'Us' and 'Them':

Ethnic Minority Gangs in the Singapore Prisons

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Abstract

This research is the first empirical study to examine ethnic minority gangs which have emerged within the Singapore prisons. It argues that the distinctive forms these entities have assumed in terms of history, structure, subculture, geography and ideologies have to be appreciated in the context of the social, economic and political dynamics that exist in wider Singapore society in general and the symbiotic relationship that exist between the formal social control institutions and the institutionalised Chinese secret societies in particular. What is sociologically revealing is that while the latter operating within the prisons tend to recruit non-Chinese inmates and therefore more 'out-group' orientated in their recruitment strategies, memberships into ethnic minority gangs such as the 'Omega' and 'Sarah Jumbo' – the two important minority gangs in prisons – are restricted to inmates of the same 'race', pointing to a conceptualisation of gangs in prisons as a racialised phenomenon as far as the Singapore context is concerned.

Introduction

There is a dearth of literature on the phenomenon of gangs in Singapore and the few that deal with it are limited to the study of Chinese secret societies (Wynne, 1941; Comber, 1959; Blythe, 1969; Trocki, 1979; Wong, 1963; Mak, 1981). There is still relatively little empirical knowledge on gangs in prisons or the nature of their constituency in the social organisation of the prisons. This research seeks to examine the two most important ethnic minority gangs, Omega and Sara Jumbo, and account for the forms they have assumed in the context of the prisons in relation to history, structure, subculture, geography, and ideology. Data from the study revealed that Omega and Sara Jumbo comprising exclusively ethnic Malays and Indians respectively have emerged primarily as a response to ethnic consciousness and racialisation processes engendered within the prison institution where racial self-identification becomes the *only* criterion in gang affiliation. Sociologically, this also begs the question of why is it that gangs which have their roots in prisons tended to be ethnic minority in nature. The ideology of ethnic minority gangs stands in contrast to the criminality exhibited by the 'imported' (into prisons) Chinese secret societies which is juxtaposed with mainstream values such as consumerism, elitism, and competitive success – values which promote the strong economic orientation of these societies.

This observation necessitates an analysis of gangs in prison (and in the free society as shall be illustrated later) as a racialised phenomenon warranting an investigation into the power relations – both structurally and interpersonally – that exist among gang members of the various racial groups in prisons. Such understanding and contextualising of their experiences not only reveal the function of gangs as part of the informal inmate code to 'surviving' the prisons but chart important conceptual and empirical linkages with the free and legitimate society. This study, as the next section will reveal, intends to challenge the position of

the structural-functionalists (e.g. Irwin & Cressey, 1962) who have sought to understand the processes of gang formation in prisons as merely a mechanism to cope with the pains of imprisonment. While this seems a logical deduction, such an analysis obscures an understanding of the historical contextualisation of the lived experiences of inmates of various racial as well as class groups in prisons, and the social hierarchies, rivalries and ideologies these groups represent and reproduce in the context of the prisons. While this study primarily focuses on the lived experiences of ethnic minority gang members where it is argued that they are qualitatively distinct from the experiences of Chinese inmates, any analysis of ethnic minority gangs in prisons cannot be complete without documenting the role of the Chinese secret societies as a dominant player in the illegitimate society, as will be discussed later in the section on 'The Legacy of the Chinese Secret Societies'.

Theorising Gangs in Prisons

Academics researching delinquent gangs in prisons have often invoked the concept of *prisonisation* to understand their emergence and proliferation. Prisonisation conceptually refers to the 'process by which a new inmate takes on the norms, customs, values, and culture in general of the penitentiary and learns to adapt to the prison environment' (Clemmer, 1958:298). This concept has influenced the development of two important theoretical models – deprivation (Sykes, 1958; Cloward, 1977; Goffman, 1961) and importation (see Irwin & Cressey, 1962) – in explaining the role of delinquent associations in the prison milieu. These two models, fundamentally, have suggested that the emergence and importation of gangs into prisons are functional to countering the numerous 'pains of imprisonment' induced by the loss of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual contact, autonomy and security as well as the psychological threats to their self-conception (Sykes, 1958:63; Sykes & Messinger, 1960:13-18). Delinquent associations safeguard against the threat and reality of physical violence in prisons which is often a consequence of material and psychological deprivations, and against

poverty through an 'informal prison economy, involving the selling and consumption of contrabands smuggled into the penitentiary' (Ross & Richards, 2002; Toch, 1998).

Following the deprivation model of imprisonment, the myriad functions of delinquent groups in prisons instills in unaffiliated inmates the reality that membership in delinquent groups is crucial as a 'currency' to surviving incarceration (Flesher & Rison, 1999:237; Jacobs, 1974:400). Within the organisational framework of delinquent groups, members are allocated definite roles and can aspire to successive levels of status through the display of manly virtues like that of bravery or fearlessness, toughness, physical prowess and loyalty to one's group members, which allows them to assert their masculine self (Ross & Richards, 2002:129). In contradistinction to the prison institution's attempt to 'de-masculinise' its subjects, or at least to regulate masculinity through institutional means such as providing legitimate space for sports activities during 'yard time' and banning of physical exercise in the cells, participation in gangs allows members to subscribe to the ideals of an 'aggressive' or 'exaggerated' masculinity where such performances allow inmates to attain status among peers and imperviousness towards staff. This often assumes the expression of 'rape, defiance against custodians of control, sports and the construction of the "ideal type" masculine physicality' (Lockwood, 1980; Sabo & Runfola, 1980; Messner, 1989; Messerchmidt, 1993). More importantly, leveraging on the social platform provided by gangs, displays of masculinity offer symbols to resist the 'mortification of self' within the prison milieu (Strong, 1943:564).

The 'border crossing' image which the concept of prisonisation attests to arises from a normative conception of prisons as a 'total institution', denoting a place of 'residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut-off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life' (Goffman, 1961:xiii). Similarly, Foucault saw the prisons as a 'complete and austere institution' which 'assumes responsibility for all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday

conduct, his moral attitude, his state of mind' (Foucault, 1979: 235). For the prisoners, it entails a transition into 'a social world that is organised differently and centred around a different culture than the everyday world left behind – a passage that is acknowledged by the prison culture distinction between the world of the joint and the outside free world' (Jones & Schmid, 2000:1).

