

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES OF A MALAY COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION

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SINOPSIS

Bahagian pertama kertas ini membincangkan tahap perkembangan antropologi sosial yang telah mula mengkaji kebudayaan-kebudayaan kompleks, khususnya melihat usaha ahli-ahli antropologi yang telah mengkaji masyarakat dan kebudayaan Melayu kini. Penulis sendiri menumpukan kajian kepada satu fenomena kebudayaan Melayu, iaitu pertumbuhan elemen-elemen urbanisma di dalam dan di sekeliling kebudayaan Melayu. Memandangkan bahawa urbanisma telah mula mempengaruhi kebudayaan Melayu tradisional, penulis cuba menghuraikan dalam bahagian kedua kertas ini kegiatan-kegiatan satu masyarakat Melayu tradisional dalam bidang sistem kepercayaan dan adat resam yang berkaitan dengan sistem kepercayaan itu. Penulis melihat kegiatan-kegiatan ini sebagai tindakan penyesuaian masyarakat tradisional dalam satu sekitaran baru.

SYNOPSIS

The first part of this paper discusses the development of social anthropology, particularly the works of social anthropologists who have studied contemporary Malay society and culture. The writer himself focuses his interest on one phenomenon of Malay culture, that is the growth of urban elements in and around Malay culture. Since urbanism has started to influence traditional Malay culture, the writer attempts in the second part of the paper to discuss the activities of a traditional Malay community regarding their religious system, and customs which are related to that religious system. The writer observes that these activities constitute adaptive measures of a traditional community in a new environment.

A. Anthropology and the Study of Complex Societies.

Traditionally anthropologists have concentrated their efforts on the study of cultures of tribal and primitive groups. The history of anthropology as a science has always been mostly the history of the study of these groups and the theoretical formulations and orientations of the science are usually introduced to students of anthropology through the extensive literature on the subject of tribal and primitive cultures. However, anthropology is

more broadly defined. It is the study of man and his culture, from prehistoric to modern and metropolitan times.

In the last forty years, anthropologists have begun to honor that portion of this broad aim and definition that includes complex societies and cultures. Anthropologists have undertaken studies of rural groups and studies of relationships between rural inhabitants and their urbanized counterparts. Robert Redfield (1930) created a framework within which studies of urban and rural sub-cultures could be integrated with each other. All societies, he argued, could be grouped along a theoretical continuum the ideal of which represented the extremes of a "folk culture" and an "urban culture". According to Redfield, population density and cultural homogeneity act as independent variables, which affect changes in a number of cultural elements. This conceptualization, he referred to as the "folk-urban continuum".

Redfield's continuum continued to attract the attention of anthropologists for sometime, but "It was not until the 1950's that criticism of the theory, coupled with adequate case material and alternative theoretical positions began to make themselves felt" (and presently), "The heuristic value of Redfield's work is to be witnessed by the contributions of his critics" (Adams 1965:7).

Redfield's formulations focussed attention upon rural and urban societies as parts of a larger society. Kroeber (1948) continued this theoretical trend when he pointed out that 'peasant societies'¹ were part societies. In recent decades most anthropologists have reinforced the notion that communities can be understood only within the context of complex societies. There has also been considerable debate on the concept of a complex society, but a comprehensive definition of complex societies has been suggested by Gamst (1974: 3) when he contends that "Complex societies and their peasantries may be viewed as extending along a developmental continuum of modernization from a polar type of agricultural civilization to another type of industrial urban civilization".

B. Studies of Complex Societies in Malaysia.

Nearly all anthropological studies of complex societies in Malaysia recognize that rural communities exist within a larger society. However, only a few ethnographers have recognized the significance of the Malaysian national culture which affects the sub-cultures that they have studied (Firth 1946; Swift 1965; Provencher 1971; and S. Husin Ali 1975). Firth explores the dependence of Malay fishermen on the market system of the complex Malaysian national culture. Several technological changes and innovations

1 There is considerable disagreement about what makes a rural person a peasant or even whether the term has universal application. Because of this I shall avoid the term 'peasant' and speak only of rural inhabitants or dwellers.

in the marketing system have occurred as a result of the influence of the bureaucracy and the economic system of the complex society. Provencher contends that the urban Malay communities retain several significant traditional values, even though they depend on the urban economic system for a living. S. Husin Ali relates briefly the importance of the national political system of the complex society to the leadership pattern of rural communities. Wilson (1967) describes the relationships of a village to the national society and the manner in which the latter has imposed certain changes in the name of rural development.

