

## Social Cohesion of Kampong Lorong Buangkok: Community Amidst Singaporean Industrialization

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to conduct a comprehensive examination of the Malay community living in Kampong Lorong Buangkok, the last village in Singapore's Hougang area. This community is intriguing due to its preservation of customs, traditions, and a simplified economic system amidst Singapore's rapid industrial development. The study utilizes in-depth interviews with current residents of Kampong Lorong Buangkok and reveals their steadfast commitment to upholding Malay traditions as a social foundation. Residents persist in maintaining a traditional economy designed to promote unity and support productive community life. This economic system functions to enhance social unity, assisting the residents in coping with Singapore's high cost of living. The robust social cohesion within the community has enabled Kampong Lorong Buangkok to persist despite political tensions and the encroaching pressures of rapid Singaporean industrialization that jeopardize the village's survival.*

**Keywords:** Social Cohesion, Local Resident, Malay, Last Village, Industrialization, Kampong Lorong Buangkok, Singapore

### INTRODUCTION

Several scholars have approached the concept of social cohesion from diverse perspectives. Cota et al. (1995) used it to elucidate behavioural conflicts and psychological aspects. Jenson (1998) applied the concept to observe evidence of chaotic social interactions and increasing disparities among different socioeconomic groups. Fonseca (2019) and Novy et al. (2012) have utilized social cohesion as a less conventional method to address societal unity and diversity. Social cohesion, a multifaceted social phenomenon, is influenced by geographical disparities, political representation, economic factors, and other social issues (Bruhn, 2009). It serves as a universal measure for certain phenomena (Pahl, 1991; Friedkin, 2004). Some theories of social cohesion draw from Durkheim's concept of 'social solidarity' (Burns et al., 2018), while others reference Ibn Khaldun's notion of 'asabiyya' (Norton & de Haan, 2013). Understanding these various social cohesion theories is particularly relevant as a framework for examining conflicts, differing perspectives, and social solidarity among the residents of Kampong Lorong Buangkok, Singapore, who strive to uphold Malay traditions and a traditional economic system amidst rapid industrial growth in their surroundings.

Singapore, a city-state consisting primarily of one main island and 63 offshore islands, has a total land area of 682.3 km<sup>2</sup>. It is predominantly urban, with a minor rural sector comprising 9.8 km<sup>2</sup>. The population stands at 4,131,200, having grown from 3,319,100 in 2001, making Singapore the world's third most populous city after Macau and Hong Kong. Within Singapore, Muslims constitute 15% of the population, with 93% of these Muslims being ethnic Malays (Nasir & Pereira, 2008). Kampong Lorong Buangkok (KLB) thus serves as a unique representation—a village that resists modernization while housing Malay Muslims within Singapore. KLB, located in Singapore's Hougang district, stands as the last surviving village maintaining a traditional atmosphere characterized by houses with tin roofs and stucco floors, sustaining itself economically through plantations despite being encircled by condominiums, offices, and flyovers resulting from industrialization (Thean, 2018). This area is served by four significant links and flyovers facilitating industrial access: Buangkok Drive Street, Serangoon, Buangkok East Drive, and Buangkok Link.

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The endurance of Kampong Lorong Buangkok is closely linked to Malay cultural heritage. Traditionally, Malay culture has been intertwined with Islam, which has thrived in Singapore. Since the People's Action Party (PAP) took office in 1965, there has been a noticeable trend towards individuals maintaining and cherishing their ethnic, cultural, and religious identities within more private spheres (Tan, 2018). Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1963 was influenced in part by persistent disputes between the Chinese-dominated PAP and the Malay-dominated Alliance in Malaysia. While Islam became Malaysia's official religion, Singapore adopted a more secular model, restricting religious practices to private contexts (Steiner, 2018; Rahim, 2009). Therefore, the unique resilience and cultural preservation demonstrated by the residents of Kampong Lorong Buangkok, who maintain Malay traditions and a traditional economic system amidst broader societal changes, warrant in-depth exploration and study.

