Modern Asian Studies (2026), 1–29
doi:10.1017/S0026749X26102194

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Experience, person, and myth: A socio-cultural history of the 'oily man' in post-colonial Malaysia and Singapore

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(Received 15 September 2025 UTC; revised 5 April 2026 UTC; accepted 10 June 2026 UTC)

Abstract

Drawing on English, Chinese, and Malay newspapers, this article examines the 'oily man', a figure who shifted between sexual assailant, ghost, and intruder across twentieth-century Singapore and urban and semi-urban peninsular Malaya/Malaysia. It situates him not as a timeless 'Malay' entity but as an elastic label and repertoire, assembled and reassembled through rumours, retellings, and recurring events. Departing from most studies of Malay-world monsters, which reduce such figures to allegories or cinematic symbols of gender, modernity, or social change, this article demonstrates how the oily man's historical force lay in intrusions, panics, and community responses—events mediated, disputed, and reworked across time and place. His history is framed through three registers: experience, person, and myth, which trace how this elastic label took shape through encounter, attribution, and retelling. Experience captures sightings, rumours, and assaults that animated fear; person traces how individuals were accused or apprehended as oily men; myth designates the narratives and repertoires that amplified these encounters in film, fiction, and folklore. Across these registers, the article shows how monsters emerge through lived circulations of testimony, attribution, and storytelling. It highlights the value of historical research that privileges experience and offers a framework for future scholarship: monsters as unstable, context-specific composites of encounter, narrative, and transmission that illuminate the entanglements of state, society, culture, and religion in post-colonial Malaysia and Singapore, with resonance for the study of rumour and monstrosity elsewhere in Asia.

Keywords: Oily man (*orang minyak*); rumour; experience; Malaysia; Singapore

Introduction

Across the twentieth century in Malaya and Singapore, and into the present, fear gathered around a figure slick with oil. The 'oily man' (M. *orang minyak*; Ch. *you gui zai* 油鬼仔, literally 'oily ghost-fellow') slipped through doors and windows, peered into dormitories, assaulted women, or drew crowds into the streets screaming '*hantu*'

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(ghost). In 1932, he surfaced in the press as a burglar turned molester; in 1954 he was a carnival spectacle on Queen Street, toppling police cordons; in 1957 he haunted Clementi Estate, prompting soldiers with shoot-on-sight orders and *kadhi*s offering Quranic remedies; by the 1990s he was even trapped in a bucket in Kota Tinggi. Was he a thief, rapist, ghost, or object? He endured not for what he was, but because stories about him kept circulating, retold until they took on a life of their own. This article traces the history of that circulation.

Drawing on English, Chinese, and Malay newspapers, this article argues that the oily man was not a timeless 'Malay' ghost but an elastic label and a repertoire continually assembled and reassembled across settings and actors. Following Ann Swidler, we read accounts surrounding the figure as assembled, pragmatic resources rather than fixed beliefs—episodes, idioms, and assumptions deployed and recombined to make sense of unsettling events, legitimize actions, and negotiate tensions in various historical contexts.[1] Rather than a stable supernatural type, the oily man took shape through multiple and diverse influences across time, language, and social setting. The oily man's force lay in circulation and constant reworking: situational and contested, he never congealed into a single profile. Oil, burglary, sorcery, sexual menace, even Faustian pacts, appeared in shifting combinations. What began as unease about intrusion was circulated and refracted through the oily man label, amplified by witnesses, journalists, and circumstance, until it cohered as a category mobilized in different ways across time and space.

Rumour, reports, and circulation

This repertoire belongs within the wider history of rumour in post-colonial Asia. Unlike gossip, rumour was diffuse and untargeted, its script shifting with circumstance even as familiar forms endured; indeed 'it is not even possible to find out their sources', and in many cases, 'there is not only one source'—a maxim well suited to oily man reports.[2] Because rumour destabilized politics, it raised recurring questions of authority, circulation, and control across Asia. In China, the 1768 'Soulstealing' panic analysed by Philip Kuhn, and later stories of organ-harvesting blamed first on missionaries and then on Soviet agents, showed how rumour could trigger sweeping anxieties about outsiders and state power.[3] The tenuous British presence in South Asia before and after the 1857 Mutiny has likewise generated landmark studies on the

[1]Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 24–42.

[2]Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 29–58. The quotations are derived from Martin Sökefeld, 'Rumours and Politics on the Northern Frontier: The British, Pakhtun Wali and Yaghestan', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2002, p. 336.

[3]Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Barend ter Haar, *Telling Stories: Witchcraft and Scapegoating in Chinese History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 154–201; Barend J. ter Haar, *The Fear of Witchcraft and Witches in Imperial China: Figurines, Familiars and Demons* (Leiden: Brill, 2025), pp. 383–418; Steve Smith, 'Fear and Rumour in the People's Republic of China in the 1950s', *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2008, pp. 275–280.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

political force of rumour.[4] In Singapore, Loh Kah Seng shows how *kampong* (village) fires produced rumours that foregrounded clashes between developmentalist state and grassroots, while in Indonesia tales of headhunting or organ theft tied to construction projects and state collusion played a comparable role.[5] In all these settings, participants, officials, and sceptics formed a circuit where rumour, imagery, and anxiety fed each other—never settled, always generative. The oily man repertoire shared this generative instability, but its relation to authority was less oppositional: rather than consistently targeting the state or colonial outsiders, it drew authorities into the work of verifying and managing rumour.

This difference also shaped how the figure was attributed. Across the late colonial and early post-colonial settings examined in this article, Malaya and Singapore were marked by mobility across the wider Nusantara and beyond, and by the social heterogeneity of what Maurice Freedman, following Furnivall, characterized as a 'plural society'.[6] In the urban and semi-urban settings that constitute the main source base of this article, the oily man did not attach to any single ethnic group, but circulated instead across plural publics and socially mixed environments. Whereas most rumours fixed on a marked 'other'—missionary, migrant, or ethnically distinct stranger—the oily man embodied suspicion itself, a menace suspended in indeterminacy. He circulated not by reinforcing community boundaries but by unsettling the very possibility of drawing them.

Rethinking the supernatural: Beyond folklore, ethnography, and film

Our second intervention is methodological. Three approaches have dominated the study of Southeast Asian supernatural figures: folklore, ethnography, and film. All share a tendency to reduce spirits and monsters to symbols—of nation, gender, modernity, or politics—rather than treating them as situated social phenomena. Folklore

[4]The literature on this is immense; among others, see Sökefeld, 'Rumours and Politics', pp. 299–340; Homi K. Bhabha, 'In a Spirit of Calm Violence', in *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, (ed.) Gyan Prakash (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 326–343; Kim A. Wagner, '"Treading upon Fires": The "Mutiny"-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India', *Past & Present*, vol. 218, no. 1, 2013, pp. 159–197; Kate Brittlebank, 'Tales of Treachery: Rumour as the Source of Claims that Tipu Sultan was Betrayed', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2003, pp. 195–211; Rajesh Rai, 'The 1857 Panic and the Fabrication of an Indian "Menace" in Singapore', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2013, pp. 365–405.

[5]Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore*, new ed. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), pp. xxiii–xxvi, 23–24, 175–181; R. A. Drake, 'Construction Sacrifice and Kidnapping Rumor Panics in Borneo', *Oceania*, vol. 59, 1989, pp. 269–279; Nils Bubandt, 'From Head-hunter to Organ-thief: Verisimilitude, Doubt, and Plausible Worlds in Indonesia and Beyond', *Oceania*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2017, pp. 38–57; Gregory Forth, 'Heads Under Bridges or in Mud: Reflections on a Southeast Asian "Diving Rumour"', *Anthropology Today*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2009, pp. 3–6, esp. p. 5. Colonial Singapore likewise saw rumours that labourers were decapitated for use in construction foundations, though attribution remained diffuse and not consistently tied to any single group. See also 'Extremely Foolish Rumours', *The Straits Budget*, 27 August 1908; 'Head-Hunting Rumour', *The Straits Times*, 27 August 1908; 'Headhunters in Singapore!', *The Straits Budget*, 30 March 1911.

[6]Maurice Freedman, 'The Growth of a Plural Society in Malaya', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 2, June 1960, pp. 158–168.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

studies, from colonial collections to contemporary analyses, cast such figures as survivals of 'belief', timeless relics of the past, yet remain strikingly presentist, privileging style, performance, or narrative form while neglecting the historical conditions of origin, circulation, and transformation.[7] Contemporary anthropologies and ethnographies, though valuable in showing how spirits are lived today—through accounts of shifting spirit cosmologies, magic monks, or occult economies, notably in ostensibly Theravada mainland Southeast Asia—remain locked in a presentist frame: vivid and insightful in theorizing the now but often thin in historical depth.[8]

Of the three approaches, film and cultural studies have generated the largest amount of academic literature, and this article is at its core a response to their dominance. Fictionalized representations of the monstrous in the Malay world are parsed as symbols of gender, modernity, nationalism, or post-colonial conditions—especially in the deluge of studies on *Pontianak* (Kuntilanak) films, where they have been variously read through the lenses of Freudian modernity, tropicality, monstrosity, and decolonial feminism.[9] Such readings have generated important insights into the politics of representation, but by remaining more concerned with the screen than with social life, they rest on speculative reconstructions of audience impression and creative liberties that detach them from historical experiences that gave these figures their force.

This article resists that narrowing. We focus on lived experience to show that monsters cannot be reduced to symbols reflected in cinema, for rumours, encounters, and fears—real or imagined—gave them force. Yet the oily man cannot be understood apart from film, which shaped how people imagined and sought to subdue him, even as he was neither conjured by the screen nor reducible to it. He was named, feared,

[7]Walter W. Skeat, *Malay Magic: Being an Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula* (London: Macmillan, 1900); Maximo Ramos, 'The Aswang Syncrasy in Philippine Folklore', *Western Folklore*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1969, pp. 238–248; Paul G. Brewster, 'The Malayan Hantu Musang and Other Possession Games of Indonesia and Indochina', *Oriens*, vol. 11, nos. 1–2, 1958, pp. 162–176.

[8]Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Peter A. Jackson, *Capitalism Magic Thailand: Modernity with Enchantment* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021); Nicholas J. Long, 'Haunting Malayness: The Multicultural Uncanny in a New Indonesian Province', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2010, pp. 874–891; Timo Duile, 'Kuntilanak: Ghost Narratives and Malay Modernity in Pontianak, Indonesia', *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, vol. 176, nos. 2–3, 2020, pp. 279–303; Megan Sinnott, 'Baby Ghosts: Child Spirits and Contemporary Conceptions of Childhood in Thailand', *TRaNS: Trans-Regional-and-National Studies of Southeast Asia*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2014, pp. 293–317.

[9]For a sample of this flourishing field of study, see Justito Adiprasetio and A. Winda Larasati, 'Deconstructing Pocong, the Indonesian Sacred Ghost: A Diachronic Analysis of *Mumun* (2022), Indonesian Contemporary Horror Film', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2025, pp. 410–429; Rosalind Galt, *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); Alicia Izharuddin, 'The Laugh of the Pontianak: Darkness and Feminism in Malay Folk Horror', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 20, no. 7, November 2020, pp. 999–1012; Andrew Hock Soon Ng, 'Reimagining the Pontianak Myth in Malaysian Folk Horror: Flexible Tradition, Cinema and Cultural Memory', in *Monstrous Beings and Media Cultures: Folk Monsters, Im/materiality, Regionality*, (eds) Jordi Balanzategui and Alexandra Craven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), pp. 191–216; Sophia Siddique Harvey, 'Mapping Spectral Tropicality in *The Maid* and *Return to Pontianak*', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, pp. 24–33; Kenneth Paul Tan, 'Pontianaks, Ghosts and the Possessed: Female Monstrosity and National Anxiety in Singapore Cinema', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 34, no. 2, June 2010, pp. 151–170.

