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History, Orality, and the Construction of the German Girl Shrine Legend

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In the western part of Pulau Ubin, an offshore island of the Republic of Singapore, there is a shrine dedicated to an anonymous German girl who had supposedly met her unfortunate demise on the island during the First World War.¹ The shrine is referred to as the German Girl Shrine, and there is a corresponding legend narrative that explains who the shrine was built for. The general narrative outline of the legend usually goes like this: The plot of land in the vicinity of the shrine used to be a coffee plantation owned or managed by a German who lived on Pulau Ubin with his family. When the First World War broke out, the British rounded up and interned Germans in Singapore—Singapore was a British colony then, and the Germans were considered the British's adversaries. When the British came to Pulau Ubin, the German family were arrested except for the manager's daughter who managed to make a run for it. Unfortunately, she slipped and fell to her death in the course of her escape. Local workers of the plantation later found her body and supposedly dedicated a shrine to her. The shrine has been a staple on the island since.

This legend narrative was constructed primarily from oral history accounts and was mostly transmitted through repeated oral narration from the local residents of the island. It was largely perceived as a *legend* which explains how the shrine came to be, and not as the *history* of the shrine. Yet, when attempts to seek the historical veracity of the narrative emerged circa 2001, it facilitated an added dimension to how the legend was perceived, from legend to history.² This change in perception was further enhanced when archival material that lent weight to the historical truth of the legend's narrative emerged. Coupled with written forms of the oral accounts, subsequent transmitters of the legends then contributed to how the form of the legend transformed (from legend to history), and constructed the legend narrative with each transmission.

One of the earliest extensive attempts to determine the veracity of the legend narrative is arguably the crowd-sourcing project entitled "Find German Girl," which came in the form of a

¹ Pulau Ubin is an offshore island of Singapore, northeast of the main island Singapore. According to the *Anecdotal History of Singapore*, Pulau Ubin was brought under the jurisdiction of the British in 1825, as part of Singapore.

² The website "Find German Girl," *Find German Girl*, was established around 2001. Last accessed 25 November 2023, <http://www.frische-medien.de/kunden/fgg/>

website.³ The website served as a platform for knowledge-sharing for anyone interested in investigating the identity of the “German Girl.”⁴ The project did not set out to be the authoritative source on the history of the shrine or the girl’s identity; it was a platform where researchers could share and “enhance the common knowledge pool” about the shrine.⁵ On top of sharing audiovisual clips of oral interviews conducted with the locals, the website also hosted archival material that the team has retrieved— an 1892 land record stating that the land was once assigned to Thomas Heslop Hill, Hermann Muhlinghaus and Daniel Brandt.⁶

The emergence of this archival material – the land record – resulted in it becoming the defining evidence that added weight to the veracity of the legend. As a result, there was a shift in how the legend was perceived, from a mere legend to a history of the shrine, as the narrative was presented as having some form of historical truth to it. The National Parks website, for example, stated that “According to historical research, the plot of land used to belong to two German families, Daniel Brandt and Hermann Muhlinghaus’s, but the identity of the German girl remains unknown.”⁷ Similarly, *Remember Singapore*’s piece on the shrine also largely presented the legend narrative as a possible reconstructed history of the shrine.⁸ Subsequent written accounts of the legend that drew from this source, or drew from sources that drew from this source, also perpetuated the same narrative form, henceforth perpetuating the emphasis that there is historical truth to the legend.

By drawing from the same pool of sources, each subsequent transmission was also feeding into each other, creating a network of internal verification. This was how transcription error and omission were also often perpetuated. The “Find German Girl” website stated that the land where the shrine stands on belonged to “Daniel Brandt” and “Hermann Muhlinghaus.”⁹ There is a minor transcription error here, whereby “Muhlinghaus” was transcribed as “Muhlinghaus,” and the name “Thomas Heslop Hill,” which was originally stated in the land record, was omitted. Even Gibson, who explored the history of the land where the shrine stands on, perpetuated a transcription error, spelling “Muhinghaus” instead of “Muhlinghaus.”¹⁰ Similarly, subsequent transmissions also tend to use the available sources in a Procrustean manner. For example, there was no mention in the archival land record that the land owners were Germans apart from the fact that their names were German-sounding. The “Find German Girl” website even shared the

³ “Find German Girl,” *Find German Girl*, last accessed 28 February 2022, <http://www.frische-medien.de/kunden/fgg/>

⁴ “How you can help,” *Find German Girl*, last accessed 28 February 2023, <https://www.frische-medien.de/kunden/fgg/help.htm>

⁵ “Find German Girl,” *Find German Girl*, last accessed 28 February 2023, <http://www.frische-medien.de/kunden/fgg/>

⁶ “Material,” *Find German Girl*, last accessed 28 February 2023, <https://www.frische-medien.de/kunden/fgg/material.html>. “Muhlinghaus” was often printed in English sources, but the German spelling is Mühlinghaus or Muehlinghaus. “Hermann” was also spelt as “Herman” in some sources.

⁷ “German Girl Shrine,” *National Parks Board*, last modified 17 December 2020, <https://www.nparks.gov.sg/pulau-ubin/heritage/places-of-interest/german-girl-shrine>

⁸ “The Legend of a German Deity at Ubin,” *Remember Singapore*, 13 October 2012, <https://remembersingapore.org/2012/10/13/german-deity-at-ubin/>, last accessed 25 November 2023.

