle your son!"

Minutes later dad was standing in the anjung (lounge) with me in his arms. Then he whispered the muezzin's call softly in my ears just as any good Muslim father would do to his newly born child.<sup>25</sup>

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23 Fernandez, et al., "Illustrating Childhood," 6-7.

24 Delanty, *Community*, 19-20.

25 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

While we note the discourse of remembrance here that underscores the beginning of many instances of nostalgia, we begin to note, too, that the illustrations themselves amplify this nostalgia for an idyllic, traditional kampung life. Mohamed and Nor point to “key nostalgic graphics” in Lat’s illustrations through the “simple attire[s]... the jungle landscape[s]... [the] kampung house...”<sup>26</sup> The “black and white drawings likewise contribute to this idealization. Visual elements, which are part of the language of the graphic narrative, such as colour, light and shade, line, and placement of individual items, serve as the vocabulary which combine to form the entire visual message.”<sup>27</sup> The tinting choice here echoes the sepia tones of early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs, and it appears to complement the perceived simplicity and starkness of kampung life.

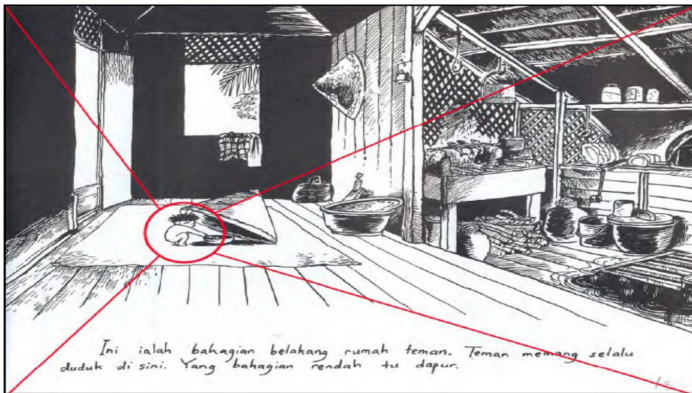


Fig. 2. Mat/Lat in their kampung house<sup>28</sup>

The readers of Lat’s cartoon are lulled into the conception of the kampung as traditional local space, with its narration of birth, Malay customs and traditions such as Mat’s hair-shaving ceremony, his learning about the production of rubber tree latex, his learning how to deal with family and neighbors. The kampung is enlivened as

26 Mohamed and Nor, “Lat’s *Budak Kampung*.”

27 Ausburn and Ausburn, qtd. in Lee, et al, “Lat’s Comics,” 162.

28 Mohamed and Nor, “Lat’s *Budak Kampung*.”

...a community [that] gains a character and a personality of its own, an identity so to speak through its cultural values. Hence, the bond which brings the people of a community together are the customs and traditions that the people of a community follow, the festivals they celebrate, the kind of clothing they wear, the food they eat, and most importantly, the cultural values they adhere to, bind them together.<sup>29</sup>

However, the fact that “the images [in comics] are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way than the prose text”<sup>30</sup> is a breakage of the “sequential, syntactic processing... [of] information in the verbal system”<sup>31</sup> and thus breaks, too, the unproblematic synthesis of the wholeness, and perhaps even the wholesomeness, of the kampung as community.

I had earlier noted the directness by which Lat’s narrative about his early life has been laid out in this text, but we begin to see the potency of the humor of his illustrations as we note its use of caricature, especially of Mat’s own person—a squat, bushy-haired boy, perhaps what Lat himself had in mind when choosing his nom de plume, and in this we see the intersection of his visual figuration of himself and the comic shortcut his name evokes, making this a clear support of the autobiographical nature of his comics:

Lat is short for the Malay word ‘bulat,’ meaning round or moon-shaped... the moon is bulat, the soccer ball, too... and so is the globe.... *The family wouldn’t call you Mohamed Nor Khalid when you’re a stark naked toddler running around the village house.* The name Lat got stuck till school days, early adulthood and eventually up to the end [italics added].<sup>32</sup>

The corporeal caricature spills over onto the other characters in Lat’s comics, generating such exaggerated features as the prominent, matron-like chin of his mother, the inordinate gauntness of his

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29 Lee, et al, “Lat’s Comics,” 160.

