

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* (grand-daughter) 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 Malay? But she spoke good Malay!

The tall woman whom I later 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's mother worked for a friend of Nenek as a domestic helper. I recall reading about *hamba orang* (slaves of people) who were said to have been acquired

through commercial sale or piratical raids.¹ Apparently these *hamba orang* were foreigners imported to Riau (a province of Indonesia, located in the centre of Sumatra along the Strait of Malacca) as bought slaves. The informants in the research conducted by Vivienne Wee about the Malays in Riau referred to the *hamba orang* as ‘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.² There were subsequent ‘negro’ slaves who resided in Riau; some were described to be ‘Hottentot’ (a tribal group that resided in Southern Africa, near the Cape of Good Hope and Namibia) slaves who were short and dark. The ownership of the slaves was of a private nature and that the slaves belonged to individual aristocrats and not to the aristocracy as a class. Vivienne Wee’s informants also claimed that the slaves were branded on their faces to mark whose property they were.

In addition, Vivienne Wee stated in her thesis that 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 Piah Hitam’s descendents be those whom Vivienne Wee had met in the early 1980s? Or were there other *keturunan Habsyi* (of Abyssinian descent)? After reading about the *hamba orang*, I was somewhat comforted by the fact that Haji Yusoff did not acquire any *hamba orang* when he could have easily afforded a few. The Gedung Kuning family apparently was kind towards Piah Hitam who was treated 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.

¹ Wee, Vivienne, “Melayu: Hierarchies of being in Riau”, Unpublished PhD Thesis. Canberra: Australian National University, 1985, page 240.

² Ahmad, Raja Ali Haji, *The Precious Gift (Tuhfat al-Nafis)*. An annotated translation by Virginia Matheson and Barbara Watson Andaya. Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1982, page 256.