In 2021, Kampong Lorong Buangkok comprised 25 houses and one Surau al-Firdaus. Singaporeans often invoke the "village spirit" slogan to uphold village culture against the encroachment of industrial influences, promoting values of friendship, trust, and generosity (Qi Yow, 2021). This reflects a strong sense of social cohesion among Kampong Lorong Buangkok residents, who strive not only to maintain their homes but also to preserve Malay cultural traditions. Residents of Kampong Lorong Buangkok continue to uphold an economic system centred on agricultural resources and a "non-capitalist" ethos, with house rents averaging about S\$6.50 per month in Buangkok—a stark contrast to the average rents of S\$500 per room or S\$1,650 for a three-room unit in neighbouring Hougang (Campbell, 2021). In the realm of public discussion and policymaking, Kampong Lorong Buangkok's presence has become a topic of debate. In 2017, Singaporean Member of Parliament Azura Mokhtar advocated for measures to protect Kampong Lorong Buangkok, a 122-hectare area, from the impacts of industrialization and proposed considering it for designation as an educational or conservation site (Sim, 2017).

Considering this background, conducting research in Kampong Lorong Buangkok holds significant promise. Moreover, the village presents a rich tapestry of Indonesian traditions, exemplified by the usage of Malay dialects in interactions, the presence of Padang satay vendors, and a trading system that operates with the Indonesian Rupiah (IDR) currency. This unique cultural setting offers valuable insights for scholarly investigation. In essence, this study emphasizes the urgent need to document the rich oral history and heritage of the village and its residents before it succumbs to urban development

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Kampong Lorong Buangkok is culturally significant as a rare vestige of traditional Malay village life in Singapore, offering a glimpse into the historical heritage and cultural practices that have endured amidst the country's modernization. The significance of Kampong Lorong Buangkok is underscored by the focus of prior research on this unique community. To illustrate, Xuan et al. (2017) examined how 30 elementary school students understood the concept of "Respecting the World and the Territory We Live In" through the lens of Kampong Lorong Buangkok. The study highlighted that exposure to this environment enhanced students' collective reasoning and problem-solving abilities, leading to improved judgments about people's actions in both spatial and temporal contexts. Importantly, subject-specific literacy skills notably progressed through their experiences in Kampong Lorong Buangkok. Xian et al. (2006) explored community perceptions of lifestyle and heritage in Kampong Lorong Buangkok, influencing attitudes towards village preservation. The findings indicated that the village was perceived more as a "retreat" than a permanent residence. While many advocated for preserving heritage villages for educational and tourism purposes, they felt powerless in conservation efforts.

Previous research also supports the investigation of traditional Singaporean culture and economics. Richards (2020) studied generational shifts and urbanization's impact on Singaporeans' reliance on local ecosystems, highlighting diminishing cultural appreciation among post-1996 generations. Xiong and Brownlee (2018) underscored Singapore's rapid transition from traditional Kampongs to a densely populated, technologically advanced city-state, emphasizing the need to preserve rural cultural and economic practices. Zuber (2010) further opined the cultural significance of preserving the identity of the Singaporean Malay community within Singapore's multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-religious societal framework. Although previous research has

explored Kampong Lorong Buangkok (Mokhtar, 2020; Xuan et al., 2017; Xian et al., 2006), additional investigation is warranted to delve into the obstacles and dynamics of conflict and unity experienced by residents who are endeavouring to safeguard Malay cultural and economic traditions amidst Singapore's swift modernization. According to Mokhtar (2020), Kampong Lorong Buangkok stands out as the final mainland village slated for conversion into urban infrastructure as outlined in the Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) 2014 Masterplan.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study involves field research that explores organizational dynamics and direct observations in a natural setting, following the framework described by van Maanen (1988). The focus is on exploring social interactions among residents of Kampong Lorong Buangkok (KLB), Singapore, with a specific emphasis on social cohesion in preserving Malay culture and traditions within the context of an industrialized economic landscape. Data collection involved observation, document analysis, and interviews with various individuals including property owners, residents, scholars, and community figures conducted throughout 2023. The interviews deployed an unstructured and open-ended approach, involving the broader KLB community, individual residents and Mosque administrators, along with notably Malay studies scholars from leading Singaporean and Malaysian universities.

