

The Formation of a Malay Child's Identity through *Adat, Akhlak, and Budi*: A Psychogeographical Reading of Lat's *Kampung Boy* (1979)

Seach Jin Beng ^a

seachjb@tarc.edu.my

Faculty of Social Science and Humanities,
Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology, Malaysia

Jeslyn Sharnita Amarasekera ^b

jeslynsa@tarc.edu.my

Faculty of Social Science and Humanities,
Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The locations around us are not merely the mundane settings for our routine life stories; through meaningful interaction with the places that we are in, our thoughts, feelings, and experiences can be drastically shifted. This resonates with the psychogeographical aspect of examining people's interaction with their surroundings that lead to personal attachments and a myriad of emotions. Lat's *Kampung Boy* (1979) is an autobiographical graphic novel/comic set in the 1950s in a Malay *Kampung* in Perak that recounts the childhood memories of the author when growing up there. Lat's formative years spent in his *Kampung* were crucial in shaping his Malay identity due to his exposure to Malay traditional rituals, culture and lifestyles. Hence, this study aims to examine how psychogeography plays a role in shaping Lat's Malay identity as a child and adolescent through three key foundations; *adat*, *akhlak* and *budi*. This study argues that Lat's experiences across distinct settings in his *Kampung* are essential in helping him to learn and get assimilated into the Malay identity. It highlights how Lat's understanding of cultural values pertaining to *adat*, *akhlak* and *budi* was heavily impacted by his interaction and observation of his surroundings. Hence, it demonstrates that apart from the people and life experiences, places also have a significant role in shaping a child's identity.

Keywords: Lat's *Kampung Boy*; Psychogeography; Malaysian comic; Malay Identity; *adat*; *akhlak* and *budi*

^a Main author

^b Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

Lat's *Kampung Boy* (1979) is well regarded as a timeless Malaysian comic that has significant impact to many Malaysians be it culturally or academically. Although Lat's works have always been credited for their abilities to paint a realistic cultural landscape of Malaysia that celebrates the country's diversity and plurality, *Kampung Boy* (1979) is one that specifically emphasises the formation of identity of a Malay child in a *kampung* setting. Served as both the protagonist and narrator of the comic, Lat recounts his childhood through the character of Mat from his birth to his departure from his *kampung*. Mat's childhood is marked by a series of ups and downs within his family and village community. It is through the vicissitudes of these early years that his Malay identity takes shape, influenced by the people he encounters along the way. Although academic discourses related to Malay identity are aplenty, the concept of Malay identity or *Malayness* remains scarcely examined within the realm of Malaysian comics.

As explained by Zainal and Nasir (2021), defining the Malay identity or *Malayness* has always been hard, noting that attempts to frame it within either Asian or Western contexts are inevitably criticized. However, scholars have agreed unanimously that *Malayness* is a concept that remains 'dynamic, historically contingent and contested' (p 5). This idea is well-supported by Milner (2011) who noted how *Malayness* is often regarded as an ambiguous term although it is widely accepted that Islamic dominance forms a crucial part of the Malay identity that contributes to the notion of *Malayness*. This means that the concept of *Malayness* exists within a framework formed by a few pivotal elements. It is also noteworthy that discussion pertaining to the notion of *Malayness* falls within the purview of postcolonialism. During the colonial era, *Malayness* was closely linked to Islamic values, authority of Malay royal and Malay ethnicity (Smith & Bender, 2017). A similar idea was proposed by Chan (2018) who asserted that the Malay way of life revolves around three crucial elements; the kingdom, the Malay language and Islamic values. Nevertheless, beyond all these elements mentioned, the concept of *Malayness* is also linked closely to one specific geographical setting; the *kampung*. As Kahn (2006) rightly observed, the *kampung* or Malay rural settlement, is deemed the core element associated with the Malay identity because the Malay ways of life and *kampung* existence go hand in hand.

This means that in order to examine the concept of *Malayness*, the geographical location of the *kampung* is one crucial factor to consider. A *kampung* is essentially a rural settlement primarily inhabited by Malays, where the social and economic aspects of life largely follow traditional rural practices (Bunnell et al., 2012). Not only is the *kampung* crucial to the Malays as a space to nurture a sense of community, as noted by Fischer (2011), the *kampung* also carries a special significance to the Malay community as it represents an ideal form of national authenticity. Until today, the practice of going back to the *kampung* during religious festivals remains highly relevant to many Malay city folks. Ultimately, the association of *Malayness* with a geographical location, specifically the *kampung*, bridges it more closely to the concept of psychogeography. Given that the Malays have always held the *kampung* close to their hearts, their identities are closely tied to a specific geographical setting. This lends credence to the claim that psychogeography has always been influential within the Malay community, as their sense of identity is deeply embedded in the *kampung* environment.

To further elaborate, psychogeography is deeply rooted in the cultural context of France and England. Based on Guy Debord's post-war neo-Marxist concepts, the term has some anti-establishment feelings, and its origins go back to the international Lettrist and Situationist, dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. Regarded as social movements in the 1950s–60s that explored how

