

## SOME ASPECTS OF SOCIALIZATION AMONG RURAL MALAY CHILDREN

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### INTRODUCTION

Both anthropologists and sociologists have studied socialization practices in many different societies and cultures of the world. For example, observations and analysis on child rearing practices have appeared in the works of scholars such as Powdermaker (1933), Wilson (1936), Fortes (1938) and Kaberry (1938). Other writings on socialization have also been documented by prominent anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1928, 1930, 1935), Ruth Benedict (1934) and Ralph Linton (1936). In recent years empirical researches on socialization and child rearing practices have taken place not only in simple societies but also in complex modern industrial societies, and have attracted anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists as well. Among others consider for example the works of Parson and Bales (1956), Brim and Wheeler (1966).

Both society and individuals have different points of view on socialization. For society socialization is often viewed as the way in which a given culture is transmitted and the way the individual is fitted into an organized way of life of the community. It is therefore a life long process. It begins very early in life, and thereafter, at every stage of the child's life cycle, he or she begins to take part in group life — the family, the peers, the community, and the institutions. He or she begins to learn and to embody the values and norms of his or her culture and society and groups within it. As the individual participates in new social forms and institutions within his or her culture, he or she learns new ideas, social disciplines and develops new norms and values.

For the individual, socialization is viewed as the process of fulfilling his or her potentialities for personal growth and development. Through the process this child is transformed into a self having a sense of identity, capable of disciplined and ordered behaviour and endowed with ideals, values and aspirations. Thus for both society and individual, socialization has two complimentary meanings: the transmission of culture and the development of personality (Broom and Selznick, 1968: 84).

The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of some dominant themes surrounding the informal elements of socialization practices in the rural community of Selemak, Negeri Sembilan. It will focus on the methods by which society socializes the young at various stages of the life cycle — infancy, childhood and adolescence, how it transforms the biological organism into one, suitable to perform the activities of society. Emphasis is primarily placed on the way the infants and adolescents acquire the social habits, beliefs, attitudes, and values of the

society which will eventually enable them to perform satisfactorily the social roles expected of them in society.

#### THE RURAL COMMUNITY OF SELEMAK

Selemak, the surveyin the district of Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, is a small rural community situated approximately 13 kilometers south of Rembau town, the district capital. The image of the village held by both outsiders and the villagers themselves is both a padi-growing and rubber tapping village. Therefore its inhabitants depend much on padi growing and rubber cultivations as their means of livelihood: Other than being peasants (See Shanin, 1971; Swift, 1965; Redfield, 1956), some villagers also perform the work of taxi drivers, religious teachers, and other odd jobs, while a few are pensioners, who have returned to the village from the cities to settle down and therefore are not engaged in any particular occupation. The kinship structure of the community is based on the principles of matrilineal, matrilocal and matriarchal systems. The basic family group comprising a couple and their unmarried offspring has an institutional bias to the wife's side under this principle. Therefore, besides the village and households as basic social units found in the community, there are other social units that are equally important governing the social order and customary life of the people. These units are *clans* and *lineage*. They usually contain several households whose members have conjugal or consanguine ties or relationships. Kinship ties and networks are regarded as important elements of social intercourse and on occasions govern the social actions and activities of members of the community in economy, marriage, property inheritance, religious, and etcetra

Because of the dominance of kin marriages in the past and the custom of tracing kin ties matrilineally, most villagers are regarded as related. More strictly speaking, chains of kinship ties interlock to such an extent that everyone can claim some connection to most other villagers through one or more linking relatives. Therefore, most villagers are addressed by kinship terms, supplemented by sibling order terms and nicknames to distinguish persons in the same generation.

As a social group, the structure and organization of the community is relatively simple. The mode of production, labour and its economic organization is simple. Even though the people are receptive to new technologies, new ideas and techniques in the conduct of agricultural activities, however, their patterns of small land ownership inhibited them from overwhelmingly practicing the modern methods of padi growing or rubber cultivation. Traditional implements such as *cangkul*, *bajak* and human labour are still regarded as the major means of tilling their lands. As such economic production is still subsistence primarily to cater the needs for household consumption. If there is surplus production it is too little for capital investment.