The study utilizes descriptive qualitative analysis to interpret research knowledge and theories within a defined timeframe (Nassaji, 2015). Two analytical frameworks are employed: one draws from social science disciplines like political science, sociology, and social psychology, while the other is based on policy formulation (Mekoa and Busari, 2018). These approaches help examine internal factors (such as traders' perspectives) and external factors affecting social cohesion and economic systems amidst industrialization in Kampong Lorong Buangkok.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **A. Description of Kampong Lorong Buangkok**

Kampong Lorong Buangkok (KLB) is situated in the eastern part of the Hougang area, still maintaining its distance from urban centres and nestled beside a tributary of the Punggol River, one of Singapore's largest rivers. Its existence represents the resilience and fortitude of the marginalized rural Malay community in the face of industrial and urban social dominance in Singapore. Previous research indicates that villages in Singapore are often perceived as underdeveloped and lacking hygiene standards, often regarded more as recreational destinations rather than places suitable for permanent residence. However, KLB stands out as a residential village rich in Malay heritage and history (Xian et al., 2006).

The establishment of KLB dates back to 1956 when Sng Teow Koon purchased 1.22 hectares of land, nine years before Singapore's independence on August 9, 1965. Sng Teow Koon, a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner, invited six families to settle in KLB. Sng Mui Hong, his daughter who continues to reside in KLB, recalls her father using plants from KLB for traditional Chinese medicine, with his expertise extending to neighbouring countries (Interview with Sng Mui Hong 2023; Mokhtar, 2020). Sng Teow Koon represents a distinctive figure, embodying the non-mainstream approach of Chinese immigrants in the 1950s who opted for a career in traditional medicine over mainstream business ventures. Holmberg (2009; p. 110) noted that over 96% of Chinese immigrants chose manufacturing jobs, which accounted for 68% of Singapore's industrial workforce. The development of KLB was spearheaded by the Sng Teow Koon family, reflecting a departure from the findings of Tan (2020), who suggested that Singapore's villages were primarily established by the British to accommodate residents based on ethnicity, resulting in distinct areas such as the Indian Village, Chinese Village, Malay Village, and European City.

### **The Existence of the Malay Tradition**

#### **Architectural Approach**

Several houses lining the entrance road of Kampong Lorong Buangkok (KLB) prominently display Chinese identity ornaments, setting them apart from the rest of the village. Some of these houses feature tightly secured gates with iron bars, contrasting with the typical houses within the village. As one enters KLB, the architectural

landscape gradually transitions to a more dominant Malay influence, with traditional Malay-style houses becoming more prevalent alongside remnants of Chinese architectural elements. Notably, the Surau Al-Firdaus Mosque at the village entrance exemplifies Malay architectural aesthetics, with similar house designs found further into the Kampong.

The simplicity of village infrastructure further underscores the Malay character of KLB. The main road is paved but not extensively, while areas beyond the road are characterized by cement plaster and dry soil. Electrical cables, mostly installed on poles using traditional methods, contribute to the rustic ambience, a departure from Singapore's usual underground cable installations. Kampong Lorong Buangkok has managed to preserve its traditional village identity, avoiding displacement by the Housing Development Board (HDB) flat projects that enforced national housing policies in the 1990s (Bin Azman, 2019). The village's ambience starkly contrasts with modern landmarks like the boat-shaped Marina Bay Sands and the vibrant Gardens by the Bay. The existence of KLB underscores a broader thesis about villages in Southeast Asia, challenging the urban-rural dichotomy by embodying different social and physical constructs. While Nallari and Poorthuis (2021) discuss villages as suburban, urban-poor, or rural entities, McGee (1991) and Rigg (1994) emphasize that the term "kampung" transcends mere physical or administrative definitions. They view "kampung" as representing a traditional way of life rooted in egalitarian and communal values, influencing everyday language and academic discourse alike.

### Malay Language

The study of language maintenance, language shift, and their repercussions holds significant importance in Singapore, given its diverse and multilingual society. Singapore presents a rich context for detailed sociolinguistic investigations due to its complex and dynamic linguistic environment (Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010). Singapore is truly a multilingual country, as Table 1 illustrates. Table 1 illustrates that Singapore, spanning just 692.7 square kilometers, is home to a diverse array of at least 23 spoken languages. This count excludes languages spoken by non-residents who live, study, and work in Singapore (Gordon, 2005).

