

“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” — X: Siti Meriyam Binti Idris (Siti Meriyam daughter of Idris) alias ATOM (Born in 1927, Malaysia)

Thursday 27 December 2007, by [KHOO Agnes](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2007).

This is a condensed version of Chapter Eight: “Siti Meriyam Binti Idris (Siti Meriyam daughter of Idris) alias ATOM (Born in 1927, Malaysia)”, of Agnes Khoo’s book *“Life As the River Flows” - Women’s Oral History on the Malayan struggle for Independence* (Published by Merlin Press, United Kingdom, 2007).

See also:

Part I : [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” — I: About the book](#)

Part II: [“Life As the River Flows - Women’s Oral History on the Malayan struggle for Independence” — II: An Introduction](#)

Part III (Chapter 1): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” — III: Cui Hong](#)

Part IV (Chapter 2): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” — IV: Chu Ling](#)

Part V (Chapter 3): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” — V: Lin Mei \(Born in 1937, Singapore\)](#)

Part VI (Chapter 4): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” — VI: Lin Dong \(Born in 1944 in the tropical rainforest of the State of Selangor, Malaya\)](#)

Part VII (Chapter 5): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” — VII: Suria \(Born in 1951, Thailand\)](#)

Part VIII (Chapter 6): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” — VIII : Guan Shui Lian \(Born in 1946, Perak, Malaysia\)](#)

Part IX (Chapter 7): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” — IX: Xiu Ning \(Born in 1927, Malaysia\)](#)

Part XI (Chapter 9): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” — XI: Huang Xue Ying \(Born in 1934, Perlis, Malaysia\)](#)

Part XII (Chapter 10): "Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle" – XII: Qiang Lin (Born in 1955, Ipoh, Malaysia)

My mother - we called her 'Mok' (also Mak) in Malay - joined the Revolutionary Movement during the time of the Japanese occupation. She was a supporter of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) and she was involved in the Anti-Japanese Alliance. One day, she told us that she was leaving us. She was going to a secret meeting and that we should not tell anyone, otherwise she might lose her head (she will be killed). She told us not to worry and gave us milk and canned sardines, which she stashed away in the house for us to feed ourselves. So that we would not be hungry when she was gone. During the Japanese occupation, life was very hard. Rice like everything else was very expensive. People in the village had no food at all. Mok told us to live peacefully with the villagers. If anyone asked us for help, we were to help because everyone was suffering. Mok was good. She said to me: "They want to arrest me. I have to go into the jungle. But don't worry about me."

I was fourteen years old when the Japanese came. I did not go to school. I have many brothers and sisters. My father died when I was only ten and Mok struggled to bring us up on her own. I started to menstruate when I was twelve and by thirteen, I was married and gave birth to a child soon after.

The Malay Progressive Democratic Organizations grew - Comrades brought the democratic revolutionary movement to us in our village. A strong alliance was formed with the emergence of AWAS (Battalion of Conscious Women), API (Movement of the Conscious Youth) and PETA (The Patriotic Fighters) in the village. They helped one another and they planted rice together. With the money they got from selling the rice, they bought other things. The women's group was beautiful; they have the spirit of our ancestors and they all hated the Japanese colonizers.

Joining the Guerrillas - We were taught that the Communists were good people who respect and work for the good of our religion, people, and country. I finally left my nine-month old second child behind and joined the guerrillas in the jungle. When Mok saw me, she wailed: "Yalalalala, my child has abandoned her child!" But she still asked for water to be brought to me. No, I was not forced to join the party; I really wanted to join myself. Even though my comrades tried to dissuade me, they told me that I could do other work to support them by remaining outside the jungle. They said "I could have a red heart under the fair skin" (that I can still be a communist without showing it to the outside world). They warned me that inside the jungle there was only hardship. But I insisted because I was afraid to be arrested. So I tried to convince Mok to let me stay. She even agreed to take care of my children when I was gone. Unfortunately, she was arrested after she returned to our village.

Marriage - My husband and I entered the party at the same time. But he surrendered to the government in 1959, leaving me behind. He could not stand the hardship. Life was tough and we did not have enough to eat. We never saw any sugar or salt. This was a test of our determination, to differentiate between those of us who could take it and those of us who could not. We were educated in the same way by the party, including my husband. We already knew the evils of colonialism and its harmful effects on the people, society and religion. He too sat nicely in his chair receiving his education. So why could he not take the hardship, like the rest of us? He was also warned about the hardship before he entered the jungle and yet he ran away in one of our big battles. He was even a leading cadre at that time but he could not endure the suffering. I stood firm. I could withstand the hardship in the jungle because being hungry was normal to me all my life. When we were still in Malaysia, we had to ask the Orang Asli for food. They gave us vegetables and potatoes. I did not feel that it was a problem because our leaders were with us. I did not meet my second husband again. Later he sent me a letter, "Min - that's my nickname outside - make a rice field and plant padi (rice).

Do not worry about me. I have returned to the village and I will look after our children. You continue with the work. “

I married again but the second marriage did not last either. He was a comrade and the father of my son, Azijah. We were attracted to each other at first but when he had a change of heart, we divorced and I became free again. I had two children from him. Unfortunately, one of them was killed by enemy bombardment. This husband also died later on but I do not know where.