Other ethnographers who have conducted research in Malaysia emphasize certain aspects of Malay culture rather than the relationships between the rural sub-culture and the urban sub-culture. Nagata (1974) discusses the significance of Malay customs in an urban environment. She, however, rejects the idea that urbanism (size, density of population, etc.), is the most important factor in culture change among the urban Malays. She contends that the supra-urban forces such as the government, have a strong influence on the behavioural patterns of Malays in the cities. Government has specific programs for Malays in the urban areas. She argues further that understanding the sub-culture of an ethnic group in a particular city requires an understanding not only of the national culture, but also the particular city as a whole.

A study by Swift (1965) focussed its attention on the role of modernization in a Malay rural community. It is obvious that he regards the super forces of the state as significant variables in bringing about changes in the rural community. Swift contends that the international market system has major effects on the rural sub-culture, because as rubber producers, the inhabitants not only have become dependent upon the world rubber market, but they also have changed institutions which previously were functional in a non-cash economy. For example, in a traditional system no individual from the same *suku* (clan) could get married, but because there is a cash economy this prohibition has now become ineffective. This is because individuals who defy the prohibition can settle and earn a living in the nearby town or in another village.

My study centers around a Malay village, known as Kampong Sungei Penchala, which is situated about twelve miles from the city of Kuala Lumpur and six miles from the new township of Petaling Jaya. Kuala Lumpur and the township of Petaling Jaya form the urban environment of the village of Sungei Penchala. However, though surrounded by an urban environment, Kampong Sungei Penchala has many characteristics normally associated with rural villages. For example, its houses are made of planks and thatch. The houses are widely dispersed and the streets do not form a grid. Also, some of the residents are rubber producers and the rubber trees grow within the village. For the past few decades the urban areas have

been moving towards the village. Finally, in 1974, Kampong Sungei Penchala was officially incorporated into the city of Kuala Lumpur.

Thus, Kampong Sungei Penchala can be considered as a community in transition from a rural to an urban situation. As such it provides an opportunity for collecting data on a sub-culture that increasingly must adapt to an urban environment. Most of the adult residents of the village work in the city and the surrounding areas. This tendency will be accelerated by a project now being planned by the Urban Development Authority of the national government. The project will develop the village into a modern housing estate.

I have classified residents of the rural community of Kampong Sungei Penchala into three major categories. They are the rural rubber producers (a small percentage), urban wage earners and the village entrepreneurs. These three categories are interdependent in the village sub-culture. The villagers perceive the importance of their relationships among themselves for both personal and communal interests. They try to place common communal interests above the individual good. This is one of the many ways the people adapt to the national culture and their urban situation.

C. Religious Institutions

Every community has some form of religion. Norbeck (1961:127) has defined religion as "... a set of beliefs with practical effect in human affairs and is at the same time a system of action and interaction among human beings with consequences important to culture, society, and the individual" The community of Kampong Sungei Penchala consists not only of Malays, but also of followers of the Islamic religion. As Muslims, they follow the religion as taught by the Prophet Mohammad and as Malays in Malaysia they belong to the Shafie sect.

Religion and religious practices are important to the villagers as members of the Malay community. Islam is a major cultural factor in identifying Malays. In Malaysia, a Malay is officially defined as an individual who belongs to the Islamic faith, speaks the Malay language habitually and and follows Malay customs in daily life. In this respect there are many Malaysian born natives who are not Malays because they are not Muslims, even though they speak Malay fluently and follow Malay customs.

In the following pages I examine the importance of religious institutions and practices of the residents of Kampong Sungei Penchala. I begin by presenting an overview of the most important religious institution in the village, the mosque, and then discuss the various ritual occasions which mobilize the congregation or part thereof, special attention being devoted to the month of fasting (*bulan ramadan*), and those event required extensive cooperation to stage the requisite feasts.

D. The Mosque

The major symbolic focus of the Islamic religion in the village is the mosque. The mosque in Kampong Sungei Penchala was built in 1953 by the State Government of Selangor. It is located more or less in the centre of the village, a location which appropriately expresses its unifying function since it assists members of the community in many ways.