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and encountered in person—experience inflected but not governed by representation. We thus position our research within a growing body of historical scholarship that examines the Malay world through entanglement rather than neat binaries, attentive to culture, society, religion, and the contested terrains of truth-making across communities and authorities. Inter alia, Teren Sevea has demonstrated how the *pawang* and *bomoh* mediated between Islamic cosmologies, ritual techniques, and post-colonial resource economies; William Gibson how *keramat*s embodied palimpsest-like and contradictory regimes of interpretation; and Faizah Zakaria how everyday religion braided animist and monotheist forms in upland Sumatra and Malaya.[10] Together, these studies underscore the persistent hybridity through which the history of cultural and social life in the region unfolded—a perspective our article extends to oily man encounters.

The limits of the cinematic approach are clearest in Yogesh Tulsi's essay, the only sustained study of the oily man, which pushes the film-studies strand to its extreme. Predominantly informed by two 1958 films featuring the monster, he arrives at the flawed conclusion that the figure reflected 'a horrific assemblage of petrohorror', embodying the contradictions and tensions of Malaya and Singapore's reliance on the oil and petroleum industries.[11] His claim that 'there is no reference to the orang minyak in any sources prior to 1957' rests on poor method: by restricting his search to the Malay language daily *Berita Harian*, founded only in 1957, he guaranteed the conclusion, ignoring Anglophone and Chinese press reports from decades earlier.[12] This narrows a pan-ethnic phenomenon into a monolingual Malay frame, even though his own material depicts the oily man in inconsistent, non-Malay, and non-petroleum terms. The distortion deepens when he retrofits crude oil into reports that never mentioned it—describing hair oil, coconut oil, and soot, he treats everyday substances as if they prefigured petroleum. Crucially, Tulsi himself concedes that oil extraction only became significant in the 1960s, yet he even presses the *Sejarah Melayu*'s oiled elephant into service as if it prefigured crude oil.[13] This is projection, not argument: everyday lubricants are misleadingly recast as supposed antecedents of petroleum. While petroleum-driven post-war development formed part of the broader background of Singapore and Malaysia, the available evidence does not support making it central to the oily man's interpretation.

Tulsi's move is not eccentric; it parrots a wider academic fashion. Since the 1980s, anthropology has embraced what Adam Yuet Chau identified as an 'extractological turn', examining how oil, coal, and other resources reshaped communities.[14]

[10]Teren Sevea, 'Pawangs on the Frontier: Miracles, Prophets, and Divinities in the Ricefields of Modern Malaya', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2019, pp. 1106–43; Teren Sevea, *Miracles and Material Life: Rice, Ore, Traps and Guns in Islamic Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); William L. Gibson, *Keramat, Sacred Relics and Forbidden Idols in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 2024); Faizah Zakaria, *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant: Religion and Ecological Change in Maritime Southeast Asia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023).

[11]Yogesh Tulsi, 'An Oily Mirror: 1950s Orang Minyak Films as Singaporean Petrohorror', in *Eating Chilli Crab in the Anthropocene: Environmental Perspectives on Life in Singapore*, (ed.) Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2020), p. 177.

[12]Ibid., p. 164.

[13]Ibid., pp. 165–166.

[14]Adam Yuet Chau, 'Human Organs in Oil Tank Trucks: An Extractology', *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2017, p. 403.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Malay world has been central: from corporate disciplining of Malaysian factory women, to logging and deforestation, to studies of oil-palm economies and dispossession, and even to rumours of headhunting or organ trafficking as idioms of capitalist coercion.[15] Against this ethnographically grounded body of work, Tulsi's film-based reading treats the oily man chiefly as an allegory of fossil fuels and capitalist anxiety. In doing so, it falls within what Chau identifies as an 'anti-extraction imperative', marked by a 'blanket critique of neo-liberalism and hyper-commodification'.[16] Tulsi's reading illustrates the limits of an approach that asks symbolic interpretation to do too much explanatory work. As that framing has begun to circulate in later scholarship, it risks turning a speculative allegory into a citable account of a figure better understood through encounter, rumour, and historical response.[17]

The problem is not film analysis itself but its detachment from testimony and experience. Fictional representations matter only when read alongside rumours, arrests, and victims' accounts. As Nils Bubandt stressed in his study of headhunting and organ-theft rumours in Indonesia, rumours, press reports, and media coverage are not merely descriptions but 'co-producers of circumstances', inhabiting 'a field of verisimilitude in which fiction and fact, rumour and reality, are fundamentally blurred'.[18] Cinematic depictions of the oily man similarly drew on existing fears and reshaped them: monsters on screen shaped how communal panics were narrated, just as rumours fed back into cinematic tropes. Our aim is to resituate film within this loop—not as origin or allegory, but as one strand in a wider repertoire through which people made sense of the supernatural. The oily man is no free-floating allegory, but a formation of persons, encounters, and myths embedded in social life.

To capture that wider process historically, we organize this article through three analytic registers. We adapt Paul Cohen's study of the Boxer Movement's epistemological and framing devices—event, experience, and myth—here recast as experience, person, and myth. In Cohen's work, this approach serves a broader point about how historiographies come to be multifaceted even when dealing with the particularities of a specific event.[19] Here, we repurpose the framework for a different task. Rather than treating the oily man as a stable supernatural figure, we use it to trace how he took shape historically through encounter, attribution, and retelling. What emerges is not a fixed being but an elastic label, assembled and reassembled through diverse influences across time, space, and social setting.

[15]Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010 [1987]); Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Anu Lounela and Heikki Wilenius, 'Haunting the Factory: Indonesian Modernity and the Spiritual Landscape of Central Kalimantan', *Ethnos*, vol. 90, no. 1, 2025, pp. 128–148; Pujo Semedi, 'Palm Oil Wealth and Rumour Panics in West Kalimantan', *Forum for Development Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2014, pp. 233–252.

[16]Chau, 'Human Organs', pp. 402–403.

[17]Works that developed the interpretive framework of petrohorror include Kenneth Tay, 'A Well-oiled Engine: Towards a Critical Petro-aesthetics of Singapore', *Journal of Environmental Media*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2023, pp. 9–25; Shrabanee Khatai and Seema Kumari Ladsaria, 'Elucidating Petroleum Affinity in Modern Car Culture Through Monster Motors', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2024, pp. 399–414.

[18]Bubandt, 'From Head-hunter to Organ-thief', p. 38.

[19]Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The three sections that follow track that process from different angles. Although parts of the discussion concern a shared colonial history, Singapore and Malaysia followed distinct political trajectories after 1965. The source base used here therefore bears most directly on Singapore and urban or semi-urban towns in peninsular Malaya/Malaysia. Experience situates the oily man within the contexts of migration, labour, and mobility in Malaya and Singapore, showing how newly formed communities and circulating ideas created conditions in which such a figure could be encountered. It then traces how confrontations with prowlers, assaults, and rumours crystallized into repertoires of slipperiness, menace, and sexual threat. Precisely because the figure remained uncertain—intruder, ghost, assailant, or sorcerer—these encounters also drew communities into patrols, religious remedies, and appeals to police and state authority. Person captures the oily man whenever contemporaries pinned the label to agents, actual or suspected, named or unnamed, transforming diffuse unease into immediate panic. Myth designates the elaboration of these repertoires in film, folklore, and media, where categories blurred and the figure was symbolically reworked. This scaffold resists privileging one register over another: persons anchor rumours to bodies, repertoires lend those attributions coherence, and myths reconfigure both for new contexts. By bringing all three into the same article, we attend to the problematic ontology of the oily man and the epistemological processes through which historical agents made sense of the figure.

Experience

Origins: Migration, empire, and historical antecedents

The conditions that later nourished the oily man repertoire were laid in the nineteenth century, when Malaya and Singapore became imperial crossroads marked by mobility and migration. The consolidation of the Straits Settlements in 1826, the Pangkor Agreement of 1874 that brought Perak under British control, and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 further intensified this role, making the region a hinge of empire. Labour and capital followed. Although travel and migration had long produced interchange among Malay, Minangkabau, Baweanese, Bugis, and Peranakan communities within the region, the 1830s inaugurated an unprecedented inflow of Chinese migrants from Fujian and Guangdong (including Chaoshan). These migrants were almost exclusively male: some arrived as merchants, but far more as indentured labourers bound for tin mines in Perak and Selangor or for gambier and pepper plantations in Singapore and Johor.[20] The Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860) and the Taiping Movement (1850–1864) accelerated this exodus, so that by the close of the century the numbers of Chinese ran into the hundreds of thousands.[21]

Empire and migration seeded early antecedents of the oily man, 'connected by a "corridor"—a cultural space that transmits people, wealth and information in both

[20]Carl A. Trocki, *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore, 1784–1885* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007); Koh Keng We, 'Familiar Strangers and Stranger-kings: Mobility, Diasporas, and the Foreign in the Eighteenth-century Malay World', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2017, pp. 390–413; Khoo Chun Yok, 'The Collapse of the Riau Entrepôt in 1784 and the Rise of Singapore', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 96, no. 2, 2023, pp. 29–48.

[21]For a review of this phenomenon, see Philip A. Kuhn, 'Why China Historians Should Study the Chinese Diaspora, and Vice-versa', *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2006, pp. 164–165.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

directions'—linking Southeast Asia with Qing China (1644–1911).[22] Tales of theft, sorcery, and bodily transformation travelled as readily as goods and labour. The Scottish photographer John Thomson (1837–1921), passing through the Straits of Malacca, Siam, Cambodia, and Cochin China before reaching China, recorded such accounts in his *Through China with a Camera* (1898). He described a variety of techniques ascribed to 'Chinese thieves': housebreakers stripping naked and their 'bod[ies] oiled all over' so that they could evade capture; queues, then a distinctive Qing hairstyle, coiled with needles or swapped for detachable false ones to frustrate pursuers.[23] Oil here was not supernatural but tactical, a bodily stratagem that made intrusion uncanny.

Panics: Scares and spectacles from the 1930s to the 1950s

The 1930s yielded the first documented oily man complaints in Singapore, crystallizing repertoires already in circulation. On 15 July 1932 a pseudonymous 'father' wrote to three English papers describing a prowler 'heavily greased and nude'. Each paper reframed him differently: in the *Straits Times* he appeared as a thief 'with the object of stealing'; the *Singapore Free Press* recast him as someone whose 'main intention is not to steal but to spy on women and girls'; by the time the *Malay Tribune* reproduced the letter, his 'primary motive' was 'to outrage the modesty of women, and young girls in particular'.[24] It remains unclear whether these were three different letters or one reshaped by editors, but the effect was unmistakable: a housebreaker recast variously as thief, voyeur, and rapist. Rumours multiplied and for months the figure circulated in letters.[25] The 1932 scare followed a familiar rhythm—flare, embellishment, subsidence—yet what endured was not certainty but circulation itself, the momentum that secured his staying power.

Oily man fears crystallized in 1932 because of a demographic shift. The Immigration Restriction Ordinance of 1930 limited male but not female arrivals, gradually transforming Malaya and Singapore from male-dominated labour societies into communities where women were more visible in public and domestic life.[26] In this setting, the oily man was increasingly cast as a menace to women. As burglars who entered homes disproportionately encountered women, intrusion was recast as sexual threat. Responses were framed through protective roles: the 'father' cited earlier declared his intention to apply for a revolver licence, while a schoolgirl's friend considered a pistol to defend herself from the oily man.[27] Fieldwork conducted after the Second

[22]Ibid., p. 163.

[23]John Thomson, *Through China with a Camera* (Westminster: A. Constable & Co., 1898), pp. 20–22; Chan Ying-kit and Tong King Lee, 'Hair Discipline in Singapore: Aesthetics, Morality, and Gender', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2024, pp. 542–544.

[24]'The Oily Man', *The Straits Times*, 15 July 1932; 'Hist! Here Come the "Oily Man" Tanglin', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 15 July 1932; 'Singapore's "Oily Man"', *Malaya Tribune*, 15 July 1932.

[25]Among others, see 'Letters to the Editor', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 20 July 1932; 'The "Oily Man"', *Malaya Tribune*, 9 August 1932; 'Victim', 'The "Oily Man"', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 12 August 1932.

