

Bernard Sta Maria, the Boy from Praya Lane



Bernard Santa (*abbrv* Sta) Maria, a Malacca Portuguese descendant lived in Melaka, Malaysia between the years of 1944 until passing away in 1987, at the age of 42 years. To this day, he is not only missed by his family but also by his community, friends, fellow politicians and by almost anyone who knew him. His achievements were all aimed at raising the socio-economic status of his people – the *Kristang*, a unique race in Melaka descended from the inter-marriage between the local women and the Portuguese men who remained in Melaka long after the Portuguese *conquistadores* left Melaka in 1641.

Photograph of Bernard Sta Maria, 1974. Photo from the collection of the late Sister Lucy Theseira.

Much is known about Bernard’s political milestones and his contributions to the Malacca Portuguese community, such as initiating the first San Pedro celebrations on a grand scale in 1967, setting up an education development centre in the Portuguese Settlement, re-establishing social and cultural relations between Portugal and the Malacca Portuguese, appealing to the Malaysian government to grant the Malacca Portuguese access to invest in a national fund specifically reserved for the *bumiputeras* (sons of the soil), among others. In addition, Bernard also wrote and published two books in his lifetime.

However very little is known about Bernard’s origin, his early years and younger days as a boy from Praya Lane. As these stories are fading fast into the untold memories of close ones many of whom have passed on. As part of the Praya Lane Memory Project, it was deemed appropriate to conduct a mini study into the early life of Bernard Sta Maria, to understand who he was, what shaped him and what he stood for.

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*“The young ones...
Darling, we're the young ones
And the young ones...
Shouldn't be afraid
To live, love
While the flame is strong
For we may not be
the young ones, very long.”*

The lyrics above are taken from a song made famous by the singer, Cliff Richard titled “The Young Ones”. And these words couldn’t ring any truer for a young man from Praya Lane, who lived his life almost in its entirety by the time he turned 40.

*B*ernard Sta Maria was born and raised in Praya Lane, Melaka, Malaysia. The auspicious day of his birth being September 20th, 1944 when the nation was still in the grips of the Malayan Japanese Occupation during the Second World War. He was the second child to Donald Sta Maria and Jenny Theseira. Donald and Jenny had an elder daughter who passed away as a baby. Bernard thus became the eldest of six other children to come.

Donald’s and Jenny’s Son



Donald worked as a plumber in the Malacca General Hospital while Jenny did multiple jobs over the years such as sewing clothes (including wedding dresses!) for the neighbourhood ladies, cooking noodles for breakfast and selling to school-going children, making Melaka Portuguese pickles and the delicacy she became famously known for – *Aunty Jenny’s pineapple tarts*.

Photo of Donald Sta Maria and Jenny Theseira, parents of Bernard Sta Maria, taken in the late 1950s. Photo courtesy of Caroline Danker.

Donald and Jenny not only treasured their son because they had lost their first child but more so because Bernard developed severe lung problems very early in his childhood. They tried to look after him to the best of their abilities despite their near-impoverished economic status. By the age of 3, the doctors had declared his left lung ineffective and gave him but a few years to live. However, Bernard somehow managed to outlive his given years. Prior to his passing at the age of 42, the doctors claimed that he had been living on borrowed time and was supposed to have died much earlier. Bernard’s entire life was therefore characterised and constrained by his chronic asthma that resulted from his weak lungs.

