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DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 70

ABSTRACT

The Changing Peasant World in a Melaka  
Village: Islam and Democracy  
in the Malay Tradition

by

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March 1974

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## Table of Contents

Preface

Introduction

Chapter I. Historical Circumstances

Chapter II. Family Circle and Family Career

- A. The Malay Family as a Social Circle
- B. Marriage and the Formation of Family Circle
- C. Residence
- D. Family Relationships
- E. Stages in the Family Career

Chapter III. Making a Living

- A. Occupations
- B. Distribution of Cash
- C. Patterns of Consumption

Chapter IV. Social Networks

- A. Social Intercourse in the Village
- B. The Feast (kenduri)
- C. Conformity

Chapter V. Religious Institutions

- A. The Mosque and its Extent
- B. Religious Education and Faith
- C. Solidarity through Rituals

Chapter VI. Leadership and Deference

- A. The Structure of Administration
- B. Leaders and the Community
- C. Deference

Conclusion

Appendix: Note on the Field Work

Bibliography

ABSTRACT

THE CHANGING PEASANT WORLD IN A MELAKA VILLAGE: ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY IN THE MALAY TRADITION

The field study on which this account is based was conducted in a small village seven miles from Melaka Town, West Malaysia (Malaya). Predominant economic activities of the village include padi-farming, rubber-tapping, wage labor, and migrant work. Villagers conceive of the padi-farming as their major occupation. Nevertheless, this conception only vaguely reflects their actual life-style. From adolescence to middle age most men either emigrate to follow a profession or engage in wage labor. Only from middle age to old age do they settle in the village for agricultural work. In their last years they live modestly without being disturbed by other people.

The main focus of this account is to describe and analyse "meaningful structure of experience as it is apprehended by representative members of a particular society at a particular point in time." My aim is to interpret the everyday life of the villagers in terms of how marshalling symbols in their larger society, which do not emanate from the mass but from a group which makes decisions and deliberately elaborates the code, aid villagers in coping with a changing world.

Malaya achieved her independence in 1957 and Malaysia was founded in 1963, separating from Singapore in 1965. Since



independence she has been ruled by the Alliance, a confederation of the United Malays National Organization, the Malayan Chinese Association, and the Malayan Indian Congress, within which "a matter-of-fact, quid-pro-quo, all-in-the-same-boat political understanding" has been reached among Malay, Chinese, and Indian leaders. Ironically, parallel to this political coalition of these purely communal parties, Malays, Chinese, and Indians as ethnic blocs came to be realized as structural entities on a nation-wide scale rather than as mere ethnic categories. With this structural realization, the communal problem has become the most sensitive issue in Malaysia. This is illustrated by the incident of May 13, 1969, reportedly one of the largest communal explosions to have occurred in Malaysia.

The present government has tried to achieve national unity through emphasis upon tangible goals, such as economic development and prosperity. Specifically, it has attempted to upgrade the underdeveloped rural sector which constitutes most of the Malay population. It is true that the state presents itself as a mobilizing agent for development and as a symbol of all-important collective aspirations. However, to mitigate the communal problem, the government tries to foster harmony among ethnic groups, since the stability and the security of the nation is a prerequisite to development. Thus, democracy is prevalent as a nation-wide, inter-ethnic symbol, which is closely related with the aspired norm of inter-ethnic equity. At the same time, the values of each ethnic culture are respected

by the government to the extent that it does not promote 'racism' or destroy democracy itself. Islam and the Malay tradition are regarded among Malays as marshalling symbols. The peninsular Malays have been Muslims for several hundred years, and Islam has been the state religion since independence. The Malay tradition embodies 'Malayness,' which is a residual category encompassing all that are conceived to be traits particular to the Malay themselves but not to Islam.

The basic unit of the village social structure is a family circle. Beyond it, there is only a loose, occasional grouping of kindred. This family circle, as well as its residential, economic expression, the household, is not a fixed and definite, boundary-maintaining group but in fact a very fluid one in terms of its membership, as with other Southeast Asian bilateral kinship systems. From the experience of their family career in family circles, villagers apprehend the world as based on a dyadic equilibrium relationship, i.e., the mechanism of balance or harmony between individual vis-à-vis individual. The important point is that the equilibrium is not relevant to a system or group, but to dyads. The actor's motivation is not for maintenance of the group but the management of individual relationships. Lacking an intrinsic mechanism to hold a group together, villagers expect each to get along with others without hurting them, i.e., without directly

pointing out their faults, in face-to-face relationships. This, in turn, is conceived of as the core of what is called Malay courtesy, e.g., decorum, equivocality, a compromising attitude, and so on.