30 Chute and DeKoven, qtd. in Fernandez, “Illustrating Childhood,” 7-8.

31 Paivio, qtd. in Fernandez, “Illustrating Childhood,” 7.

32 Lat and Campbell, qtd. in Mohamed and Nor, “Lat’s Budak Kampung”



grandmother, and the girth of his father. Even the neighbors, like Pak (Uncle) Alang, the caretaker of the kampung mosque, and the rest of the townsfolk, are depicted with characteristic mouths drawn as lines which straddle both the realistic and the merely figural. In fact, Mohamed and Nor spoke of “simplified drawings” in reference to these black and white line drawings.

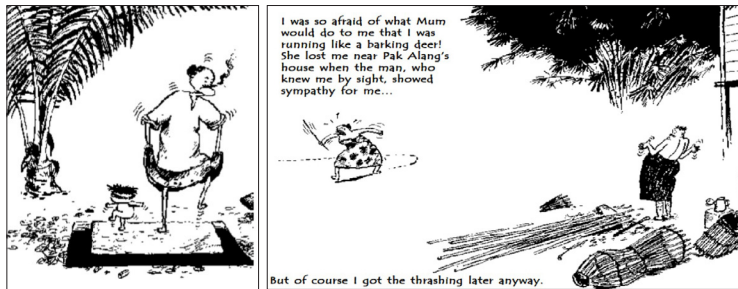


Fig. 3. Mat's grandmother; Mat's mother (background), Pak Alang (foreground)

Complementing the exaggeration of the graphic caricature is what Mohamed and Nor point to as the semiotics of dimension, the “dialectic of small and big”, in which they primarily highlight the contrast between a small Mat within ample spaces, “invisible [in] his surroundings...giv[ing] a further visual playfulness to the readers, as we search the landscape for his reduced body”. Mohamed and Nor see this “contrasting scaling”, this “perspectivism”, “accentuate further the sense of longing... key to what makes Kampung Boy [a] powerful medium in absorbing readers’ attention [to] Lat’s nostalgia.”<sup>33</sup>

Another manifestation of caricature here is shown in the depiction of multicultural characters within the ambit of the narrative kampung. The presentation of Malaysia, as “a newly-independent nation marked by ethnic pluralism, like Malaya and later its successor Malaysia has been fashioned... by the distinctive roles of, and the potential friction between, the major ethnic groups in the nation.”<sup>34</sup>

33 Mohamed and Nor, “Lat’s Budak Kampung.”

34 Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, 76. Further, it is worth noting here that the Malay nation-state that Lat memorializes in his work is the Malaya that was created in 1957, “when Malaya attained independence from colonial rule.”

The kampung as “preservation of national community”, as “integration of its component parts”<sup>35</sup> is evident in Mat’s description of his town: “This is our town. Next to the dispensary is... Ah Yew’s shop, where we do our shopping, and next door is a cloth dealer who is also a small-time goldsmith. On the right is an Indian eating shop, followed by a book shop, a rubber dealer, and a bicycle shop”<sup>36</sup> What is so readily foregrounded here is the reality of the way “culture manifests itself in the small everyday interactions of people”<sup>37</sup> as the kampung is enlivened for us by its quotidian activities of buying and selling, and dealing with actual people in their neighbourhood. Lat/Mat’s inscription of his town within a greater national state is rather covert. The kampung is central to Mat’s life and Lat’s work as a physical, emotional, social anchor, but we also realize how Lat’s humor reveals to us how the kampung is focal only to him, because we also become privy to the peripheralization the kampung as space, when he blithely mentions that the “five o’clock mail train... never stopped at their kampong”<sup>38</sup> or alluded to the backwardness of the town that had lanes so narrow they had to veer to the side of the road to give way, and “very rarely [had] a motorcar passing by”<sup>39</sup> The idyllic rurality of neighbourhood amity and communal concord is also counterpoised against urban mechanization and incipient anomie here, albeit obliquely done.