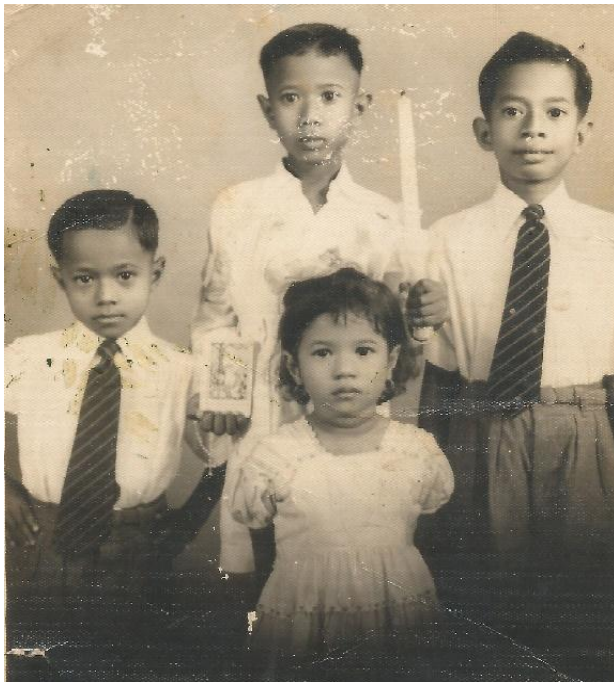
In spite of his limited physical abilities, young Bernard refused to stay home and away from the childhood action in the *kampong* (village) that was rife with fun, games and activities. Bernard’s *kampong*, called Praya Lane or Kampong Praya was, at the time, a predominantly Catholic community of Malacca Portuguese descendants, known locally as the *Kristang* people. These descendants, being a product of intermarriage that took place during the Portuguese occupation of Malacca in the 16th century.

For Bernard, after school activities included playing traditional games near the Assumption Church, swimming in the sea behind the church, going on boat rides with his uncles or the neighbourhood fishermen, and taking part in the “Secret Seven” or “Twilight Teenagers” activities organised by his

youngest aunt, Lucy Theseira. Friends and relatives claimed that even though his health limited his participation in the physically exerting escapades, he was always in the middle of action regardless, taking a keen interest in everything that went on. During his “dancing days”, he would dance until he couldn’t breathe, then sit and rest to catch his breath before getting back on the dance floor. Bernard was a boy, who presumably due to his fragile health, developed a *carpe diem* or ‘never say die’ attitude from an early age.

Nevertheless, his health condition would stunt his physical development for many years to come.

Catholicism and Religious Traditions



After the Dutch took over Melaka in 1641, the Malacca Portuguese descendants kept to their religious traditions, holding on sacredly to most of them. Support for their faith however continued from the missionary priests who were sent by the Portuguese dioceses in the Far East, including Melaka. The continuous spiritual support rendered by the foreign priests played a role in keeping the faith practices of the Kristang people intact for some 400 years.

Photograph of Bernard Sta Maria and his siblings from Bernard Sta Maria’s collection. Occasion of the First Holy Communion of Bernard’s second brother, Manuel circa 1955. (From left: Anthony Sta Maria, Manuel Sta Maria, Bernard Sta Maria and Patricia Sta Maria.)

Despite their constantly busy lives, Donald and Jenny ensured that Bernard and his siblings fulfilled their religious obligations such as getting their First Holy Communion. Like most of the Catholic families at the time, they passed on their religious traditions to Bernard and his siblings. Being Catholic to Bernard was an identity he wore with pride.

St. Peter’s Parish in Melaka was under the Portuguese religious mission, and was the church that still hosted these ancient practices. And Bernard took part in one such Good Friday tradition as a child. It was to walk under the bier bearing the statue of the *Dead Lord* (a life size statue of Jesus Christ lying dead) in the Good Friday evening procession around the church. At the time, it was the norm for the role to be played by an adolescent boy chosen from the community. Every year, a different boy is chosen because the last one would have physically outgrown the part. However, Bernard was the only one who was asked to reprise the role three times because of his small stature.

Growing up in Praya Lane

Little is known about Bernard's years as a student of SFI or St. Francis Institution, in Melaka. Friends and family recall that he loved reading and used to spend hours at home, his nose buried in books.



Bernard was also a junior debater in school. A former teacher recounted to Joseph Sta Maria, Bernard's youngest brother how Bernard was able to raise solid arguments that impressed the teachers and the senior debaters. He was such a valued debater that one day, when he couldn't walk to school due to his asthma, the school sent a car to fetch him to take part in a debate.

Photograph from Bernard Sta Maria's collection, taken at St. Francis Institution, Melaka circa 1958-1959.