urban environments affect emotions and behavior, they aimed to promote more spontaneous, meaningful interactions with space through concepts like *dérive* (drifting) by condemning capitalist city planning. Goddard and Halligan (2013) noted that psychogeography is often closely related to urban exploration and practice. Psychogeographical approaches when adapted as scientific concepts, enable readers and authors to use a particular framework as the starting point for text and linguistic analysis. Through the lens of psychogeography, we need to re-evaluate the place around us, because the interaction with the place's streets, corner, or buildings can have both positive and negative impacts on our mental health. According to Von Benzon et al. (2021), psychogeographers are similar to sensory detectives who use multiple clues from various sources from a place to understand the place for the purpose of forming emotion, speculation and subtle data associated with that place. Overall, psychogeography encourages us to reconsider our environment and surroundings because they can influence our experiences, behaviours and emotions. The three key terms examined in this study are *adat*, *akhlak* and *budi*. *Adat*, whose origin is attributed to Arabic, can mean custom, tradition, or even culture. Due to its close association with traditional folkways, Forth (2021) noted that translating the word directly into English accurately often presents certain difficulties. It is important to note that the word *adat* is also widely used in Indonesia, with a meaning closely resembling its usage in Malaya, where it is understood as traditional law and customs (Fanany & Fanany, 2018). Meanwhile, *akhlak*, another term of Arabic origin, is considered imperative in cultivating laudable personal traits and is closely linked to notions of faith and spirituality. The closest English equivalents of this word are morality and virtue (Saad, 2023). Finally, another term explored in this study that is difficult to translate directly into English is *budi*. As observed by Lim (2003), it is a term well assimilated into various aspects of ethics and culture within the Malay community. This is evident in the wide usage of the word *budi* within the Malay corpus, ranging from *budi bahasa* (wholesome manners) to *budi bicara* (the use of discretion). Hence, *budi* involves a multidimensional comprehension of both reality and intuition, which play a role in aiding a person to attaining a harmonious form of existence (Dahlan, 1991).

This study examines how Mat's Malay identity is shaped within the kampung setting through the lens of psychogeography, focusing on how he learns the concepts of *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi*. It highlights that while these values are taught by the adults around him, the geographical settings in which these lessons take place play a crucial role in instilling their deeper meanings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lat's comics have been studied extensively in the scholarly domain. Zainurul Aniza Rahman and Nasya Yadi Bahfen (2024) clarify that Lat often uses stereotypes of rural and urban environments to emphasize Malaysia's identity. This includes ethnic, religious, sex and political elements that are integrated to emphasize the evolution of Malaysia's social and religious standards. Siew Chin et al. (2017) investigates Lat comics with four-level models from Rodriguez and Dimitrova. They focused on two important elements: prayer meetings and gender representation, revealing Malaysia's identity, practices and feelings. His conclusions suggest that Lat tends to place his cartoons in a clear landscape of Malaysia. Teh and Dahlan studied Lat comics, *Budak Kampung* (1979) and *Mat Som* (1989) with Alan Swingewood's theoretical lens of literary sociology in 2020. The research highlights the social and cultural influences on the design of characters such as Teman and Mat Sim, and helps to illustrate the conflicts between rural and urban values in Lat comics. In

addition, Salehuddin (2022) studied Lat's comics from a linguistic point of view and through the Ideal Cognitive Model (ICM) studied the cultural differences in conceptualization of Lat's graphic novels and their Malaysian versions. This study shows how to understand these conceptual differences and improve the intercultural appreciation of metaphors and global cultures without direct physical contact.

To continue the discussion, Malaysian fictional texts have also been examined through the perspective of psychogeography. Khaidzir, Hashim, and Yusof (2021) shed light on the role of Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, who acts as a female flâneuse, in uncovering obscure urban landscapes through her poetry anthology "The Art of Naming" (2006). Their study is crucial in illustrating that wandering should not be viewed as aimless searching. Instead, exploring different locales can foster empathy, generosity, and love among people. Similarly, Hashim and Faizal (2016) delved into Nassury Ibrahim's poetry anthology within the realm of psychogeography. Unlike previous studies focusing solely on the positives of urban environments, their research underscores the plight of Kuala Lumpur's inhabitants due to urban poverty and inadequate urban planning. In another vein, Amran and Termizi (2020) utilized psychogeography to analyze the character May from Chan Ling Yap's "Where the Sunrise is Red." This narrative centers on May's presence in Kuala Lumpur's local markets. As a flâneuse, May seamlessly integrates into the bustling crowd, forging a unique connection and unraveling her identity and sense of belonging through her exploration of public spaces. In a more recent study, Seach (2024) explored how the city of Kuala Lumpur influenced the life trajectories of female characters in the anthology, *KL Noir* as they navigated the dark sides of the city.

Taking a different perspective, Sim (2012) delved into the portrayal of Malay identity in various literary genres such as children's books and comics was examined. The study revealed that these literary texts offer valuable alternatives for readers to comprehend the nuanced aspects of Malay identity compared to history textbooks, which are often rigid and monotonous. By fictionalizing Malay identity through the lens of fiction, it allows for discourse to evolve and develop, ultimately enriching the narrative. Kamal and Ghani (2014) focused on Malay identity in relation to *akhlak*, revealing a strong correlation between *akhlak* and emotional intelligence. The adolescents studied were observed to exhibit better emotional control and resilience against negative influences due to the cultivation of *akhlak*. Meanwhile, Jerome et al. (2016) examined the formation of identity in fictional characters in the works of Malaysian writer Karim Roslan. They noted the incorporation of a wide range of techniques and expressions in creating characters, enabling readers to better understand the characters' multiple identities based on elements such as ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and nationality. This facilitates readers' identification with others within the intricate world of fiction. Regarding *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi*, their contribution to the formation of Malay culture and identity was underscored by Ali (2022). He proposed that understanding Malayness through the spectrum of *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi* is crucial, as it allows for a deeper comprehension of the values embedded within these concepts, which form the foundation of Malay cultural and ethical systems. Specifically, within the realm of *budi* in the Malay context, C. Richardson et al. (2016) proposed that *budi* is crucial within the Malay domain, as it is considered the defining feature of the Malays. Despite its diminishing influence on younger generations, *budi* remains highly relevant in the contemporary world. As pointed out by a study by De Asildo et al. (2022), *akhlak* plays a pivotal role in the Malaysian education scene, particularly in the subject of Moral Education. The incorporation of the concept of *akhlak* means that, through Moral Education, it is possible to produce learners who are not merely knowledgeable but also equally competent in the spheres of reasoning, emotions, and behavior (De Asildo et al., 2022). Meanwhile, newer scholarly studies pertaining to *adat* per se remain scarce, with most of them dating back to the 1960s or 1970s. More recent studies on the concept

of *adat* usually focus on how *adat* impacts Islamic laws in Malaysia, including inheritance division among Muslim couples or even *adat perpatih* (Abdullah et al., 2010; Gunardi et al., 2017).