The Islamic religion requires every member, among other things, to pray to God (Allah) five times a day and to attend the Friday (Holy Day) prayers with the rest of the congregation in the mosque. A true Muslim prays five times a day. The early morning prayer period just before sunrise, is known as *sembahyang subuh*. This is followed by early afternoon prayers called *sembahyang zuhur*, between one and two in the afternoon. The late afternoon prayers are held between five and six and are known as *sembahyang asar*. The early evening prayers (*sembahyang maghrib*) take place between 6:46 and 7 p.m., while the last prayer period for the day (*sembahyang isyak*) can be performed at any time between 8 and 12 p.m. Each prayer session takes about ten to twenty minutes. Those who pray face the direction of the sunset, assuming that it is the direction of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

The majority of the adult population of Kampong Sungei Penchala perform these mandatory prayers. Some of the urban workers miss the early afternoon prayers (*sembahyang zuhur*) because they are at work. Others, however, manage to perform the prayers in one of the Petaling Jaya or Kuala Lumpur mosques. The unemployed inhabitants of the village perform most of the prayers in their homes except the Friday prayers when they congregate in the mosque. Some villagers make use of a nearby *surau* (prayer house) to perform their daily prayers.

Many of the young urban workers from the village miss the late afternoon and evening prayers claiming that they are too tired to participate or that they cannot find the time to perform them by the time they reach home from work. Before taking part in a prayer session, each individual washes his hands, feet, face and forehead. This is mandatory and near the entrance of every mosque or prayer house there is a concrete tank filled with water for such cleansing purposes.

The mosque is regarded as very sacred. It is unbecoming for a Muslim to show any disrespect to the mosque such as urinating, spitting or quarrelling in the mosque compound. The grounds are well fenced to prevent animals and young children from playing in the mosque compound. The mosque of this village is built of concrete and cement plaster and has a seating capacity of about four hundred people.

Every Friday noon most of the village adults and a few young boys walk or cycle to the mosque to perform the Friday noon prayers. During these

prayers, the *imam* (leader of the congregation) exhorts those in attendance to be good and true Muslims. His exhortation before the prayers take place is known as the *khutbah*, the contents of which is prepared by the State Religious Department of Selangor.

The mosque in any Muslim community in Malaysia is not politically independent. Religion is managed by the State and only recognized officials and officers of the community or individuals commissioned by the government can deliver the Friday *khutbah*. The *imam* himself is formally appointed by the government. He is not paid any allowance for his services. His main task is to lead the congregation in the prayers and to deliver the official sermons. If the *imam* is not well, his place is taken over by the *nazir*, chairman of the mosque committee.

The village mosque is managed by a committee of 21 person. The chairman of the committee and other members are selected by secret ballot by the villagers in an election supervised by the State Religious Department. The *imam* is also a member of the committee. The tenure of the committee is for five years or more, depending on the evaluation of their performance by the State Religious Department. The tenure can be shortened or lengthened. If the people express some discontent and the State Religious Department subsequently feels that the dissatisfaction is reasonable, another election is held. The present committee has been in office for more than than four years.

If a committee member resigns or dies, he is replaced by a person appointed by the State Religious Department. Normally the *nazir*, the *imam*, and the village headman give their views on the candidate to the Department before any decision is reached. The committee of the mosque of Kampong Sungei Penchala has not had to face this problem. Very few people talk about the mosque committee because the committee has no regular functions and its members are not paid any allowance. The committee has a treasurer and an honorary secretary, but no regular books or files. The committee seldom meets and no minutes of meetings are kept.

The mosque of this village does not receive any kind of regular grant from the State Government to maintain the institution. From time to time the committee makes casual repairs, cleans the compound and purchases mats. Funds for these purchases are obtained from donations, often made by well-wishers at the Friday prayers. During Friday prayers, a committee member carries a small basket and walks from one member to another requesting donations. Some members of the congregation give and some do not. The average weekly collection is about M\$10.00. The donations from the Friday prayers are primarily used to pay the *siak* of the mosque. The *siak* is a regular member of the congregation who is engaged by the committee to clean the compound, wash the water containers and arrange the mats for Friday prayers. He is paid an allowance of M\$15.00 per

month. The *siak* may do other jobs in the mosque if he wishes or if he is directed to do so by the *nazir*.

The members of the management committee of the mosque are mostly urban workers. The *nazir* is a pensioner and owns land in the village. Other committee members are the *imam* and the elders of the village including the village headman. The honorary secretary, however, is a young urban clerk. The committee finds it unnecessary to keep accounts or regular minutes of meetings because they believe that they have nothing to hide from the people. After all, they are serving not only the people but also God (Allah).

The committee held a short informal meeting in 1973 to request the Electricity Board to exempt payment of the power bill for the mosque. Electricity was then about to be installed for the whole village. The request was turned down and the committee has had to continue paying about M\$20.00 a month for electricity. This money is also obtained from the donations of members of the Friday congregation.