This leads to a conceptualisation of the prison community as a social system in its own right, in variously conceptualised as 'primitive society', 'prison society', 'autonomous society', 'social microcosm', 'micro society', 'inmate society', 'segregated communities' and 'closed institution' (Clemmer, 1958; Skyes, 1958; Sykes & Messinger, 1960; Jacobs, 1979; Etzioni, 1957) where it is isolated from the outside world with its own language, leaders, laws, rites and rituals. Members of this society are seen to speak in 'the pungent argot of the dispossessed and have their own vocabulary for everything from sex roles to dispositions *vis-à-vis* the official administration' (Sykes & Messinger, 1960:11). Yet, rather paradoxically, both the deprivation and importation thesis of prisonisation challenge the much revered notion of the prison as a total institution. While it denotes structurally a totalitarian regime and an almost absolute control of the inmate population, the very formation, proliferation and importation of delinquent associations into prisons as an adaptive response to surviving incarceration provides a conceptual space for recognising *agency* amidst the 'totality of the institution'.

A more serious conceptual problem with the deprivation theory, despite its utility in documenting the 'structural accommodation' on the part of the inmates, is the assumption of the existence of a monolithic, homogenous and an 'isolated' prison culture which is conceived as the result of a collectively adaptive response to the conditions of imprisonment. Though the importation model tends to address this conceptual gap by emphasising the influence of external statuses and behaviour patterns on prisoner subcultures (see Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Jacobs, 1979; Philips, 2008), it cannot adequately explain the *form* the prisoner subcultures assume and the differentiated strategies offered by the various racial, class and gen-

der groups within the prisons. Of interest to this study is the salience of race as an ideology in gang formation and membership – an important component in the process of prisonisation – among minority inmates and how it equips them with a repertoire of *race* resources to cope with the pains of imprisonment. By this, I argue that the experiences of minority gang members are qualitatively distinct from those of the majority Chinese inmates where the discourse of racialisation and the attendant semantics of social exclusion, subjugation, racism, and discrimination have a pervasive effect on constructing intra-minority and minority-majority relationships in the prisons context.

Theoretically, the empirical investigation into the phenomenon of minority gangs calls for the need to merge the deprivation and importation models of prisonisation to appreciate why and how their racialised adaptation to the prison experience is a direct consequence of the unequal power arrangement between the minority and majority racial groups in both the legitimate and illegitimate society. Undoubtedly, the socialisation into prison life is dictated by the conditions of captivity but the *form* the process assumes has to be traced beyond the boundaries of prisons (deprivation model) and pre-prison behaviour patterns of individual inmates and groups (importation model). Following this argument, one can then locate the 'excesses' of violence disproportionately perpetrated by minority gang members against 'others' including prison staff and members of their own 'race' but who have joined rival gangs run by the Chinese in the differential access to race resources. Given that minority gang members do not see a future in hegemonic masculinity by virtue of their ethno-class position and because they lack the race resources of the Chinese majority in and outside prisons, minority gang members tend to resort to those hegemonic masculine ideals that remain available in prisons, such as physical violence. Thus, instead of pathologising the violent behaviors of minority gang members, their engagement in physical aggression should be seen as a collective resource for accomplishing masculinity – hyper, 'uncontrolled' and racialised. It is crucial to recognise their violence as a form of compensatory

behaviour in the context of unequal distribution of race resources and it is one way through which ethnic minority members prove and 'visibilise' their masculinity which becomes a status resource in itself in prisons.

It is the contention of the author that the study of ethnic minority gangs in prisons must necessarily entail an analysis of the social, economic and political dynamics that exist in wider Singapore society and how they are reproduced and replicated, albeit in different forms, in the prison context. Central to this investigation is examining the historical role of the institutionalised Chinese secret societies in both colonial and contemporary Singapore society, and the symbiotic relationship that exists between these societies and the police in the regulation of illicit markets which serve to control the distribution of race resources in the illegitimate society. The latter is an important precursor to understanding ethnic minority gangs in prisons.

Methodology

Data collection for this study was conducted in three phases. The first phase was initiated in 2003 when I had the opportunity to witness and experience prison life beyond the 'showcase' sections of the prison institution. Assuming an ethnographic style, close to 500 hours were spent in the field engaging inmates in informal conversations and observing the routines and rhythms of their lives as they interacted with fellow inmates and prison staff. These initial observations were confined to one Housing Unit of a Remand Prison where convicted prisoners were housed. The yard, particularly, offered an excellent site to study prison life as it was here that prisoners from the housing unit were allowed for an hour to leave their cells and mingle 'freely' with others but always under the watchful eyes of the prison staff and Gurkha guards observing the prison community from the guard towers. Most of my conversations and observations were done during the 'yard time' as it presented me with an opportunity to penetrate the inner and what is often regarded as the central feature of prison life where cliques were formed, alliances reinforced, deals

made, and in a more somber note, sex preys identified. Excerpts from the field notes attest to the dynamism of the yard:

> …the yard is more than a physical place where inmates do their daily exercises, reading papers which are weeks old, bathing in the open, shaving, and all. It becomes a symbolic site for inmates to engage in the deliberate display of manly virtues where they would usually walk with their shoulders and upper chest awkwardly lifted to communicate intimidation and a sense of superiority and accomplishment. Some, especially seasoned gangsters, like to pace around the yard, sizing people up…and this will soon be followed with exchanges of stares between inmates… The yard becomes a theater where the display of masculinity is rehearsed and expected. The masculinity script thus provides for a great deal of certainty and order, but still it is always accompanied with an acknowledgement that something can go terribly wrong anytime (field notes).

Prisoners were asked about their incarceration experience generally and in almost all the conversations, this led to discussions about their gangs without any prompting, a clear attestation that surviving incarceration and gang involvement are intrinsically and inevitably tied to each other. Of particular salience was how prisoners articulated their masculine and gang identities which almost always intersected with narratives of racialisation and social exclusion both inside and outside the prisons. During this phase, I basically resorted to mental-note taking as it was not possible or permitted to physically record the observations especially given the fact that I was operating in a 'naturalistic' environment.