In their social life villagers predominantly conform to customary law (*adat*). The basis for this conformity is the "feeling of being observed or watched by others". Villagers conform to other people or to the perceived majority, or the people's opinion of them. They even feel that others are keeping an eye on their

appearance or outlooks. The eyes are often considered the instrument of judgement of what is good and what is bad. They regulate and sanction what people do. In a sense they are the centre of behaviour. The *adat* is said to mean to follow what people do and the sanctions are the eyes of other people.

A prerequisite to village life is to conform and to conform is to be similar to one's fellows. To be the same is considered proper or right and to be different in conversation, in movement, in social manners and etiquette and so forth is improper, and impropriety leads to shame through the sanctions of the eyes of others.

In religion, the villagers are pious Muslims at least viewed externally. There are mosque, suraus, Qur'an reading classes, and frequent religious activities in the village. Most villagers congregate for Friday prayers, perform the daylight fast in the month of Ramadan, held feasts at important times in the yearly Islamic calendars, and at important junctures in the individual's life. By nature in all these feasts, it begin with a prayer for God's blessing, an appeal to the sacred world.

Against this rural community setting, the following will discuss on the child training practices during infancy and childhood, puberty and adolescence in the rural community of Selemak.

#### INFANCY AND CHILDHOOD

Almost without exception, all Malay families desire children. Pregnancy and child-birth are considered to be happy events in the social life of the household. Children are regarded as a source of joy and delight when small, and of security to their parents when older. A childless couple is often the object of pity. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see them approaching and consulting the *bomoh* (medicine man) to get herbal medicines to enable the wife to conceive. The birth of a child is considered as a *rezeki* (heaven-sent gift, a grace from God), whose arrival, therefore, must not be controlled or interfered with, even though there are already many children in the family and its economic status is poor. After birth, the health and survival of the infant are sources of anxiety to the parents, although this is not apparent until the child is actually ill. The underlying notion appears to be that infants are particularly susceptible to the "evil eye" and, therefore, if they develop prolonged stomach trouble or teething pains, the mother becomes extremely worried and will usually ask a *bomoh* to administer portions orally. The practitioner may be paid some money indicating some measure of the mother's concern. Occasionally it is the practice of some mothers to let their infants wear an amulet in order to protect them from the "evil eye". An intensive relationship is developed with his mother who nurses him. The most common practice is to breast-feed the baby. Malays believe that breast-feeding is important. This is partly explained by the belief that children who are breast-fed will be more attached and loyal to the parents, especially the mother. There are no feeding schedules, the mother nurses whenever the infant cries or appears to be hungry and does not try to anticipate his hunger. The infant's desire to suck is consistently indulged. The breast is given for as long as he evidences interest or continued distress.

During infancy, women in the family take control over the child. In the absence of the mother, the grandmother also acts as a baby-sitter. The mother acts affectionately towards her infant. It is common to see a mother kissing, cuddling, hugging, or cooing at her child. However, the grandmother is regarded as the most affectionate nurse. The role of the male members is limited. It is rare to see a man holding an infant or paying him much attention. Occasionally, a young father can be seen holding his child in his arms, but this is done at the time when the mother is away or when she is getting ready to serve food to her husband. Infancy is also the beginning of the process of adapting the infant to the outside world; a process that inculcates the basic elements of social discipline, of customs, and of the cumulative experiences and wisdom found in the culture. Although the infant is nurtured indulgently during his early years, he nevertheless, is subjected to a few constraints and pressures.

"Fear training" is one of the first kinds of verbal cues learned by the infant. The mother encourages overdependence, but similarly she does not put her child on his own or expect him to be intrepid or fearless. She seems to use fear more frequently than reward to train and control the child's behaviour. Mother will frighten the young child with animals, insects, evil spirits, and the vaguely defined creatures of the night. Threats and subtle forms of intimidation are often used and, in some cases, the "bogeyman" is used. Parents often warn their children of these threatening figures unless they behave themselves. These methods are often effective, and inhibit the child's excessive crying; thereby, the child is subjected to parental control.