[26]Joyce Ee, 'Chinese Migration to Singapore, 1896–1941', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1961, pp. 38–50; Maurice Freedman, 'Immigrants and Associations: Chinese in Nineteenth-century Singapore', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1960, pp. 25–27.

[27]'The Mischievous Oily Man', *Malaya Tribune*, 17 August 1932.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

World War confirmed that Chinese and Malay homes were conventionally organized around segregated spaces—bedrooms and kitchens—where valuables were kept and where women spent much of their time, further heightening the sense that women were especially vulnerable to the oily man's intrusion.[28]

The 1932 scare shows how oily man reports could sustain contradictory registers. On 12 August the *Malaya Tribune* published an interview with a 'Chinese gentleman' who dismissed the panic as 'imagination backed by Asiatic superstition ... especially the Chinese who are very superstitious', echoing elite critiques of popular practice during the Republican period (1911–1949) in China.[29] Yet earlier in the same article the oily man appeared as burglar and sorcerer, said to rely on a 'magic cockle-shell' granting invisibility and to consult 'wooden slips ... kept in a bamboo tube'—motifs of Chinese divination that cast him as a practitioner of mantic arts.[30] For most households, however, he was treated as a lived threat. Families responded within what Barend ter Haar characterized as a 'demonological paradigm' of Chinese religion and society, treating the oily man as a malign presence requiring prophylactic measures:[31] 'quite a number of Chinese families have put up all forms of charms and amulets at the front and back doors to keep this "hobgoblin" away', while it was 'customary for anxious mothers [to] rush off to propitiate the gods' at various temples '[d]uring this period of "Calamity"'.[32] A single scare could thus be narrated as rationalist dismissal, thief with magic, or ghostly assailant—registers that coexisted because they captured different ways of experiencing intrusion.

The same tension resurfaced in May 1954 at Zion Road, near the British Military Hospital, where the oily man was reported in both Anglophone and Chinese presses. Witnesses described him as being dressed in white, dancing in front of his pursuers, and throwing stones towards bystanders.[33] Households responded in patterned ways: 'women have been staying indoors and the men obliged to come home early', while 'jittery' residents 'stay(ed) indoors after dinner, and make sure doors and windows are bolted before retiring to bed'.[34] Yet fear did not remain at the level of crime. Explanations quickly slid into the supernatural.

Several women linked the apparition to nearby construction, convinced that wartime burials had been disturbed—a persistent concern in a city still haunted by the

[28]Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore* (London: HMSO, 1957; reprint New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970), pp. 47–52; Judith Djamour, *Malay Kinship and Marriage in Singapore* (London: Athlone Press, 1959; reprint Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 47–49, 124, 182–184.

[29]'Local Chinese Topics, Scare About the "Oily" Man', *Malaya Tribune*, 12 August 1932; Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 46–63.

[30]On the practice of divination with bamboo slips, see Esther-Maria Guggenmos, 'Qian Divination and its Ritual Adaptations in Chinese Buddhism', *Journal of Chinese Religions*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2018, pp. 43–70.

[31]Ter Haar, *Telling Stories*, pp. 174–175.

[32]'Local Chinese Topics, Scare About the "Oily" Man', *Malaya Tribune*, 8 August 1932.

[33]'油鬼仔再度在賢律騷擾警員圍捕無所獲' [Oily Man Again Causes Disturbance in Zion Road, Police Encirclement Yields Nothing], *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报, 30 April 1954; '"油鬼仔"出現說各方議論紛紜警方認該物非人類' ['Oily Man' Appears, Much Controversy, Police Believe the Creature is not Human], *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商报, 1 May 1954.

[34]'Now the Women Say: "Oily Man" is a Spook', *The Straits Times*, 30 April 1954; 'Oily Man is a Dying Boy's Agent', *The Singapore Free Press*, 3 May 1954.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mass executions of Chinese men during the Japanese Occupation (1942–1945).[35] Others associated the intruder with a 'dying and pale-looking Chinese youth', with a Siamese priest identifying it as the 'dying boy's agent'.[36] When an elderly woman died on 4 May, residents concluded that the spirit, echoing the Siamese priest's hypothesis of the oily man as 'an "agent of death"', was appeased: 'relieved housewives are now burning joss sticks on their doorsteps, windowsills, and family altars to appease the "spirit" and pray that it would never return'.[37] The oily man's dress carried its own resonance: its white clothing likely evoked the white-robed psychopomp of Chinese religion—the White Spirit of Impermanence (*Bai Wuchang* 白无常) who escorts souls to the afterlife—an association that almost certainly informed how housewives responded to its ominous appearance and abrupt departure.[38] As in 1932, repertoires of crime and repertoires of ghostliness converged, so that prowling and stone-throwing were experienced not as nuisance but as spiritual assault demanding ritual closure.

If Zion Road evoked haunting, the Queen Street incident of May 1954 displayed a different register: spectacle rather than fear. For five nights thousands gathered outside St Joseph's Church and the neighbouring St Anthony's Convent Middle School, not in dread but in curiosity, eager to glimpse the figure. This was a scene of gaiety, disorder, and near-carnival anticipation rather than panic. Its origins were unusually well documented. On 22 May Mrs Fang Guiniang, the Chaoshanese wife of a church caretaker, reported seeing a 'weird person' with a body 'covered in oil' and dressed only in swimming trunks. She insisted it was 'probably a madman' rather than a ghost. After other residents confirmed similar sightings, she finally spoke out.[39] Here the oily man was encountered less as supernatural menace than as collective mystery, unfolding in real time and drawing residents into the streets to take part in the spectacle.

Once in motion, the Queen Street story detached from its source and sparked interest across Singapore. From 26–27 May hundreds of boys surrounded the church and school shouting '*hantu*' when lights flickered, while police scoured the compound with flashlights.[40] In subsequent nights the crowd swelled to more than 2,000, blocking traffic, breaking police cordons, and pelting officers with stones and fruit. One officer conceded it was 'nearly a riot', while hawkers peddled their wares to the crowd.[41] What unfolded was less a scare than a carnivalesque experience, a classical instance of 'actants amassing' as residents, hawkers, journalists, police, and the oily

[35]'Now the Women Say: "Oily Man" is a Spook', *The Straits Times*, 30 April 1954; Fabian Graham, *Voices from the Underworld: Chinese Hell Deity Worship in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 25.

[36]'Oily Man is a Dying Boy's Agent', *The Singapore Free Press*, 3 May 1954.

[37]'A Death has Appeased this Ghost', *The Singapore Free Press*, 15 May 1954.

[38]Graham, *Voices from the Underworld*, pp. 44, 46.

[39]'奎因街教堂內女住戶對本報記者說她曾親眼看見 "油鬼仔" 滿身油滑行動迅速可能是瘋漢' [A Female Resident of Queen Street Church Told this Reporter She had Personally Seen the 'Oily Man', his Whole Body Slick with Oil, Moving Quickly, Possibly a Madman], *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商报, 30 May 1954.

[40]'Church Grounds Invaded by Boys', *Singapore Standard*, 27 May 1954; '奎因街市民爭看警察捉鬼據稱五晚來均有油鬼仔出沒昨晚大事搜查亦未發現鬼踪' [Queen Street Residents Jostle to Watch Police Catch a Ghost; Oily Man Said to Have Appeared for Five Nights but Last Night's Major Search Yielded no Trace], *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商报, 27 May 1954; 'Crowd Halts Traffic', *Singapore Standard*, 28 May 1954.

[41]'They All Came to See the "Oily Man"', *The Straits Times*, 29 May 1954; '小坡昨晚仍有羣衆聚集警察亦束手無策' [Crowds Again Gathered Last Night in Xiao Po; Police Powerless], *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报, 30 May 1954.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

man himself converged without orchestration until curiosity swelled into spectacle.[42] The site intensified this dynamic. Alleged eyewitnesses variously placed the oily man in the belfry, within the church itself, or on upper floors invisible from the street.[43] The very opacity of the church likely fuelled speculation, much as Christian churches in Qing China had sparked rumours of organ harvesting or human sacrifice.[44] On Queen Street, architecture and rumour together produced conditions in which the oily man was experienced not in terror but in rowdiness.

The Queen Street panic also revealed how oily man scares could be tamed and disciplined within familiar vocabularies. On 13 August 1954, a *Sin Chew Jit Poh* journalist explained the figure not as a ghost but as the 'oil chicken fellow' (*youjizai* 油鸡仔), a practitioner of oily chicken sorcery. According to his account, the latter was conflated with 'oily ghost fellow', and in turn rendered as 'oily man'. He traced the confusion back to Chaoshan, citing a scare 'more than two decades ago'. The slippage he described, almost certainly sustained by Chaoshanese homophony between 'chicken' (*gai*) and 'ghost' (*guei*), is telling: Mrs Fang, whose sighting sparked the rumour, was herself Chaoshanese. In this lore, practitioners of oily chicken magic (characterized as a form of Mao Shan 茅山 sorcery) stripped naked, concealed their clothes within cockle shells—recalling tropes from 1932—and turned invisible to commit mischief. Practitioners included itinerant Buddhist monks, who stole food or defecated in rice pots.[45] Such motifs of wandering monks trafficking in illicit magic were long established in late imperial Chinese literature and history, and they also resonated with common perceptions about the malignant potency of Mao Shan sorcery.[46] In the process, the writer folded new figures into older cultural frames, naturalizing the uncanny within Chaoshanese language and familiar Chinese stock tropes. The oily man was thus rendered recognizable through wordplay—on Queen Street experienced as neighbourhood carnival, at once strange and familiar.

While the 1930s and 1954 scares were narrated largely through Anglophone and Chinese vocabularies, a turning point came in October 1957 when the repertoire was reframed through Malay idioms of gender and honour. The *Straits Times* reported that Corporal Yacob bin Abdullah of Clementi Estate claimed his wife had been molested by the 'oily man'. The couple awoke 'with a feeling of having been in a magic spell or trance'; his wife found oil stains on her neck, with 'oil trails' leading from the bedroom through the kitchen to the back door. The response was immediate: within days Clementi 'resembled a curfew area', with 1,000 police and soldiers patrolling nightly

[42]Adam Yuet Chau, 'Actants Amassing (AA): Beyond Collective Effervescence and the Social', in *Durkheim in Dialogue: A Centenary Celebration of the Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, (ed.) Sondra L. Hausner (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), pp. 206–230.

[43]'警方勸告市民 勿信油鬼仔謠言 昨晚圍觀市民仍人山人海' [Police Advise Residents not to Believe Oily Man Rumours; Crowds Still Thronged Last Night], *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商报, 30 May 1954; 'The Elusive "Oily" Man Hoax Say Police, but They Doubt it', *The Straits Times*, 6 June 1954.

[44]Xiaoli Tian, 'Rumor and Secret Space: Organ-snatching Tales and Medical Missions in Nineteenth-century China', *Modern China*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2015, pp. 197–236.

[45]Haike 海客, '从 "油鬼仔" 说到 "油鸡仔"' [From 'Oily Man' to 'Oily Chicken Fellow'], *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报, 13 August 1954.

[46]Ter Haar, *Telling Stories*, pp. 127–130; Wu Junqing, 'Sex in the Cloister: Behind the Image of the "Criminal Monk" in Ming Courtroom Tales', *T'oung Pao*, vol. 105, nos. 5–6, 2020, pp. 545–586; Jean DeBernardi, *The Way that Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 118–120.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

under shoot-on-sight orders.[47] What earlier reports had framed as burglary or nuisance was now lived as crisis—an affront to Malay masculinity and the honour of soldiers unable to protect their own women.