This initial acquaintance with prison life and the understanding of how *racialised* and *gendered* that experience was to so many prisoners precipitated an interest to further examine the social organisation of the prisons and the role of minority gangs in it. Through informal and personal contacts, I conducted in-depth interviews with 22 Sara Jumbo members including its founder, 11 Omega members and 18 Chinese secret society members in both the 'free' and 'prison society' as part of the second phase of data-collection. These interviews were done between February 2004 and September 2008 and the relatively long period of data collection was primarily due to problems of access to

and arranging interview sessions with gang members. In this phase, a further 15 interviews were done with ex- and current police and prison officers for the purposes of data triangulation and documenting the 'institutional' viewpoint. For the third phase of data collection, participant-observation was carried out for about six months in 2008 at a working-class Indian pub located in the Serangoon Road area (also known as Little India) where members of Sara Jumbo usually congregated. The method allowed for a more intimate involvement with the members and provided an insight into their values, norms, and worldview. The fieldwork was completed in the first quarter of 2009. Because it is a protracted and small-scale study, the results cannot be considered definitive. Nevertheless, they provided an overview of contemporary prison life and the role of gangs in the prisonisation process. Importantly, the study was able to document the lived experiences of (ex)prisoners as classed, raced and gendered subjects and their relationship with gangs in prisons.

The Legacy of the Chinese Secret Societies

Historically, Chinese secret societies which were based on the Triad organisational strategy were instrumental in maintaining control over the Chinese immigrants to Malaya, and for the greater part of the nineteenth century existed as an intermediate layer of extra-legal jurisdiction in regulating the social, economic, and political life of these immigrants (Trocki, 1979; Turnbull, 1996:52-3). This system of domination of the rapidly increasing immigrant community by such societies meant that many of the powers and functions of the colonial government were wielded by them (Blythe, 1969:1). The growing economic and political dominance of the Chinese secret societies and the rivalry between them over the control of lucrative resources in a frontier society soon compelled the colonial authorities to rethink their policy toward these societies. The indiscriminate violence which accompanied the degeneration of Chinese secret societies as evidenced in the Chinese Post Office riots in 1867, and during the Larut Wars (1862 - 1873) be-

tween the Hakka Hai San and the Cantonese Ghee Hin over the control of tin mining became an important justification for the colonial authorities to introduce the Societies Ordinance which effectively criminalised all forms of Chinese secret organisations in 1890. Since then, a series of legislative measures such as the Banishment Ordinance were experimented with but it was not till 1955 that the colonial authorities enjoyed phenomenal success in the suppression of Chinese secret societies when they introduced the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Ordinance (Ganapathy, 1995).

Fundamentally, this law allowed the authorities to detain a secret society member without trial for an indefinite period and the relative success of this law was seen in the decline of secret society related incidents from 416 in 1959 to 13 in 1977 (Police Life, 1977). The total number of detainees under this Act, which was renewed for the 11th time in 2004, has also dropped from 1, 260 in 1988 to 463 in 1998 to 290 in 2008 (The Straits Times, 2009:4). While it is tempting to attribute the apparent success to the deterrent effect of this law, it is equally important to acknowledge the existence of a symbiotic relationship between the police and Chinese secret societies, which has evolved to address the problem of policing marginal occupations and geographical locales that attract criminal elements (Ganapathy & Lian, 2002). In the Singapore context, this is particularly relevant to certain groups – prostitutes, illegal money lenders, coffee shop owners, hawkers, mobile newspaper vendors, building contractors, owners of massage parlours and karaoke bars – by virtue of the fact that their occupation are either not rendered full protection of the law, or require a state of perpetual protection which the State police can ill-afford (Mak, 1981).

Seen from this perspective, Chinese secret societies play a functional role in offering protection to the vulnerable and marginalised population (subscribers) in return for gaining territorial monopolisation and control of both illegal and legal economic activity generated within these territorial, extra-political entities while respecting the 'rules' enshrined in the symbiotic relationship (Ganapathy & Lian 2002). The *exclusiveness* of the symbiotic relationship between the police

and Chinese secret societies serves to preserve social order in the illegitimate (criminal) society, first, by evicting headmen of secret societies who are not compliant with the police from the symbiotic participation, and second, by preventing *new* gangs i.e. street corner and secret society types from gaining a foothold in the criminal underworld and potentially upsetting the institutional symbiotic relationships between the Chinese secret societies and the police. The low number of *recorded* secret society incidents cited earlier should be understood in the context of this historical and institutional symbiotic relationship.

The stability of this relationship could be attributed to two factors. First, since the organisational characteristics of Chinese secret societies promote their economic motive – which has been the case since colonial times – through a subscription to what are often considered 'mainstream' values of financial gain, competitive success, elitism and long-term planning and investments, there is no real need for these societies to challenge the symbiotic arrangement as it would be against their own economic interest to do so. As studies on organised crime have shown, the stability of illicit markets rests upon the extent to which organised criminal groups successfully embed themselves in both the illegitimate and legitimate society fundamentally achieved through a symbiotic relationship with enforcement agencies (Reuter, 1984; Chambliss, 1989; Lowman, 1992; Smith, 1971; Hobbs, 1988).

The second factor contributing to the resilience of the institutional relationship is the Chinese secret societies' subscription to an *ideology* that apparently de-emphasises ethnicity among its members. Notwithstanding the provision of socio-cultural and structural mechanisms by which younger Chinese – by virtue of their ethnicity – could gain access to the illegitimate opportunity and learning structures should conventional means fail, Chinese secret societies in Singapore had to historically adopt an ideology of 'brotherhood' and 'blood-oath of loyalty' where ethnic allegiance among members had to be downplayed. This adaptive strategy arose from the need to recruit members from an ethnically heterogeneous community comprising Indian and Chinese emi-

grants of various dialects and the native Malays to boost their membership, and where numerous secret societies additionally existed and competed for members in order to flourish (Musa, 2003). As Wynne (1941, p. 254) noted:

> ...in order for Chinese secret societies to safeguard their imperium in imperio within the context of a multi-ethnic, migrant community such as Singapore, it was crucial for Chinese secret societies to ideologically de-emphasise ethnic allegiance.

