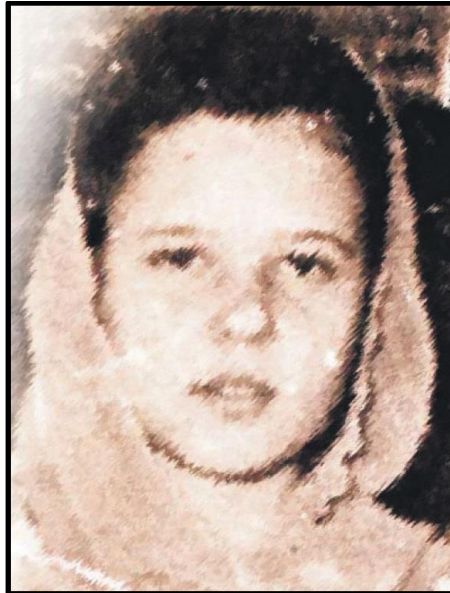


A tragedy of errors

This girl witnessed the power of hate, when one mistake after another led to the Maria Hertogh Riots of 1950. Justin Zhuang tells her story.



Splashed on the cover of *The Straits Times* on 3 August 1950 was the photograph of a newly-wed couple. The groom was a bespectacled young Malay man wearing a songkok and baju Melayu. In his arms was his bride, a smiling European girl in a floral baju kurung.

This picture, taken on their wedding two days earlier, could have marked a happily-ever-after ending for the bride, Maria Bertha Hertogh. Unfortunately, Maria's life was not so simple. By the end of that year, her marriage was broken up and she lost a family. She became famous for the wrong reasons. Today, Maria Hertogh is known as the girl whose story caused a deadly riot in Singapore. She was just a girl who wanted to be loved by her family and her new husband. Instead, her story became a reminder of the power of hate. With Racial Harmony Day approaching, we look back at this moment in Singapore's history.

Maria's story

Maria used to live on the Indonesian island of Java with four siblings and her Dutch mother, Adelaine. During the Japanese occupation of Java, her father was captured and imprisoned. Her mother struggled to raise the five children

by herself. So, when Maria was five years old, her mother passed her to an Indonesian friend, Aminah, to look after. In those days, this was not an unusual thing to do.

For the next eight years, Aminah was a mother to Maria, bringing up the girl the best way she knew how. She raised her as a Muslim, dressed her in Malay clothes, taught her the Malay language and even gave her a Muslim name: Nadra Maarof. When the war ended, the family never heard from Adelaine. Aminah and Maria moved from Indonesia to Kemaman in Malaya.

Then, out of the blue in April 1950, they received news that Adelaine and her husband were looking for Maria. Aminah and Maria came to Singapore to meet officials of the Dutch government. Aminah thought that Maria's Dutch family just wanted to finish up the paperwork for Maria's adoption by Aminah.

She was shocked to find out that the Dutch officials wanted to take Maria away. They accused Aminah of holding on to Maria against her parent's wishes. They offered \$500 as compensation for bringing Maria up the last eight years. Of course, this hurt and angered Aminah deeply. She saw Maria as her own daughter, not someone whom she was being paid to look after like a nanny.

The battle for Maria went to court. For the next few months, the judges went back and forth. Round One went to the Dutch. The officials persuaded a judge to order that Maria be separated from Aminah. The girl was placed in a welfare home until the court made a final decision.

In May, the judge decided that Maria should be returned to her Dutch parents. Aminah was not going to let go so easily. She appealed against the decision. Two months later, the court gave in to her appeal. She had won Round Two.

Maria's Dutch parents did not give up and the case went back to court. Round Three: On 2 December 1950, the court decided that Maria should be sent back to her parents in Holland. The judge said that Maria's Muslim marriage did not count because her father had never given permission for her to become a Muslim.

Again, Aminah appealed. Her appeal was turned down. Maria and Adelaine boarded a plane to Holland and left Singapore for good.

The fight for Maria was not just between the two families in court. It was going on outside, between Asians and Europeans. On 11 December, just

before the court made its final decision and Maria was taken to Holland, a riot erupted.

There were a total of 313 violent attacks around Singapore. Rioters killed 18 people and injured 173 others. Most of those targeted were Europeans, but Eurasians were mistakenly attacked, too.

Some of the attacks were vicious. Dead bodies were flung about. It was a horrifying period in Singapore's history.

How did things spin out of control? It was partly because the colonial government handled Maria's case badly, angering locals. But, it was also because there were some politicians who used the whole affair to create trouble.

Rising anger

When Aminah was forced to fight for Maria in court in Singapore, she had no choice but to seek help from local Muslims. She needed a lawyer and money to pay for the legal fees. Muslim newspapers in Singapore helped to spread the word by writing articles about her plight. As a result, the court hearing in May attracted a crowd of around 500 onlookers and reporters.