In line with the aforementioned, the literature reveals that while there were attempts to examine Malaysian fictional texts in relation to psychogeography and Malay identity, they have not been studied alongside each other in the examination of Malaysian comics particularly Lat's. Also, despite the earlier endeavours to study Lat's comics in relation to Malaysia's diverse identities, studies focusing on scrutinizing Lat's comics in association with Malay identity based on the three essential foundations of *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi* remain scarce. Therefore, this study holds significance in establishing points of convergence between psychogeography and Malay identity through the lenses of *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi*. This is crucial in reinforcing the adaptability of the text within the realms of psychogeography and literary studies.

ADAT, AKHLAK AND BUDI

Despite the rising number of academic studies dedicated to examining the Malay identity, most of them have focused on how the Malay identity has been challenged or compromised as a result of modernization and Westernisation. Studies conducted specifically on investigating the Malay identity in relation with ethics and values within the Malay community remain relatively scarce. The scarcity is particularly more pronounced when it comes to examining the formation of Malay identity in relation to ethics and values within a Malaysian comic. To further examine this, this study aims to highlight the importance of *adat*, *akhlak* and *budi* in shaping the character of Mat in Lat's *Kampung Boy* (1979). The term Malay *adat* laws refer to specific aspects associated with Malay customs that bind individuals with legal consequences when breached (Rahman, 2006). Among the different types of *adat*, the most relevant ones related to the Malay community's everyday life are known as *adat resam*. As Yusoff (2018) noted, *adat resam* originates from customs and is passed down from one generation to another. It is a tradition that becomes ingrained or habitual for every individual within a particular community or region Khalid et al. (2021). *Adat* is a significant element linked to the Malay identity although some elements within the Malay *adat* are not necessarily Islamic by nature. As posited by Hussain (2021), although, Malay identity is closely linked to its Islamic association, it is also closely intertwined with *adat* or local customary laws followed by the Malays. *Adat* and Islam are the integral parts of the Malay identity and many aspects of Malay *adat* are understood as traditionally tolerant. *Adat*, inclined towards secularism, has functioned as a framework for preserving a harmonious balance amidst the influences of Islam and Westernization. As maintained by Khoo (2011), *adat* which is of Arabic origins, is best understood as local customary laws that are deemed originally Malay prior to the advent of Islam.

Meanwhile, *akhlak*, refers to laudable values that should be practised by all Muslims. Kennedy (2021) proposed that *akhlak* which also originates from an Arab word, is best understood as characteristics, behaviours or traits that comply with Islamic laws. Furthermore, *akhlak* is also well regarded as a set of universal traits to be righteously followed as all human beings are expected to adhere to God's doctrine. Those who adhere to *akhlak* are regarded as praiseworthy because good *akhlak* (character) and effective leadership are the foundation for the development of education and the formation of superior civilization (Pa & Idris, 2008).

Finally, *budi*, which resembles *akhlak*, refers to other good values that may not be linked directly to Islamic values. They are the universal good traits that make a person wholesome and righteous. As stated by E. M. Hussain (2019), *budi*, a concept closely linked to *akhlak*, includes traits such as kindness and compassion towards others. Highly revered in the Malay community,

budi entails repaying and reciprocating good deeds done to us. *Budi* and Malay culture are deeply interconnected, forming a crucial structure in the Malay community. Scholars have examined how *budi* is closely embedded to the Malay identity and culture in various contexts. *Budi*, integral to Malay culture, deeply influences mindset and behaviour, guiding social interactions with an emphasis on positive values and mutual benefits (Dahlan 1991; Wan Norhasniah 2011; Lim 2003; Mohd. Taib 1989; Tham 1971). Often synonymous with ethics and intellect, it reflects the essence of Malay culture, as highlighted by scholars (Wan Norhasniah 2011; Syed Husin 2008b; Lim 2003).

HOME, SOCIAL SPACES AND NATURAL LANDSCAPES

In discussing how places are able to influence the protagonist's experiences, emotions and behaviours from the psychogeographical standpoint, it is first crucial to set the spatial parameter under examination. In analysing Lat's *Kampung Boy* (1979), three spaces are identified as the most pertinent in influencing the protagonist's childhood journey; home, communal places and natural landscapes. Home refers to the specific *kampung* wooden house where Mat grew up, spending his childhood with his parents and siblings. Communal places include his school, mosque, and wedding venue, where social interactions shape his experiences. Lastly, natural landscapes encompass rivers and play areas, offering a direct connection to nature. These are the places that profoundly influence Mat as he navigates the realms of *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi*. Despite the absence of towering skyscrapers, historical monuments or modern malls in the protagonist's *kampung*, Mat's life is far from being devoid of any fun and excitement. Everyday spaces like home, communal spots (bus stop, restaurants, schools etc) and natural landscapes have had significant impact on his life, granting him a childhood brimming with endearing moments and memories as his attachment to these places grows of him. Notably, place attachment can develop through positive or negative connections. When this attachment becomes strong enough, individuals may find it difficult to exist independently of that place. Ultimately, when individuals become deeply integrated with their surroundings, a sense of place identity emerges, making them inseparable from their environment (Hutchison, 2018).

A home is a space that houses our recollections, imagination and ambitions. It is the same space where life experiences dealing with physical and context are formed which eventually enables us to establish our self-identity (Rowles & Chaudhury, 2005). Evidently, home is also the space that has impacted Mat most profoundly and it is not difficult to see why. Home, as noted by Richardson (2018), is not merely the physical space that shelters us from danger or harm, the concept of home entails the shared connection between individuals and their space. The notion of home can be constructed and reconstructed as we live in it, shaping our experiences and relationships with others who share the space with us. Meanwhile, Fox (2016) argued that most people's perception of home gravitates toward the positive where home is often linked to an environment teeming with love, security and encouragement. The home and the self our two elements that cannot be separated and both depend of each other for continuous existence. This is in line with what Marcus (2006) observed where to him, home and childhood form a strong connection. While childhood marks the time when we begin to build our conscious of self, we often try to reminisce this period through memories of the places that we once lived in. Since birth, home has served as the space for Mat to learn the Malay ethics and values expected of a child.