Also, the over-representation of Malays in the police service in Singapore at least till the 1970s (Ganapathy, 2000) compelled Chinese secret societies to recruit Malay members in order to play the frontline role of dealing with, and bribing the police officers to overlook the activities of Chinese secret societies (Musa, 2003). As Wynne observed:

> …the Malays were always a tool in the hands of the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the Chinese Secret Societies, engaged to do the dirty work that the Chinese did not want associated to their own Chinese societies. The differentiated status between Chinese and Malay members of Chinese secret societies was marked by a difference in the entrance fee of Chinese members which was three dollars and sixty cents, compared to the one dollar and sixty cents paid by lesser members of Chinese secret societies, namely Malays (1941, p. 228).

A more significant reason for this adaptive strategy of 'inclusive membership', however differential it was, is its carefully nuanced compatibility to the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) political ideology of 'multiracialism'. Multiracialism, as an ideology, is committed to the equal treatment of all races in Singapore and this works well for the corporatist state whose legitimacy rests upon the articulation of the nation as a consensual and organic community (Lian, 2006). This also translates to the overall pervasiveness of the so-called CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) model where each racial community's ethnicity is assumed to be unique and particularistic (Benjamin, 1976; Hill & Lian, 1995). Consequently, 'Chinese', 'Malay', 'Indian' and 'Others' are assumed to be 'races' with a distinctive and identifiable culture, language and religious affiliation. Politically, 'multiracialism' as

an ethnic/racial policy is seen as the cornerstone of Singapore's social stability and economic prosperity. The 'moral symmetry' between the Chinese secret societies and the PAP is thus witnessed in '[their] structure...namely their multi-ethnic composition, the ideology of PAP's equality which parallels the ideology of brotherhood in Chinese secret societies' (Hanif, 2008:116). As one ethnic minority gang member whom Hanif (2008) interviewed noted:

> To me, the Chinese secret societies and PAP are the same. They work the same way, their thinking is the same also. Chinese SS (secret societies) make money, have the money. PAP also makes money; money making is their primary goal. In SS they got Malay and Indian sections, in PAP we also got GRC (Group Representation) where there are Malay and Indian MPs to take care of minority races. I know the PAP and Chinese SS help each other…In fact I will say that PAP is the biggest Chinese SS in Singapore…

Although the Chinese secret societies professed equal opportunities and treatment for all their members through the adoption of the ideology of sworn brotherhood (Mak, 1981), the reality of the situation was that ethnic minority members were structurally confined to positions in the lower echelons of the secret society as promotional criteria essentially depended on the ascribed characteristics of the members. As one ethnic minority member of a Chinese secret society stated plainly:

> …you have to be a Chinese to run a Chinese secret society. My loyalty to the society is not enough…your skin color must be the same as them (emphasis mine).

Ethnic minority gangs, in the context of the 'free society', arguably experience a 'triple-crisis': first, the absence of an historically inherited 'ethnic minority' adult criminal network equivalent to that of the Chinese secret societies in which younger members of ethnic minority groups could gain access to the market of illicit opportunities and learning structures (the following section deals with this in detail). Second, the ideology of ethnic/racial exclusivity of minority gangs such as Omega and Sara Jumbo and the political nuances their memberships offer is antithetical to the PAP government's nationalist ideology of multiracialism which seeks to assiduously depoliticise ethnic-

ity. As these gangs present a potential threat to the PAP's professed ideology of multiracialism and equality, they are disproportionately subjected to surveillance by the State. Third, and as a consequence of the second, ethnic minority gangs are thus excluded from the institutional symbiotic relationship which the Chinese secret societies historically have enjoyed with the police. Being excluded from the institutional arrangement meant that ethnic minority gangs do not have the structural access to gain territorial monopolisation and control of licit and illicit economic activities. The net effect of this 'triple-crisis' is the (continued) marginalisation of ethnic minority gangs in the illegitimate society. It is to this marginality that ethnic minority members react to and upon which ethnic minority gangs emerge in the prisons. The disproportionate representation of ethnic minorities in prisons, coupled with the prevailing discourse of racialisation, promotes the proliferation of minority gang membership.

Ethnic Minority Gangs in Prisons

An Historical Overview of Ethnic Minority Gangs

It is a historical truism that gangs usually begin as local groups arising from the social and defensive needs of particular ethnic and migrant communities (Campbell & Muncer, 1989). While this is true in the case of Chinese secret societies, there is no evidence to suggest that early South Asian migrants in Singapore had formed organisations, formal or informal, to protect their interests (Mani, 1993). One of the factors which might have contributed to this was that early migrant Indians who came to Malaya to work in the plantations and as labourers in the public works were recruited by British companies with the help of the colonial authorities in Malaya and India (Arasaratnam, 1979:38). This offered them greater security and protection of interests, often bypassing channels that could be extra-legal. In contrast, Chinese labour was organised by independent Chinese commercial interests that relied on clan associations and secret societies to recruit and control the large numbers of cheap indentured laborers from southern China (Elson,

1992:147- 48). By the late 1950s, the Indian population began to move into large townships as a consequence of the economic disruption caused by the Depression and Second World War (Arasaratnam 1979:42). Without the necessary skills and education, many Indians, especially Tamils, found themselves being marginalised in the urban economy and structurally excluded from legitimate opportunities for status and success. Many often reacted by banding together to develop their own distinctive culture, goals and rules of conduct. As Ganapathy and Lian (2002) found out, street corner gangs such as the 'Satu Hati' and Sara Jumbo comprised mainly children of the second generation Tamil laborers of South Indian origin who had experienced little social mobility from the previous generation and had a largely 'retreatist' outlook.