⁹ “Material,” *Find German Girl*, last accessed 28 February 2023, <https://www.frische-medien.de/kunden/fgg/material.html>

¹⁰ William L. Gibson, “Unravelling the Mystery of Ubin’s German Girl Shrine,” *Biblioasia* 17 no. 3 (2021): 13.

possibility that the girl may not have been born in Germany, but perhaps in “Austria, Switzerland, Poland or Netherlands etc”, careful not to rule out any alternative possibilities or give any definitive statements.¹¹ The archival land record as uploaded in the “Find German Girl” website did not mention that the land was used as a coffee plantation and neither did the notes on the website stated by the “Find German Girl” project.¹² Yet, despite the caveats that the “Find German Girl” project gave regarding the subject matter, many who perpetuated the information retrieved from this project had instead repeated information that was more easily accessible to them, presenting parts of the legend as historical truth, such as determining Brandt as “German.” The distortions and presentation are similar across many written pieces about the shrine.¹³ The fact that most of these subsequent transmissions are in written form and readily available on the internet also promoted the amplification of these errors and omissions. As Andrew Peck observed, digital networks have an unprecedented capacity to amplify and distort small-scale vernacular communications into seemingly large-scale or pervasive issues.¹⁴ The internet changes how information informally circulates, gains visibility, and becomes legitimated through widespread or mainstream acknowledgment.¹⁵ With each transmission, the echo-chamber or pool of (mis)information or information gets enlarged, and the legend narrative gets amplified, all while shaping how the legend narrative gets presented and transmitted.

By going beyond the pool of sources that has always been referred to, however, we can actually gain more insights to the history of the land and the lives of the “protagonists” of the legend narrative. Indeed, a Crown lease for two plots of land at Pulo Obin was granted to Thomas Heslop Hill, Hermann Muhlinghaus and Daniel Brand on 24 September 1880.¹⁶ These two plots of land made up the Pulo Obin Estate, covering a total area 832 acres, 5 roods and 40 poles.¹⁷ The estate was represented by the firm D. Brandt and Co., where Brandt and Muhlinghaus were partners.¹⁸ It remained represented by D. Brandt and Co. up till circa 1904 and it came to be known as a coffee estate during this time, though there were other crops.¹⁹ Hill was listed the

¹¹ “How you can help,” *Find German Girl*, last accessed 28 February 2022, <https://www.frische-medien.de/kunden/fgg/help.htm>

¹² “Find German Girl,” *Find German Girl*, last accessed 28 February 2022, <http://www.frische-medien.de/kunden/fgg/>

¹³ See for example Urban Explorers of Singapore, “The Forgotten History of the German Girl Shrine,” Facebook, 1 October 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/urban.explorers.of.singapore/posts/3332320773483797/>, “German Girl Shrine,” *National Parks Board*, last modified 17 December 2020, <https://www.nparks.gov.sg/pulau-ubin/heritage/places-of-interest/german-girl-shrine> and “The Legend of a German Deity at Ubin,” *Remember Singapore*, 13 October 2012, <https://remembersingapore.org/2012/10/13/german-deity-at-ubin/>, last accessed 25 November 2023.

¹⁴ Andrew Peck, “Folklore and Fake News in the Age of Social Media,” *Journal of American Folklore* 133, no. 529 (2020): p. 330.

¹⁵ Andrew Peck, “Folklore and Fake News in the Age of Social Media,” *Journal of American Folklore* 133, no. 529 (2020): p. 330.

¹⁶ *Lease of Land No. 933, Straits Settlement and Lease of Government Land for Nine Hundred and Ninety-Nine years Class C No. 934. Straits Settlement.* Singapore Land Authority.

¹⁷ “Advertisement,” *Straits Times*, 25 June 1891.

¹⁸ “Advertisements,” *Singapore Daily Times*, 1 June 1878; *Singapore and Straits directory for 1880* (Singapore: Printed at the Mission Press, 1880), p. 51.

¹⁹ See *Singapore and Straits directory, 1878 to 1915*. The Pulo Obin estate was listed as represented by D. Brandt and Co. for the period between 1880 and 1904. See also “Where Granite Grows,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 19 June 1908.

proprietor of the estate in 1880 and subsequently as “Planter, Pulo Obin” in 1881.²⁰ Not all three “protagonists” were of German nationality too. The transnational identities of these individuals also beget the question: Who was considered “German”? Up until the advent of the First World War, most people throughout Europe had not perceived their national, ethnic or linguistic identities in a narrow, specific manner.²¹ Brandt, for example, wrote in German and while he was an Austro-Hungarian subject, he had at one point also served as the Belgian consul in Singapore as well.²² There also does not seem to be any possible “candidates” that would fit *both* the profile of the “German girl” and the timeline of the legend. For example, while Brandt had a daughter, the child was still-born on 9 April 1890 and she was not buried in Pulau Ubin.²³ In short, the conclusion that can be drawn from the current available archival textual sources is that it remains inconclusive whether there really was a “German girl.” At most, one can only conclude that there was a plantation, albeit not just a coffee plantation, and that there were German and German-speaking stakeholders in this plantation.

Ultimately, the shift in perception from a legend to a history of the shrine was a phenomenon facilitated by the general lack of distinction between (i) the history of the shrine and (ii) history of the shrine as informed by the legend narrative. To most, there was no discernible distinction between a statement about the past and a statement about how one perceives the past. The expansion of the modes of transmission, from mostly oral to textual form, and even the platform (on the internet), also facilitated in creating a pool of interdependent sources. And in this process of adding what many perceive to be the truth or facts to the legend, the legend is not just being distorted, but also constructed with each transmission.

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²⁰ *Singapore and Straits directory for 1880* (Singapore: Printed at the Mission Press, 1880), p. 114 and *Singapore and Straits directory for 1881* (Singapore: Printed at the Mission Press, 1881), p. 137.

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