**Table 1: Singapore's Most Spoken (local) Languages**

Indian	Chinese	Malay	Others
Tamil	Mandarin	Malay	English
Bengali	Hakka	Javanese	Malaccan Creole
Gujarati	Hainanese	Baba Malay	Portuguese Creole – Papi Kristang
Hindi	Min Nan (Hokkien)	Bazaar Malay	Singapore Sign Language
Malayalam	Teochew	Orang Seletar	
Panjabi, Eastern Sinhala	Yue (Cantonese)	Madura (Boyanesese)	

Historically, Singapore's language policy has aimed to foster cohesion in its multi-ethnic society by designating four official languages: Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and English, representing the mother tongues of the major ethnic groups. Kuo (1980) notes that while many Singaporeans have transitioned to using English as their primary language, their ethnic languages continue to hold social significance as anchors of ethnic and cultural traditions. Apart from Malay, pidgin languages with Malay lexicalization, such as Melayu Bazaar and Malay Baba, remain prevalent, particularly among older Singaporeans, despite Malay Baba nearing extinction.

The rise of English in the 1980s had profound industrial and economic implications, with English proficiency deemed essential for career advancement by the majority of Singaporeans, predominantly ethnic Chinese (David et al., 2009). This widespread adoption of English, however, has not significantly impacted the Kampong Lorong Buangkok (KLB) community. Until the 1980s, KLB residents predominantly spoke their ethnic languages based on their backgrounds: Malay for Singaporeans and Malaysians, Chinese for the Chinese, and Javanese or Bawen (Madura) for the Boyan community, originating from Java, Indonesia. In 2023, most KLB residents primarily use Malay and Mandarin, with elements of Indonesian, particularly Javanese and Bawen (Madura) influences, adding a unique flavour. English, on the other hand, is rarely used as an everyday language among KLB residents. (Interview with Sulaeman, 2023). The architectural and linguistic models observed in KLB, notably, the village's existence transcends mere habitation, embodying a "kampung" that reflects socio-cultural and spatial characteristics associated with the multicultural traditions of the Malay, Chinese, and Bawen

(Indonesian) communities. KLB represents more than administrative rhetoric; it embodies a lived experience of cultural diversity and heritage.

## **Social Cohesion Based on Tradition**

### **Neighbourly Traditions**

Ujang & Aziz (2015) discovered that the traditions observed in Kampong Bharu reflect the physical and social environment typical of Malay villages. They draw from Fujita (2010), who defines a "village" as a residential area characterized by traditional values, strong moral principles, resistance to modernization, communal spaces, and a model of neighbourliness that instils pride. Many parameters identified by Ujang & Aziz in Kampong Bharu are still evident in Kampong Lorong Buangkok (KLB), particularly in the neighbourhood customs that define the breadth and dynamics of community life among its residents. The enduring tradition of neighbourliness in KLB underscores the cohesive nature of the Malay community as a social and political entity. Residents' strong attachment to their environment and participation in formal and informal social groups further reinforce social unity.

Neighborliness serves as a key social bond fostering cohesion within KLB. Malay-style traditions are not only reflected in architectural designs but also in daily social customs that persist due to the supportive architectural framework. The symbolism of neighbourly tradition is embodied in houses with open terraces and unlocked doors during the day, facilitating easy access for neighbours and visitors. Many houses keep their windows open during the day, not only for ventilation but also to convey a sense of community security. Social cohesion is deeply rooted in these harmonious social interactions which are continuously upheld by visiting neighbours, socializing, and engaging in communal activities typical of rural communities. A village represents an identity characterized by gendered spaces within households and extensive open areas for socialization (Chang, 2000; Nallari & Poorthuis, 2021), elements that are evident in KLB. However, the collective effort of KLB residents in preserving neighbourly values faces challenges posed by changing lifestyles and social interactions influenced by modernization and industrialization, trends that continue to evolve in Singapore.