In 1963, Comrade Mamat and I got married. I had no child from him but he treats my children as his own. Actually, I did get pregnant once but I lost it after 4 months of pregnancy when I fell while carrying heavy loads. Mamat was a close aid and bodyguard to our leaders. I became the leaders' assistant from 1963. I became the leader of a squad later. Life was always busy and sometimes even fun too! I learnt my ABC while in the guerrillas army. I could only read a little of the Qu'ran (The Muslim's Holy Book) before I entered the army.

The Long March - I remember our Long March vividly. We did it twice. The first one was in 1953 but we did not make it to our destination because there were too many obstacles on the way. So we had to retreat. We finally succeeded in 1955 and it took us one year and 4 months to accomplish the march, all the way from Malaysia to the border of Thailand. Throughout the journey, we had to fight many battles with the enemy. By that time, there were only 5 women comrades left in the troop. One of them later died in action and left four of us. Our lives today have become far more comfortable, so we do not forget what the Party has given us. Instead, I will always remember what the party has taught us. I am content with my life now. Had I not joined the party, I cannot imagine what kind of life I would have today.

Life as a Party Cadre - As a cadre, I had to allocate tasks and resources among the others. We were in a revolutionary struggle, which means we had to fight battles here and there, wherever we were. Yet I was never afraid, if I had problems, I just asked our leaders for advice. That helped to make things easier. The important thing I learnt in the army was not to lie about our abilities. To be honest with ourselves. Like me, I was not educated, so work with the outside world was not suitable for me. But I was bold and capable with work inside the jungle. In the army, we discussed things openly with one another; we had meetings everyday, so that we could raise any issues that were at hand. We learnt how to work and live collectively and not do things individually.

Deciding not to come home - When peace came, we were allowed to register to go back to Malaysia if we wanted. My children who now live in Malaysia had wanted me to move back to stay with them. But I finally decided not to because our leaders are here in the village, I do not want to leave them. I want to stay with them until they die. Mamat also agreed with me. He said, “We have been through so many hardships with our leaders in the jungle, so why should we leave them now?”

Life in the Village - We now have some savings because whenever my relatives visited us, they gave me money. It is money for the family. Mamat suggested that we changed our money from Malaysian Ringgit to Thai Baht and use some of it to buy a TV. So now Mamat can watch some Chinese programmes in the village. Shaharir, one of my sons bought me a fridge. Unfortunately, he died of lung cancer 3 years ago. He gave me 9,000 Thai Baht to buy the fridge before he went to Mecca for his pilgrimage. I think of him a lot. He was the son I had from my first husband whom I left behind to join the guerrillas when he was only 9-month old. Despite our new possessions, we are not rich today. We still live from day to day, with just enough to eat and drink. The party gave each senior comrade who is over sixty years old, 540 Thai Baht a month as allowance. Life has been all right. Now I only have two children left. One lives in Malaysia and the youngest lives with me in this village. The older one in Malaysia is a father of five children. Unfortunately, he is mute and his wife too. When he was very young, he could still call, “Father, mother, and grandmother....” Then one day

he had an accident, he put some burning hot meat in his mouth and his tongue got burnt severely. From that day on, he could speak no more. But he can write. It is a pity that I have little education myself, so I prefer talking to writing. He got his education from a deaf-mute school. Luckily, all his five kids are normal.

Religious Choices - Initially, Mamat and I were considering to return home to Malaysia and live with my children there. I asked them what they think about Mamat, being a Chinese joining us. They told me it was not a problem at all so long as he converts to Islam. They said, "Race is not a problem, so long as he is a Muslim, we consider him Malay." But I thought it would be difficult for both of us to adapt to our Muslim community if we go back. We would have to follow what the others do; we could still have tried even if we were ill prepared. If people go to mosque, we go to mosque, if they fast, we also fast, if they pray, we pray too. Then we would not be isolated from the community. I guess had we decided to return, all these problems can be overcome. In my view, all races are like brothers and sisters. The human race is one; there is no difference between us. For the Malays and Muslims, as long as we convert to Islam, race does not matter. According to the Islamic laws, if Muslims are able to convert non-Muslims to Islam, that is a great merit in the eyes of God.

I have always been close to the Chinese. My mother even adopted a Chinese child before, who belonged to a vegetable farmer in our village. She stayed in the same house with us. Our neighbours threatened to kill her but we told them, "We do you no wrong, no evil. Therefore, you should do us no evil." My mother was good, she had a wide social circle and she told us not to listen to evil from others. She said, "If people talk like this, it is untrue. If we do no harm, others will not harm us too."

What makes me happy now is that I have become a useful human being. Because of the party, I am who I am today. Had I remained outside the jungle, I do not know what would become of me today.

Note from Author: Atom lives in the Sukirin Village in Southern Thailand, very near to the Malaysian border. Bombing incidents have been rife lately due to the increased activities of the so-called Muslim separatists in the area. Sukirin is one of the Peace Villages of the CPM ex-guerrillas. A film has recently been made by a young Malaysian Director, Amir Mohammad about it. However, this film is now banned by the Malaysian government, just like Amir's first film which was entitled: "The Last Communist", even though "The Last Communist" had toured major international film festivals around the world including South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, India, New York etc. EBS in South Korea had also broadcasted the film in August 2006.