Unlike the Indians, there is evidence to note the organisation of Malays into ethnically exclusive Malay secret societies since the 1830s. The two prominent Malay secret societies detected in the Malay States were the *Bendera Putih* (White Flag Secret Society) and *Bendera Merah* (Red Flag Secret Society) whose origins could be traced to the political circumstances surrounding the Siamese occupation of Kedah (Blythe, 1969). The attacks at the Siamese were seen as a 'jihad' and pointed to the way Islam functioned as an ideology to unify the Malay-Muslims against the 'infidel' Siamese (Musa, 2003). Ritual elements were enshrined in the recruitment and organisational process of these secret societies where members were made to take the oath of secrecy by swearing on the Quran (Musa, 2003). However, by the 1950s, these societies were largely disbanded by the colonial authorities for organising political and 'jihadist' campaigns to oust the Chinese and Indians from Malaya fundamentally over issues of Malay rights. Consequentially, many members of *Bendera Putih* and *Bendera Merah* left to join the Chinese secret societies which with a more extensive and deeply embedded network afforded their members better protection and economic privileges.

Minority Gangs in Prisons

It is noteworthy that the founding of the Omega and Sara Jumbo gangs has been by *individual* members through 'accidental' circumstances in the prisons which stands in sharp contrast to the Chinese secret societies where the latter have had historically enjoyed a strong *institutional* and *organisational* basis. In this regard, it becomes particularly imperative for ethnic minority gang leaders to articulate personal charisma in order to ensure their gangs' expansion and sustenance. The discourse on the origins of these gangs, not surprisingly, is often couched in recognition of the mystic, masculine and invincible powers of their founders. As the founder of Sara Jumbo mentioned to the author:

> It was to come sooner or later. For years, the Indians were beaten up, sodomised in prisons mainly by the Chinese inmates because they have the power and they have the backing of the Chinese SS (secret societies). They are everywhere in prisons and they bring their 'shirt' (prison jargon for secret societies) when they come to prisons. For Indians and also Malays, we are not like them and we are not protected by some prison officers although some of the wardens side us. I founded the gang on 1 January 1996, one day after I fought a 'one-to-one' (single unarmed combat) fight with 12 Chinese inmates in the housing unit. There were only 3 other Indians in the housing unit. They were fighting too. I was bleeding all over my face but I defeated one by one till all 12 Chinese fell to the ground. That was the day when one senior Chinese Headman of this very powerful secret society which controlled the prison shook my hands and told me that from this day, all Indians in prisons will not be disturbed anymore. I named the gang SARA JUMBO which means **S**TRENGTH, **A**MBITION, **R**IGHTNESS, **A**IM – **J**USTICE **U**NDER **M**URUGAN **B**ROTHER **O**RGANIZATION (The word 'Murugan' here refers to one of the Hindu deities worshipped mainly by Tamils of South Indian origin).

Similarly, the origins of OMEGA also had such a history attesting to the bravery and valour of the founding members who came to be known as the 'Seven Wonders' – at least among the second generation members of Omega. Formed on 23rd September 1989 in the former Chia Keng Prison (a prison institution in the north-east of Singapore) in the aftermath of the 'Seven Wonders' defeat of the Chinese gangsters

who were 'controlling' the prison then, Omega's primary objective was to protect the interests of the Malay-Muslim inmates. There are several acronyms including a religious one for the word Omega but one remains popular: **O**rganisation-**M**artyrdom-**E**ncroachment-**G**allantry-**A**dmittance.

Understanding such performative acts of manliness has to be contextualised within the broader economic and social structures. As Messerschmidt (1993) argues, social structures situate young men in relation to similar others so that collectively they experience the world from a specific position and differentially construct cultural ideas of hegemonic masculinity – that is, dominance, control and independence. He further contends that young minority males living in economically dislocated communities, in this case the prisons, 'are typically denied masculine status in the educational and occupational spheres, which are the major sources of masculine status available to men in white middle class communities and white working class communities' (Messerschmidt, 1993:112). This denial of access to legitimate resources creates the context for heightened public and private forms of aggressive masculinity (Joe & Cheney-Lind, 1995:408).

Similarly, leaders of Sara Jumbo and Omega having been denied access to 'success-goals' – which is primarily defined in terms of *economic* success and material status – in both the legitimate and illegitimate society engage in what Katz (1988) called as 'street elite posturing'. In the context of the prisons, it involves displays of defiance, toughness and public aggression, and is an essential *gender* resource for young minority men to accomplish masculinity (Sim, 1994). As Scraton *et al.* (1991, p. 67) note:

> …the acts of violent men in prison, sustained by a culture of masculinity which idealises and equates personal power with physical dominance, reflects the world outside. Inside, the dominance can be total with nowhere to hide from the bullying of other prisoners. It is concentrated within a totality of masculinity, the ground-rules heavily underlined by official male authority. Prisoners' violence is often part of the symbol, ritual and reality of a hostile male environment.

This is exacerbated by the nature of the 'total institution' where it strips off the individual normative

facets of masculine identity associated with the 'free society'. As a prison officer remarked:

> …you can be somebody outside but you see in prison, whoever you're or whatever you're doesn't count. This is a dog eat dog world. You must learn to survive here and the moment you show weakness, someone will be fucking you up.

Acts of intimidation and gang violence by Omega and Sara Jumbo members are not simply an expression of the competitive struggle in prison, but a means for affirming self-respect and status. The prison, then, becomes both a battleground and a 'theater' dominated by young men doing gender (Connell, 1987), albeit in racialised ways. As the founder of SJ noted:

> To me, first and most, I am an Indian. We are one family and because of this every Indian is my brother, every Indian who enters prisons is Sara Jumbo. The membership is automatic. Whenever they have problems with other inmates, I will go in and if I do, at least 10 people will be on the floor. That is the target I set for myself. The prison officers know this and that's why they don't try funny things with me. They will call me 'yogi kudu' for my fighting abilities. Only I can see the SOP (Superintendent of Prisons) anytime and for a long time I never allowed them to shave my moustache and beard. If I remove my moustache, I am no longer a Man, no longer an Indian…