### **Commonality in Traditions**

The general traditions observed among KLB residents foster a sense of togetherness within the community. When relatives return to the village and experience good fortune, it is customary for them to organize joint celebration events as an expression of gratitude to God for their successes. These events typically take place in the house's yard or the village's central road, serving as public spaces for traditional gatherings. Another common tradition involves celebrating family members' birthdays, particularly those who no longer reside in KLB but in city apartments. They choose to host traditional Malay or Chinese celebrations in the village due to the challenges of conducting such rituals in urban settings. These communal traditions contribute to preserving social cohesion within the village and act as a shield against the negative impacts of modernity, which has permeated most areas of Singapore, including urban environments.

Neighborly interactions and shared traditions are crucial for instilling collective values and inclusiveness among the descendants of KLB residents who now live outside the village. Tan (2020) notes the significant lifestyle changes experienced by the last generation of Singaporeans upon moving from kampung residences to high-rise apartments. While urban living offers convenience and comfort, it has led to a decline in community spirit, with residents often isolating themselves behind closed doors and having limited interactions with others. Additionally, newer generations are missing out on opportunities for close contact with nature, as many have never experienced the presence of live animals or fruit trees in garden settings.

### **Religious Tradition**

Kampong Bharu's existing spatial layout fosters shared space and opportunities for informal exchanges along narrow streets. This setting underscores the charm and sense of place inherent in traditional village life, which may impact residents' overall sense of well-being and community attachment (Ujang & Aziz, 2015). Similarities can be observed between the Malay ethnic and religious communities in Kampung Bharu and those in KLB (Kampong Lorong Buangkok). However, KLB exhibits unique religious traditions, encompassing both Islamic

and Chinese customs. Islamic religious practices at KLB's Surau Al Firdaus are conducted with a quiet and unobtrusive approach. Congregational prayers during festive occasions like 'Aidhil Fithri' and 'Aidhil Adha' draw larger crowds, largely gathering in the village's central road. Meanwhile, Tarawih prayers during Ramadan and Friday prayers comfortably accommodate congregants within the Al Firdaus Mosque.

A notable tradition among Muslims in KLB is group prayers after Asr and Maghrib prayers to mark the Hijriyah year's transition, held at Al Firdaus Mosque and followed by communal meals after Isha prayers. Although daily prayers (Fardu prayers) like Maghrib, Isha', Fajr, and Jumlat may involve smaller congregations, these rituals maintain religious traditions and foster social cohesion among Muslims in KLB, ensuring the continuity of Surau Al-Firdaus. Prominent figures within the Muslim community, like descendants of Encik Abdul Rahim Musa, the village "penghulu" in the early 1970s, play vital roles in these religious activities (Anuar, 2022). The continued growth of Surau Al-Firdaus owes much to the residents' efforts, evolving from a structure with leaky roof tiles and flood risks to its present state. Programs submitted to the Singapore government have played a crucial role in educating KLB's younger generation, now grown old (Interview with Rahim & Sulaiman, 2023).

On a global scale, the religious traditions of KLB's Malay population reflect Islam's historical spread across the Malacca Strait region, associated with past sultanates like Malacca Sultanate (1398-1511), Johor Sultanate (1511-1699), and Riau Sultanate (1699-1818) (Saefullah, 2016). The primary Chinese religious celebration observed in KLB is the Chinese New Year (Gong Xi Fa Chai), often held at a Chinese resident's house near Surau Al-Firdaus. This event underscores the solidarity among KLB residents amid modern openness, counteracting negative issues related to racial and ethnic divisions. Participants in Gong Xi Fa Chai celebrations include Chinese residents of KLB and their city-dwelling relatives, with luxury cars dotting the village during the event. Afterwards, the village returns to its tranquil state (Interview with Suhaimi, 2023). KLB's ethnic structure reflects a heterogeneous village dynamic, unlike historical British-influenced villages in Singapore that segregated labour groups along ethnic lines, potentially fostering prejudice and stereotypes that led to inter-ethnic conflict (Lim, 1980; Noor & Leong, 2013).