The mosque committee members are all males. There are no regular female participants at Friday prayers. This is explained by most people as due to the fact that women in Kampong Sungei Penchala are too busy with house-hold chores. Some older women pray at home and a few of them participate in the *surau* prayers, especially during special feasts in the *surau* is partitioned off for women to pray in. However, most inhabitants in the village believe that, in a Muslim community, the males are and should be leaders in all aspects of social life including religious affairs.

Besides the weekly Friday prayers, the mosque committee occasionally organizes other religious functions such as discussions of Islamic teachings. Normally these functions are held during the fasting month or during the month of the birthday of the Prophet. For these special activities, there are usually one or two guest speakers from outside the village. The discussants concentrate on religious matters, such as the basic teachings of the *Kuran*, the life history of the Prophet and his friends, and the role of modern Muslims in the world. They also exhort their audience to improve themselves economically and to educate their children in the Islamic ways.

The guest speakers are often close friends of the *nazir*. Sometimes a few urban workers who are devoted Muslims manage to contact the religious leaders in town and invite them to the mosque after obtaining prior permission from the *nazir*. Strictly speaking, these activities should be approved ahead of time by the State Religious Department, but the committee usually finds it unnecessary to obtain prior permission if the *penghulu* and the village headman agree to the event. The guest speakers are not paid any honorarium, but they are well entertained after the speeches. Members of the congregation often bring food and non-alcoholic drinks to the mosque to consume while listening to the speeches. On these occasions the women

seem to participate earnestly. They bring along food they have cooked and listen quietly in the rear portion of the mosque.

E. Religious Gatherings and Festivities

There are many religious occasions in the lives of Malay villagers. The birthday of the Prophet is considered to be especially holy in the village, while the fasting month is the most significant period of the year. Then there is *Hari Raya Puasa*, which follows the fasting month and is a period of rejoicing, thanksgiving and forgiveness. Furthermore, a family holds *khenduri arwah* to request God to bless the soul of the dead; a resident who has just completed a new house holds a *khenduri syukur* to thank God; and family gives a *khenduri selamat* a few days after the birth of the first child to thank God for the safe delivery and the addition to the family and the faith.

The Prophet's birthday, *Maulud Nabi*, is a public holiday throughout the country. Most wage earners in the village stay at home on that day, except a few who may be required to work in certain industries having special overtime allowances. This day is considered to be very holy. Special prayers are offered in the mosque at noon prayer period known as *sembahyang zuhur*. The villagers begin to gather around the mosque compound late in the morning. A guest speaker is often invited who gives a lengthy speech about the life of the Prophet and his teachings. After the noon prayers all participants are feted, the food and drinks being provided by the congregation.

The fasting month, *bulan ramadan*, is the holiest month of the Islamic calendar. In the village, most adults, female and male, fast. A few youngsters below the age of twelve try, but usually they cannot endure the fast which lasts till the eating time known as *buka puasa* at about seven in the evening. A few youths do not fast, claiming that they have to work hard in the city. These individuals, however, do not eat in public.

The month long fasting period affects the daily routine of life in the village. During this time religious activities are more numerous and more faithfully attended in comparison to previous months. Working adults, who normally visit the coffee shops or the grocery stores after work, go home to sleep after daily chores. There are hardly any gathering or festivities in the daytime during the fasting month.

Fasting begins at about five in the morning, and believers who are fasting do not eat or drink or smoke until about seven in the evening. Besides observing the non-eating and non-drinking rules, the believers are not allowed to engage in activities which are considered to be *haram* (forbidden). Among other things, sexual intercourse in the daytime is so considered and is believed to nullify the religious effects of fasting. A believer who is fast-

ing is not supposed to entertain the idea of fun, rejoicing or bad intention. Young people who normally tease each other try to avoid these activities during the fasting month. An attitude of seriousness pervades the village bus terminal, the *surau* and other places. There is less joking, fewer games, and less movement of people in the village. During the first few days of the fasting month, the believers in the village are not keen to talk and prefer to spend their free time sleeping, especially during the day. Some youths spend their free time sleeping in the *surau*. Unemployed youths pass their free time by taking a bus ride to Petaling Jaya or Kuala Lumpur in the morning and return to the village in the afternoon to sleep. A few youths who are not fasting pretend to be tired or hungry during the peak hours of the day to avoid public redecule.

Most households do not cook food in the afternoon unless there are several young children who are not fasting. Some households just heat the leftover food from the previous evening for this purpose. At about three in the afternoon, while the men and youths either sleep or engage in light conversation with neighbours, the women of the household busy themselves cooking for the evening meal. The usual evening meal is preceded by the *buka puasa* or the breaking of the fast. Most households prepare sweet delicacies and iced cold drinks for the breaking of the fast, after which some adults walk to the nearest *surau* to perform the evening prayers. Immediately thereafter they return home for the evening meal. Some villagers pray in their own homes and continue to eat for about an hour. At eight in the evening most adults adjourn to the mosque to perform the special nightly prayers of the fasting month known as *sembahyang tarawikh*.