The monolithic definition of Malay national identity, that it is multicultural and multi-ethnic, that “the unique characteristics of different cultures are nationally accepted, thus contributing to the diversity of a multi-ethnic society”<sup>40</sup> is also gently belied by Lat in *Kampung Boy*. He does include the Chinese and the Indian as members of his community, but he presents them as socioeconomic stereotypes—the Chinese always as grocers, Tamil ladies with “thick lips, long wagging tongues, dot on forehead (pottu).”<sup>41</sup> Tamil Indians were stereotypically depicted as “rubber tappers in the many estates in Malaysia”, and as the comics frame here, the “Indian lady

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35 Cheah, *Malaysia*, 76.

36 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

37 Koshewa, qtd. in Rajendra and Taib, “From Village Boy to Town Boy.”

38 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

39 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

40 Rajendra and Taib, “From Village Boy to Town Boy.”

41 Rajendra and Taib, “From Village Boy to Town Boy.”

[carries] containers of latex with a child behind her, presumably her daughter.”<sup>42</sup> The character of Ah Yew, the Chinese grocer, is graphically emphasized here as we find in the frame “various details like abacus and ledger depict[ing] a typical Chinese grocery store”, “the lady in [a] samfoo (a traditional Chinese attire) who is feeding the baby... [and whose] feeding... at the business premise and not at home indicates the involvement of family members as a common trait of family run business among the Chinese”.<sup>43</sup>

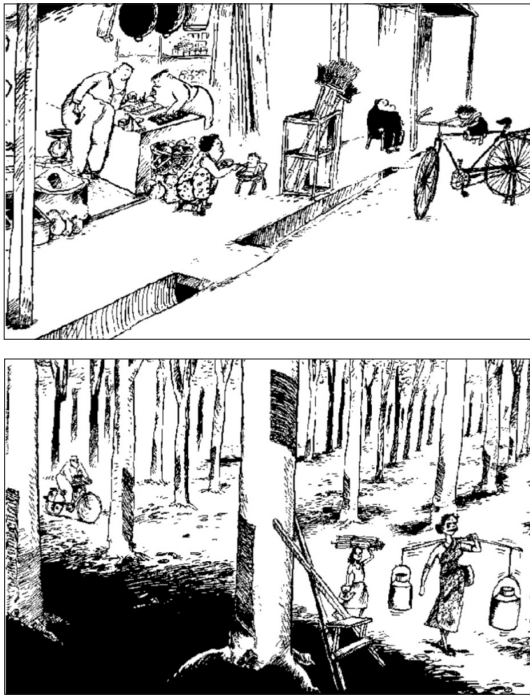


Fig. 4. Ah Yew the grocer; Tamil ladies working in the rubber plantation

Lat may not have meant to create an overtly political statement about Malayan diversity here, and the caricatures here spark recognition of a pluralistic Malayan society that embodies “deep respect” and inclusivity.<sup>44</sup> Rajendra and Taib speak of the stereotyping in

42 Rajendra and Taib, “From Village Boy to Town Boy.”

43 Rajendra and Taib, “From Village Boy to Town Boy.”

44 Rajendra and Taib, “From Village Boy to Town Boy.”

Lat's comics as "evident... but... unavoidable.... [His] illustrative exaggerations... are recognized by readers as a representation of Malaysia and her people at that period of time." However innocuous and well-meaning these may be, though, these ethnic caricatures also carry over remnants of a "pre-war ethnic Malay nationalism [that] aimed at a nation-state exclusively for Malays in which Chinese and other non-Malay residents in Malaya... find no place".<sup>45</sup>

We note that these drawn comic figures contrast so starkly with the very staid narrative about daily life in the kampung. One episode that illustrates this is the narration of how Mat was enrolled to attend Tajwid classes, "the art of reading Arabic with the correct enunciation so that we could master the Koran".<sup>46</sup> The process was actually very solemn, very proper and ceremonial:

Dad handed over to Tuan Syed a bowl of glutinous rice, a fee of \$1, and a small cane and then said: "Tuan, I am handing my son over to you in the hope that you'll teach him the Koran. Treat him as if he is [sic] your own child.... If he is stubborn or naughty don't hesitate to punish him with this cane—as [long] as you don't break any of his bones or blind him." Tuan Syed took the cane and nodded. Thus ended the formality....<sup>47</sup>

The accompanying narrative here is so emphatic of the appreciation of knowledge in Malay society, with "the Qu'ran, the holy book of Allah", as the "primary source of Islamic law".<sup>48</sup> The belief that Allah will reward them for the correct reading of the Qur'an, "even [for] a verse of it" impels the Malay to do well, "although most of them do not understand Arabic". Indeed, Malay ceremonial customs (such as weddings) employ readings of the Qur'an.<sup>49</sup>

The place of Mat is inscribed within Malay society by way of this simple recollection of his first Tajwid classes, but what this really presents us is Malay society's identification with Islam. Indeed, Mohamed Nor Bin Ngah avers that:

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45 Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, 10.

46 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

47 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

48 Ngah, "Islamic World-View," 25-26.

49 Ngah, "Islamic World-View," 27.

The adherence of the Malays to Islam is reflected in the word “Malay” itself which sometimes is taken to mean “Muslim” in Malaysia. Therefore, converts to Islam say that they have become Malays, meaning Muslims. In the Constitution of Malaysia, a Malay is defined as a Muslim who speaks the Malay language habitually and conforms to the Malay custom.<sup>50</sup>

The formality of the ceremony, and the serious national context of this, is belied by the way Tuan Syed is pictured here. The teacher who is literally charged with taking on paternal responsibilities in disciplining Mat is portrayed not as a grave figure, but as a comical one, with his overblown belligerent stance, juxtaposed against his debonair, dapper, upturned moustache that is so inconsistent with the grave religious figure we expect him to be. This is even more emphasized in the exaggeration of his lip and tongue positions to show how exacting he is to get his students to pronounce the Qur’an verses correctly. This comic incongruity is activated keenly in this episode.

This is the same incongruous humor deployed in presenting us with Tok Modin, who ceremoniously circumcizes Mat. Like Tuan Syed, his portraiture is exaggeratedly inane, with googly-eyes and a smile that stretches his lips grotesquely. This remarkably comic appearance does complement what Lat says of him: “Tok Modin was quite a funny fellow”, but in fact, from the beginning of Mat’s acquaintance with him, he already comes in fulfillment of the Bersunat, the circumcision ceremony, a rite of passage for Mat in this graphic autobiography. The ceremony itself begins way before Tok Modin arrives:

It was my grandmother’s wish that the Bersunat (circumcision) ceremony be held at her house. I was to be circumcised along with two other cousins of mine who were studying at a boarding school far away. Grandma... went around [house] to house inviting neighbors to the occasion.

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50 Ngah, “Islamic World-View,” 22-23.

And so the big day came.... There was a big feast attended by a large crowd of relatives and friends (in other words, the whole kampung).

The three of us were splendidly dressed in the traditional costume. All the good food was [sic] placed before us....

Then out we went for a little procession to the river for a dip. We were greeted by the kampung 'rebana' (drum) team, who accompanied us with Arabian songs.

...I didn't know what the purpose of this short bath was. Whatever it was, I knew we were very special people that day.<sup>51</sup>

Again, the seriousness of this circumcision ceremony is countered by the gentle humor of the circumcision itself: Tok Modin feeding them "magical chocolates", which were really "betel leaves and areca nuts", over which a "magical incantation" was said, apparently for Mat and his cousins to undergo a painless circumcision, which seems to work, because as Mat/Lat narrates, "It took place on a banana trunk... and in two minutes it was over! It was not very painful... just like an ant bite!"<sup>52</sup>



