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Home for me is here in Singapore, even in terms of my ancestors, and the surrounding region of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago. On my NRIC, I am also identified as "Malay", so this is where I will start. Being predominantly Muslim and influenced by the Arabic naming system, Malays generally employ the patronymic style when formally naming their children. A child's name comprises of a first name followed by *bin* ("son of") or *binti* ("daughter of") and then, his/her father's name. This seems to favour a more patriarchal approach, but the cultural reality is that Malays consider lineage and kinship through bilateral descent, that is, both the mother's and father's sides matter equally – which is why I picked two objects instead of one.



Noorashikin at ACM

I want to make two quick points to contextualise my heritage. Firstly, "Malay" has become a shorthand today to refer to peoples of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago. Within this easy categorisation, however, are diverse ethnic groups with a variety of languages, foods, customs, traditions, and so on. We share common touchpoints, of course, such as standard Malay being the lingua franca, but I take pride in a richer, more multifaceted makeup.

The second point revolves around the Malay term for "homeland" – *tanah air*. The two words literally mean "land" and "water", recalling the most salient fact about where we are – that we are a maritime region. How I understand this maritime embrace of "home" is that the rivers, seas, straits are equally important. They function less like boundaries and markers, and more as connectors and conduits, as well as residential addresses for some, which brings me to the first object and a piece of my paternal family history that has long fascinated me.

This is a traditional tackle box from the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula that a fisherman would bring along, hence its name in Malay, *kotak ke laut* ("box to the sea"). Despite being an everyday apparatus to store hooks, lines, other necessary fishing equipment including talismans, attention has been paid to the aesthetic quality of this humble tool. These boxes are often decorated with designs carved in shallow relief, inside and out. Here, the scrolling vegetal motif that dominates much of Malay art across various media can be seen. This attention to decoration can be found on other fisherman's apparatuses, including round meal containers known as *cepu ke laut*, and even all over a fisherman's boat. One of the more ingenious aspects of tackle box design is that they are carved from single blocks of wood to ensure watertightness. Typically, the wood of the jackfruit tree is used to make these boxes as it is light, enabling them to serve as floatation devices in the unfortunate event of the boat capsizing.



Fisherman's tackle box.

Malay Peninsula, probably Kelantan, early 20th century. Wood. ACM, Z-0449

Whenever I look at this box, I am impressed by the thought and attention that went into its design, suggesting a respect and reverence for fishing as more than a livelihood, as a way of life. This makes me think of my paternal great-grandparents, Wok bin Ahmad and Embon binti Mohamed. Through them, I trace part of my ancestry to the Orang Laut ("sea peoples"), often described as nomadic tribes who had adapted to riverine or sea-based living, and were some of the earliest natives in Singapore. I was too young when she was alive to ask the questions I have now, but what I have gleaned from family members is that the Orang Laut strand of my paternal side hail from Siglap (through great-grandfather Wok) and the Singapore River (through great-grandmother Embon), anchoring my sense of home to the Johor-Riau Archipelago that Singapore was historically a part of.

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Prayer chart.

Singapore, mid-20th century.
Wood, paint, metal, chalk.
ACM, 1995-00133,
Gift of Haji Mohd Amin bin
Abdul Wahab, Singapore

The next object I am highlighting is a modest prayer timetable that was used in Masjid Wak Sumang. The mosque was located in Kampung Wak Sumang at the end of Punggol Road. Also known as Kampung Punggol, Kampung Wak Sumang was thought to have existed before the arrival of the British, making it one of the oldest fishing settlements in Singapore. It was named after the founder, a legendary Javanese warrior (Wak Sumang). *Wak* underlines the ethnic context as it is, firstly, a Javanese appellation to designate the uncles or aunties who are elder siblings to our parents, but can also be used as a respectful title.

On this chart, the prayer names are written in Arabic while the daily times would have been updated in both chalk and by setting the hands on the individual clockfaces. This is because Muslim prayer times are calculated according to lunar and solar cycles, hence precise timings will shift throughout the year. Most likely, the prayer times would have been updated by Masjid Wak Sumang's imam.

This calls to mind my late grandfather, my mother's father, Haji Hamzah bin Haji Sidek, who was Javanese and an imam. In fact, the majority of my maternal side identify as Javanese as my grandmother, Hajjah Rusiah binti Haji Ali, too was Javanese. Haji Hamzah was the imam at Masjid Bidadari, within the former Bidadari cemetery along Upper Serangoon Road. Although the Muslim section of the cemetery was opened in 1910, the first record of a mosque being built was in 1932. According to a small publication of prayers produced by the mosque, Haji Hamzah was acknowledged as the first imam of the mosque but I am uncertain if he was old enough to lead a congregation in 1932. Unfortunately, given the current restricted access to library materials, I am unable to determine the length of my grandfather's service. I am quite certain though, based on my mother's accounts, that he was the imam during the 1950s. One other poignant connection between the prayer timetable of Masjid Wak Sumang and my grandfather is this: recorded on the timetable is a date ending in the year 1995. The Wak Sumang mosque was demolished in this year while Haji Hamzah passed away in August of the same year. Masjid Bidadari ceased operations in June 2007, and the former cemetery has also been subjected to redevelopment plans, which have now come to fruition.