Malay parents do not generally encourage their children to learn to walk too early, instead they demand a steady physical adjustment from them. Parents will not expose them to unnecessary dangers and risks and will never allow them to stray beyond the limits of safety and watchful adult care. Protection of the child consists of a series of prohibitions. The child's movement is gradually redefined as he matures (though perhaps invariably lagging behind his potentialities). Some restraints will be enforced on his activities. The young child will be kept away from fire, water, harmful objects, touching injurious substances, or violation of religiously sanctioned rules.

As the child matures, obedience and responsibility training is considered by parents as one of the most important aspects of child training. The young boys begin by carrying food, helping to gather firewood, feeding the chickens, or running errands, while the young girls tend to the baby, fetch water or help the mother in some household activities. An obedient child is also considered responsible and as such, he performs his tasks that are regularly assigned to him by his parents with minimum supervision. A good child is generally viewed as an obedient child who does what his parents tell him invariably and without question; the child who is obedient is loved by everybody. While mothers are more strict about obedience than fathers, high standards are expected and enforced by both parents. Both parents usually are stricter with boys than with girls, a practice that must be understood in the light of differential role expectations for the sexes. Because he is given

more freedom of movement and action, the boy will find more areas in which to challenge parental authority and therefore he is subjected to more rigorous obedience demands than the girls. It is the boy who is always being sent on errands and outside chores. Furthermore, the boy is born, so to speak, with all of the urges of the man which must be curbed, while the girl is conceived of as a submissive, defenceless, delicate person who, while respect and obedience are demanded, must not be subjected to the same rigorous treatment as the boy. It is easier for her to adjust to submissiveness and passivity, which is not difficult to carry out, than for the boy to adjust to dominance and aggressivity, in a culture in which there are few opportunities to become dominant-aggressive except within the family. Therefore, the implications are that obedience, rather than enterprise or initiative, is considered to be the key to success. Scoldings, warnings and restrictions are the most common forms of social disciplines employed to discourage misbehaviour such as quarrelling among siblings and coming home late, although occasionally, corporal punishment such as caning or beating on the legs and buttocks is administered. However, corporal punishment is used only on social behaviours that are assumed to be shameful, such as "lying" and "stealing". These types of behaviours are considered injuries, not only to the interpersonal relations among members of the community, but also to the offender and his family.

Another salient feature of Malay socialization during childhood is training in sociability, which serves an important function of lubricating interpersonal and face-to-face relations among members of the community. From an early age, the young are taught and exposed to the norms of sharing food, playthings, and work assigned to them by their parents, not only among siblings but also among peers. Generosity is greatly emphasized among children. However, the degree of sociability among children is seen only within the circumscribed limits of physical and social mobility. Thus, the general picture of the Malay child, as he emerged from infancy, is that of a dependent, fearful and obedient individual, capable of making demands on his mother and other caretakers for food and protection, but generally not aggressive in his approach to the physical and social environment. Despite the low position of childhood in the hierarchy of age-status, it is not viewed as unrelated to adulthood. Indeed, adults see in the behaviour of individual children as foreshadowing their adult characters: a troublesome child will become 'bad', while an obedient child, who is restrained, responsible and respectful of his parent's wishes will turn out to be a "good person". This does not mean that they are completely fatalistic about the character development of children, but they come to regard some children as responsive to parental training, and others as incorrigible.