Fig. 5. Tuan Syed the teacher; Tok Mudin the circumciser

In episodes like this one, Lat leaves us to discover the humor of the taboo that is sited within carnivalesque parameters, as any act that has to do with genitalia transgresses the bounds of a societal

51 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

52 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

respect for bodies, and any mention, or in this case, allusion to male genitalia, engenders collective laughter. That circumcision here is primarily presented as a religious/social ceremony mutes this laughter and normalizes the taboo, but Lat's inclusion of this in his narrative means to satisfy the social import of this transitional ritual, as he does the personal significance of it. And it is in this insertion of his remarks and recollections—the eating of the “magic chocolates” that were not so, the ironic efficacy of these, the circumcision on the banana trunk, the pain like an ant bite, the drawing of Mat and his cousins in loose sarongs walking awkwardly—which moves the ceremonial and the social to the realm of the personal. Even while Lat remains respectful of this social significance, his text and graphics gently poke fun at this ritual and transform it into a humorous spectacle for his readers.

There are certain sections in which he notes what is explicitly “funny” in his text, and among these, is his father. Lat states: “My father was different. He was a funny fellow”.<sup>53</sup> Funniness here rests mainly on dimensional excess—“he was a big man”—which he shows graphically by drawing an outsize figure that takes up most of the left side of the frame, which in ratio to the right side, is made even larger because the right side of the frame has a tiny vignette of the father arriving home on his bicycle, with Mat, his sibling and the side of the house all depicted in the same scene. The juxtaposition here amplifies the father's figure.

The father is also depicted as having many foibles and quirks. In the same drawing, we are introduced to the father's morning habit of scratching his back against a post, while his children watch him from below their perch on the staircase and snigger. While not directly in opposition to the sobriety of the father being a “government clerk in Batu Gajah”,<sup>54</sup> it does activate unexpected humor in this rather juvenile act, coupled with the drawing of the father coming home on the bike but doing handlebar acrobatics on it.

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53 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

54 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

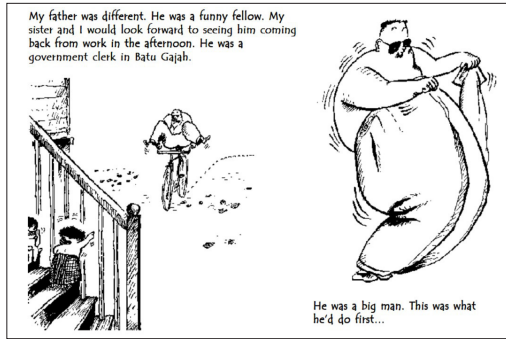


Fig. 6. Mat's father

The father's playfulness is also narrated by Lat—"Then we'd fool around with Dad. As you can see, he was a very playful person"<sup>55</sup>—and shown in the father playing hide-and-seek with Mat, teaching Mat and his siblings about local fauna (weaverbirds), and swimming with them at the local waterhole. In this latter instance, the father perches on a stout tree branch in only his wraparound/sarong, yodels, and accidentally slips off the branch. He lands in the water, but not before his sarong is caught in the branches. The next frame shows him sheepishly trying to use a stick to get his sarong. Note how this sheepishness is highlighted as his head is turned at an unnatural angle to look back, rather embarrassedly, at his children, who are snickering again at his predicament.

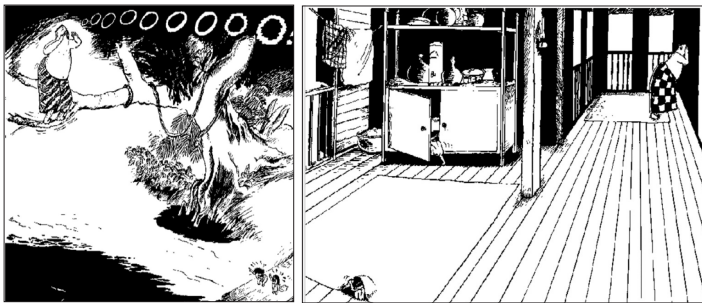


Fig. 7. Mat's father at the swimming hole; hide and go seek at home

<sup>55</sup> Lat, *Kampung Boy*.