Bernard was said to have loved school and was a diligent student, his motivation to study fuelled by Rita Theseira, his mother's youngest sister who later joined the Infant Jesus religious order as a nun in 1958. Fondly known as Auntie Rita, she paid special attention to the studies of her nieces and nephews, including Bernard's. Her strict but encouraging voice would insist they understood their lessons and completed their homework. Bernard is quoted to have commented "*If Auntie Rita had not left to join the sisters (in 1958), that if she had stayed on, all of us would have completed our schooling*".



Indeed, Bernard himself, his siblings and cousins who benefited from Rita's tutelage struggled to remain in school after she joined the convent. Bernard failed his GCE (General Certificate of Education) the first time but later on re-sat the exam and passed.

Nevertheless, even in her absence, Rita's influence may have played a part in Bernard's return to night classes to complete his GCE in 1966 (at 22 years of age) and later his Higher School Certificate (HSE) in (1973). Bernard's cousin, Mabel De Mello recounts how she herself was encouraged by Bernard to do her HSE in Melaka High School. They attended the night classes together and completed their exams that year.

Photograph from the late Sr. Lucy Theseira's collection showing Rita (Lucy) Theseira and her mother, Lucy Theseira (Spykerman), Bernard's maternal grandmother. Photo taken on 10 February 1958.

Later on, Bernard was said to have been offered the opportunity to attend a degree course at a university in Manila, Philippines. Bernard was in a dilemma because the offer arrived just after he had won his first state elections. Despite his desire to continue his studies, Bernard chose to stay in Melaka and forgo the opportunity in favour of serving the members of his constituency.

“The Young Ones”

*....Tomorrow, why wait until tomorrow
'Coz tomorrow sometimes never comes....”*



In his late teens, Bernard found himself part of a group of young men and women from the kampong, who had one thing in common...their love for music and dancing. They called themselves “*The Young Ones*,” mimicking the dressing, hair styles and music tastes of that era.

Photograph from the Bernard Sta Maria’s collection of Bernard and his friends in the Young Ones, taken in the early 1960s.

A close friend of Bernard and member of the group, Datuk Phua Jin Hock recalls the past with fond memories of spending time in Bernard’s house at 112 Praya Lane, listening to Cliff Richard songs and learning to dance. Phua mentions how Bernard was the only one among them who had a record player that his parents had bought for him even though they were financially struggling, simply because of their special love for Bernard.



“His parents loved him a lot, enough to buy him a record player. My own parents never got me one....but I also remember Bernard’s mother, Auntie Jenny, she was so wonderful and always welcomed us to hang out in her house. Theirs was a more liberal household so we had a lot of parties there.”¹

Photograph from the Bernard Sta Maria’s collection. From left Larry Lian, Bernard, Phua Jin Hock and Yap Kim Soo taken in 1961.

¹ Interview with Phua Jin Hock, 25 April 2024.

The Young Ones went on to organise dances often, some private like birthday parties and some public where ticket money was collected to fund the costs and earn some cash for the group itself. *“We loved music and we loved to dance, Bernard especially. I was the Cliff Richard of my time, I had my own band and I was the singer and we played at a few parties. It was in Bernard’s house that I listened to Cliff Richard and learned the songs. I also gave the group their name, The Young Ones. Bernard was the treasurer of the group. He was not really a frontman but he would be behind all the ideas and activities.”* Most, if not all the boys from The Young Ones later went on to find successful careers, but for one reason or another most of them did not keep in touch nor maintain their friendship in the later years.



Margaret Bonaventura, a close friend, neighbour and fellow member of the Twilight Teenagers and the Young Ones, recounts how she had to be interviewed by Bernard to obtain the position of being in-charge of the girls in the Twilight Teenagers.