When Mat is old enough to venture outside from his home, the parameter of his exploration widens correspondingly. This is when he gets to be at communal places like his teacher's home, bus stop or even convenience stores within the *kampung*. In line with this, Bridger (2022) maintains that in the subject of public places, psychogeography urges people to evaluate how their environment and surroundings bring about personal and social changes by looking at how public spaces can transcend beyond their production and consumption purposes. In the same veins, according to Ellard (2015), within built spaces like homes, offices, or places of education and entertainment, individuals are bound to feel emotionally responsive. The built spaces can affect our feelings, attitudes, and behaviours, from feelings of insignificance to a desire to connect with something larger, perhaps even the divine. The fact that Mat begins to explore these places as a child means that these places will have significant impact on him especially in association with his Malay identity. Rieh (2020) emphasised the significance of the sense of place, especially in childhood, as it has a lasting impact on children's psyche. Adults' emotional connections and perceptions of specific places are influenced by the cognitive foundations established during childhood. This resonates well with the notion of 'space identity' as explained by Murphy (2018). As he noted, people actually form beliefs related to themselves by responding to their physical environments.

Then, there are also natural landscapes that also have an equally impactful presence in Mat's life in the *kampung*. With regard to nature, Tso (2020) explained that in the lens of psychogeography, society is regarded as a civilized form of nature while the world is seen as an extension of societies. Hence, nature's influence in the domain of psychogeography is significantly undetachable. The importance of nature as a nurturing space is also highlighted by Sandberg et al. (2014) who noted while many agree with the claim that the highly modernised and industrialised world is limiting one's emotional engagement with the natural landscape, psychogeographers would counteract this by immersing themselves with nature where their body, mind and emotion can sync with nature. Hence, places like forests and the woods are great places that can offer therapeutic spaces that are affectively appealing.

METHODOLOGY

This study is an attempt to conduct a textual analysis of the selected text through the lens of psychogeography, highlighting how the three identified spaces play a crucial role in solidifying the Malay identity of the text's protagonist, Mat. Hence, the analysis will be divided into three sections, focusing on each identified space. The initial stage of Mat's life revolves around his exploration of his home, an ordinary wooden house located within a Malay *kampung*. It is within this same space where Mat is able to learn the essential values encapsulated in *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi*. As a result of being an observant child, Mat is perceptive towards the actions of the adults around him do as he grows up. Be it the birth ceremony, altercation between his parents, or being disciplined by his father for stealing tin, each event contributes to his understanding of these concepts of *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi*. The analysis draws connection between the effectiveness of the lessons learnt and Mat's emotional attachment with his home. As this study emphasises the role of place in shaping Mat's experiences through the lens of psychogeography, the analysis is organized into three sections based on different settings. The first section focuses on his home, the foundation of his early upbringing. The second examines communal spaces, which he explores as he grows older. Finally, the third explores natural landscapes, which serve as the backdrop for his childhood games and bonding moments with his father.

When Mat reaches school age, he is then allowed to explore beyond the space of his home where he begins to explore communal places such as the home of the teacher of the religious class, the school, the home of a relative and the bus stop. Through his interaction with these places, these places begin to grow on him, and this eventually enables him to once again absorb essential values within the purview *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi*. The analysis will especially focus on illustrating how these interactions further deepen his understanding of *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi*, showing the influence of communal spaces on his character development and Malay identity formation.

Then there are natural landscapes, which also play a crucial role in fuelling Mat's psychogeographical inclination. The three types of natural landscapes- the river, mining pond, and rubber plantations serve as the perfect backdrops for Mat as he continues to learn from the people he meets throughout his childhood. As his attachment to these natural landscapes grows stronger, lessons he learns in relation to *adat*, *akhlak* and *budi* also begin to leave a more enduring impact on him. Although Mat leaves his kampung at the age of 10 to attend high school in Ipoh, these spaces; home, communal places, and natural landscapes, undoubtedly play a pivotal role in strengthening his Malay identity as he is exposed to the values linked with *adat*, *akhlak* and *budi*. The analysis highlights how psychogeographical effects impact Mat's Malay identity formation through the aspects of *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi*. Although people are crucial agents in passing on the lessons to Mat, the significance of these spaces shall not be undermined as they have the power to impact his internal world. This illustrates the enduring impact of these spaces on his psyche and the lessons learned. Whether they are traditional rituals, Islamic values, or secular values, these values become deeply ingrained in Mat's character, akin to the lasting impact of the places he has interacted with and experienced.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

IDENTITY FORMATION BEGINS AT HOME



FIGURE 1. Home

Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

As highlighted earlier, our home holds our earliest recollections, memories and experiences and one's attachment to home is particularly strong during the period of childhood. As evident in the text, Mat's sense of attachment to his home has been formed since he is at a young age. His keen observations of his home's surroundings are beautifully depicted in the following lines:

On the lower level is the kitchen. Mum did her cooking on that table. It was also in the kitchen Mum bathed me, since I was too young to go to the river. From the window in the front part of the house I could see a rubber estate.

Our house was made of 'chengai' wood. The chengai tree gives very handsome timber that really lasts a long time.

Owing to Mat's observant nature, his attachment to his home began forming at a tender age. As a result of this newly-formed attachment, Mat is able to vividly remember significant moments that occur there. Upon closer reflection, each of those moments becomes ingrained in his recollection, enriching his life experiences as he learns more about *adat*, *akhlak* and *budi*. Mat's initiation into Malay *adat* takes places during his birth. The ceremony ensues after his birth serves Mat's initial encounter with Malay *adat*, signifying the beginning of his immersion into its traditions."

Dad also presented my grandmother with the following items:

A roast chicken

A plate of yellow rice

A batik sarong.