## **Social Cohesion based on Solidarity**

### **Landlord Solidarity**

All the land in Kampong Lorong Buangkok remains under the ownership of the Sng Teow Koon family, who are referred to as "Tauke" or "Toke" by the local community, a term denoting a boss or company owner in Chinese entrepreneurial contexts (Zapalska & Edwards, 2001; Budiman, 2020). Residents of KLB address the village owner as "Toke" because all the original land owned by Sng Teow Koon continues to be held by his family and has since been passed down to his daughter, Sng Mui Hong. Sng Mui Hong, the youngest daughter of Sng Teow Koon and currently around 71 years old, is often described as a determined individual due to her strong commitment to preserving the last remaining village in Singapore. She is the sole member of the Sng Teow Koon family residing in KLB, while her siblings prefer city apartment living.

Community solidarity in KLB was fostered by Sng Teow Koon, the landowner, and his family. He allocated portions of the land for plantations and fish ponds, leasing other sections specifically to small communities working in nearby hospitals and rubber plantations. Tenants from Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia were given the liberty to construct houses reflecting their respective tastes, customs, or ethnicities and utilize surrounding land for cultivation (Interview with Sng Mui Hong, 2023). Today, numerous descendants and children of early land tenants still inhabit KLB. However, many have passed away or relocated to other areas. Abandoned homes are rented to new residents related to those who have either passed away or moved.

Sng Mui Hong is aware that the village represents valuable property amidst political intrigue. In a land-scarce country like Singapore, numerous developers have expressed interest in acquiring the village, making repeated attempts to purchase it. Yet, Sng Mui Hong's enduring commitment and sense of solidarity toward the entire KLB community have thwarted all offers. No proposal has been compelling enough to justify breaking her promise to her late father, who passed away in 1997, to preserve KLB by refraining from selling the land (Interview with Sng Mui Hong, 2023). Additionally, Sng Mui Hong has encountered misinformation about Malays in Singapore. The existence of propaganda has shaped social perceptions of ethnic privileges held by

the majority group, leading to institutionalized racialization that portrays Malay Singaporeans as a problematic minority against the high-achieving dominant group (Koh & Dierkes-Thrun, 2015; Bin Azman, 2019).

## **2. Cheap Rental Prices**

The population decline in KLB began in the 1990s due to several factors: first, the passing away of many residents; second, the descendants of the initial generation who settled in KLB pursued education, careers, and established families in urban areas. The distance between urban centers and KLB, nearly an hour's journey, led subsequent generations to prefer city living in flats, which has become a predominant lifestyle for Singaporeans. To preserve KLB, Sng Mui Hong has kept land rental rates affordable for residents. The rental fees range from S\$4.50 to S\$30, depending on the size of the house. In contrast, the cost of renting a one-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of Singapore can range from SGD 800 to SGD 1,500. Sng Mui Hong maintains these rates for the 25 families currently residing in KLB (Thean, 2018; Interview with Sng Mui Hong & Sulaiman, 2023).

According to Sulaiman, one of the KLB residents and community leaders, rental fees may vary based on changes in the building area. An increase in building size may result in higher fees, while a decrease could lead to reduced costs. Despite being among the most affordable housing options in Singapore, KLB has seen few new residents since the 1990s. This trend reflects the differing views of current generations compared to the original settlers and the necessity for individuals of Malay descent in Singapore to acquire competencies and access opportunities prevalent in the urban majority community, which can be challenged while residing in KLB. Furthermore, the "Ethnic Integration Policy" initiated by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in 1989 appears to have influenced the perception of the Singaporean Malay community, favouring rental flats as a viable alternative. The Straits Times in 2016 reported a disproportionate concentration of Malays in rental housing across various Singapore neighbourhoods, which is particularly concerning given their status as a minority group but forming a majority within public housing rental flats (Bin Azman, 2019).

## **Solidarity Amongst Tenants**

As detailed in KLB's demographics, the village's development originated with Sng Teow Koon, who leased his land to Chinese and Malay communities from Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Throughout its development, the population composition in KLB comprised approximately two-thirds Malays and the remainder Chinese. Presently, some houses are repurposed as offices and inhabited by several Indians (Tanggono, 2002). At the time of this study, the population consisted of 25 families, including three families of Javanese and Madurese descent. The current residents are typically aged 50 and above, with some in their 70s, while teenagers and village children prefer urban living in apartments (Interview with Suhaimi & Sulaiman, 2023). These circumstances strengthen societal bonds by fostering social cohesion among older individuals, who collaborate to navigate life's challenges. Additionally, their efforts help preserve social ties and maintain KLB's significance as the last remaining village in Singapore, garnering recognition from external communities.

