

Little children play with fire

NANA

Translated by May Chong

CONTENT WARNING:
colorism, religious bigotry, child death



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Translator's Introduction

May Chong

The Malaysian Malay identity is deeply entwined with Islam, right down to the constitutional definition of what a Malay is. Affirmative action for the Malays became national policy following the racial riots of May 13 1969, an incident more often used as a threat to Malaysia's other races than a topic of discussion.¹ After over 60 years of continuous rule by a political coalition with the United Malays National Organisation/UMNO at its head, to challenge or criticise these policies in any way is branded as threatening the Malays themselves.

In April 2017, a student at a tahfiz or religious school in the state of Johor was beaten by an assistant warden. The wounds he sustained became gravely infected, resulting in the amputation of both legs and his right arm. He died after 8 days of treatment.² The Coroner's Court ruled that his death was due to complications from leptospirosis (rat urine disease) and no one was criminally liable for the death.³

In September 2017, another tahfiz was burned down in Kam-

¹ Two books recommended to the translator were Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein, *The May 13 Tragedy* (Kuala Lumpur: National Operations Council, 1969) and Kua Kia Soong, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* (SUARAM Komunikasi, 2007). It is worth noting the sources drawn upon by both books, the identities of both authors, and the fact that Tun Abdul Razak was the Prime Minister at the time of these riots. Teen readers may also find Hanna Alkaf, *The Weight of Our Sky* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019) more approachable, though still informative.

² "Schoolboy in abuse case dies," *The Star*, 26 April 2017, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/04/26/schoolboy-in-abuse-case-dies/>.

³ "Judge: Tahfiz pupil died from leptospirosis complications," *The Star*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/03/22/judge-tahfiz-pupil-died-from-leptospirosis-complications/>.

pung Datok Keramat, Kuala Lumpur. 23 souls were lost, with 3 more critically injured in the fire.⁴ The building had a single entrance and grills over the windows, which hindered the students' escape. Seven students aged 11-18 were later charged with murder, as they had started the fire as revenge following a bullying incident.⁵

It was later discovered that the tahfiz did not have a valid permit from the Fire and Rescue Department, and the building should not have been occupied.⁶ In response to parents' outcry, the headmaster was quoted as saying, "Why ask now about fire safety when it was not a matter that bothered the parents before."⁷ Concerns were also raised about monetary donations not reaching the parents of the deceased students.

During further investigation, the state of Selangor's Fire and Rescue department found that several similar religious schools were not adhering to specifications on fire safety, with improper wiring and no fire extinguishers.⁸ A number of tahfiz were not registered with Jais (the state Islamic authori-

⁴ "Keramat tahfiz school fire: Here's what we know so far," *New Straits Times*, 14 September 2017, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/09/279724/keramat-tahfiz-school-fire-heres-what-we-know-so-far>.

⁵ "The Tahfiz Fire That Killed 23 Was Started By 7 Young Teens Seeking Revenge," *SAYS*, 17 September 2017, <https://says.com/my/news/the-tahfiz-fire-that-killed-23-was-started-by-7-young-teens-seeking-revenge..>

⁶ "School had no permit, fire safety cert to operate at premises," *Malaysiakini*, 15 September 2017, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/395146>.

⁷ "Tahfiz School Principal Says Parents Should Have Asked If The Building Had A Safety Permit," *SAYS*, 24 September 2017, <https://says.com/my/news/tahfiz-school-principal-blames-parents-for-not-asking-if-the-building-had-a-safety-permit..>

⁸ "Poor fire safety in Selangor tahfiz schools," *Bernama*, 27 September 2017, <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/poor-fire-safety-selangor-tahfiz-schools-156260>.

ty) and did not use modern academic systems.⁹

Despite these tragedies and the unclear legal, safety or educational status of these tahfiz, a lack of accountability remains and parents continue to entrust their children to these schools. Part of this is out of a desire to give them a religious education, and a belief that the deaths of these children has reserved a place for their parents in heaven.

'Anak kecil main api' was written as a response to these events, with the growing voice of Malay supremacy as its background. The title is borrowed from a Malay song used to fan ethnic pride, played during UMNO meetings and to teenagers undergoing National Service/Khidmat Negara until 2018.¹⁰ While there are altered versions that blur the message, it originally includes lines such as 'The earth (we) tread belongs to others', 'Gains flow into other hands/and the natives weep alone' and 'the Malays are strong in the Nusantara', or the name for maritime Southeast Asia.¹¹

The poem also makes a reference to the folktale of Pak Kadok, who wins a cockfight against royalty but loses his village in the process ('the village is razed, yet still a cheer/of victory'). Throughout, it highlights the prejudices and apathy of the adults who have failed to protect their children, or even prevent them from 'main api'/playing with fire in the first place. By hiding behind religion, they have neglected their

⁹ "Selangor Sultan: Unregistered tahfiz schools can no longer operate," *Malay Mail*, 18 March 2019, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/03/18/selangor-sultan-unregistered-tahfiz-schools-can-no-longer-operate/1733806>.

¹⁰ "Anak Kecil Main Api-lagu Warisan," *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vxmIZn-4R4>.

¹¹ Compare the versions at the following links:

a) <https://www.1liriklagu.com/lirik-anak-kecil-main-api-versi-lama/>
b) <https://www.1liriklagu.com/lirik-warisan-anak-kecil-main-api/>

duty of care to the next generation, many of whom are put at risk not just by the decision of their parents to educate them outside the standard schooling system, but also the educators who abuse their authority and fail to provide sufficient care and safety for their students. In asking for accountability for these children who are unable to speak for themselves, must the whole system first be burned down?

Little children play with fire¹²

Nana

Little children play with fire?
Let them be!

We are the descendants of matches
with heads of red, black and white
in a cramped box nation
no wiggle room for
the big,
the long
the broken
the bent
the spotted
the other.

Little children play with fire?
Let them play!

We are shafts of sulfur

incarcerating hearts full of hate
hate for skins that diverge from langsung yellow like

you dark
you pale
hate!

hate for Muslims that diverge in prayer like

you different

¹² Originally published in Malay as "Anak kecil main api" in *Jurnal Svava* Issue 2, April-June 2020.

you deviant
hate!

Little children play with fire?
Light the spark!

We grown-ups wait for meltdown time
to ignite other matches
We claim to be proverbial candles
lighting the way for others
unwitting grave diggers, burying futures
of someone's child
our children
scratch the match
loose the grip
thrown away.

The village is razed, yet still a cheer
of victory
The tahfiz is ash and only then
do heads raise
do minds appraise
Which child shall pull us by the hand
rank with blood
Unashamed, let them
haul us to heaven.

A child of eleven slips
we slap
we snap
we loose from the trap!

So let the little children play with fire
for the grown-ups like us
have lost their compass
have lost their way
have turned from light.

About the Author and Translator

Nana's poems and short stories have been featured in *The Jakarta Post*, *Dirty x Dirty*, *Jurnal Obscura*, *Fixi*, *Math Paper Press*, and the *Malaysian Anthology of Modern Poetry*. Other than performing spoken word poetry, they also create poetry and game zines for leisure and on commission. Contact email: nanawrote@gmail.com.

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