*These gifts were just a formality. On the 45th day, the day of my mother's complete recovery from her 'pantang' (taboo) period, I underwent some formalities myself. It was the *adapt cukur kepala* (my hair-shaving ceremony). Quite an affair; I must say. Dad invited neighbors and relatives, It was on this day that, just as the sun was rising, I was brought out of the house for the first time to feel the air outside*



FIGURE 2. Ceremonial Representation
Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

Although this account is recounted from the perspective of his mother as he is too young to remember specific events that takes place during that time, the impact of the mentioned *adat* would not have been so profound on Mat if not for his deep attachment to home. It is also noteworthy that it is in the very same home that Mat learns about the importance of prayer in Islam.

This is he where learns by observing his parents together with his younger sister; '*Maimunah and I would wish wait for Dad and Mum to finish their prayer before all of us had dinner*'.

Besides *adat*, Mat also picks up important life lessons related to the aspects of *akhlak* and *budi*. When Mat's mother reproached his father for his 'inappropriate behaviour' at their relatives' wedding ceremony, Mat learns what is deemed appropriate conduct for a Muslim man.

They danced the night away. Dad on the stage most of the time. On the whole it was a very happy occasion. But 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 bear her whisper in anger: "A father of two doesn't dance with cabaret girls, you know! That is meant for bachelors! Next time you do that I'll go on stage and pull you by the ears!" Dad kept quiet.

Under the influence of his friends, Mat is tempted to join in *dulang*-washing, an activity that some villagers resort to by finding tin using pans. Although the dredge operators will usually turn a blind eye to this activity, Mat's action is not received well by his father when he brings home what he has collected from the mining pond.

I retired early that night. My eyes were swollen because of the beating and my excessive weeping. And I once again became the subject of discussion between my parents. This time my mother complained that Father's punishment was too harsh. "He was just trying to show you that he is capable like the rest of boys," she said. He should do well in his studies," said Dad, "instead of stealing tin! His special examination is coming soon he must pass in order to be admitted to the boarding school in Ipoh.



FIGURE 3. Representation of Budi
Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

Mat learns the consequences of his action the hard way from his father and it is in the very same home that he sees how *budi* is upheld by his traditional father. Despite the mining company's leniency, stealing is unequivocally wrong. Through this experience, the value of *budi* is then etched on Mat's memory as he learns the importance of education and being a person who embodies *akhlak* and *budi*. Hence, Mat's home at his *kampung* is not merely a wooden structure that provides shelter to his family, it is a space when he imbibes the true values of *adat*, *akhlak* and *budi* that ultimately shapes his Malay identity.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD



FIGURE 4. Representation of the Village
Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

Even at a tender age, Mat's enthusiasm and zest for life are evidently discernible as he immerses himself in his *kampung*. As his observant nature grows, Mat begins to realise the vast opportunities awaiting exploration beyond the boundaries of his home. With this understanding, he sees just how important being with a community really is. Notably, the existence of a community hinges of spaces that provide platforms for the people to interact and socialize. Mat's predilection to become a part of the community is evident here as he slowly observes and endeavours to blend in with it.

This is our town. Next to the dispensary on the left 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. When the shopping was done we would proceed to a tea stall in front of the village mosque. Here the kampung men met and had long conversations over coffee and tea. I would join in the talk. However, I could not follow their conversations.

Religious education plays a pivotal role in shaping the identity of the children in the *kampung*, particularly for children of Malay descent whose parents will insist on having their children taught the right Islamic values and virtues since young. Unexpectedly, the most valuable lessons that Mat learns from his religious teacher, Tuan Syed Ahmad's home, expose Mat to the beauty of *adat*.

My enrolment in the class was done in the traditional way. I can still remember clearly what happened. 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 over my son to you in the hope that you'll teach him the Koran. Treat him as if he is your own child...if he is stubborn or naughty don't hesitate to punish him with this cane- as long don't break any of his bones or blind him.' Tuan Syed took the cane and nodded. Thus ended the formality. But I noticed the teacher already had his own cane.

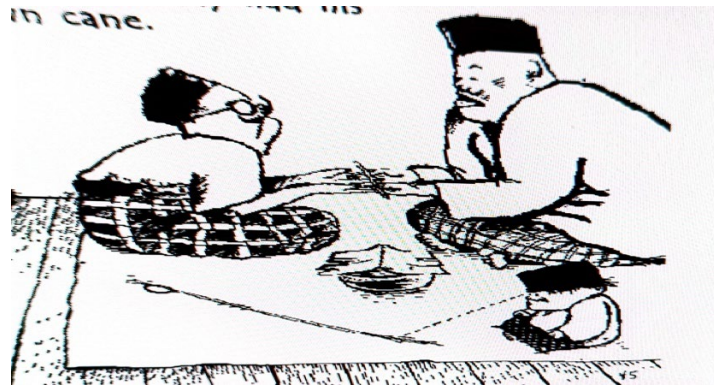


FIGURE 5. Representation of *Adat*
Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

The simplest acts of *adat* that highlight the values such as appreciation and trust between a parent and the teacher is well captured within the above excerpt. Viewed through the eyes of a child, it slowly turns a lesson that draws him closer to the realm of Malay *adat*, igniting the flames of his Malay identity.

Waiting inside were the Kathi (judge), other guests, and witness. There was no sign of the bride because in this Akad Nikah ceremony only the groom needed by the Kathi to sign the marriage papers. Then came the tricky part. Watched by witnesses, the groom was asked to recite after the Kathi the holy words of matrimony in one breath. In my cousin's case, he had to do it three times because the witnesses weren't satisfied until the third time.

Mat once again witnesses the display of *adat* at his first trip out of his kampung, when he attends the Nikah ceremony in his relatives' house. Witnessing the prom and circumstance of the said ceremony in his cousin's house, an event attended by many guests and relatives, transforms the house into a communal space that day. With the accompaniment of strange and familiar faces, another chapter of Malay *adat* unfolds beautifully in front of Mat, fostering him closer to his Malay identity.