## **4. Solidarity in Maintaining a Traditional Economy**

Historically, the economic activities of the Malay community in Singapore during the 19th and 20th centuries were diverse, encompassing trades such as goldsmithing, silversmithing, blacksmithing, fishing, portering, domestic service, and hunting (Interview with Kamaluden & Ibrahim, 2023). Despite Chinese dominance in Singapore's trade, Malay traders maintained a notable presence, with many Malay-owned shops in the eastern part of Singapore by 1846. Additionally, artisanal work was prevalent among the Singaporean Malay community, and Indonesian traders thrived in the Paya Lebar area (Interview with Ibrahim, 2023).

Reflecting the historical traditions of the Malay community in Singapore, residents of KLB continue to engage in activities such as poultry farming, maintaining fish ponds for catfish, and cultivating various flowers in a village-like setting. Traditionally, gardening ornamental plants and fruit-bearing trees like coconuts and mangoes have been integral to their economic practices and cultural heritage. Since the 2000s, changes in lifestyle and other factors led to the cessation of fish farming, and the ponds have been converted into green spaces covered with soil and planted with trees, enhancing the village's verdant atmosphere. Some areas have been transformed into communal gardens for all residents, cultivating crops like chillies, sweet potatoes, bananas, papayas, and



coconut trees. In addition to sustaining the traditional Malay economy in KLB, these gardens foster community unity, with fruits used during village events or gatherings (Interview with Sulaiman, 2023).

## **D. The Challenges of Social Cohesion Sustainability**

### **Social Factor**

Sociologically, the existence of villages or villages as resistance to urban fragmentation has been used in various countries to generate a sense of pride about place and community in urban spaces. In Singapore, the government has repeatedly used the eradicated kampung narrative of restorative nostalgia to encourage harmonious living in terraced houses. However, it is still unclear how the concept of “village” and related social policies will be accepted by society (Nallari & Poorthuis, 2021). In contrast to what happened in the KLB, its sociological existence provided restorative nostalgia about the richness of culture, history and community unity. Even heroically, the KLB can be positioned as a symbol of resistance to urban fragmentation, where the KLB can escape the fate of eviction like other villages in Singapore.

KLB can also maintain communities united in various similarities, which Chua (1997; p. 88) calls a "vernacular village", a village still filled with residents who are integrated and united as an inclusive community. That is different from the meaning of "kampung" in Xuan et al. (2017), which was written in the early era of the flat house program in Singapore which was campaigned with the term "kampong spirit" to increase the village spirit in our high-rise apartments. Meanwhile, Xiong and Brownlee (2018) explain it using the term "gotong royong," or cooperation, in the apartment environment in Singapore.

However, the "village spirit" or "gotong royong" among residents in flat houses does not work; they still experience "social segregation", namely residents who are together in high-rise "blocks", but in fact, they avoid interacting with each other. Piekut et al. (2019) describe segregation as perhaps also having political significance, being considered a spatial expression of class and ethnic divisions, while Gorard and Taylor (2002) mention polarization, stratification and inequality.

Social segregation or polarization did not occur in the KLB. Everyone who attempts to destroy the social order in KLB will be met with Sng Mui Hong, the landlord who is determined to defend his existence. All the trees and plants that grow and are maintained in KLB make it not just a symbol of village social cohesion in the wilderness of the city-state of Singapore but a symbol of Malay and Chinese social cohesion in creating an "environmentally friendly and ecological village".

### **Economic Factors**

The estimated value of the KLB land is approximately US\$ 24.5 million (Sarna & Lim, n.d.), reflecting a substantial worth. In the 1980s-1990s, Singapore underwent rapid urbanization and transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial economy, resulting in significant changes where many shophouses were replaced by high-rise apartments and tall buildings. Additionally, minor roads were transformed into multi-lane highways during what was known as the "Era Jalan Raya. During this period, many villages across Singapore were gradually displaced due to industrialization, but KLB managed to survive. Despite its economic and business limitations compared to other areas in Singapore, KLB remains less attractive for commercial and industrial development.