The fasting month is considered to be very sacred by the villagers and all Muslims in the country. The adult population of the village observe the fasting month strictly. The few who do not fast are construction workers who work hard or young children. Those who do not fast do not eat in public. It is an offence to do so, although villagers are not worried about being arrested by the village policemen. They are ashamed to be seen eating in public. Young children are encouraged to fast at an early age. They join their parents and older siblings in the early morning meal known as *makan sahur* which is normally consumed before five in the morning. It is a very heavy meal and is supposed to last them until about seven in the evening. Most of the young children who are trying to fast break their fast in the afternoon after school. Some of them try to endure it until about three or four in the evening and parents praise their children in front of others for trying to fast.

During the fasting month all the coffee shops are closed in the day time. Owners, however, open their shops a little after seven in the evening, after the breaking of the fast. The primary reason is not to serve coffee or tea but just to provide clients with services such as cigarettes.

Towards the end of the fasting month, especially on the last day of fasting, villagers busy themselves preparing *ketupat* (rice cooked in coconut leaves). A few households cook *lemang* (glutinous rice cooked in bamboo containers). On this day nearly every household is busy making last minute preparations for the *Hari Raya Puasa* (end of the fasting month celebrations). Village entrepreneurs purchase several cows or buffaloes to be slaughtered for sale to the residents. The meat from these animals is turned into *rendang* (beef stewed in coconut milk with spices). The average household purchases five to ten pounds of beef for this purpose at a cost of about M\$3.00 per pound. A few households, who cannot afford to purchase beef, slaughter their own chickens and turn these into several types of delicacies including *rendang ayam* (chicken stewed in coconut milk with spices).

During this period, extra cooking facilities are constructed just outside each household kitchen. A large number of persons do not fast on this day because they need the energy for last minute preparation for the coming celebrations. Some fathers hurriedly cycle or take a bus to town to purchase new clothes and shoes for their children. The cost of these preparations use up a large portion of the monthly budget.

The village becomes a center of festivities and prayers on *Hari Raya* day. This is the day on which the people of Kampong Sungei Penchala and all Muslims all over the country celebrate the end of the fasting month. Villagers congregate in the village mosque at about eight in the morning to perform the *sembahyang Hari Raya* (the prayers to end the fasting month). These prayers take about an hour to perform.

Elders, young people and children in their new clothes and songkok (fezes) congregate for these prayers which are followed on the verandah of the mosque by a small feast prepared earlier by the ladies and organized by the village mosque committee. After performing the special prayers, participants shake hands with each other warmly and ask for forgiveness. They then disperse and return home to visit their friends and relatives. Young people are ideally supposed to ask formally for forgiveness from their parents on this day, but the children in the village are more likely to be seen running toward the buses and taxis to visit the movie houses in town after the prayer session.

Those relatives who are not able to return to the village on this occasion usually send greeting cards by mail. This is a gesture to ask for forgiveness on this auspicious day. On *Hari Raya* all Muslims are supposed to forgive and forget and therefore they visit each other to perform this ritual.

The people of Kampong Sungei Penchala normally hold 'open house'. This means that all friends and neighbours are welcome. Groups of five or six individuals visit one house after another. On arrival they are received by the head of the household or any male adult of the family. The guests shake hands with the host, wish him and his family *Selamat Hari*

Raya, and ask for forgiveness. If the host is a young adult and the guest is older, the host will shake the guest's hand while bowing. The rounds of visiting continue leisurely for the whole day and on into the next, but at a slightly slower pace. Delicious foods (prepared several days earlier during the fasting month) and drinks are served to visitors.

Some individuals do not visit certain households because of long standing feuds. Some young people participate, but they form their own visiting groups, typically organized by sex, and rarely mix with the older groups. The women have to stay at home most of the time to look after the needs of the guests.

F. Feasts and Feasting

Nearly every household in Kampong Sungei Penchala has held a feast of one kind or another. The most common feast is the *khenduri arwah*, the special prayers for the dead. The following table indicates the number of households which have held *khenduri* between 1968 and 1972;

TABLE 1
FEASTING HOUSEHOLDS

<i>Types of Households</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>%</i>
Urban wage earners	95	67
Rubber producers	23	92
Entrepreneurs	18	81
Unemployed	11	78

Out of the 140 households containing urban workers, 95 or about 67% have had such feasts, most of which were *khenduri arwah*. A few of these households have also held marriage feasts. The *khenduri arwah* is held more often than any other by the villagers because they believe that the spirits of their dead relatives must be blessed by God and it is their duty to request God to do so. In addition, they also believe that the spirits of the dead must always be cared for as if they were alive. In this way they maintain continuous links with their deceased parents or siblings.