A pertinent characteristic of Sara Jumbo and Omega is the ethnic affiliation, solidarity and self-identification among the members, thus pointing to gangs in prisons as a racialised phenomenon. This is crucial to the origination of a discourse in prisons which racialises the socio-economic marginality of ethnic minorities in both the wider society and Chinese secret societies. As mentioned earlier, one cannot appreciate the formation of these gangs in prisons without understanding the racial dynamics operating in the wider society and the perceived repression by ethnic minorities as far as policing organised crime is concerned. To many of these members, prison is the ultimate semblance of their marginality – physically, socially, economically and politically. To the many ethnic minority inmates as well as ethnic minority prison guards, the overrepresentation of Indian and Malay members of Chinese secret societies in prison attests to the exploitative structuring in the Chinese

secret societies where ethnic minorities are relegated to low-level and frontline positions such 'Gi Na Kia' (fighter) or 'Gina' (recruit). As these positions render higher visibility, they are more vulnerable to detection, arrest and subsequent incarceration. As a former senior member and former Headman of the Indian wing of Chinese secret societies recollected their respective experiences:

> It is a pity that we Malays have been taken to be fools working for the Chinese; we call them masters and devote everything I have to them. I personally help to expand the SS using my name and it was the Malay members who were contributing to the expansion. Say my name, they know who I am. But I must say that they did take care of us, pay all of our expenses and recognised us…But only thing is that they ask me and my members to do all the dirty things like whacking people and controlling businesses… the Chinese never wanted to dirty their hands…Soon the police put me in prison. I am actually surprised that police can find me so easily. I suspect that it was the General Headman who 'powtao' (inform) me to the police because I was becoming too powerful for them. (Incarcerated Malay member of Chinese Secret Society)

> From what I know, the police are only searching for Indian or Malay members of Chinese SS (secret societies). They somehow forget that we are theirs (Chinese secret societies) and a lot of the senior people are Chinese. I know that the police are bias people, only disturbing us and turning their heads away whenever the Chinese do things. Many Indians are put in (incarcerated) under CL (Criminal Law) for gangster activities. In my case, they say that I am the headmen. Yes, I am for Loh Kuan but I was doing the business for the Chinese, I just get a small share of the profits and my guys control the Indian prostitutes in the area. But the SSB (Secret Society Branch) did not look for the big guns who are the Chinese…they cannot touch them. But they can show all the evidence that I am the headman. I am in now (in prison) but I remember that when I wanted to surrender I did not even have ten dollars in my pocket. Am I the real headman? (Former Headman of the Indian wing of Loh Kuan Secret Society)

Inter and Intra Ethnic Relations of Minority Gang Members

Observations of and interviews with members of Sara Jumbo revealed that a more accommodating and 'inclusive' relationship existed between them and Indian members of Chinese secret societies in prisons. This

is perhaps attributable to the operating ideology of Sara Jumbo where it positions itself as a racially inspired self-help organisation to meeting the needs of *all* Indian inmates. Indian members of Chinese secret societies are therefore allowed to 'suspend' their 'wearing of Chinese shirts' (meaning gang membership) before they become *ad hoc* members of Sara Jumbo during their period of incarceration. However, there is a strategic advantage to having Indian members of Chinese secret societies admitted into Sara Jumbo as the former could then operate as a 'conflict-reduction mechanism' (Mak, 1981) to mediate conflicts that arise between the Chinese secret societies they were part of and Sara Jumbo. Reciprocally, members of Sara Jumbo also tend to ease tensions between Indian members of warring Chinese secret societies, as the following field observation notes reveal:

> …There was this low level gang member from CA3 who was boasting about his exploits of his secret society. CA3 is the name of the Indian wing of the Chinese secret society called Guat San Siah. He talked so much about his S.S. that it upset two members of Ang Soon Thong from the Taman Jurong area (a historical stronghold of the society) who began to indulge in their exploits too. Things got built up that they agreed to settle their differences during yard time to see who is 'bigger'. At about this time, a respected member of Sara Jumbo intervened to remind them that they had 'suspended' their 'shirts' and that they are now Sara Jumbo members. He made the CA3 member apologise to them not as a secret society member but as a fellow Indian (field notes).

Confrontations involving Chinese members of secret societies whether with minority gang members or with other Chinese are markedly rare in the context of the prisons. In fact, interviews conducted with Chinese members of secret societies revealed that they preferred to take on a 'low profile' role in prisons. For many of the affiliated Chinese inmates, imprisonment was seen as a 'passing phase', as one mid-level member of a Chinese secret society stated:

> …To me, I come to prison because of loan sharking activities. I just spend my time in prison relaxing…no point getting into trouble. I know a lot of Malay people and 'kiling kia' (referring to Indians) make a lot of noise here. You only get a lot of attention from the prison people (prison staff). I like to keep to myself. When I am released I have a job…I have to

go back to my loan sharking activities. They are my friends…My boss got tell me that I can get promotion (in the syndicate) also…I must quickly get out from here to make money.

This is an important assertion as it meant that many of the affiliated Chinese inmates by virtue of their ethnicity could (re)gain access to a criminal network monopolised by the Chinese secret societies after imprisonment. This seems to have an impact on their conduct in prison to a large extent. John Hagedorn's (1993:11) investigation of white and racial minority youth groups in Milwaukee found similar processes occurring although the context was the streets: African American and Latino gang members 'matured out of the gang at a slower rate than Whites, who found steady employment in much greater numbers'. White youth had access to legitimate resources with which to construct a particular form of hegemonic masculinity and, therefore, able to age out of crime. Most racial minority boys similarly wanted to age out of crime, Hagedorn (1993) found, but the racial divisions of labour and power limited access to such resources. For the Malay and Indian inmates in this study, however, the prisons becomes a contested arena symbolically and materially as they attempt to mobilise their marginal labour to promote and sustain self-help in the context of perceived institutional repression. The statistical superiority of ethnic minorities in prisons thus poses a strategic lead for the minority gangs to organise themselves.