Situated in the lower plains alongside the Punggol tributary, KLB is prone to flooding, earning it the nickname "Kampong Selak Kain" (a village that lifts its skirt), reflecting its history of experiencing flash floods in the past (Thean, 2018; Mokhtar, 2020). Despite its strategic location, the Buangkok area is not designated as an industrial or economic centre. Indeed, developments in this area are predominantly non-commercial, with initiatives like the Buangkok Crescent main road being transformed into green parks and care facilities for the elderly. Notably, there are three major nursing homes in the vicinity: Home Nursing Foundation, St. Andrew's Nursing Home, and ECON Healthcare - Buangkok - Block 5. In the 2014 Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) Masterplan, proposals to demolish KLB were met with resistance. Instead, the government suggested replacing it with a main road, two schools, and a public park, signalling a commitment to non-commercial development in the area. Minister of National Development at the time, Desmond Lee, affirmed that there were no immediate



plans to develop the KLB area (Thean, 2018; Mokhtar, 2020). This stance was met with objections from many Singaporeans, some of whom advocated for KLB's inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

### **Political Power**

Before the 2014 Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) Masterplan, the 2009 URA plan proposed releasing KLB for the construction of a main highway connecting Buangkok Drive, sparking protests from many Singaporeans who wished to preserve their connections to the past (Sarna & Lim, n.d.). In the political history of Singapore during British colonial rule, the 50 villages that emerged on the outskirts of Singapore City were labelled as "black areas," representing marginalized and precarious spaces. These villages exhibited weak state control, and subordinate groups often contested authority, potentially altering society's fundamental character (Douglas, 2002: p. 150; Merriman, 1991: p. 6). Despite this, Chinese and Malay-inhabited villages continued to thrive until 1961, with their influence extending to almost a quarter of the urban population (Seng, 2009).

In Singapore's modern political landscape of the 1980s, the Housing Development Board (HDB) implemented a subsidized flat program (House Flats Development - HFD), successfully relocating 80% of Singaporeans, particularly the younger generation, to high-rise flats (Bin Azman, 2019). This initiative led to the demolition of nearly all villages to make way for apartment complexes, industrial zones, and other developments. For instance, Khatib Bongsu, known for its natural resources, was transformed into flats and a military training ground, with its remaining tin-roofed houses demolished in 2007 (Anonymous, 2022).

Similarly, Chan Chu Kang, one of Singapore's oldest Chinese villages established in 1850, was renamed Nee Soon village after rubber magnate Lim Nee Soon (1879–1936). Westhill/Chong village and Chong Pang village met similar fates, demolished in 1989 to pave the way for the development of Sembawang New Town (Interview with Kamaludeen & Ibrahim, 2023). As emphasized in various Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) Masterplans, the government's power to remove entire villages illustrates the potential for KLB to be included in Singapore's future development plans, a challenging proposition for dissenting voices.

### **CONCLUSION**

KLB residents continue to uphold daily Malay traditions, practices that extend to include non-Malays. This commitment is rooted in the stewardship of the ancestral owner Sng Mui Hong, who remains steadfast in continuing her father's vision since the village's establishment in 1956. The social cohesion in KLB is sustained through the predominant use of the Malay language, with some Chinese influence, while the Bawean/Madurese language from Indonesia has sadly faded away. Religious practices in KLB are not sources of conflict but rather exemplify the solidarity and inclusiveness among permanent residents and families of those living in the community.

Despite the industrialization and political pressures that have led to the demolition of many villages in Singapore, KLB has endured. The village's cultural resilience, ecological conditions, and its status as a "vernacular village" serve to foster strong bonds among residents. The harmonious relationship between Sng Mui Hong as the landowner and the residents as tenants further complicates efforts by developers and the government to acquire and disrupt the cherished social fabric of KLB. Any attempt to acquire KLB would need to navigate the sociological influence of Sng Mui Hong, the village's substantial economic value and its political significance, which would undoubtedly face challenges from various stakeholders, should it be challenged.

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