Another common religious feast is the *khenduri syukur*, that is, thanking God for fulfilling whatever they have wished. A family holds such feast if a son passes the government secondary examination, or if they complete a new house. Besides praising God for his divine assistance, the owner also hopes that the house will not be disturbed by such undesirable supernatural beings as ghosts.

Twenty three rubber producing families had held feasts in their homes. They ranged from an elaborate wedding feast to a small family affair, a *khenduri syukur*, thanking God for being blessed with a first child. The entrepreneurial families also sponsor feasts for similar reasons. Members of this group, however, seem to spend more to stage such affairs. One entrepreneur spent about M\$2,000 for his daughter's wedding, the high point of the scale for wedding costs which ranges from as low as M\$500.00. Even the unemployed heads of household give feasts, the money being provided by a working son or daughter.

Most of the religious feasts, except weddings, are held on Thursday night (the Malays call it *Malam Jumaat* or Friday Eve). This is because the Malays in the village like Malays in general, regard this night as sacred and auspicious. Weddings, however, are carried out on Sunday, a public holiday, thus enabling the family to obtain more assistance from neighbours and permitting more guests to attend. A wedding feast requires extensive preparation and therefore considerable time and labour.

At a *khenduri arwah*, the number of guests varies from as few as four adult males to as many as fifteen, the number of invitations depending on the economic status of the giver and purpose of the rite. One entrepreneur of Kampong Sungei Panchala spent about M\$200.00 for a *khenduri arwah*, but a typical wage earner spends only about M\$30.00 to hold the same feast. The policeman who bought land and built a house in the village held a *khenduri syukur* to bless his new house. It is estimated that he spent more than M\$400.00 to put on a day long affair. A goat was slaughtered, several chickens were bought from the Petaling Jaya market, and several huge pots of rice were cooked to feed the approximately 130 guests who were mostly his neighbours.

Some households which conduct small feasts prefer their guests to perform the evening prayers (*sembahyang maghrib*) in their house. This means that the guests arrive about ten minutes to seven in the evening. Prayers begin at seven. After the prayers, the participants, led by the *imam* or some other religious individual requested by the host to attend, will start chanting verses from the *Kuran*. The entire ritual lasts for about twenty minutes after which the food is served.

At some feasts the hosts indicate to the guests that they would prefer the ritual to begin after evening prayers. In this case the guests normally pray in their own houses and later proceed to the feasting family. The chanting of *Kuran* verses is led by the *imam* or the most religious individual. Sometimes guests arrive just in time for the meal and explain to the host why they arrive late.

In most of the feasts the major participants are immediate neighbours and the *imam* of the mosque. If the *imam* is not able to come, the host will ask the man whom he considers to be the most religious to lead the group in

chanting the specific *Kuran* verses. In Kampong Sungei Penchala, most of the older men who are *haji* (a person who has gone to Mecca on a pilgrimage) are considered very religious and can perform some of the basic religious rites such as the *tahlil* (reading aloud and by heart specific verses of the *Kuran*). There are no youths who can perform this ritual in Kampong Sungei Penchala.

During the *khenduri syukur* for his new house, the policeman invited most of the village elders, the *imam* of the mosque, the village headman, and people from the fifteen households immediately around his new house. Most of these neighbours come not only as guests, but also as helpers. In this particular case, the *imam* led the congregation in the *berzanji* (group reading of the *Kuran* verses which praises the life of Prophet Mohammad). The host scheduled the feast to take place during this period to take advantage of the auspicious birthday month of the prophet. He hoped that a feast held on such a time would help prolong his life and the lives of his entire family. He also hoped that his new house would be blessed by God and the spirits of his ancestors.

At this particular *khenduri syukur* all such preparatory work as cooking the food, constructing a guest tent and laying the mats in the main guest area of the house was undertaken by 'volunteers' from the village. The adult males from six immediate neighbouring households provided free labour for the occasion. The new resident purchased all the food items, including a sixty pound goat, rice, cooking oil, and coconut. The people involved in the feast claimed that the policeman had become *orang kita* (a member of our community). This is because he bought land and built a house in the village and lives as a member of the village. The policeman attends Friday prayers with the rest of the villagers in the mosque. Before his house was completed, he lived in the police quarters in Damansara, but he visited his new house almost daily. He had previously been in touch with the people of Kampong Sungei Penchala for a long time, since, as a policeman in Damansara, he covered Kampong Sungei Penchala in carrying out his police duties.