#### CHILDHOOD AGGRESSION

With regard to childhood aggression, we may assume that Malay children, like children in other societies, have aggressive impulses. This assumption perhaps is simply based on the idea that aggression is a universal human response to frustration, and that frustration is an invariable concomitant of living with other people. What seems clear in Malay socialization is that parental control, its implementation

and evasion, is a factor of primary importance in the aggressive and sexual behaviour patterns of Malay children. Parents disapprove and discourage any display of overt aggression and sexual interest at early infancy and childhood, either through disapproval and intimidation or, at a later stage, through moral and religious precepts and the model of public behaviour by adults in the society. Malay parents, especially mothers, have always wanted to discourage aggressive habits in their children and to protect them from the aggression of others. Therefore, they prohibit their children from fighting not only because fighting is "bad", but because parents are afraid that they will get into trouble. Parents warn them of the dangerous consequences, moreover, the parents will cane their children if ever they provoke fights. Quarrelling and fighting are strictly discouraged and socially disapproved by parents and adult members of the society. A child is absolutely discouraged to retaliate or hit their rivals, even if he did not start the fight. In this way, the child is taught the norm of subordinating his own interests to group harmony, even if he considers himself to be relatively autonomous; group harmony and conformity permeates Malay culture. The prevalent attitude is that violence and aggression are evil and should be avoided whenever possible. The more widespread attitude is that, if the fight or quarrel is serious enough to result in a visible injury, then the victim, usually through his parents, will report the incident to the parents of the offender so that it can be settled at the higher level, while if it is not serious, and is happening among the same sex age-mates, then probably, it is not worth interfering in the conflict. Thus, most parents will close their eyes to the fighting that takes place among children unless it is forcibly brought to their attention by injury or complaint by other parents or if they happen to be near the incident. Nevertheless, parents place heavy restriction on all forms of aggressive activity.

The act of pushing oneself to dominate others is considered "wrong" in the community and any openly aggressive behaviour is also considered "wrong". As such children are deliberately taught that it is improper to show wilful behaviour, ruthlessness or bad temper in social interactions. Moreover, children are often encouraged to withdraw from a situation in which aggressive feelings are likely to develop openly. The most highly valued personality traits in the man are good temper, a "controlled tongue", industrious, cooperativeness, and humility. Children are trained for "good behaviour".

#### PUBERTY AND ADOLESCENCE

The passage from infancy and childhood to puberty and adolescence in Malay society is not marked by special ceremonies, as in many societies. The process is taken in the most casual manner by adults and no one talks about it unless asked. Physical changes which occur during these periods are recognised as part of the development of a child into a man or a woman in the period of increasing maturity. Generally Malay boys are expected to have achieved the status of puberty and adolescence at the age of twelve and girls at nine. Boys are considered to become "bujang" (youth) and girls "anak dara" (maiden).

Sociologically speaking, this period is characterised by marked maturity and self-consciousness, greater autonomy, and a position of increasing importance in the family until marriage, at which time adulthood status is formally attained. Boys tend to take particular note of their behaviour such as the way they dress and the girls are sensitive about their demeanour. Both boys and girls are more susceptible to criticism, shame and ridicule, and generally they rely on these means to encourage, to incite to do, or to refrain from doing something. Adolescents are expected to display shyness before strangers and visitors. This means that they must never walk in front of a guest or unnecessarily interrupt a conversation among adults. They should be seen but not heard, at least in the immediate vicinity of the visitor. In both sexes, the onset of adolescence is the beginning of the pressure to abandon familial dependency and to form independent attachments outside the family. The most important change during this period is the structuring of definitive sex roles. Sex differentiation among peers, which also starts during late childhood, becomes marked and heterosexual companionship is openly discouraged. It is thus common to see boys go with boys and girls with girls. Adolescent boys are supposed to do manly work and the girls, feminine tasks. This usually occurs after returning home from school in the afternoon or during the school vacation. Social roles of both involve important elements of restraint in behaviour and language. Modesty is the rule among girls and conscientiousness among boys. The intimate companionship among peer groups begins to break up as both males and females become more and more involved in helping household activities. Adolescent boys will experience greater participation in adult activities, such as helping the father in the field, accompanying him to the plantation, looking after domestic animals, fetching firewood or handling some other odd job, especially for those who choose to stay in the village.