Perhaps the most evocative of the father's penchant for jollity is when he dances as part of a wedding celebration, an impulsive and unexpected act. There is a band and dancing girls on a stage, dancing girls who Lat surmises "were hired from a cabaret in Ipoh, a big town 30 miles away," and it is Mat's father who climbs onto the stage: "To my surprise, it was Dad who went up first!"<sup>56</sup> The father's foray into impracticability is countered by the expected seriousness he is supposed to live by. Mat's mother berates him for his foolishness:

Later at home... the atmosphere was not good. Mum was in a bad mood because she didn't like Dad dancing with the girls.

From inside my kelambu I could hear her whisper in anger: "A father of two doesn't dance with cabaret girls.... That is meant for bachelors! Next time you do that I'll go on stage and pull you by the ears!"

Dad kept quiet.<sup>57</sup>

This apparent absence of self-restraint is the condition of incongruity in the narrative, and the dance as ludic state is returned to seriousness, and therefore, normalcy, when the mother reminds Mat's father, in a forceful and equally comic manner, of how he should comport himself as an authority figure, as "fathers have more definite responsibilities for changing ignorant, sensuous children into responsible, prosperous adults."<sup>58</sup> The lapse of the father to "bachelorhood" is a departure from this responsibility and stature.

The gravity of the father's role plays into the structure of life that Lat remembers as part of his kampung life, because as the progression of *Kampung Boy* shows

...the narrative highlight[s] Mat's increasing awareness that he must become more responsible for his own actions and the outcome of his life and that this responsibility should take more

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56 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

57 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

58 Banks, *Malay Kindship*, 131.

socially appropriate forms—not stealing tin in a [get-rich-quick] scheme but rather, looking after the family land and studying hard so that he can further his education in town. By the end of the graphic narrative, the childlike carefree gleeful Mat has begun to grow up into a more observant boy who recognizes that life is more complex than he had thought it.<sup>59</sup>

Mat's journey to maturation is a growing awareness of his place within the household and within the kampung, set side by side his deference to his parents', especially his father's, authority, as he moves away from a world of play—for instance, declining to play with the Meor brothers later in the text as he realizes that he will inherit a modest rubber plantation, which his father shows him to set him right and make him behave. Prior to this, he panned for tin illegally and was almost caught by police. When he gleefully bragged about his panned tin at home, instead of being praised, he was soundly scolded and was given “a good thrashing”.<sup>60</sup>

Mat's father asks “why [Mat] wasn't thinking seriously about [his] future”, and later remarks: “He should do well in his studies... instead of stealing tin. His special examination is coming soon and he must pass in order to be admitted to the boarding school in Ipoh.”<sup>61</sup> Soon after, he “[takes Mat] to his 2-acre [sic] rubber plantation”.<sup>62</sup> He wants Mat to help him clear the plantation, but when Mat asks why he does not just ask the plantation caretakers to do this, the father sternly tells him that Mat will have future ownership of the land as his eldest son, and should therefore “look after it”.<sup>63</sup> These acts of the father take on both punitive and indulgent aspects,<sup>64</sup> and fulfil Banks's observation of traditional Malay paternal roles:

Fathers gradually teach their children how to tap rubber trees and collect the latex from them.... Fathers also teach their children how to prepare fields for the planing of padi

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59 Fernandez, et al., “Illustrating Childhood,” 7.