The Expansionist Policy of the Ethnic Minority Gangs

Between the two key ethnic minority gangs, Sara Jumbo and Omega, the latter is more aggressive when it comes to the procurement of its members, and for ideological and structural reasons, has adopted a proselytising strategy. This is manifested in the religious elements incorporated into the organisational principles of Omega which take the form of swearing on the Quran as part of their initiation rites, the adorning of a secret number of '535' signifying the Islamic practices of praying five times a day and last but not the least, employing a semantic structure where common enemies of the gang and street gang warfare were

being described as 'infidels' and 'Jihad' respectively. This finding reveals an affinity with the *Bendera Putih* and *Bendera Merah* of the previous century when the two societies staged attacks on the Siamese in Kedah. The target of the proselytising approach of Omega is both the unaffiliated Malay-Muslim inmates and Malay-Muslim members of Chinese secret societies. The latter is targeted in view of the relegation of Malay-Muslim members of Chinese secret societies to low level positions. Thus, the conversion is both symbolic and instrumental in that it does not only represent a shift in loyalty from one secret society to another but a religious 'conversion' for the many Malay Muslim members to reaffirm their allegiance to *Allah*. As one 'converted' Malay-Muslim member stated:

> …I was at peace only when I found my religion back. Omega made it happen for me. I ate pork, pray to Chinese gods, attend their 7th month Hungry Ghost festival…you know I did what all Chinese did…I even got go to the Chinese cemetery to pray. But when I was caught and put in jail, I turned back but saw no one. I was taken to be a fool. Here, in prison, Omega tells me I am 'bodoh' (Malay word for stupid) to work for Chinese people. They tell me that the Chinese are making use of the Malays to do their dirty job. When I think about that I realise it is true and I feel ashamed because I have left my religion. Now, I am at peace…I can hold the Quran now… Omega must live to the end.

The overtly aggressive recruitment policy of Omega compounded by its antagonism towards Malay members of Chinese secret societies who are seen as betrayers of Islam leads to an almost institutionalised conflict between them in prisons. The conflict is particularly marked when it comes to the Sio Kun Tong secret society where there is a sizeable representation of Malays. While at one level the hostility could be explained as a logical consequence of the rivalry that exists between different gangs in prisons, it is interesting to note how members of the 'prison society' have come to ethno-racialise the phenomenon at another. As this Omega member observed:

> …don't you see a conspiracy? Malay whacking Malays in prison! , we are the children of Allah and yet we are killing each other. How can I explain it? I can only explain that there is a Chinese conspiracy. They make

brothers enemies because they promise the Malay members in their gangs all the money, connections and successes of life and all the 'bodoh' (stupid) Malays follow them. These fellows think that they are big because the Chinese have given them a table or two for their Hungry Ghost Festival. They feel so proud to smoke, eat pork and gamble just like the Chinese. Some will also kill brothers just in the name of the society. Even here, they fight with the Malays and target the Omega members who are actually telling them that the Chinese are making use of them. In the end, Malays whether they are from the Chinese SS or Omega get into the PC (punishment cell) and it is the Malay race that gets destroyed – both inside and outside the prison. What a waste and a conspiracy!

This invocation of race consciousness (thus by definition religious fervour) has also the effect of mobilising the collective sentiments of the Malay-Muslim prison guards who often aided in the facilitation of the 'prison economy'. The statistical over-representation of Malays in the prisons coupled with the proselytising and economic motives of Omega contributed rapidly to the expansion of the gang both inside and outside of prisons. Thus though the Omega gang was initially 'prison-inspired' and its members 'state-raised', there was a strong symbiotic relationship between the prisons and streets. As Moore (1978) in her study of the Chicano prison gang found out: 'The Mafia attempted to use its prison-based organization to move into the narcotics market in East Los Angeles, and also, reputedly, into some legitimate pinto-serving community agencies' (1978:115).

From an informally organised self-protection group at its inception, Omega, over a span of two decades, has had established a structure equivalent to the Chinese secret societies with an elaborate system of networks, relationships and offices akin to a criminal enterprise. The gaining of a foothold both in the illegitimate society and prisons was made possible by adopting a strategy of extreme violence as witnessed in some high-profile cases which had commanded the headlines of local newspapers. Three of these include the Duxton and Kallang murders in 1999 and 2000 respectively (The Straits Times, 13 Feb 1999; The Straits Times, 4 February 2000; The Straits Times, 8 October 2000) and in Newton Food Centre in 2004

when members of the Omega staged a pre-dawn retaliatory attack armed with samurai swords. The use of violence, as studies of organised crime have revealed (see for example, Smith, 1971, 1980; Maltz, 1976; Kelly *et. al*, 1993) is necessary, at least initially, for the survival and continuity of criminal gangs especially if they are market-driven. Similarly, in the Singapore context, the employment of violence by Omega was instrumental in breaking the monopoly held by the Chinese secret societies over the illicit markets. Omega, because of its historical antecedents, ventured into taking control of the drug trade and by the mid 1990s the local drug trade has begun to show features of a transnational criminal enterprise (personal communication; The Straits Times, 2008:7). The case study of Omega is a remarkable attestation to Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) conceptualisation of differential access to criminal opportunities and networks in that it documents how a group of incarcerated drug addicts with an initial 'retreatist' outlook had risen to the status of an established criminal subculture through extreme violence. Appreciating the historical and structural circumstances which have led to the birth and subsequent rise of Omega has been the focus of this article. Omega has since become a household name for many Malay youths as it provides especially for those marginalised an exclusively Malay 'ethnic' criminal network in which they could gain access to and realise status goals that exist in the illegitimate society.

Sara Jumbo, on the other hand, has largely remained 'retreatist' over the years without any professed economic motive. At the time this article was written, its founder was remanded for drug consumption and it is likely that he may be committed to a long term imprisonment regime known as *Corrective Training* where he may be incarcerated for no less than 14 years. While historically Indians in prisons have had commanded legendary status, it is doubtful if Sara Jumbo could still operate as a 'gang' under the current penal regime. Incidentally, Sara Jumbo has been classified as a defunct association by the prison authorities at the time of writing. However, one can argue that as long as Indian members feel marginalised and 'make sense' of it racially, it may still be pos-

sible that Indian inmates transform their structural inadequacies into a form of 'ethnic consciousness' which in itself may provide *a* reason for gang sustenance within the prison. Whether this leads to a revivalism of Sara Jumbo or formation of a new 'ethnic' Indian gang remains to be seen.