FIGURE 6 Representation of *Adat*
Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

However, the communal spaces do not only serve as the backdrop for the portrayal of *adat*, these spaces also allow Mat to learn other valuable life lessons associated to *akhlak* and *budi*.

First thing on Friday morning we'd go to help arrange mats at the mosque for the Friday prayer. There'd be a big crowd later. Pak Alang, the mosque caretaker, would give us yellow rich with beef curry in return for this little help.

In the mosque, Mat learns the importance of being helpful to each other and how there is a role that everyone can play in ensuring the Friday prayer session proceeds smoothly. Payment in kind is not just a gesture; it teaches Mat the value of friendship and camaraderie over money in a community where spirits run high.

I still remember what my grandmother said while we waited for the bus: "Listen...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 kampung."

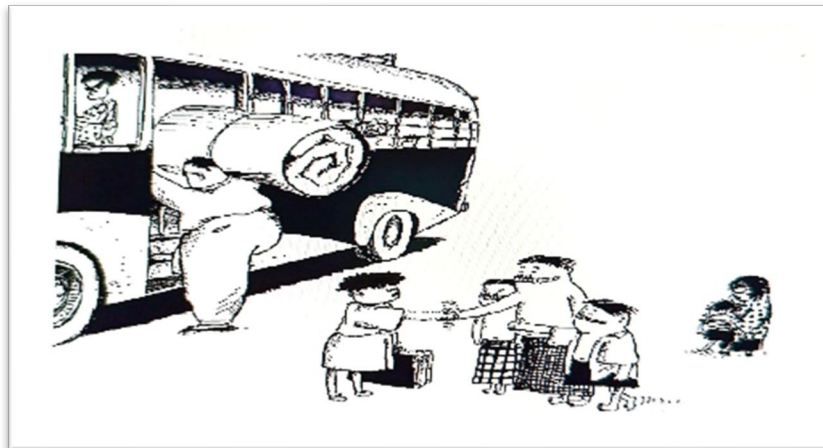


FIGURE 7. Representation of Communal Space
Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

The communal space that impacts Mat's life most profoundly is the bus stop. During the emotional send-off, Mat learns the true essence of *budi* from his grandmother who reminds of the importance of humility and remembering his roots. This resonates deeply with the Malay culture, instilling in Mat a renewed sense of Malay identity as he embarks on a new chapter of life in the city.

THE NATURE BOY

Nature plays a role in forming our identity. In the words of Clayton & Opotow (2003), nature and identities are closely related because our interaction and experience with nature would give us an identity. Nature for instance, can contribute to group identities such as bird watchers, hikers or hunter and this means that environmental identities do contribute to social meaning. Furthermore, children's attitudes are shaped by the experiences and attitudes passed down by their teachers, grandparents and parents even if they eventually reject some of these beliefs and values when they become adults (Davy, 2019).

The biggest dissimilarity between the *kampung* and big cities is the abundance of natural spaces once gets to immerse oneself into within the *kampung*. Mat's childhood is no exception when it comes to being blessed with opportunities to be close with mother nature. The natural landscapes are not just merely the backdrops that enrich Mat's childhood experience, they are instrumental in instilling *Malayness* into his identity. Some of the fondest memories Mat has with his father occur at the river, regarded as the source of life for the villagers.

I remember Dad telling us an astonishing fact about the weavers. "These birds are very clever," he said. "When the time comes for mama weaver to lay eggs, papa weaver will do anything to make her comfortable. "He will catch a firefly at night and take it back to light up their home." Dad knew a lot about such things.



FIGURE 8. Representation of the Weavers
Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

While Mat's father story might seem like casual conversation that carries little significant meaning, Mat takes to his heart the values behind the story. The story of papa weaver brims with the beauty of *budi*, teaching Mat the importance of familial love, support and responsibility. The essence of *budi* is passed down subconsciously to Mat during the bonding session between him and his father in the embrace of the river.

Then 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 special people that day. Even for this simple dip the guests-including women and girls-followed and watched us.

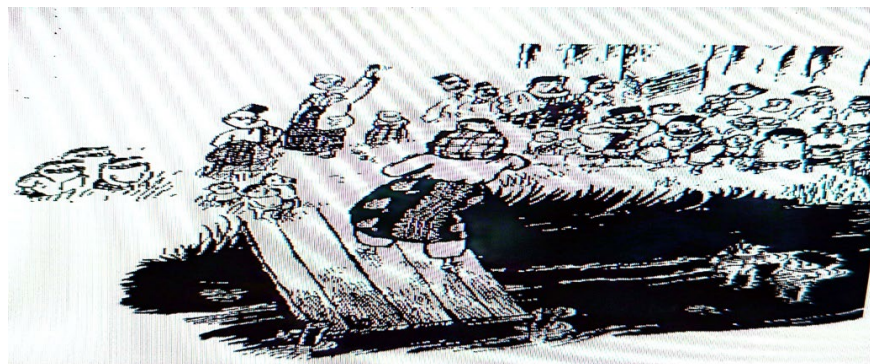


FIGURE 9. Representation of Embracing the River
Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

Furthermore, the river's significance is equally notable as it provides the backdrop for Mat to experience *adat* once again during the circumcision ceremony. Deemed as the momentous ceremony for all male Muslim adolescents, circumcision marks a new phase for them as they transition into puberty. When examined closely, the *adat* will not be so profoundly impactful to Mat if not for the tradition of dipping in the river, which all the boys, including Mat, had to partake in. The memories of the ceremony are etched permanently in Mat's heart as it takes place in the river to which Mat is closely attached to. These memories serve as the essence that instills *Malayness* into Mat's identity.



FIGURE 10. Representation of Natural Landscape and Identity
Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

"You should know about this plantation." 'Soon I'm planning to replant this land with high-yielding rubber. But first I have to get some people to clear it., he said. ...But I hesitated and said: "But father...why not let the man who looks after this plantation take care of that?" Dad seemed annoyed... Because this land is going to be yours! You are my eldest son. When you have grown up this plantation will be in your name! you will look after it!