Yet these responses did not mark a wholly new or uniquely Malay phenomenon. They continued familiar repertoires of prowlers and oily thieves, only now recast in Malay idioms. What was distinctive was not simply the scale of the response, but its specifically Malay inflection. In the Malay press, the Clementi scare centred on Malay households, especially the wives and families of Malay soldiers: women temporarily left their homes or slept together in nearby houses, while increasingly angry Malay men formed patrol units to guard the area, with some assistance from police and soldiers.[48] The chief *kadhi* of Singapore did not dismiss the reports outright but advised residents to recite verses from the Quran before sleep as protection.[49] A Kelantan-born *bomoh*, Encik Noordin bin Junid—the 'Bomoh Malaya'—separately offered to help drive away the oily man.[50] At the same time, *Berita Harian* carried a revealing disjunction in Acting Police Secretary F. G. Minns's remarks. While he acknowledged that the police were 'not taking this matter very seriously' and that only 'two or three' officers might be on watch that night, he also observed that 'Malay soldiers in the area are angry with the intruder' and had 'formed a patrol unit'.[51] Read together, these reports suggest not a uniform official overreaction, but a strongly Malay communal response that exceeded the more limited police posture. The oily man remained an intruder refracted through Malay anxieties of gendered honour and Islamic protection, not an invention of Malay folklore.

Authority: Gender, policing, and the management of rumour

By the late 1950s oily man scares were still narrated through the authority of family men and the vulnerability of women, continuing the pattern first set by the pseudonymous 'father' in 1932. On 15 July 1958 the *Straits Times* reported from Klang that Inche Johari bin Haji Yusof, 45, father of three children 'including two grown-up daughters', had sighted a naked oily man whose body was 'very bright and shining'. Another witness, Inche Ismail bin Haji Hassan, 32, was likewise noted to have a 'beautiful daughter'.[52] Such details were not incidental. By privileging the testimony of married men, hajis, and fathers, journalists invoked their moral authority as guardians of women, distinguishing them from idle bachelors or gossipmongers. If, as Aihwa Ong argues, Malaysian factory women invoked 'spirits of resistance' to negotiate the strictures of predominantly male overseers at work, sightings of the oily man signified the opposite:

[47]'Phantom: Big Hunt', *The Straits Times*, 11 October 1957.

[48]'Wanita-wanita pindah takut orang minyak' [Women Move out Fearing Oily Man], *Berita Harian*, 12 October 1957.

[49]'Orang minyak yang ghaib harus' kata kadhi' [Chief Kadhi Says the Unseen Oily Man is Possible], *Berita Harian*, 14 October 1957.

[50]'Tawaran dari bomoh na' menghalau orang minyak' [Offer from Bomoh to Drive Away the Oily Man], *Berita Harian*, 19 October 1957.

[51]'Orang minyak yang ghaib harus' kata kadhi' [Chief Kadhi Says the Unseen Oily Man is Possible], *Berita Harian*, 14 October 1957.

[52]'Oily Man Scares 50 Families in Village', *The Straits Times*, 15 July 1958.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a prowler whose menace curtailed women's freedoms and placed their experiences within claims to male guardianship.[53]

This pattern, in which assaults were framed through women's vulnerability and male mediation, persisted. On 17 November 1959 the *Straits Times* reported from Changi Road, Frankel Estate, that a girl had been assaulted in a playground at 8 pm by a young man 'wearing only swimming trunks'. Women stayed indoors while armed police searched for an attacker whose 'oil-smeared hands' were said to have clasped the victim's mouth.[54] Here the oily man repertoire fused directly with the imagery of a sex crime, with oil functioning less as trace than as label marking the assault as uncanny. In January 1967 similar fears spread at Kampong Pengkalan Rinting, Johor, where young women screamed as the oily man peered through windows.[55] No physical harm was recorded, yet in each case danger was conceptualized through women's exposure and fear, and through the mobilization of men as guardians.

Yet an earlier example had already surfaced in a homosocial female environment. These gendered dynamics were most visible in such settings, where collective living intensified fear. In June 1954, at the Singapore General Hospital Nurses Hostel, '300 living in the hostel had shut their windows for fear of a "visit"'; as one nurse explained: 'we closed our windows because people said the oily man could even slip in small openings'.[56] Similar panics erupted at the Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM) in Shah Alam in August 1975, when the *Berita Harian* reported students abandoning campus after rumours of an oily man sighting. The director, Haji Lokman Musa, attempted to calm them, insisting that 'there is no reason for them to be afraid'. Yet in 1994 the fears resurfaced, as female students in ITM dormitories were once again said to have been disturbed by oily men.[57] As Aihwa Ong has observed, in post-independence and industrializing Malaysia, women's living and working quarters often became charged sites where spirits articulated both vulnerability and agency. In the case of the oily man, the experience drew less on male corporate disciplinarians than on the intimate dynamics of dormitory life, where rumours, jokes, and anxieties spread quickly, blurring the line between menace and mischief.[58]

The oily man's instability already shaped lived response: uncertainty over what the figure was helped generate patrols, religious intervention, and demands for official action. While oily man scares spread like other rumours, they did not fit the functionalist model of rumour as 'weapons of the weak', forms of grassroots resistance against

[53]Djamour, *Malay Kinship and Marriage*, p. 68; Ong, *Spirits of Resistance*, p. 88.

[54]'Fear of an "Oily Man" Keeps Estate in Jitters', *The Straits Times*, 17 November 1959; '樟宜猶太園傳出現油鬼仔 調戲良家婦女' [Oily Man Said to Appear in Changi Jewish Estate, Molesting Respectable Women], *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报, 17 November 1959.

[55]'Orang minyak ganggu gadis bersahor?' [Oily Man Disturbs Girls at Sahur?], *Berita Harian*, 2 January 1967.

[56]'Now the Nurses' Rooms are All Lit up Again', *The Singapore Free Press*, 15 June 1954.

[57]'Orang minyak di ITM pelajar gempar' [Oily Man at ITM Causes Panic Among Students], *Berita Harian*, 10 August 1975; 'Oily Man Scare: no Cause for Alarm', *The Straits Times*, 10 August 1975, p. 8; '油鬼仔闹学院留宿女生怕怕' [Oily Man Disturbs College, Female Boarders Frightened], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 6 November 1994; '大马校园传闻 油鬼仔闹宿舍 女生人心惶惶' [Rumours of Oily Man in Malaysian Campus, Female Students in a Panic], *Lianhe Wanbao* 联合晚报, 6 November 1994.

[58]Ong, *Spirits of Resistance*, pp. 201–213.

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the powers-that-be.[59] Elsewhere in the region rumour often bore a subversive charge: Loh Kah Seng demonstrated how *kampong* clearance in Singapore generated whispers of government arson, while in Borneo and Indonesia stories of headhunting expressed hostility towards state agents and foreign intruders.[60] Oily man rumours, in contrast, rarely projected anxiety onto officials or colonial outsiders. Europeans were not primarily framed as culprits, nor were state agents accused of donning oil to terrorize villages. Instead, these scares unfolded on another terrain—through women's silence, men's mediation, and the state's role as epistemological arbiter of whether the oily man was fact or fiction.

Women's silence decisively shaped how oily man scares were narrated and judged. Because many did not or could not report assaults, police statements became the main yardstick of whether rumours were groundless. Women consistently figured as victims, yet their voices remained largely absent from the record. In Penang in October 1957, 12 young women—described by the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* as 'those sacrificed', a phrase that connoted victimhood and communal shame—were allegedly molested, though their parents insisted on anonymity when interviewed.[61] Three years later, in Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur, it was noted that several women had been assaulted but 'police were not told'.[62] Honour and the protection of reputations meant experiences went unreported even as fear was invoked to justify male authority. The same dynamic persisted decades later. In Batu Arang near Kuala Lumpur in June 1997, a gang of oily men had carried out more than 20 housebreakings and frightened women, yet residents avoided lodging reports so as not to invite trouble.[63] Silence curtailed women's agency even as it prolonged the rumour's life, keeping the oily man suspended in hearsay rather than resolved as verifiable crime.

In this epistemological vacuum, state authority increasingly became the decisive arbiter, with policing at its forefront. Oily man scares were experienced not only as encounters with prowlers or ghosts but as tests of the state's authority to define truth. Already in 1932 letter-writers to the *Malaya Tribune* asked why he had not been arrested and fingerprinted, one jeering that Scotland Yard should be called in. The editor's condescending reply—that 'the police know their business well enough to attach great importance to fingerprints'—asserted expertise while tacitly admitting doubt.[64] Similar logics resurfaced after independence. In December 1960 the figure had even entered Parliament, where the Member for Muar (North) urged the government to act against oily men said to climb into houses at night, enter bedrooms, and disturb sleeping women.[65] In 1965 Acting Police Secretary Tuan Ratna Singam dismissed

[59]James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 220–228, 251–252, 282.

[60]Loh, *Squatters into Citizens*, pp. xxiii–xxvi, 175–181; Drake, 'Construction Sacrifice'; Forth, 'Heads Under Bridges or in Mud'. Also see Patrice Ladwig, 'Haunting the State: Rumours, Spectral Apparitions and the Longing for Buddhist Charisma in Laos', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2013, pp. 509–526.

[61]'傳槟城亦有"油鬼仔"' [Rumours of Oily Man in Penang], *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报, 29 October 1957.

[62]'Gang of "Oily Men" Molests Three Women', *The Straits Times*, 9 July 1960, p. 5.

[63]'仅穿内裤 • 全身涂油 • 连抢20家 油鬼仔半夜闯屋绑女人' [Wearing Only Underwear, Body Covered in Oil, Broke into 20 Homes at Midnight and Tied up Women], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 6 June 1997.

[64]'The "Oily Man"', *Malaya Tribune*, 15 August 1932.

[65]'Orang minyak di-bawa dalam Parlemen' [Oily Man Brought up in Parliament], *Berita Harian*, 6 December 1960.

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rumours in Geylang Serai because no reports of such incidents had been lodged.[66] In 1984 Taiping police opened an investigation into an oily man sighting, lending rumours provisional recognition.[67] Even in 2011, after reports near a Kedah secondary school, Acting District Police Chief Mansor urged residents not to believe rumours of an oily man who had allegedly raped a 16-year-old student, even as he told them to report suspicious individuals.[68] Across these episodes the state appeared both as arbiter—pronouncing what was true or false—and as participant, caught in the same interpretive loop that sustained the rumours themselves.

To be sure, such ambivalence was already visible in the mid-century cases. Far from standing above the communities they were expected to police, state officials were drawn into them, compelled to report, debate, and even ritualize the oily man as though he were part of their beat. At Queen Street in June 1954 a police representative bemoaned that colleagues returning from patrol were themselves pressed to report on 'ghostly figures' until they too became 'talking ghosts'.[69] Weeks earlier at Zion Road, police secretary Peter Clague had declared, 'We do not believe the "oily man" is a human being. There is no evidence to suggest it', while another policeman said that if the figure were real, 'he could not have escaped the police dragnet'.[70] In press coverage, official responses were often ambivalent: even when police and other authorities sought to dismiss oily man rumours, they still engaged them as matters requiring explanation, investigation, or preventive action. Four decades later, in January 1993, policemen summoned to a robbery scene in Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, found a tower of stones believed to be a 'curse' left by the oily men. Instead of dismantling it, they allowed a ritual specialist to neutralize the danger—an acknowledgement of its resemblance to sorcery, and of the fact that oily men were experienced as threats demanding ritual as well as legal remedy.[71]

Alongside police intervention, oily man scares were also lived as calls to collective self-defence. In March 1960 *Berita Harian* reported that villagers in Kampong Parit Tengah, Rungkup, near Bagan Datoh, formed nightly patrols. By September youths from Kampong Jawang, Perak, prepared clappers or rattles to alert neighbours, while residents of Kampong Chegar Galah on the banks of Sungai Perak likewise organized watches.[72] In Singapore the Sar Kong Vigilante Corps (established in 1962), attached to

[66]'Orang minyak di Geylang; ta' benar kata polis' [Oily Men in Geylang; not True, say Police], *Berita Harian*, 5 November 1965.

[67]'太平湖花园 情侣遭 "油鬼仔" 袭击 警方接获报告展开调查' [Couple Attacked by 'Oily Man' at Taiping Lake Garden, Police Investigate], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 3 May 1984.