During the *khenduri arwah* or *khenduri syukur*, one common element that is performed by the participants and led by the *imam* is the *doa selamat* (asking God for his blessings). The *imam* chants *Kuran* verses while he and the other worshippers hold their hands in front of themselves with open palms facing the head. This posture constitutes a symbolic gesture asking God to grant whatever is requested. After a while the *imam* and the participants turn their open palms away from their faces asking God to prevent any hardship or bad luck which might be about to befall them, an act known as *doa tolak bala*. As the next to the last gesture of the ritual, the worshippers' hands are returned to the original position while the *imam* chants the *Kuran* and the rest in a chorus say *amin* (amen). The ritual is

ended when the *imam* and other participants each raise both hands to their lips.

While this activity is going on in the *serambi* (the guest area) of the house, a few female guests quietly follow the ritual in another adjoining portion of the house by murmuring the *Kuran* verses instead of reading them aloud. Most of the *Kuran* chanting, however, is done by the male guests while the majority of the women in the household quietly prepare the food in the kitchen. Young children are often scolded for making noise during this ritual. If they continue to disturb the ritual, they are taken away to the back portion of the house by an older sibling.

In all these feasts, the male participants put on a sarong (loose male skirt) and a shirt. Sometimes they wear the *baju Melayu* (Malay shirt) with *songkok* (fez). The men who have been to Mecca put on the *serban*, a distinctive white cap trimmed with white cloth. Guests usually sit cross-legged on the mat covered floor of the house. In large scale feasts, such as weddings, however, most of the guests sit on chairs provided by the hosts, although guests who occupy the front portion of the house still sit on mats.

Special feasts are sometimes carried out as joint projects by a congregation. These are held in the *surau* or prayer house when the *surau* committee invites guest speakers for the late afternoon prayers known as *sembahyang asar*. Such prayers are held between four and five in the evening and a feast, which does not in itself have any religious significance, is prepared as a sign of respect for the guest speakers. The speaker normally talks about the teachings of Islam and the role of Islamic community in the modern world. For this *surau* feast, participants jointly share the expenses by bringing cooked food, soft drinks, tea or coffee.

At a wedding party, the only religious ritual that is considered mandatory is the *akad nikah* (marriage solemnizing ceremony). In this ceremony the man and the woman are formally pronounced to be man and wife. The *akad nikah* is performed by the *khadi* (a religious official appointed by the state). The *khadi* who officiates weddings for the people of Kampong Sungai Penchala resides in Petaling Jaya. Before the wedding he is formally invited by the bride's parents or their representatives. In an Islamic community, the father of the bride can marry off his daughter by conducting the *akad nikah* himself. Nowadays, however, parents prefer to invite the *khadi* to officiate at the ceremony because there are several legal papers to be filled out before and after the *akad nikah*. The people of Kampong Sungai Penchala believe that the presence of the *khadi* makes the occasion grander and more solemn.

Immediately after the *akad nikah*, the officiating individual or the *imam* is formally requested by the host or his personal representative to conduct the *doa selamat*, requesting God to bless the couple. The *akad nikah* normally takes place in the bride's house. The *serambi* is again the place where

the bridegroom sit cross-legged in front of the officiating *khadi*, who is witnessed by three individuals, normally elders of the village. During this occasion the bridegroom is accompanied by a close friend who acts as his *pengapit* (best man).

Feasts at wedding ceremonies are more lavish than other feasts. The wedding of the daughter of the retired headman for example, costs a great deal of money. Several hundred guests came and specially cooked food such as the *nasi minyak* (oily cooked rice), *rendang ayam* (stewed spiced chicken) and other delicacies, were served.

For such an occasion a 'task force' is normally organized by the family to prepare the food, construct the guest areas, decorate the bridal room and recruit helpers. In Kampong Sungei Penchala this 'task force' is normally formed about a week before the wedding takes place. The head of the family concerned invites a few elders and relatives to a small feast in house and explains his intentions.

In three of the weddings and ceremonies that took place in the village during the study period, the *bersanding* ceremony was also held. For this prestigious ceremony the bride and groom are seated on a specially constructed dais, either inside the house or in the compound of the house close to the guest tent. The *bersanding* ceremony consists of essentially the formal public display of the newly weds. The couple are lavishly dressed in traditional Malay costumes and heavily decorated with gold ornaments.²

While the couple sits on the dais, relatives and friends pay their respects and wish them well by sprinkling holy water on the hands and face of the bride and the groom. The *bersanding* lasts for about forty minutes. In one of the weddings in Kampong Sungei Penchala, the *bersanding* took place on the grounds of the house while children of the village *silat* (the Malay art of self defence) group performed for the couple.