Undeniably, natural landscapes enable a lot of father and son moment to take place during Mat's childhood. As seen in the following excerpt, the rubber plantation becomes the space where Mat learns the values of responsibility that resonate with *budi*. His father's advice quickly becomes the lessons that remind Mat of being responsible when dealing with inheritance. In the rubber plantation, Mat learns how important it is to be self-reliant and that one should invest in effort in safeguarding their own '*rezeki*' (rewards). Relying on others to safeguard our own rewards is reprehensibly irresponsible.

A closer examination reveals that the places Mat explores in his childhood are not just settings he happens to encounter as he grows up. Instead, they serve as spaces that gradually impart the essence of *adat*, *akhlak*, and *budi*, shaping his identity. Though the process is slow and subtle, its impact is lifelong.

CONCLUSION

The process of identity formation of a child is filled with complexities and nuances. Hence, tracing it is never an easy task as it is a subtle process that transpires by default or design. Whenever identity formation is examined, people are often regarded as the main agents in this process. This study highlights the significant role of the environments where a child's experiences unfold. As evident in this study, the spaces that serve as the backdrops of a child's narratives are the formidable force that solidifies his identity. This once again highlights the notion that the places that we find ourselves in do have great impact on our experiences, emotions and behaviours. Through the combined forces of *adat*, *akhlak* and *budi*, Mat's life is enriched with the intricate values linked with the Malay culture. Through his meaningful interaction with the surroundings, the essence ingrained within *adat*, *akhlak* and *budi* are unlocked, becoming the defining elements that form Mat's Malay identity embedded within the vicinity of a *kampung*. Not only does this align well with the concept of psychogeography, it reinforces the core argument of how our surroundings are not to be undermined. They are the spaces that not only serve as the settings to our narratives; they are the invisible guides that lead us to our desired goals as we navigate through the journey we dearly call, life. While this study only focuses on one particular text, further studies may delve into other local texts that explore such notions of identity formation through the psychogeographical lens. Lat's *Kampung Boy* (1979) is not merely a comic book that captures the Malaysian essence through story-telling, it also holds with it numerous scholarly codes waiting to be decoded. Hence, it is almost certain that the text will always have a special place in Malaysians' hearts because it is in the past that we draw the inspiration from to keep progressing and prospering as a nation. If the essence of this study were to be captured in one succinct point, it highlights how Mat aptly epitomises the phrase 'You can take a Malay boy out from the kampung but you can never take the kampung out from a Malay boy', revealing how psychogeography forms the equilibrium that makes it possible for cultural identity and places to exist interdependently.

REFERENCES

- Abdullah, R., Martinez, P., & Radzi, W. Mohd. (2010). ISLAM AND ADAT: Considering the wife's moral contribution in the division of *harta sepencharian* in Malaysia. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 38(111), 161–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2010.489349>
- Ali, K. K. (2022). A discourse on the Malay cultural identity within the Malaysian society. *Kajian Malaysia*, 40(1), 83–107. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2022.40.1.5>
- Amran, N. A., & Termizi, A. A. (2020). The Visible Flâneuse in Chan Ling Yap's Where the Sunrise is Red. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 26(2), 81–93. <https://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2020-2602-06>
- Bridger, A. J. (2022). *Psychogeography and Psychology: In and Beyond the Discipline*. Routledge.
- Bunnell, T., Parthasarathy, D., & Thompson, E. C. (2012). *Cleavage, connection and conflict in rural, urban and contemporary Asia*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Chan, H. Y. (2018). *Special relationship in the Malay world: Indonesia and Malaysia*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Clayton, S. D., & Opotow, S. (2003). *Identity and the natural environment: the psychological significance of nature*. Mit Press.
- Dahlan, H.M. 1991. Local values in intercultural management. *Malaysian Management Review* 1: 45–50.
- Davy, A. (2019). *A Sense of Place*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

- De Asildo, N. Z. S., Yasin, M., Abdullah, N. S. M., & Mokhtar, M. M. (2022). An overview of akhlak and moral concepts and their relevance to moral education in Malaysia. *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, 12(4S), 101. <https://doi.org/10.5296/jpag.v12i4s.20574>
- Ellard, C. (2015). *Places of the heart: The Psychogeography of Everyday Life*. Bellevue Literary Press.
- Fanany, R., & Fanany, I. (2018). *The Elderly Must Endure: Ageing in the Minangkabau Community in modern Indonesia*. Iseas Publishing.
- Fischer, J. (2011). *The Halal Frontier*. Springer.
- Forth, G. L. (2021). *Guardians of the Land in Kelimado: Louis Fontijne's Study of a Colonial District in Eastern Indonesia*. BRILL.
- Fox, M. A. (2016). *Home: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Goddard, M & Halligan, B. (2013). *Mark E. Smith and The Fall: Art, Music and Politics*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Hashim, R., & Faizal, F. (2016). Psychogeography of Kuala Lumpur in Nassury Ibrahim's Selected Poems. *Malay Literature*, 29, 165–182. [https://doi.org/10.37052/ml.29\(2\)no3](https://doi.org/10.37052/ml.29(2)no3)
- Hussain, E. M. (2019). *Simbol dan Makna dalam Pantun Melayu: Siri Ilmiah APM-ITBM*. Malaysian Institute of Translation & Books.
- Hussain, R. B. M. (2021). *Labelling identity: Malay Student Identity Adjustment in Australia*. Partridge Publishing Singapore.
- Hutchison, E. D. (2018). *Dimensions of human behavior: Person and Environment*. SAGE Publications.
- Jerome, C., Hashim, R. S., & Ting, S.-H. (2016). Multiple Literary Identities in Contemporary Malaysian Literature: An Analysis of Readers' Views on Heroes by Karim Raslan. *3L the Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 22(3), 35–47. <https://doi.org/10.17576/3l-2016-2203-03>
- Kahn, J. S. (2006). *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*. NUS Press.
- Kamal, S. S. L. A., & Ghani, F. A. (2014). Emotional Intelligence and Akhlak among Muslim Adolescents in one of the Islamic Schools in Johor, South Malaysia. *Procedia: Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 114, 687–692. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.12.768>
- Kennedy, K. J. (2021). *Social Studies Education in South and South East Asian contexts*. Routledge.
- Khaidzir, M. F. S., Hashim, R. S., & Yusof, N. M. (2021). Nor Faridah's Wanderings as Female Flâneur in The Art of Naming. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 21(3), 140–153. <https://doi.org/10.17576/GEMA-2021-2103-08>
- Khalid, A. Z. A., Mahmad, M. A., Yassin, K. M., Zain, A. M., Hamid, S. A., Rahman, M. N. A., Ishak, I., Adon, I., Ahmad, M., & Mohamed, Z. (2021). *Penghayatan Etika dan Peradaban (UUM Press)*. UUM Press.
- Khoo, G. C. (2011). *Reclaiming adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*. UBC Press.
- Lim, K.H. (2003) *Budi as the Malay Mind: A Philosophical Study of Malay Ways of Reasoning and Emotion in Peribahasa*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Hamburg]. UM Research Repository. <https://eprints.um.edu.my/28892/>
- Marcus, C. C. (2006). *House as a mirror of self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*. Nicolas-Hays, Inc.
- Milner, A. (2011). *The Malays*. John Wiley & Sons.