[68]'谣传16岁女生午睡遭强奸 油鬼仔奸处女炼巫术' [Rumour that 16-year-old Girl Raped During Nap; Oily Man Said to Rape Virgins to Refine Sorcery], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 23 October 2011.

[69]'市民捕風捉影連晚爭看油鬼仔累煞了警員無事忙' [Residents Chase Shadows, Crowd to Watch Oily Man for Consecutive Nights, Exhausting Police], *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商报, 2 June 1954.

[70]'Oily Man is a Dying Boy's Agent', *The Singapore Free Press*, 3 May 1954.

[71]'施降头入屋抢劫 油鬼仔吓死屋主' [Practitioner of Black Magic Breaks into House and Robs; Oily Man Frightens Homeowner to Death], *Lianhe Wanbao* 联合晚报, 13 January 1993.

[72]'Lembaga hitam ganggu kampong' [Black Apparition Disturbs Village], *Berita Harian*, 25 March 1960; 'Kampong di-usek oleh orang minyak; pendudok berjaga malam' [Village Disturbed by Oily Man; Residents Keep Night Watch], *Berita Harian*, 17 September 1960; 'Pendudok sekarang berjaga' [Residents Now Keep Watch], *Berita Harian*, 25 September 1960.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Mun San Fook Tuck Chee temple at Sims Drive, also sought, among its many functions, to protect the village from oily men.[73] These mobilizations were not ad hoc but drew on long-standing arrangements of communal self-help: as in late imperial China, Malaya, and Singapore, neighbourhoods relied on surveillance and collective patrols to defend their interests.[74] The oily man scare tapped into these traditions, making vigilance itself an embodied way of experiencing the figure's ubiquity. Recent cases followed the same rhythm. In June 2002 Segamat villagers not only lodged police reports but also organized themselves into volunteer patrols in consultation with police officers.[75] Similarly, in Kulim, Kedah, in 2007 the community security corps mobilized men who joined auxiliary policemen in their pursuit of an oily man who scaled rooftops and left behind blue-coloured footprints.[76] Each formation shows how rumour repeatedly animated older structures of collective defence, often in coordination with the state but never wholly dependent on it. Oily man scares thus operated less as idioms of resistance than as threats that drew both communal vigilance and state authority into everyday life.

Scepticism and dismissal, however, were present from the beginning and remained part of the repertoire throughout. During the 1932 panic in Singapore, several letters to the English press mocked the scare as superstitious rubbish and a distraction from serious matters.[77] At Zion Road in 1954 officials such as M. P. D. Nair insisted that 'the real remedy lies in the hands of the City Council, street lights', treating the panic as an infrastructural rather than supernatural threat.[78] Police likewise sought to defuse disorder: on 1 June 1954 the *Straits Times* quoted Superintendent Song Kok Hoo, who 'personally spoke over a police car loudspeaker and asked the crowds to go home'.[79] Some of the strongest denials came from communities themselves. In Malacca in 1969, elderly residents smiled at reporters and dismissed claims of an invisible oily man at work as 'all nonsense', attributing disturbances to 'a few young thugs'. They linked the scare to a recent spate of thefts in the vicinity but rejected its supernatural dimension outright.[80] Dismissals became part of the circulation of rumours, shaping how they were lived, so that oily man scares remained contested rather than unanimously believed.

[73]Ang Yik Han, 乡情祠韵: 沙冈村和万山福德祠的流变与传承 [A Kampong and its Temple: Change and Tradition in Kampong Sar Kong and the Mun San Fook Tuck Chee] (Singapore: Mun San Fook Tuck Chee, 2016), p. 60.

[74]Loh, *Squatters into Citizens*, pp. 104–106; Edward A. McCord, 'Militia and Local Militarization in late Qing and Early Republican China: The Case of Hunan', *Modern China*, vol. 14, no. 2, April 1988, pp. 156–187.

[75]'马国 "黑巫术" 奇谈 "油鬼仔"学法术为增法力骚扰少女' [Malaysia's 'Black Magic' Strange Tale: 'Oily Man' Learns Sorcery to Increase Power and Harasses Girls], *Lianhe Wanbao* 联合晚报, 22 June 2002.

[76]'信不信由你 "油鬼仔" 大闹马国民宅?2000住户夜难眠' [Believe it or not, Oily Man Wreaks Havoc in Malaysian Homes? 2000 Residents Lose Sleep], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 30 June 2007.

[77]See the fiercest criticism of repetitive letters to the press on the phenomenon by Soh Swee Keong, 'The "Oily Man"', *Malaya Tribune*, 26 August 1932, who recommended that the editor 'delete all the letters', claiming that 'the more you publish, the more nonsense will come'.

[78]'Now the Women Say: "Oily Man" is a Spook', *The Straits Times*, 30 April 1954.

[79]'The "Oily Man" is Just a Hoax, Say Police', *The Straits Times*, 1 June 1954.

[80]'甲市盛傳怡力路一帶 夜間出現油鬼仔 所謂隱身有術實在荒謬' [Rumour in Malacca that Oily Man Appears at Night Along Yili Road; Claims of Invisibility are Absurd], *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报, 27 January 1969, p. 12.

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From the 1970s onwards oily man scares continued to intrude into everyday life. We have already seen how predominantly female environments such as the Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM) remained recurrent sites of panic in 1975. By the 1990s, encounters with oily men began to materialize in tangible form. In 1994 at Kota Tinggi a Malay settler woman claimed to have caught one in a bucket—infant-sized, ice-cold, with a wizened face—before summoning a specialist to subdue it.[81] A decade later in Pekan, Pahang, villagers discovered a 10-centimetre 'wooden figure' on a beach—bald, red-eyed, wrapped in black cloth, and sealed in a tin with sand and onions—described as an 'oily man' and as an object capable of harm.[82] Across East and Southeast Asia, figurines were a familiar ritual form believed to inflict harm; in Kota Tinggi and Pekan they became a way of confronting, trapping, and neutralizing the oily man's presence.[83] These were not abstract figures glimpsed fleetingly from rooftops or windowsills, but lived dangers that had to be ritually subdued.

Person

If oily man scares were experienced collectively through rumour, patrols, and police action, they also crystallized around suspect individuals and communities—real or imagined. Its instability was constitutive: reportage, retellings, and social anxiety condensed around it in ways that multiplied identities rather than fixed them. As 'person', instability emerged through a circulation in which labels fed images and vice versa, an unstable process recalling William Gibson's study of contradictory *keramat* biographies in Singapore.[84] Instability was not incidental but the very mechanism of endurance: journalists and interviewees framed his presence through their own cosmologies, anxieties, and concerns, allowing multiple identities to coexist at once. The figure was thus diverse and inconsistent, never reducible to a 'Malay' ghost. Equally important were the communities and individuals onto whom the label was projected, for these attributions themselves made the oily man tangible.

Early suspects and plural society

In the wake of the dramatic 'father' letters of July 1932, the oily man label spread so quickly that it began to be attached to actual suspects. On 19 July, the *Singapore Free Press* felt compelled to clarify that a Malay man known only as '[illegible] bin Ali', arrested for loitering and dishonestly receiving stolen property, was not the oily man—a disclaimer which hints at how swiftly the epithet had entered the everyday.[85] Less than a year later, on 26 April 1933, the same paper reported the arrest of Haron bin Hamid, an 'ex-sailor', who on 1 March had assaulted Dorothy Puchas, a European resident at

[81]'新山一妇女捉到油鬼仔' [A Johor Bahru Woman Catches an Oily Man], *Lianhe Wanbao* 联合晚报, 16 September 1994, p. 4.

[82]'北根发现发油 "油鬼仔" 木头' ['Oily Man' Effigy Discovered in Pekan], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 24 February 2006.

[83]Skeat, *Malay Magic*, pp. 568–580; Ter Haar, *The Fear of Witchcraft*, pp. 53–84.

[84]Gibson, *Keramat*.

[85]'The "Oily Man": A District Court Rumour', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 19 July 1932.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Goodwood Park Hotel. Found naked at the Tanglin Club with his clothes bundled in his hand, he was explicitly associated with older reports of an 'oily man', though no oil was observed.[86] Such cases show how readily the label attached itself and laid the ground for firmer consolidation in the mid-1930s.

From this point the oily man label was repeated so freely that embellishment, misremembering, and retrospective attribution hardened the repertoire. On 2 April 1935 the *Malaya Tribune* ran 'Another "Oily Man" in Singapore', misidentifying an earlier oily man as Indian and (wrongly?) backdating a similar attack to 1934 with a Malay girl as victim.[87] The next day the *Singapore Free Press* named Haroon bin Ali, a Javanese man, as having trespassed at Telok Kurau. Again, no oil was observed, though the paper admitted he had already managed to 'catch the popular imagination as Singapore's oily man'. That same day the *Malaya Tribune* instead called him 'a Malay crouching behind the hedges'.[88] Only in May, once Haroon bin Ali was securely arrested, did reports add that his arms were 'covered with oil', the *Straits Times* claiming that 'two Javanese passers-by' failed to hold him.[89] Whether fact or retrospective invention, repetition and improvisation were now fleshing out the repertoire.

In 1936 the oily man resurfaced in Kuala Lumpur, where the label was attached to an English-speaking Tamil servant—evidence that it could cross ethnic lines and urban settings with ease. The accused, Frank Joseph Paul Amedius, described in a 2 January report, had Hainanese victims: Wee Teow Eng and her husband, Chan Chew Yong, a cook employed in European residential quarters. Amedius lodged in the servants' annex of the same flats, separated from their room by only a partition.[90] The oily man here was neither Malay nor a *kampong* intruder. Instead the label fixed itself to a Tamil suspect whose proximity arose from the entanglements of domestic service. No oil was observed; nocturnal entry and theft sufficed for the press to revive the epithet, underscoring how easily it traversed ethnic and social boundaries.

Throughout the late 1930s, confusion over names, ethnicities, and charges showed how the oily man label clung to a variety of suspects. Haroon bin Ali and Haron bin Hamid were almost certainly conflated by journalists, their names variously spelled (as Haroun or Haroon bin Hamid), and their ethnicities described in turn as Malay, Javanese, or Indian. From 1937 the moniker fixed most firmly on Haron bin Hamid. On 28 April that year, the *Malaya Tribune* reported his rearrest as a returned banishee, describing him as the 'alleged oily man of Singapore' and noting his claim to Dutch subjecthood and to having been swept ashore by accident.[91] In fresh charges brought three years later—'housebreaking and theft of a watch' on Jervois Road in September 1940—no oil was alleged, yet the label stuck. Haron, who claimed he 'bought a watch from an Indian' after arriving from Rhio (Riau), openly resented the epithet

[86]'Oily Man Episode Recalled', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 26 April 1933.

[87]'Another "Oily Man" in Singapore', *Malaya Tribune*, 2 April 1935.

[88]'The "Oily Man"', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 3 April 1935; 'Naked Figure Lurking Behind Hedges: Malay's Midnight Visitor', *Malaya Tribune*, 3 April 1935.

[89]'Singapore's "Oily Man" Caught', *The Straits Times*, 4 May 1935.

[90]'K. L.'s "Oily Man" Scare', *The Straits Budget*, 2 January 1936; '"Oily Man" of K. L. Captured', *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 11 January 1936, p. 4.

[91]'Alleged Oily Man of Singapore', *Malaya Tribune*, 28 April 1937.