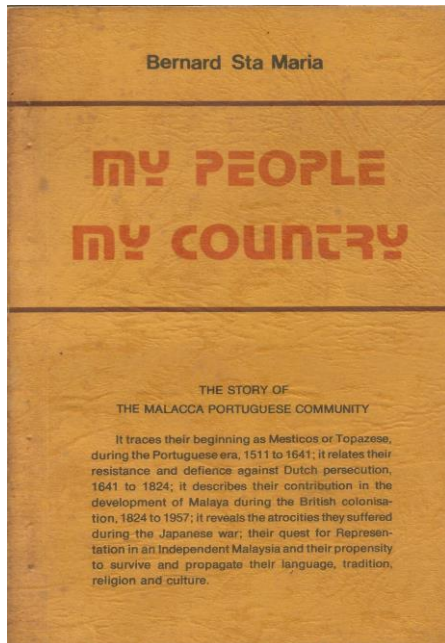
“Sister Lucy would get us together as children and gave our group a name - The Twilight Teenagers. Bernard was in-charge of the boys, and I was in-charge of the girls. And I had to be interviewed to get that position..... Bernard was the one who was always initiating activities like plays and dances. He would not take the front roles but he was behind everything....He was also a good dancer but you had to be a good partner yourself to follow his dance steps. Not many girls could but I was able to follow him.”²

Photograph Bernard and his childhood friend, Margaret Bonaventura, taken during the wedding reception of Margaret Bonaventura. Photo from Bernard Sta Maria’s collection, taken on 7 August 1965.

² Interview with Margaret Bonaventura, 24 April 2024.

To Be A Malacca Portuguese Descendant and What it Means

Growing up a Malacca Portuguese, a minority among the minorities in Malaysia, Bernard questioned his origins often, in his quest to discover what it meant to be a “*Kristang*”. He thought about the significance of being a descendant of the Portuguese who once conquered Melaka. Being a *Kristang* in the context of a Malay society, while sharing many similar physical features like hair type, skin colour yet being raised in a culture and religion completely foreign to this land.



Bernard must have become aware of the differences early in his life, but more importantly he was aware of how unique and wonderful it was to be a Portuguese descendant in and from a Malay society. He had also grown to realize that there were descendants of other European races, such as the Dutch and the British, who while they were citizens of Malaysia and a mixture of European and Asian blood, were not from the Malacca Portuguese lineage and thus did not share the same culture, language and religion. Although many were integrated into the Malacca Portuguese community over the centuries, those who were not able to identify themselves as *Kristang*, presented themselves as Eurasians.

Cover of Bernard Sta Maria's second book, My People My Country published in 1982.

In his book, *My People My Country*, Bernard lamented the lack of representation of the Malacca Portuguese people in the very early days of the nation's birth. He wrote,

“There was not a single representation made on their [the Malacca Portuguese Community] behalf. While collective representation enveloping all segments of the Eurasian Community was commendable, representation on behalf of the Malacca Portuguese Community, should not have been omitted.”³

In 1966, when the nation was just 9 years old, Bernard embarked on something that would place the Malacca Portuguese identity in the national consciousness (and at some points, the national agenda) a permanent part of the historical and racial narrative of Melaka, if not Malaysia. Bernard established the first ever Portuguese Cultural Society, comprising young men and a woman from the community.

The reason for its creation as recounted by family and friends who were involved with the society then was because the *Kristang* culture was dying. The younger generation at the time did not appear to be interested in practicing the traditions any more.

³ B. Sta Maria, *My People, My Country*, page 191.



Photograph of the founding members of the Portuguese Cultural Society, from left top row the late Augustine Derrick, the late Stanley Overee, Walter Sequeriah, the late Maurice Sta Maria, the late Lim Kee Chang and the late Charlie Overee. Seated from left, the late Bosco Lazaroo, the late Bernard Sta Maria, Mabel De Mello and the late George Lopez. Photo from Bernard Sta Maria's collection, taken in 1966.



Photograph of cover of souvenir booklet, "A Saint In Malacca and Cultural Hit Parade, organised by the Portuguese Cultural Society, 3 December 1967. Booklet courtesy of Joseph Sta Maria.