They witnessed a pitiful scene: Maria being separated from her mother Aminah by force. "I don't want, I don't want to go to Holland," Maria cried in Malay as she clung on to Aminah's waist. "Aminah is my mother, she has loved me, cared for me and brought me up."

Sympathy spread for Aminah. But, people didn't see it as just one mother's struggle. Many Malays felt that Europeans had been controlling Southeast Asia for too long. The Europeans' attempt to take Maria away was a symbol of how they were mistreating locals. Aminah's struggle was now their own struggle.

The case was also followed in Holland. The Dutch newspapers reported extensively on this issue, claiming that their country's pride was at stake. To them, Singapore was a backward place in the East, and the Dutch were losing Maria to the people living in a region it once ruled over. Several newspapers there even depicted Maria as living amongst wild beasts and primitive people, giving her the nickname "The Jungle Girl".

The Dutch reaction just made the Muslims here even more angry. It seemed to prove that the Europeans had no respect for Asians.

In September, Muslims' anger increased. First, the British government in Singapore decided to stop the Muslim Welfare Association from raising

more money to fight the court case. Muslims felt this was unfair, since funds for the other side were still being raised in Holland.

Two key players

Two Muslim politicians in Singapore took a leading role in the protests. They found it easy to influence others in the community because they both ran their own newspapers. Karim Ghani was the editor of *Malaya Nanban*, while Burhanuddin Al-Hemy was the editor of *Melayu Raya*. In November, Mr Karim spoke to the large crowd gathered in a hall. He said that Maria and Mansoor were victims of “injustice” and “punished for being Muslims”.

These were strong words. He challenged the community not to back down, “because there is no compromise when our honour is at stake”.

According to a National University of Singapore professor who has written a book about the case, Mr Karim and others were blowing up the issue.

“Newspaper reports and commentaries added fuel to the fire that was burning within the Muslim community in Singapore,” says the professor, Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied.

Moreover, he says, ordinary people were quick to believe rumours. For example, when Maria’s husband got injured in a motorbike accident, news spread that Dutch agents were trying to kill him. He actually fell off when his motorbike knocked against a kerb.

Different pictures

The British authorities made a big mistake that the Muslim politicians and newspapers took advantage of. While waiting for the court’s final decision in December, the authorities sent Maria to a girls’ home run by the Catholic church.

Dutch officials invited the press to photograph Maria’s life in the home. They wanted to show that she was happy to be in a Christian home. The next day’s English-language newspapers were splashed with photos of a smiling Maria in church. One picture showed her playing the piano and surrounded by bouquets of flowers. The flowers were probably placed by Dutch officials to show how warmly Maria was welcomed. These officials may have been at the side encouraging her to smile.

But, Muslims reading *Utusan Melayu* received a very different impression. This newspaper published pictures of Maria crying in the church with the headline “I am very miserable – forced to wear a gown”. Perhaps this

was how Maria really felt. However, we must remember that such newspapers were not interested in reporting her true feelings. They wanted to persuade readers that Maria was unhappy to be separated from Aminah. They would have purposely chosen pictures that fit this plan.

Violence erupts

On 11 December, Mr Karim organised a protest march. Thousands gathered at the Padang to await the result of the appeal. When the European police officers tried to disperse the crowd, they were pelted with stones. A Eurasian Singaporean, H.L. Velge, was leaving his office next to the Supreme Court. Thinking he was a European, the crowd surrounded Mr Velge and began raining blows on him. In defence, Mr Velge took out his revolver and fired at the crowd – wounding two Malays. The crowd went hysterical. They began smashing the vehicles around and attacking the police. Even though the police tried to tell the crowd that Velge was not a policeman and had been arrested, the word went out: the police were shooting at the Malays!

Violent incidents broke out across Singapore for three days. According to Professor Khairudin Aljunied, the rioters were not all angered by Maria's case. Mr Karim probably had only several dozen supporters. "Many joined in the riots because they saw it as an opportunity to settle old scores especially with the Europeans and Eurasians who were known to be bosses of many firms," says the professor.

The Maria Hertogh Riots may give the impression that people of different religions cannot live together peacefully. Now that you have read the real story, you will realise that is a wrong conclusion. Religion alone was not the problem. The riots would not have happened if the authorities had acted more sensitively.

But, most importantly, there were a few politicians and editors who purposely wanted ordinary people to lose their heads. They spread suspicion and made people believe rumours. Only then could hate win for these few awful days in 1950.

One thing that Mr Karim said in a speech was right: "The Maria tragedy can well be described as a 'tragedy of errors'."