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and protested to a detective: 'How do you know I am the "oily man"?' The reply was blunt: 'In 1935, several people tried to arrest you, but your body was covered with oil.'[92]

Together these 1930s cases show that the oily man was less a village intruder than a figure that took shape within British Malaya's plural society and the intimate proximities of colonial life. Suspects and victims could be Malay, Javanese, Tamil, Hainanese, or European, and the label crossed these boundaries without ever fixing on one group, attaching instead to whichever suspects proximity and circumstance made available. Haron bin Hamid, for example, claimed to be a Dutch subject who arrived from Riau—underscoring, as Koh Keng We notes, the porousness of the British–Dutch maritime border—while Frank Amedius's Catholic-sounding name pointed to similar diasporic entanglements.[93] Victims likewise reflected these structures: the couple attacked by Amedius in Kuala Lumpur exemplified the Hainanese occupational niche of cooking and domestic service in European households.[94] What enabled such encounters was not invasion from outside but proximity within colonial residential enclaves, where cooks, maids, and lodgers were separated by only a partition. The oily man label thus never mapped neatly onto a single ethnicity or setting; it drew its force from overlapping, unstable social worlds. By the end of the 1930s, the oily man was no longer a fixed culprit but a flexible repertoire, primed for the sexualized and supernatural elaborations of the 1950s.

This ambiguity did not extend to Europeans. Europeans do not appear in our material as oily men. Unlike accusations of headhunting in Indonesia or organ-theft in late imperial China, where foreigners often became rumoured culprits, in Malaya and Singapore Europeans appeared instead as visible victims. This divergence may reflect the region's comparatively peaceful decolonization: although Britain retained deep stakes in Malaya's shipping, mining, and plantation economies, withdrawal was negotiated rather than revolutionary, leaving fewer circumstances in which Europeans could be recast as the threatening figure itself.[95] Visibility worked in reverse. Europeans, socially conspicuous and newsworthy, appeared disproportionately as victims, and it was precisely this prominence that kept oily man incidents in circulation. An earlier antecedent already hinted at this asymmetry: John Thomson's 1898 travelogue, for example, concluded with a European acquaintance who failed to arrest one such Chinese thief, who 'slipp[ed] like an eel from the grasp of his antagonist' because he was covered in 'a coat of oil'.[96]

[92]'"Oily Man" is Sentenced to Two Years' R.I.', *The Straits Times*, 13 October 1940, p. 7; '"Oily Man" Questions Detective', *The Straits Times*, 15 October 1940, p. 11.

[93]'Vain Appeal of "Oily Man"', *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 2 November 1940; Koh Keng We, 'Gateway and Panopticon: Singapore and Surviving Regime Change in the Nineteenth-century Malay World', in *Reframing Singapore: Memory—Identity—Trans-regionalism*, (eds) Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), pp. 40–43.

[94]Claire Lowrie, *Masters and Servants: Cultures of Empire in the Tropics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 44–61.

[95]For a comparison between Malaya's relatively peaceful decolonization vis-à-vis other Dutch and French colonies in the region, see A. J. Stockwell, 'Southeast Asia in War and Peace: The End of European Colonial Empires', in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia. Vol. 2: From World War II to the Present*, (ed.) Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 325–386, esp. 344, 354, 373, 376, 380.

[96]Thomson, *Through China with a Camera*, p. 21.

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Press coverage turned European encounters into a recurring spectacle. Haron bin Hamid, as we have seen, assaulted Dorothy Puchas at Goodwood Park Hotel and was also charged with breaking into the home of R. J. Fenny. Frank Amedius was said to have similarly 'terrorised the European residential area around the Sam Peng flats' in Kuala Lumpur. In June 1947 Ipoh 'oily men' dressed in their underwear and covered in grease made off with $5,000 worth of jewellery from European homes.[97] The pattern continued after Malaya's independence in 1957: in October that year, an incident in Ayer Rajah, Singapore, saw Ida Wilson, a housewife, discover oil stains at her door and window, while in January 1962, in Butterworth, Penang, a nocturnal intrusion at a European household on Pantai Road was likewise attributed to an oily man.[98] Perpetrators do not appear as European in the available reports, yet European households and bodies repeatedly served as the stage for oily man intrusions.

From prowlers to predators

After the Japanese Occupation the oily man repertoire tilted toward sexual menace, and journalists blurred the line between burglary, voyeurism, and assault. In 1947 the *Straits Times* exemplified this slippage when it reported Khoo Phang Hua's conviction in Sitiawan for housebreaking and attempted outrage of modesty. Oil was not mentioned, yet he was dubbed an 'oily man'.[99] The association deepened in 1953 at Kellock Road near Tiong Bahru, when the *Sunday Standard* reported a prowler who climbed a drainpipe to a communal bathroom and peeped at Mrs Andrea Ortega, a European resident. Neighbours said women were so frightened they no longer dared use the bathrooms or latrines at night. No oil was mentioned, but at Havelock Road police station the culprit was nonetheless christened '*orang minyak*'.[100] Journalists and police thus collapsed burglary, voyeurism, and sexual menace into a single category, entrenching the oily man as catch-all figure of nocturnal intrusion.

By the late 1950s, newspapers were already acknowledging that the oily man label did not always match the facts, even as they continued to use it. On 30 October 1957 *Sin Chew Jit Poh* reported incidents in Ipoh where its oily men perpetrators were 'believed neither Indian nor Malay but Chinese youths'. The paper contrasted these cases with Singapore: there, it explained, the oily man operates alone and applies oil all over his body, whereas in Ipoh three to five intruders wore only shorts, applied no oil, and entered young women's rooms when men were absent.[101] By applying the label and simultaneously acknowledging its inaccuracy, the report exposed the repertoire's contradictions.

Before the label fully loosened in the 1960s and 1970s, the contradiction was already visible: newspapers themselves recognized that some 'oily men' did not fit the expected profile. Indeed, the label had stretched so far that sightings no longer required oil. Communal fears of prowlers and outsiders attached themselves easily to

[97]'Big Police Hunt on for "Oily Men"', *Malaya Tribune*, 24 June 1947.

[98]'Oily Man Again Shocks a Woman at Night', *The Straits Times*, 30 October 1957; 'Orang minyak gemparkan kampong' [Oily Man Causes Panic in Kampong], *Berita Harian*, 30 January 1962.

[99]"'Casanova" Gets Gaol Term', *The Straits Times*, 26 October 1947.

[100]'Prowler Scares the Women of Kellock Rd.', *Sunday Standard*, 27 September 1953.

[101]'怡出現油鬼仔' [Oily Man Appears in Ipoh], *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报, 30 October 1957.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the name. In June 1960 the *Singapore Free Press* reported an 'oily man scare' in Kranji village after a 12-year-old boy spotted a loiterer during hide-and-seek: 'tall, dark and handsome', 'scantily dressed and is believed to haunt the village in the evenings', with no hint of oil.[102] The next day *Sin Chew Jit Poh* ran a story about a 20-year-old male found under a bed at the Central Hospital nurses' dormitory in Kuala Lumpur at 10 in the morning—no oil, no molestation, daytime intrusion, and alleged theft of medicine rather than valuables—yet the label applied.[103] Other reports continued to stretch the category. The oily man was no longer just a rumoured ghost but a guise which criminals chose to inhabit. On 6 October 1961 both *Berita Harian* and the *Straits Times* reported the capture of an 'oily man' in Seremban. At 3.30 am on 31 July taxi driver Jaafar bin Kifli and factory clerk Lee Weng Choy apprehended an intruder, describing him as naked and slick with oil. The accused, R. Kanapan, a 27-year-old Indian man, was charged with housebreaking.[104] Here the repertoire was no longer imposed by reporters alone; the accused deliberately appropriated oil as a getaway technique.

Once the label had stretched, police and journalists tried to define what counted as a 'real' oily man—but their efforts only showed how incoherent the category already was. Even when culprits did not claim the role, the authorities themselves perpetuated the confusion. On 12 October 1972 the *Straits Times* reported that Hamdan bin Abdul Hamid, a student caught with housebreaking tools, was an alleged oily man in Kuala Lumpur. The association prompted Woman Inspector Helen Loh Kuen Chow to clarify: 'But he is not an oily man as he only rubs himself with oil to avoid being caught. He is but a skilful cat burglar', implying that sexual assault was necessary for the label to apply.[105] In November 1972 a grisly Orchard Road accident was reported: a Malay thief, naked from the waist up and shoeless, fell to his death from a ninth-floor lift shaft; his partial nudity was enough for him to be labelled an 'oily man' by the journalist covering the story.[106] In January 1974 *Nanyang Siang Pau* described disturbances in Sungai Way New Village, Selangor, where a naked night visitor who took nothing was variously called an oily man or a lunatic.[107] Arbitrary attributions of loosely related phenomena to the oily man bound these repertoires to public memory, keeping him in headlines long after oil was no longer observed. By the 1970s, press coverage and cinematic tropes of the oily man as a sexual predator had, at least among some communities, reshaped expectations so deeply that oil and burglary seemed insufficient; even the police presumed sexual menace. In trying to police the boundary, they only confirmed its incoherence.

Decades later, the repertoire emerged in a more violent form, showing that the older script could still be consciously replayed. Later in 1997 some 20 robberies around

[102]'Prowler Sparks an "Oily Man" Scare in Kranji Village', *The Singapore Free Press*, 18 June 1960.

[103]'中央醫院護士宿舍 發現黝黑青年 懷疑是油鬼仔' [Dark-skinned Youth Discovered in Central Hospital Nurses' Dormitory, Suspected Oily Man], *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报, 19 June 1960.

[104]'Orang minyak di-berkas' [Oily Man Arrested], *Berita Harian*, 6 October 1961; 'Capture of an "Oily Man" at 3 a.m. Leads to Jail Term', *The Straits Times*, 6 October 1961.

[105]'"Oily Man" of KL Turned out to be a Cat Burglar', *The Straits Times*, 12 October 1972.

[106]'深宵至烏節路興建中方燕山大廈行竊 行藏敗露被追踏空墮落 竊賊跌下電梯洞底身亡九樓跌下頭顱破裂腦漿塗地死狀厥慘' [At Midnight Thief Breaks into Building Site on Orchard Road; Pursued, He Fell Down Lift Shaft from Ninth Floor, Smashed His Brains and Died Tragically], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 14 November 1972.

[107]'雙溪威新村一帶神秘客驚擾居民' [Mysterious Stranger Disturbs Residents of Sungai Way New Village], *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商报, 20 January 1974.

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Batu Arang, a new village 30 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur, were said to have been carried out by three to four men 'entirely covered with oil', and dressed only in white underwear and plastic sandals. They struck at night; some victims were bound, others threatened, and in one case a family was set on fire.[108] The repertoire, already decades old, re-emerged aggressively.

Neighbours, insiders, and outsiders

Not all oily men were faceless prowlers; sometimes they were recognized as neighbours or acquaintances, showing how the label could remake the familiar into nocturnal threat. Recall how Kuala Lumpur's 'oily man' was Frank Joseph Paul Amedius, an English-speaking Tamil servant who lodged only a partition away from his Hainanese colleagues. Two decades later, in July 1958, three men—Dollah bin Sujah, Abdul Hamid Othman, and Chan Chin Lay—were arrested in Seremban after breaking into the home of Siti binte Kartanom, a 32-year-old widow, at two in the morning, leaving 'oil stains on the kitchen door and mosquito net'. During the assault Siti recognized one of the men and informed police, leading to their arrest. Oil stains were found on the suspects' bodies, and 'oil-stained swimming trunks' were later discovered among their possessions.[109] These were not costumes but material traces reframed in the wake of the two oily man movies, released the same year, which gave police and press a ready grammar to frame the case. The label also served as shorthand for molesters. In Butterworth, Penang, a 23-year-old Indian widow reported in 1972 that she had been molested twice in her sleep. She told police that her late husband had once slapped the 'oily man' in the *kampong*, and she recognized the same figure as her assailant.[110] Oil was unmentioned; here 'oily man' functioned as a moniker for a sexual assailant. Across these episodes the repertoire showed its elasticity, able to recast neighbours as oily men and embed the label into everyday life.