At one of the weddings in the village, a related event was included. This was the *khatam Kuran* (the recitation of the *Kuran* verses which mark the successful completion of the reading of the whole *Kuran* under the guidance of the family's religious teacher). This ceremony was conducted by the religious teacher and witnessed by the elders of the community. It was performed just a few hours before the ordinary guests arrived and before the *bersanding ceremony* began.³ After the ceremony was over those pre-

2 The most traditional wedding involves a total of eight steps 1) *menilik* (the selection of the bride); 2) *meminang* (the betrothal); 3) *menghantar belanja dan nikah* (the presentation of male dowry and solemnization rite); 4) *berendam* (the hair trimming of the bride); 5) *berinai* (the staining of the couple with henna); 6) *bersanding* (public display of the couple); 7) *mandi berlimau* (the ceremonial bathing); 8) *sambut-menyambut* (the visitation of the parents' homes).

3 *Khatam Kuran*, while not necessarily a part of the marriage ceremonies, is often celebrated at this time as a way of demonstrating the intelligence and good religious character of the bride and groom.

sent was offered yellow glutinous rice and hot tea or coffee. At this particular wedding the groom also participated in the *kuran* reading just before the *bersanding* ceremony.

The families which have held weddings and feasts in the village spend large sums of money, even though their earning power is low. They maintain that it is their duty to hold such feasts. Feasts are given as a sign of goodwill, generosity and gratefulness. They assert that God provides the faithful with good lives in the form of wealth, children and sufficient food, and that these should be shared with fellow Muslims whenever possible.

Holding feasts to remember and commemorate dead relatives is also part of the teaching of the Muslim religion. If the dead are remembered and respected, their spirits will look after the living. Feasting also provides opportunities for people to come together to pray or to do things for the common good. To ask God for forgiveness is considered a holy act. Therefore, if a person is wealthy and does not give feasts, he is considered to be a miser and is often shunned by relatives and potential friends.

The people believe that all events in the world are determined by God. Man is only an instrument who helps to actualize events. If a man holds a *khenduri* and asks God for His blessing and forgiveness, he is sure to obtain them.

The villagers are poor when compared with the residents of other rural Malay communities. Nevertheless, a few of them are prepared to spend about a month's wages for a feast or a year's savings for a wedding. In order partly to offset this heavy drain on their economic resources, the villagers obtain volunteered labour through the *gotong royong* system for these occasions.

The people of Kampong Sungei Penchala are frequently engaged in generalized reciprocity. There are no instances when individuals do not cooperate with or assist others because the latter failed to provide assistance at an earlier feast. Some elders explain this by saying that, even if a few individuals are indifferent to others in the village, the inhabitants as a whole are obliged to assist these individuals if and when the need arises. The younger generation, however, claims that there are a few arrogant families which do not deserve assistance. Nonetheless, the young people still provide assistance to these families as required because they all live in the same village (*hidup sekampung*) and are obliged to help. Thus, while there are differences in the degree of cooperation provided by individuals, these do not affect the essential nature of *gotong royong* activities. Furthermore, the wives and children of unhelpful individuals often do participate fully.

There is evidence of both a sacred and a secular orientation among residents in the village. The feasts, mutual self-help, elaborate wedding ceremonies, fasting and regular prayers on Friday noon, and the daily par-

ticipation in the *surau* can be considered as elements of the sacred orientation. A large portion of the older people adhere to Malay and Islamic traditions. Among the younger people, however, there are indications of none secular attitudes and behaviours. A few of them do not fast during the fasting month even though fasting is one of the most distinctive Islamic practices. Both youthful males and females seem to mix more freely during social gatherings than to their elders. There are even birthday parties with western music in a few homes. The elders often resent such activities.

Elders claim that urban influences, such as movies, free mixing between the sexes, and stylish clothing have spoilt their children. They assert that the behaviour of some of the young people is undersirable (*tidak manis*, literally meaning "it is not sweet"). The young people counter such statements by claiming that their elders are too conservative. In spite of these differences, young and old seem to get along well during such serious village activities as wedding feasts, mosque events and other *gotong royong* affairs. The elders tend to focus their daily lives on the village institutions of the mosque and *surau*, whereas the young people look to the city for new symbols, inspiration and personal satisfaction.

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