60 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

61 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

62 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

63 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

64 Banks, *Malay Kinship*, 133.

seedlings and how to harvest the ripened plants. Gruff and grouchy behavior more frequently emanates from fathers than from mothers, and it is said that one cannot be ashamed in front of one's mother (*malu*), meaning that one cannot or should not want to keep secrets from one's mother, but one may try to hide evidence of moral weakness or disobedience from one's father, because fathers have the responsibility to punish wrong deeds. Authority is the expression of final responsibility.<sup>65</sup>

This agricultural thrust of preparing children for mature duties are, of course, being rapidly superseded by “a strong and growing emphasis upon education and supporting children to a level of study sufficient for a secure non-agricultural livelihood”, with “education replac[ing] land as an element of paternal wealth gradually transmitted to children as they reach their maturity”.<sup>66</sup>

The distinction between Mat's idyllic kampung life and his incipient entry into town life (in this case, going to boarding school in Ipoh) actually begins here, as he realizes how he has to discipline himself to study and pass the examination. At this point, the only comic turn in the story is his reaction to his passing the exam, but the narrative takes a decidedly poignant shift after this, as Mat prepares to leave the kampung. In Lat/Mat's own words, “it was about this time that I suddenly discovered emotions I never knew I felt. I felt sad...”<sup>67</sup>

Mat's awakening builds up to this decisive act not just of taking his studies seriously, but of leaving the kampung as a necessary adjunct to this. We have also begun to see Mat

...becom[ing] far more aware of the financial realities experienced by his family and begins to take on more responsibilities—he helps out at the mosque, goes fishing to supplement the family diet and income, guards durian trees to prevent monkeys from stealing the fruit and does some illegal

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65 Banks, *Malay Kinship*, 131-132.

66 Banks, *Malay Kinship*, 175.

67 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

tin panning to earn some money—a move that ended with him being punished by his parents,<sup>68</sup>

which we earlier examined.

Mat's grandmother's final reminder before Mat leaves is, "...don't be arrogant there. Be humble because we are humble people. Always remember God and don't forget about us back here in the kampong";<sup>69</sup> to which Mat silently replies, "as if I was going for good!"<sup>70</sup> This grounds the kampong as more than a rural village, more than a physical site. The kampong articulates a "community... linked to locality, to identity of functional interests... to shared cultural and ethnic ideas and values, to a way of life opposed to the organisation [sic] and bureaucracy of modern society".<sup>71</sup> Lat's remembrance of the kampong in *Kampung Boy* makes it a nexus of "Malay concepts of closeness and distance... which suggest an enclosed spatial category that is contrasted with the space surrounding it".<sup>72</sup> The grandmother's reminder is more than words of wisdom for a young grandson making his way into the world, but is a statement connoting an "interiority-exteriority contrast".<sup>73</sup> Interiority signals the "kinship dimension of closeness" that Mat shares with his family and his kampong neighbors and friends, "the world of friends, blood relatives, affines, and contractual relations," some of which we have noted in this discussion, "around the enclosed social space of the household, but is not totally exterior to it".<sup>74</sup> The kampong becomes the household, "becomes the village in its clearing, and strangers, the forested environment around the village, must be kept at bay... the world of strangers... called distant because it lies outside";<sup>75</sup> in much the same way that one meaning of the kampong is literally as a "garden land on each side of the road... [a] line of houses set leisurely back from the

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68 Fernandez, "Illustrating Childhood," 11.

69 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

70 Lat, *Kampung Boy*.

71 Plant, *Community and Ideology*, 13.

72 Banks, *Malay Kinship*, 170.

73 Banks, *Malay Kinship*, 171.

74 Banks, *Malay Kinship*, 170-171.

75 Banks, *Malay Kinship*, 171.

roadway... divided into villages... follow[ing] a river course”,<sup>76</sup> thus separating it into habitable areas, outside of which are forested areas or, in the case of Lat’s Perak kampung, rubber plantations.

But Lat’s kampung, per his grandmother’s admonition, is also a social space in which Islam plays an integral role, in which “all of the pillars of Islam—faith in God, prayer, alms, fasting, and pilgrimage, are a means... for the ordering of society with the goal of maximizing kinship sentiments,”<sup>77</sup> so that a departing Mat could still return to the kampung and belong, despite leaving it to become part of the “anonymous nature of secular urban life.”<sup>78</sup> Though young Mat dismissed this teaching as unnecessary, Lat the adult, in relating this short vignette, begins to see the wisdom of his grandmother. Because those who move away from the kampung are faced with the dilemma of the “[declining] traditional community [that does free] people from what they do not like, but... leaves them on their own.”<sup>79</sup> Consequently, “the loss of community... was... a necessary condition of the emancipation of the self-conscious, self-directing individual.”<sup>80</sup>