To put it differently, the dyadic equilibrium requires conformism so that a family circle or a community continues to exist. Conformity for the villagers is to be similar to, or fit with, one's fellows, i.e., to follow what the majority do and to be sensitive to the sanctioning eyes of other fellows. The homogamous pattern of marriage and the emphasis on propinquity in social intercourse are related to this attitude. Further, cooperation and consensus are highly regarded in a family circle as well as in a community.

On the other hand, the dyadic equilibrium presupposes the existence of individualism, because this notion of equilibrium does not primarily involve a system, but, rather, the balanced relationships between individual elements. This individualistic attitude is well observed in family relationships and in household economies. In order to cope with the paradox of individualism and conformism, villagers expect from each other the same outward manifestations which give a feeling of belongingness to the community, but with an attitude of tolerance towards others as pointed out above.

These attitudes are closely related to the fact that there is no perpetual need, arising from economic, or even political, considerations to cooperate permanently for the



purpose of controlling nature. Thus an individualistic pursuit of one's living is taken for granted. The community, in its primordial sense, is acephalous with only a primus inter pares. It is not a unit of economic productivity in any sense of the concept. It is either a gathering of certain settlers or, if seen from outside, a mere framework for administration, both religious and political. This situation is, in a sense, a reflection of the fluid or amorphous character of the family circle. The looseness of whatever structure exists originates in both the lack of need for cooperation and the fact that the family circle or any other basic organization presently lacks a model after which a community or association could organize itself.

The organizing principles related to dyadic equilibrium, however, are not the Malay tradition itself. The tradition has two basic meanings: the first one is that of a 'traditional macro-social order,' i.e., the existing matrix of a given society, which culminated in the sultanate, and the relations thereby defined among the individuals and classes that comprise it. This part of the tradition is lacking in villagers' outlook, because alien colonizers established their rule in Melaka State abolishing the traditional sultanate in the state's early history, and because of the establishment of modern bureaucratic nation-state. The second sense of the term is that of the 'usual manner,' i.e., the proper way of

doing something, or the way in which a thing is done or happens. In this sense, the contents of the tradition have been localized and transformed in time, e.g., marriage ceremonies, but the essence of relationship seems to be continuous throughout time, e.g., the endogamy between villagers and kin shifts to the homogamy based upon wealth, although the principle of similia similibus is maintained.

The image of a community to which the above description gives rise is that of fragile chains of social intercourse without a definite boundary. As far as the tradition is concerned, it is through social intercourse, mainly ritualized in feast-holdings, and conformity that a villager feels he belongs to a village, just as a family circle is realized through co-residence and occasional get-togethers. To hold a community together, it must be conceived of in different terms, i.e., religious and political frameworks.

It is inconceivable among peasants that a Malay is not a Muslim, and it is in rural areas that Islam is well observed. The sense of all being Muslims together has played a part in uniting peoples otherwise divided, e.g., by ethnic differences among the 'Malays,' i.e., Bugis, Javanese, Minangkabaus, local Malays, etc. This sense or belief has been continuously supported and strengthened by the system of instruction and by participation in rituals. Admitting that Islam may provide meanings to the general concerns of the villagers, for them actual

practices and rituals, like ablution and daily prayers, Friday prayers at the mosque, alms-giving, abstinence, religious lectures and feasts, pilgrimage, fasting, circumcision, etc., are of the utmost importance: By participating in the rituals which every Muslim participates in, they feel a sense of unity with others. To be a Muslim they have to live within a community of Muslims, while Islam unifies the community through ritual and provides it with a theme of unity before God. It is more than conformity originating in the dyadic equilibrium, because it is the equilibrium with reference to the community of believers which is unified through everyone's relationship with God.

On the ground it is difficult to distinguish elements of Islam from those of the Malay tradition because both of them are closely interwoven in their social life, and the distinction made between these elements by the villagers varies widely according to their biographies. It is, however, unquestionable for them that the core of Islam is a relation with God as well as the 'other-world' which culminates in prayers, and that its geographical indications are the mosque and Mecca. In this sense a community can be seen as centered around a mosque and realized through congregations on Friday there. From the administrative point of view, this religious community is part and parcel of the state religious bureaucratic institution, but from the villagers' point of view, the community is not the one imposed from the outside, but is



spontaneous, autogenous, and existential.