In June 1967, the Portuguese Cultural Society with Bernard as the Secretary revived the celebration of San Pedro (the feast of St. Peter), which was held in Praya Lane, at the back of the Assumption Church. This was a long dormant festival celebrated in honour of St. Peter, patron saint of fishermen. As fishing was a main occupation among the Melaka Portuguese descendants, the patronage of this saint was particularly important to them.

“In the days at end of June that year, the air was rife with excitement and great expectations which were met with resounding success. Prior to the 1967 celebrations, the fishermen did decorate their boats in the hope of winning a prize for the best decorated boat. But that year saw a lot more activities being started and added to the agenda such as an open air mass, games, boat races, Branyo dancing and folk music, food, fun fair and a beauty contest⁴” – Bernard Sta Maria, 1968.

⁴ B. Sta Maria, The Story of the Society in Brief, article written in a souvenir booklet – The Portuguese Cultural Show presented at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka on 8 December 1968.



Photograph showing four Portuguese Cultural Dancers, from left Percy Lazaroo, Charlie Sta Maria, the late Goya Derrick and Mary Lazaroo. Photo from Bernard Sta Maria's collection, taken in 1966.

However the following year, in 1968 Bernard had to leave Melaka and move to Kuala Lumpur to take up his position in a new job as a trade union activist with National Union of Commercial Workers (NUCW) in Kuala Lumpur.⁵ Bernard thought that he would no longer be around in Melaka to oversee the celebration of San Pedro, but he knew that the show must go on every year without fail, if the Malaysian people are to know or learn about his people. Thus, Bernard handed the reins over to the reliable hands of Joe Felix, a fellow *Kristang* who was a musician, cultural enthusiast, and a good friend⁶ to resume the annual celebrations at the Portuguese Settlement.

Other sources cited reasons for moving the San Pedro celebration to the Portuguese Settlement such as the limited space behind the church in Praya Lane which could not

accommodate all the fishing boats from both Praya Lane and the Portuguese Settlement.

But Bernard felt that the Portuguese Settlement, being and acting as the geographical heart of the Malacca Portuguese community was indeed the best place to have the San Pedro celebrations every year, and so right he was because the festivities have continued until today. This year, 2024 would mark about 57 years of continued annual observance of the festa since 1967.

Bernard could have made efforts to have the San Pedro hosted in Praya Lane in the years that followed because his job stint in KL went on for some 9 months and ended with his return to Melaka to contest as a candidate for the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in the May 1969 State Elections which he won. Bernard went on to contest and win the two following terms in State Elections in 1974 and 1978. But that part of the story is outside the scope of this essay and is reserved for another day.

For the intent and purposes of this query, it suffices to say that Bernard Sta Maria was a *Kristang* boy from Praya Lane whose unique situation as a *Kristang* in a Malay society made him question the origins and roots of the Malacca Portuguese community. In answering this question, Bernard sought to understand, explain and establish their rightful place in the multiracial narrative of the nation. As a

⁵ Facebook article by Joseph Sta Maria, BERNARD STA MARIA: A Life Dedicated to His People and Country, posted on 20 January 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/daptrb/posts/bernard-sta-maria-a-life-dedicated-to-his-people-and-country-bernard-sta-maria-w/472154313462381/>

⁶ Interview with Joseph Sta Maria, 24 April 2024.

youth who was given but a few years to live by the doctors, Bernard appreciated the limited time given to him, living his life to the fullest. And finally, as an eldest son born to struggling parents he would go on to identify with his fellow Malacca Portuguese who were struggling economically and find ways to uplift them through donations, sponsorships, education and awareness programmes.

Bernard passed away on 30 July 1987 while staying in Praya Lane, having led a full and complete life of fun (his love for music and dancing), adventure (cultural and political projects), purpose (having served his community) and meaning (establishing what it meant to be a Melaka Portuguese descendant - Kristang).



Photograph of the author, Natassa Sta Maria and her father, Bernard Sta Maria, taken in 1981

*“...And someday,
when the years have flown,
Darling, we’ll teach
the young ones of our own.”*

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