Lat’s comic is an attempt to recollect a version of the kampung as community, and the activation of memory and the drawing of this memory is “placemaking”. This placemaking in *Kampung Boy* is, therefore, “not only about the physical making, remaking, and unmaking of the material world... but is about “world making... because the practice literally has the power to make worlds—families, communities... churches, and so on”<sup>81</sup> But while this “[became] the window to understand... differentiated identities, practices, literacies and discourses as Malaysians”,<sup>82</sup> there are at least two ways this traditional, idyllic community is interrupted and transgressed: first, the oscillations between comic instances and sober, serious, ceremonial aspects of Malay rurality in his 1950s kampung allow the entry of the laughable within “the quotidian

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76 Banks, *Malay Kinship*, 41.

77 Banks, *Malay Kinship*, 170.

78 Plant, *Community and Ideology*, 33.

79 Plant, *Community and Ideology*, 32.

80 Plant, *Community and Ideology*, 31.

81 Schneekloth and Shibley, *Placemaking*, 191.

82 Lee, et al., “Lat’s Comics,” 171.

landscape of the nation”,<sup>83</sup> thus texturizing and indeed, refuting, expected cultural commonalities, and temporarily replacing these with peculiarities and specificities.<sup>84</sup>

Secondly, the engagement of the reader, “shuttling between image and text makes... an extraordinary demand on the reader to produce closure” but also “[draws] the passive ‘looker’ into the engagement and demands of reading... the reader becom[ing]... a collaborator... in the production of meaning”.<sup>85</sup> We, the readers, are coopted by Lat in his recollection of kampung life, but the arousal of humor by the text allows us to shake off, to deviate from, this idyllic permanence he appears to wish for, and indeed, privilege. It allows us likewise to “[re-place] knowledge into [new] worlds of social practices... contradicting the notion that knowledge is objective and separate, located outside the world-as-lived”.<sup>86</sup> While Lat’s kampung life tries to freeze it as a halcyon reminder of a Malay community, and a slice of his youth, even he affirms the impossibility of this when he creates *Town Boy* and later comics. The kampung as recoverable community tries hard to move the depiction of community as “a form of social integration”, to a recreation of it as “an open-ended system of communication about belonging”.<sup>87</sup>

We have begun to explore here how, in Lat’s *Kampung Boy* as Southeast Asian comics, we find significant definitions of Southeast Asian communities. Lat’s work suggested a vision of the Malayan kampung as an alternative community, where “community is an expression of the search for something destroyed by modernity”,<sup>88</sup> reveling in the certainties and strengths of “communicative ties and cultural structures”, belonging that Gerard Delanty points to as “underlying sense of morality, a group or a place” that Lat remembers of and in the kampung, “communicat[ing] ways of belonging, especially in the context of an increasingly insecure

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83 Lee, et al., “Lat’s Comics,” 171.

84 This temporariness is of course expected, because in the kampung, communal identity is grounded on a firm assent to unchanging Islamic laws and practices.

85 Whitlock, qtd. in Fernandez, “Illustrating Childhood,” 8.

86 Schneekloth and Sibley, *Placemaking*, 195.

87 Delanty, *Community*, 187.

88 Delanty, *Community*, 186.

world”<sup>89</sup> that the young Lat (Mat) had to face as he traversed the challenges of maturation.

Lat’s comic text forces us to reimagine Southeast Asian communities as communicative spaces that move from sites of “normative social integration rooted in associative principles”<sup>90</sup> to the “atomiz[ed] social that is “fragmented by ...violence, stress... anxiety... new technologies”<sup>91</sup>

The depiction of these communities as comic networks, as discursive, communication communities, function not simply to reproduce meaning, but is productive of meaning.

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89 Delanty, *Community*, 187.

90 Delanty, *Community*, 192.

91 Delanty, *Community*, 193.

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