It is important to note that the villagers want to be, first of all, good Muslims, then, good Malays, and lastly, good Malaysians, although the emphasis may be changed according to specific situations. Yet there still seems to be a wide gap between a Muslim or Malay identity and that of a Malaysian citizen.

Villagers' experience of democracy imposed from outside is virtually limited to voting, participating in various committees created by the government and petitioning. Contacts with bureaucrats rarely occur within the village and the villagers have only a minimum of impersonal contacts with clerks outside the village. However, the democracy indigenous to the Malay tradition or Islam cannot be overlooked. Two ambivalent examples explicate the situation: One is a traditional communal leader who has been given a role of governmental administrator at village level; the other is an assemblyman who lives in the village. Although the former is a salaried official of bureaucratic organization and could exercise his authority over villagers according to the law, he abides very closely by the villagers' opinions in general, and bears, so-to-speak, fiduciary responsibilities to his followers. The villagers see him as a traditional leader rather than as an official of the government. As to the resident assemblyman, his leadership in the village is not

necessarily based on his being an assemblyman, but on his being their own delegate within the same community, on his conformity to the Malay tradition at the expense of his assemblymanship if necessary, on his having a considerable number of kinsmen in the village who generally support him, on his having a certain amount of economic control through the sharecropping of his rubber holdings and through his purchasing rubber sheets from the villagers, and on his having the support of the village's religious teachers in consideration for his service and respect to them.

If we take democracy as the exercise of a rational-legal type of authority based on process by which ordinary villagers exert a relatively high degree of control over their leaders, the villagers are both democratic and they are not: They exert a high degree of control over their immediate leaders, whether they are an official or assemblyman, through votes, reputation, gossip and even subtle refusals to follow the leaders' instructions; at the same time, if the leaders position themselves far from the villagers, they are powerless to exert control. Then they would just follow their immediate leaders or opinion leaders around them, if required to act. This kind of stategem perhaps originates in their inclination to minimize their fear of the unknown and to secure their identity through familiar ties, which are dominated by dyadic equilibrium relationships.

It is also true that a democratic way is often confused

with unbounded freedom and individual egoistic rights. This abuse of freedom, especially among the young, threatens the traditional community order mainly based on Islam and the Malay tradition. So some elder people oppose democracy and contend that the people need 'being forced or pressured' instead of democracy.

Democracy, Islam, and the Malay tradition as marshalling symbols may conflict with each other at the abstract level. In the minds of the villagers who absorb and interpret them, these symbols are transformed into organizing principles centering around the dyadic equilibrium relationship. It is not my intention to stress that these symbols merge into a mystical, unified conception in the villagers' minds. They distinguish each symbol on the basis of their own life experience, where the symbols are no more an abstract ideology which is meaningless to their daily social life. They take in these symbols and adapt them to their life situations. This monograph, then, is intended to convey the villagers' interpretations of Islam, democracy, and the Malay tradition.

In comparison with other Malay communities in Malaya, the village studied has several diacritical features. It is geographically bounded and isolated, and historically well established. It is a part of Melaka State which has experienced longer direct rule by alien colonizers without a native



central institution. A larger portion of the villagers are dependent on cash income either through emigrant work away from the village or wage work in the vicinity. It has a strong Islamic atmosphere. A greater influence of urban lifestyles is observable here than in other rural areas in the country. To determine whether or not these diacritical features contribute to making the village more atypical in terms of the symbolic order is an open issue which must be resolved through a controlled comparative study of various communities.

In this study, I would argue the followings: The family or kinship system and the economic organization in this village do not aid the people to organize a definite, relatively large social group beyond the dyadic equilibrium relationship. What holds the community together is solidarity through Islamic rituals and conformism with a nominal framework of bureaucratic administration. Islam and Malayness are particularly emphasised owing to the villagers' images of society, namely, that it comprises not only Muslims and Malays but also a large segment of other elements and that villagers' interests are deprived of because of those 'alien' elements.

In statements about concepts, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, emotions it is all too easy to assume typicality from sheer lack of evidence about degree of variation. In this dissertation, which is essentially an experiment in idiography, I have tried

to show this degree of variation among peasants on the ground, and, thus, my contribution is more to the presentation of relevant data than to the construction of hypotheses and theories. The concepts used here, marshalling symbols and organizing principles, are vague and imprecise. It is hoped that an approach to the study of ideas and values can be developed which will clarify the interrelationship of the symbolic order and man's actual and practical activity not only in primitive societies but in developing or modernizing countries as well.