As for the girls, they usually stay at home, they launder, iron, mend clothes and gather vegetables in the fields. They also help to cook the meals and perhaps help the mother in the field, especially during the harvesting season. In this way, the girls learn the skills of a good housewife.

Circumcision is the *rites de passage* which males undergo during puberty. It is an important part of the Malay boy's life and illustrated a very general feature of Malay culture, that is, it is male-dominated. The boy's transition to the stage of marriage is clearly designated by circumcision. However, circumcision is largely a domestic affair. The circumcision ceremony marks a significant change in the social status of boys, but it is not by any means an induction into manhood generally. Adolescent boys enjoy more privilege than girls. Their mobility is not as restricted as the latter. This privilege accorded to males is based on the belief that there is no moral risk involved in a man's mobility. Parents, especially, are more strict with their daughters because in a society where chastity is the primary criterion for selecting a wife, any girl whose morals are suspect will lose the possibility of establishing a permanent home and will automatically ruin the reputation of her family. Thus adolescent girls are not allowed to go about unchaperoned.

In brief, one can say that the attainment of adolescent status in the society, is also an element in the development of sexual status. There is a strict spatial separation of the sexes, except close kins. They are excluded from 'real' adult activities to a remarkable degree, especially from work and sex. Moreover, between circumcision and marriage they are supposed to be maintained by their families, but, of course, this does not stop them from working to earn an income. Social discipline at this stage depends more on verbal communication than on physical punishment.

#### APPRAISAL AND SUMMARY

In discussing some aspects of socialization practices among rural Malay children, an attempt has been made to indicate how the norms of fear, dependence, subordination, obedience, withdrawal and sociability are transmitted. An ever recurrent theme in Malay socialization is dependence, which begins at birth and is nurtured and enhanced by adults, and this kind of dependency continues to mark the Malay social behaviour until the attainment of adulthood status at marriage or perhaps continuing through life.

Generally, the Malay child-rearing environment is more casual than premeditated and more restrictive than permissive, some forms of punishments and rewards are capriciously distributed, and child-adult relationships are invariably marked by submission-dominance. Unquestioning obedience is expected and demanded of children by parents and adult kin. Punishment for disobedience is generally severe, though not consistently administered, partly because of the mother's preoccupation with domestic chores; she is the chief punitive agent. Occasionally, the reputation of the father as a supreme authority, is often held by the mother and passed on to the children in order to secure obedience without frequent resort to punishment. In principle, the severe external suppression produces high repression and few small children present difficult obeying parents, though they complain that as the boys grow older they become more troublesome.

Obedience and respect are therefore highly placed values in the value system of the Malay society. However, although, children are subject to strict social discipline, paradoxically, they build up intimate and indulgent relationship with their parents.

The child training pattern is still governed, to a large extent, by traditional values and practices, and ultimately the process is successful in producing such character traits as dependence, non-aggressiveness, obedience and subordination, withdrawal, apprehensiveness, and sociability. However, in the present period of rapid modernization and cultural transition, in which a society is progressing rapidly, such attributes as submissiveness, dependence, withdrawal, and apprehensiveness may no longer be helpful to the individual. The new society probably values such attributes as competitiveness, independence, achievement motivation and such likes.

Further, the manner in which social and cultural factors, like a lack of viable economic and educational opportunities and other modern infrastructures in



the rural vicinity may deliberately influence the lack of drive towards independent activity which may lower motivation for achievement. Looking at the prevalent situation, the writer's argument therefore points to the desirability or even the necessity to reorientate the socialization practices of rural children towards modern values and other modes of behaviour that might help in the adjustment to a modern society. Essentially socialization does not only specify character types but also inculcate values and attitudes related to economic, political and religious behaviour. Presently, there is a real lack of comprehensive knowledge of this subject within a particular culture or between cultures in Malaysia. Hence, it is proposed that a systematic knowledge of cultural transmission be gathered in order to effect any change in the values of a society to meet new needs and demands.

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