The repertoire could also shift from recognized individuals to a more diffuse suspicion that the threat lay within the community itself. Particularly revealing was the 1968 Kampong Penaga scare in Selangor, near Sungai Way, where the oily man appeared not as an outside prowler or a clearly identifiable assailant, but as a danger believed to reside within the village. Fear spread among women and girls until nightly rituals drew some 120 villagers into action. Leading them, 28-year-old Enche Mahmud bin Haji Hashim claimed to have overcome an oily man who left 'dripping with blood'. Yet the evildoer's identity was contested. One villager, Enche Jantan, described the village as having 'an enemy within' (*musoh dalam selimut*) the community, while Mahmud did not address the question of local belonging so much as recast the oily man as human—someone who had become such through the pursuit of occult

[108]'仅穿内裤•全身涂油•连抢20家 油鬼仔半夜闯屋绑女人' [Wearing Only Underwear, Body Covered in Oil, Broke into 20 Homes at Midnight and Tied up Women], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 6 June 1997.

[109]Gilbert Wooden, 'Police Hold 3 After "Oilymen" Scare', *The Straits Times*, 3 July 1958; 'Oily Man is Told: "You Should Have Worn a Suit"', *The Straits Times*, 23 July 1958.

[110]'Search for "Oily Man" in Murder Probe', *The Straits Times*, 7 November 1972.

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knowledge.[111] All agreed that the figure had been defeated, but not on who—or what—he was. Kampong Penaga thus lays bare the repertoire's deepest instability: the oily man could appear simultaneously as supernatural danger, human wrongdoer, and internal threat.

If oily men could be neighbours, they could also be foreigners. By the 1980s the repertoire increasingly mapped nocturnal menace onto migrant workers, casting them as the collective face of potential disorder—a variant of the fear and scapegoating of itinerant strangers noted elsewhere. Earlier scares often involved locals, but by this period rumours in Malaysia and Singapore persistently identified outsiders, reflecting both societies' position as wealthier hosts to labourers from less well-off parts of Southeast Asia.[112] At times the label attached not to individuals but to whole groups. On 12 June 1986 *Xin Ming Ri Bao* reported fears in Petaling, Selangor: residents warned that 'oily men' could strike anytime; one, Chen Tianxing, 47, described them as 'troublesome thieves dressed in black clothing who darkened their skin when committing crimes'—though oil was not explicitly mentioned. His home was targeted three times over two months, and suspicion fell on construction workers in the newly settled region.[113] Here the oily man became a shorthand for collective migrant menace, invoked without the need for any specific assailant.

By the 1990s the oily man was repeatedly mapped onto regional outsiders—Indonesian labourers, Thai migrants, and other foreign intruders.[114] On 13 January 1993 two oily man incidents were reported in Bukit Meiwa Garden, an affluent enclave off Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur—one so terrifying that a 60-year-old victim with a heart condition collapsed and died. Victims claimed four men, naked but for underwear and 'entirely covered in a layer of oil', broke in with knives and axes, chanting in an 'Indonesian-accented Malay'. Residents who were interviewed readily blamed the 500 to 600 Indonesian workers living nearby.[115] On 11 November 1999 an oily man at Bukit Batok Industrial Park A, Singapore—dressed in black underwear and 'covered in black oil'—was arrested after hiding for six hours in a drain. The suspect, a 32-year-old Thai national, was linked to more than 35 robberies and immigration offences.[116] In July 2007 *Lianhe Wanbao* described a MacPherson break-in by a man in underwear and a T-shirt mask. A reader later called the station and linked the case

[111]'Pawang muda berjaya lawan "orang minyak"' [Young Pawang Successfully Counters 'Oily Man'], *Berita Harian*, 26 September 1968; 'Saya bukan pawang atau bomoh, kata Mahmud' [I am not a Pawang or Bomoh, says Mahmud], *Berita Harian*, 4 October 1968.

[112]See the review by Amarjit Kaur, 'Labour Migration in Southeast Asia: Migration Policies, Labour Exploitation and Regulation', *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2010, pp. 6–19.

[113]'黑衣黑皮肤 油鬼仔扰民宅 村民终日惶惶' [Black-clothed, Dark-skinned Oily Man Disturbs Homes; Villagers in Daily Fear], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 12 June 1986.

[114]Relevant context for the case studies in this paragraph include Pattana Kitiarsa, 'Thai Migrants in Singapore: State, Intimacy and Desire', *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 15, no. 6, 2008, pp. 595–610; and Graeme Hugo, 'Indonesian Labour Migration to Malaysia: Trends and Policy Implications', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1993, pp. 36–70.

[115]'施降头入屋抢劫 油鬼仔吓死屋主' [Practitioner of Black Magic Breaks into House and Robs; Oily Man Frightens Homeowner to Death], *Lianhe Wanbao* 联合晚报, 13 January 1993.

[116]'只穿黑色内裤 全身涂满黑油 "油鬼仔" 黑夜 躲沟渠被捕' [Wearing Only Black Underwear, Body Covered with Black Oil; 'Oily Man' Caught Hiding in Drain at Night], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 11 November 1999; '捉迷藏6小时' [Hide and Seek for 6 Hours], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 11 November 1999.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to earlier oily men, claiming they originated predominantly from Indonesia.[117] By the turn of the millennium, oil, underwear, and burglary still marked the repertoire, but the oily man menace was amplified by anxieties about migrant labour, illegality, and the vulnerability of urban households.

Myth

If person captured those identified or arrested as the oily man, and experience the rumours, testimonies, and panics that followed, myth refers to the stories and explanatory frames that gave the figure supernatural powers, backstory, and a place within recognizable cosmologies. By 'myth' we mean not fiction opposed to fact, but the narrative backdrops through which the oily man was interpreted and sustained within a shared cultural frame—stories that explained his powers and situated him within recognizable cosmologies.[118] The division by which orality generates myth while writing produces history collapses: lived realities were shaped not only by retellings and events themselves but also by their circulation through journalism, fiction, and film. Indeed, as Bruno Latour reminds us, the 'modern Constitution' falsely segregates fact from belief, fiction from reality; in practice, these domains interpenetrate.[119]

The oily man repertoire exemplifies this entanglement, in which rumour, reportage, and cinema reassembled fragments into recognizable forms. Attribution was almost always unstable: stories detached from their sources (journalists? informants? horror flicks?), retold in altered form, and reattached to fresh incidents.[120] Here, as Cohen observes, 'the emphasis is less on what actually happened than on how what happened is transformed and recast by later people for their own purposes … themes from the past are identified, simplified, magnified, and highlighted, to the point where they become sources of energy in the present'.[121] It was often unclear whether reports, participants, and witnesses described an actual prowler, parroted tropes from the screen, or introduced new elaborations.

Cinema and the Faustian pact: Hybridity and sorcerous bargains

Even before cinema, communities framed the oily man through various supernatural registers—for example, in 1954, as a psychopomp who shadowed the dying or as a practitioner of 'oily chicken' magic. Malay films in 1958 did not create this repertoire but amplified its otherworldly motifs. P. Ramlee's *Sumpah Orang Minyak* (Oath of the Oily Man) fixed in memory the Faustian pact of a deformed outcast who sold his soul to the devil to become handsome, on condition that he raped 21 virgins within seven days, thereby gaining supernatural powers—invulnerability and the ability to slip away from capture when covered in oil. After 1958, press reports oscillated between worldly

[117]'穿底裤 闯洋房 莫非 "油鬼仔" 再出击?' [Wearing Underwear, Breaking into Bungalow, Could the 'Oily Man' be Striking Again?], *Lianhe Wanbao* 联合晚报, 25 July 2007.

[118]Sarah Iles Johnston, *The Story of Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[119]Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 46–50.

[120]For a similar, albeit much more contemporary, context where an identical mechanism emerged, see Mary Neuburger and Andreas Hanzel, 'Mediums, Media, and Mediated "Post"-Truth: Baba Vanga in the Russian Imagination', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2025, pp. 197–222.

[121]Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, p. 293.

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burglar, foreign intruder, and apprentice sorcerer—the boundary never secure. In fact, 1958 was not a rupture but a vantage point, when rumour, reportage, and film converged; modern media—press, cinema, theatre—became instruments of secular re-enchantment.[122] On screen, audiences consumed stylized terrors; off screen, the oily man evoked dread of sorcery and assault whenever his presence was rumoured.

From the 1960s the oily man was increasingly refracted through cinematic motifs, religious cosmologies, and competing explanatory frameworks. In 1965 Malacca, the oily man was presented both as a source of village alarm and a possible human practitioner of 'supernatural knowledge' (*ilmu ghaib*), rather than as a fully fixed supernatural being.[123] This hybridity climaxed three years later in Kampong Penaga, Selangor, where the *pawang* cum spirit-medium Enche Mahmud claimed to have overcome an oily man who had terrorized the region. Mahmud explained that the monster was an ordinary man on the cusp of fulfilling a spiritual bargain that demanded the victimization of 44 women in exchange for otherworldly powers—an account that transparently recycled P. Ramlee's cinematic Faustian pact.[124] Film fiction thus returned as lived fact, authorized through Mahmud's asserted success as the medium of a manifest spirit and through the villagers' prayers, recasting the oily man as a force countered through spirit mediumship, prayer, and supernatural discipline. The figure endured not as fixed spectre but as a node where cinema supplied narratives, participants sustained them as truth, and local religious and communal frameworks sought to discipline it.

The oily man was also recast through the idiom of apprenticeship and pact, confirming the afterlife of cinematic motifs. In 1978, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, reporting on a spate of oily man sightings in Kampong Tan Miau, Kota Tinggi, explained that 'these oily men, who possess strange arts, must undergo forty days of cultivation before their skills are perfected, after which they will be unstoppable. Judging from the behaviour of this current group of oily men, however, their training is not yet mature—when committing crimes, they still leave behind certain traces.'[125] The vocabulary of 'cultivation' and 'maturity of training' positioned the oily man within the repertoire of sorcerous bargains: a novice whose pact remained incomplete. As in the films, the logic assumed a trade-off between supernatural power and human predation. This schema of staged empowerment—cultivation, sacrifice, invulnerability—shows how the cinematic motif of the devil's pact continued to shape rumour, recycled not as allegory but as explanation.

Reform, expansion, and elastic afterlives

By the 1990s, Malay-language newspapers increasingly sought to contain the oily man by reclassifying him as superstition, reflecting the growing influence of the *dakwah*

[122]Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (eds), *The Re-enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[123]'Orang minyak mengganggu pendudok Melaka Tengah' [Oily Man Disturbs Residents of Central Malacca], *Berita Harian*, 13 October 1965.

[124]'Saya bukan pawang atau bomoh, kata Mahmud' [I am not a Pawang or Bomoh, says Mahmud], *Berita Harian*, 4 October 1968.

[125]'哥打丁宜甘榜淡苗村 谣传出现油鬼仔 警方围捕无所获' [Rumour of Oily Man in Kampong Tan Miau, Kota Tinggi; Police Encirclement Yields Nothing], *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日报, 13 October 1978.

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movement in Malaysia and Singapore over the preceding decade.[126] Reformist commentary cast *kampong* ghosts not as menaces but as distractions from true faith. A 1997 *Berita Harian* piece mocked the oily man's evidentiary emptiness—'not a single drop of oil ever found'—and grouped him with the *pontianak* as backward superstitions to be transcended. Ramadan was invoked as frame: Malays were urged to abandon ghostly fears for Quranic discipline.[127] By the late twentieth century, the Malay press rarely portrayed the oily man as myth, panic, or spectacle, but as a sign of that which obstructed rationality, modernity, and Islamic progress, thereby disciplining the repertoire within a reformist horizon. This narrowing reflected how, in the wake of Islamic resurgence, ghostly fears could be recast as symptoms of superstition and insufficient religious discipline.