- Murphy, J. (2018). *Attachment, Place, and otherness in Nineteenth-Century American literature: New Materialist Representations*. Routledge.
- Pa, A. N., & Idris, N. (2008). *Perjuangan memperkasakan pendidikan di Malaysia: pengalaman 50 tahun merdeka*. Utusan Publications.
- Rahman, N. a. A. (2006). *Colonial image of Malay adat Laws: A Critical Appraisal of Studies on Adat Laws in the Malay Peninsula during the Colonial Era and Some Continuities*. BRILL.
- Richardson, C., Yaapar, M. S., & Amir, S. (2016). Budi and Malay workplace ethics. *Journal of Asia Business Studies*, 10(1), 78–92. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jabs-02-2015-0018>
- Richardson, J. (2018). *Place and identity: The Performance of Home*. Routledge.
- Rieh, S. (2020). *Creating a sense of place in school environments: How Young Children Construct Place Attachment*. Routledge.
- Rowles, G. D. & Chaudhury, H. (2005). *Home and identity in late life: International Perspectives*. Springer Publishing Company.
- Saad, H. B. M. (2023). *Morals and Ethics: An Introduction*. Google Playbook.
- Sandberg, L. A., Bardekjian, A., & Butt, S. (2014). *Urban forests, trees, and greenspace: A Political Ecology Perspective*. Routledge.
- Seach, J. B. (2024). Tracing female resilience in KL Noir: Magic through the lenses of psychogeography and carnivalesque. *3L the Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 30(2), 91–105. <https://doi.org/10.17576/3l-2024-3002-07>
- Setiawan Gunardi, Mualimin Mochammad Sahid, Amir, Azman Ab Rahman, Abdul, A., Mohammed Ashraf Ali, Fithriah Wardi, Rahim, N., & Mohamad Ikwan Hami. (2017). Konsep Al-Adah Muhakkamah Dalam Pewarisan Tanah Adat Menurut Adat Perpatih Di Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Syariah and Law*, 5(2), 161–177. <https://doi.org/10.33102/mjssl.vol5no2.67>
- Sim, C. C. (2012). Fictionalized history: signifying changes to the Malaysian nation and identity. *IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.22492/ijl.1.1.04>
- Siew Chin, L., Kiu Choon, T. C., Ahmad Zabidi, N., & Abu Hassan, B. R. (2017, September 29). Lat's Comics and the Articulation of the Malaysian Cultural Landscape. *3L the Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 23(3), 158–170. <https://doi.org/10.17576/3l-2017-2303-12>
- Smith, M. P., & Bender, T. (2017). *City and nation: Rethinking Place and Identity*. Routledge.
- Teh, W. H. W., & Dahlan, N. S. M. (2020). The clash of rural and urban values in the comic books *Budak Kampung and Mat Som*. *Malay Literature*, 33(2), 212–242. [https://doi.org/10.37052/ml33\(2\)no4](https://doi.org/10.37052/ml33(2)no4)
- Tso, A. (2020). *The Literary Psychogeography of London: Otherworlds of Alan Moore, Peter Ackroyd, and Iain Sinclair*. Springer Nature.
- Von Benzon, N., Holton, M., Wilkinson, C., & Wilkinson, S. (2021). *Creative methods for human geographers*. SAGE.
- Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin. 2011. Budi-Islam: Its role in the construction of Malay identity in Malaysia. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science 1*: 132–142.
- Yusoff, I. (2018). *Pengenalan Sains Sosial (Edisi kedua) (UUM Press)*. UUM Press.
- Zainal, H., & Nasir, K. M. (2021). *The Primordial Modernity of Malay Nationality: Contemporary Identity in Malaysia and Singapore*. Routledge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003198215>
- Zainurul Aniza Rahman, & Nasya Yadi Bahfen. (2014). Imagining Kampung: The Rural and Urban Icons of Malaysia in The Cartoons of Lat. *Malaysian Journal of Media Studies* 16(1), 63–74. <https://jpmmm.um.edu.my/index.php/JPMMM/article/view/9010/6359>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Seach Jin Beng (Ph.D) is Assistant Professor at TAR UMT, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His primary interests are in English literature, critical thinking, language and media, and Dharma in Buddhism. He also focuses on scholarly discussions of aestheticism and the grotesque in literary texts. He also enjoys traveling and listening to TED Talks.

Jeslyn Sharnita Amarasekera (Ph.D) is Associate Professor at TAR UMT, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Her main research interest is in transnational Asian literature in English, specifically in inter-ethnic engagement within literary and cultural texts, with reference to individual identity and ethnic diversity. She is also drawn to exploring wokeness and popular culture.