Discussion

In examining the two most important ethnic minority gangs, Omega and Sara Jumbo, this research accounted for the forms they have assumed in the context of the prisons in relation to history, structure, subculture, geography, and ideology. Data from the study revealed that these gangs which have emerged primarily as a response to ethnic consciousness and racialisation discourses engendered within the prisons is a consequence of the triple crisis experienced by ethnic minority gangs in the context of the free society: first, the absence of an historically inherited 'ethnic minority' adult criminal network equivalent to that of the Chinese secret societies; second, the 'over-policing' of these gangs by the state police since their ideology of ethnic/racial exclusivity is antithetical to the ruling government's nationalist ideology of multiracialism; and third, ethnic minority gangs' exclusion from the institutional symbiotic relationship between the Chinese secret societies and the police. Being excluded from the institutional arrangement meant that ethnic minority gangs do not have the structural access to gain territorial monopolisation and control of licit and illicit economic activities. As the data revealed the net effect of this triple-crisis is the continued marginalisation of ethnic minority gangs in the illegitimate society which provides the impetus for the proliferation of minority gang membership in prisons.

Theoretically, the case study reported here has attempted to bridge the deprivation and importation models of prisonisation by emphasising the need to historically contextualize the *form* the prisoner subculture assumes and appreciate why and how the minority gang members' racialised adaptation to the prison experience is a direct consequence of the unequal power arrangement between the minority and majority racial groups in both the legitimate and ille-

gitimate society. Socialisation into prison life is dictated by the prison experience but the *form* the process assumes has to be traced beyond the boundaries of prisons and pre-prison behaviour patterns of individual inmates and groups. Thus, as Jacobs (1979:21) has witnessed, it is possible '…both to speak of prisoners as a class or group and, at the same time, recognise this class to be internally fragmented' as a result of the influence of external statuses and power configurations (Phillips, 2008:315). At the structural level, the emergence of ethnic minority gangs in prisons, as the experiences of Omega and Sara Jumbo indicate, needs to be appreciated as a consequence of the class and race divisions of labour and power in both the free and criminal society. As much as it entailed an analysis of the historical, social, economic and political dynamics that exist in wider Singapore society and how they are reproduced and replicated, albeit in different forms, in the prisons, the genesis of minority gangs in prisons also revealed how the historical role of the Chinese secret societies and their symbiotic relationship with the state police is crucial to the regulation of illicit markets and distribution of race resources in the illegitimate society. While there have been researchers who have documented the nexus between race and gangs in the prisons context (see for example Hunt *et al*, 1993; Crist, 1986; Davidson, 1974), this study has importantly revealed the active role of the state police in maintaining a racialised criminal hierarchy in the criminal underworld which not only has led to a structural relegation of minority members to low level positions in the Chinese secret societies, but to the total exclusion of minority gangs from the market of illicit activities. As the data showed, it is to this marginality that ethnic minority inmates react to and organise themselves racially into gangs.

At the subcultural level, this sets the context for how racial, ethnic, religious and gang identities are experienced, contested and negotiated by minority prisoners in complex and sometimes contradictory ways – alongside the collective discourses and narratives of ethnicity, racialisation, racism and exclusion within the context of 'prisoner society'. Of salience is how racial and gang identities, as witnessed in the

origins discourse of Omega and Sara Jumbo, interface with the accomplishment of hegemonic masculinity in prisons. Because masculinity is a behavioral response to the particular conditions and situations, ethnic minority inmates do masculinity within the prisons in a specific way that reflects their position in the class and race divisions of labor and power. Pointing to the effects of these divisions of labor and power, Jean-Paul Sarte's (1963) discussion of the 'project', for example, illustrated the important attraction of the gang to many lower-working class, racial-minority boys where the life of these men were determined 'not by the possible but by what is impossible' (Messerschmidt, 1993:103). Because they are, in effect, denied many resources for constructing hegemonic masculinity (i.e. paid work), these young men undergo, in Sartre's words, a 'subjective impoverishment' (1963:95-96). The resulting masculine-dominated street groups in marginalised, racial-minority communities are, in part,

> …the result of a collective awareness of a hegemonic, masculine future that is, in terms of social possibilities, almost entirely unobtainable. It is a form of transcendence limited by class and race divisions of labour and power where individuals become aware of their position in society by perceiving what future is and is not possible for them. For many lower-working class, racial minority boys, the street group has become both a collective solution to their prohibitions and a life-style that sometimes takes the form of street crime. For these youths, then, street crime becomes a 'field of possibilities' for transcending class and race domination and an important resource for accomplishing gender (Messerschimdt, 1993:103).

Similarly, data from this study revealed a situation where ethnic minority prisoners being denied access to the legitimate opportunities because of *social class* and equally denied participation in the illegitimate economy because of *race* turn to those hegemonic masculine ideals that remain available in prisons, such as physical violence. Physical violence within the prisons is a resource primarily employed by minority members for masculine construction as much as it allows them to negotiate the severe class and race structural disadvantage. Minority prisoners bond into gangs that provide a competitive arena in which an individual proves himself a man among men. Based on the idealised conceptions of hegemonic masculinity, minority members participate in gang violence to maintain and gain status and protect one's race. It is a form of compensatory behaviour in the context of unequal distribution of race resources and it is one way through which they racialise their masculinity which becomes a status resource in itself in prisons. As one Sara Jumbo member stated:

> …To be an Indian in prisons is a weapon in itself. Chinese can be powerful outside, but inside they must bow down to the Indians…for Indians here have a reputation for being fearless even in the face of death.

Conclusion

Prisons are where marginalized, ethnic minority inmates develop strong ties with members of their own race, persons with whom they are culturally acquainted and who they perceive to be like themselves. But ironically, due to position in the social divisions of labour and power, ethnic minority prisoners compete with rivals of their own class and race for *personal* power as they adapt to their economic and racial powerlessness. The incessant conflict between Omega members and Malay members of the Chinese secret society, *Sio Kun Tong*, is an excellent case in point. For these young men, the personal power struggle even if they represent the collective interests of their gangs is a resource for constructing a specific type of masculinity –raw and racialised – which bound them to the world of the prisons.

Acknowledgments

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