Yet beyond this reformist narrowing, Chinese-language reportage in the 1990s and 2000s continued to multiply the oily man's forms. In Pontian, Johor, in 1993, a Malay mother reported seeing eyes gleaming in the dark; a local *bomoh* identified the intruder as a water ghost seeking her child's life to reincarnate. Residents described doors rattling at night and a slick figure with unnaturally large eyes and a fishy smell, leaving behind 'slippery residue'. Pursued to the river, it vanished in a 'whirlpool'. Reports variously identified him as water spirit, child-ghost, *pontianak*, or oily man, depending on the idiom of interpretation. A recent spate of drownings among illegal Indonesian migrant labourers in the same river lent the haunting further resonance, interpreted as the restless dead of outsiders intruding into local space.[128] Demonological tropes of spirit-substitution familiar from Chinese lore were thus redeployed to explain both the figure and these deaths. Such tropes were not new to this period, but drawn from a familiar religious vocabulary through which Chinese-language reportage made supernatural events legible to its readership.

Where reformist Malay commentary sought to narrow the repertoire, Chinese-language reportage moved in the opposite direction, actively expanding it. At one level it repeated the cinematic idiom of the Faustian pact. In response to oily man sightings in Kampung Sempalit, Raub, Pahang, in 2001, reports noted that 'according to Malay folklore, those who practise black magic must sacrifice boys and girls in order to attain invulnerability and the ability to fly'.[129] Yet other Malay interviewees offered different rationalizations. Abdullah Saad, head of the Kampung Sempalit Village Security Committee, suggested the oily man was 'deliberately disturbing villagers to test his supernatural powers', while a Kelantanese teacher described him as 'an Indonesian sorcerer who crossed the sea to make a living'.[130] In this idiom the oily man was not

[126]Mohamed Imran bin Mohamed Taib, 'Neofundamentalist Thought, Dakwah, and Religious Pluralism Among Muslims in Singapore', *ISA eSymposium for Sociology*, vol. 3, 2012; Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 'The Notion of "Dakwah" and its Perceptions in Malaysia's Islamic Literature of the 1970s and '80s', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1989, pp. 288–297.

[127]A. Rahman Basrun, 'Jangan pula sampai anak kita jadi "kacang hantu"' [Don't Let Our Children Become 'Ghost Beans'], *Berita Harian*, 30 January 1997.

[128]'大笨珍河"水鬼"出没 深夜入屋摇婴孩睡篮' ['Water Ghost' Appears at Pontian River, Enters House at Night to Rock Baby's Cradle], *Lianhe Wanbao* 联合晚报, 19 August 1993.

[129]'信不信由你! 油鬼仔大闹甘榜 刀枪不入隐身逃' [Believe it or not! Oily Man Creates Havoc in Kampong, Impervious to Weapons, Escapes Invisibly], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 16 July 2001.

[130]'为试法力 骚扰妇孺?' [Testing Magical Power, Harassing Women and Children?], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 16 July 2001.

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merely prowler but esoteric experimenter and transnational menace. Where the Malay press narrowed, the Chinese press diversified, sustaining the repertoire in multiple directions.

By the turn of the millennium the oily man was less a fixed figure than a repertoire in motion—watery revenant, prowler, child-like familiar, *pontianak*-linked predator, myth-historical sorcerer, or fetish-object. Journalists amplified these contradictions, staging the very uncertainty that sustained the myth. This elasticity was most vividly displayed in Segamat, Johor, in 2002. Rumours spread that an oily man had to harass 40 unmarried girls to strengthen his sorcery, triggering panic: families fled, bamboo stalks were placed outside windows (likely informed by Chinese demonological practice), while volunteer patrols mobilized by the police took to the streets.[131] Days later a Kuala Lumpur *bomoh* staged a midnight exorcism before villagers, policemen, journalists, and television crews. A Malay girl was deployed as bait; during the ritual the *bomoh* cast a net over her, whereupon her body shook, and her expression contorted before she collapsed into unconsciousness. At that moment a grotesque anthropomorphic figure appeared in a jar of coffee, which the *bomoh* brandished as proof of capture, before throwing the bottle into the river. Villagers, '[b]elieving the oily man had been subdued, enjoyed their most peaceful night's sleep in weeks, free at last from the fear of harassment'.[132]

Segamat also showed how far the repertoire could stretch. For the first time the figure appeared not as male predator but as a 'female oily ghost', a gender inversion that unsettled earlier terrors. Upon capture, it was described as a 'wooden doll-like human figure, about a foot tall', recalling lore on child-ghosts, while its 'bald head and swollen belly' were taken by villagers as signs of 'a ghost of a woman who had killed herself while pregnant', drawing the incident into the orbit of *pontianak* traditions.[133] Three repertoires—sexual menace (rapist oily man), child-like appearance (miniaturization), reproductive menace (*pontianak*)—were collapsed into a single apparition. The dramatis personae—*bomohs*—were indisputably Malay, yet its ritual grammar was noticeably hybrid: possession of a human intermediary formed the evidentiary hinge, drawing on a well-documented Chinese religious lexicon of spirit interrogations (*kaozhao* 考召) through human bodies, though here the entity was materialized into a vessel rather than questioned.[134] By the early 2000s the oily man was no longer just the *kampong* rapist of 1950s lore but an elastic label through which disparate logics—Islamic

[131]'油鬼仔闹马国园丘' [Oily Man Disturbs Malaysian Plantation], *Lianhe Wanbao* 联合晚报, 19 June 2002; '为增强巫术法力? "油鬼仔" 闹园丘 骚扰40少女' [To Increase his Magical Power? 'Oily Man' Disturbs Plantation, Harasses 40 Girls], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 22 June 2002.

[132]'马国怪事 • 以少女为饵 巫师自称施法 活擒女油鬼仔' [Malaysian Strange Affair: Using Girl as Bait, *Bomoh* Claims Ritual Capture of Female Oily Man], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 27 June 2002; '巫师作法生擒女油鬼仔五官难辨像孕妇' [*Bomoh* Ritual Captures Female Oily Man: Features Resemble a Pregnant Woman], *Lianhe Wanbao* 联合晚报, 27 June 2002.

[133]'马国怪事 • 以少女为饵 巫师自称施法 活擒女油鬼仔' [Malaysian Strange Affair: Using Girl as Bait, *Bomoh* Claims Ritual Capture of Female Oily Man], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 27 June 2002; '巫师作法生擒女油鬼仔五官难辨像孕妇' [*Bomoh* Ritual Captures Female Oily Man: Features Resemble a Pregnant Woman], *Lianhe Wanbao* 联合晚报, 27 June 2002. On the problematic symbolism that ties motherhood, pregnancy, and the *pontianak* together, see Tan, '*Pontianaks*'; Galt, *Alluring Monsters*, pp. 83–111.

[134]Michael Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 239–243, 268–269, 274–275. See Margaret Chan, 'The Sinophone Roots of Javanese Nini

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reformist, Malay supernatural, Chinese demonological, and media spectacular—could be assembled.

Mythic elaborations broadened the repertoire by tying the oily man to wider cosmologies of reproduction and myth-history. On 16 November 2005, following reports that a female nurse was raped by an oily man in Kuala Lumpur, the *Xin Ming Ri Bao* carried a story situating him within Malay sorcery: initiates were said to sit naked beneath a banana tree for a hundred days to seal a pact with evil spirits, thereby gaining powers to slip through walls and steal from homes. The rape of virgin women was also described as central to their practice.[135] The banana tree—a staple of *pontianak* lore—thus linked the oily man to a perversion of reproduction and the restless dead.[136] Later retellings stretched the repertoire still further. In 2015, when reporting on the Sar Kong Vigilante Corps' efforts to protect its *kampong* from oily men, a journalist traced the latter's origin to a Sumatran missionary who had once offended a sultan, been executed, and left behind books detailing the 'method' of creating an oily man.[137] Almost certainly a reworking of the *Sejarah Melayu* tale of Tuan Jana Khatib—the Pasai mystic executed by the jealous sultan of Singapura after demonstrating his powers before the queen—the story shows how older narratives were readily grafted onto the oily man.[138] Myth here did not stabilize the repertoire but continually recycled and recombined it.

Conclusion

Through our situating of the oily man within the moulds of experience, person, and myth, the figure in Malaya and Singapore reveals how rumour, testimony, and authority intertwined to shape public life across space and time. His presence took shape through witnesses—victims, community patrols, police, and journalists—who anchored the figure in lived encounters while also refracting him through idioms of sorcery, crime, and sexuality. In the interwar and postwar decades, reports multiplied, transforming burglars into spectral intruders and spectacles into communal panics. Police investigations, press clarifications, and ritual remedies did not settle his reality but instead kept him in circulation, making the oily man both a test of state credibility and a menace experienced in everyday life. In a plural colonial and post-colonial society, he travelled across Malay, Chinese, and English publics, never reducible to a single ethnic or religious frame but continually reinterpreted through them.

Although curtailed in the late Malay press, this repertoire did not vanish but persisted in other arenas—Segamat being one example where Malay concerns continued to unfold but were reported most fully in Chinese newspapers. Across the decades,

Towong', *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2017, pp. 95–115, on the cross-fertilization between allegedly 'Malay' practices and Sinic sources of inspiration.

[135]'马来黑巫术 种种神秘故事' [Malay Black Sorcery: Various Mysterious Tales], *Xin Ming Ri Bao* 新明日报, 16 November 2005.

[136]Galt, *Alluring Monsters*, pp. 108–109, 217–218, 222–223.

[137]He Ying 何盈, '闲话 "油鬼仔"' [Idle Talk About the 'Oily Man'], *Lianhe Zaobao* 联合早报, 9 October 2015.

[138]Tan Zi Hao, 'The Fall of Singapura: The Necessity of Unjust Violence in the *Sejarah Melayu*', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2023, p. 372.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

newspapers, films, and community performances reframed the oily man as rapist, ghost, sorcerer, or captured object, while reform-minded commentators sought to dismiss him as superstition. These retellings verified, exaggerated, and repurposed earlier accounts, ensuring that no single witness or interpretation remained fully authoritative.

What emerged was not a stable image—let alone the phantasm of petrohorror—but an elastic repertoire in which localized circumstances, fears of outsiders, rumour, and representation blurred together, sustaining the figure while also undermining claims to certainty. The later material also suggests that this repertoire did not simply expand over time, but became increasingly compressed, as motifs that may once have circulated more distinctly were folded together into denser composite forms. Repertoire thus names not a fixed set of traits but a changing field of recombination, one that can both accumulate new elements and collapse older distinctions. Read this way, the oily man demonstrates why the study of the supernatural in Southeast Asia benefits from moving beyond allegory to recover the historical and social life of rumour. Fictional representation and creative agency too have often flattened such figures into symbols of patriarchy, modernity, or resource capitalism, at the expense of the encounters, panics, and acts of mobilization that gave them force in social life. The approach developed here may also be useful for thinking about other supernatural figures in the region whose force lies less in any fixed essence than in repeated circulation, reactivation, and reinterpretation.[139]

Acknowledgements. We thank the anonymous reviewers, editors, and editorial staff of *Modern Asian Studies* for their constructive suggestions and guidance during the preparation and revision of this manuscript. We are also grateful to Wu Yu, Toh Xuan Rou Crystal, and Nur Majdah Binte Aminuddin for facilitating access to several important primary sources used in this article. The first author acknowledges an intellectual debt to Adam Yuet Chau and Koh Keng We for their tutelage, and to Barend ter Haar's scholarship. Their work informed the article's conceptual framing, its historical grounding in Southeast Asia, and its treatment of religion and rumour. He also thanks Gary Li Ka Ho for drawing his attention to Paul Cohen's magisterial study, and for his invaluable friendship and intellectual companionship. The second author gratefully acknowledges the support of his mother, his aunt Doris, and his brother, and extends heartfelt thanks to his partner, Zoey, for her unwavering support throughout this project.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

[139]For example, see Robert Wessing, 'Homo Narrans in East Java: Regional Myths and Local Concerns', *Asian Folklore Studies* 65, no. 1, 2006, pp. 45–68, on Loro Kidul in Java and the relation between regional myth, local concerns, and motion pictures. We thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing this case to our attention.

Cite this article: Soh, Esmond Chuah Meng and Jin Rong Aw. 2026. 'Experience, person, and myth: A socio-cultural history of the "oily man" in post-colonial Malaysia and Singapore'. *Modern Asian Studies*, pp. 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X26102194

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