A MALAY VILLAGE AND MALAYSIA

social values and rural development

PETER J. WILSON
A MALAY VILLAGE AND MALAYSIA

social values and rural development

PETER J. WILSON

HRAF PRESS • New Haven
INTRODUCTION

The aim of this brief report is to concentrate attention on a specific topic: the conduct of Malay villagers in their relationships with their outside world and the values and attitudes that underlie this conduct. The scope of a report such as this lies somewhere between a paper and a monograph—a more extended treatment of the theme can be given than is possible in a paper, and yet much of the background and detailed description of an ethnographic monograph can be omitted.

The description is deliberately intended to leave out some of the technicalities of an anthropological report and to provide instead information of a topical nature, so that the whole may prove of interest to those concerned with the political, economic, and social development of Malaysia. Although the concentration on social interrelationships is anthropological, it is presented in the belief that any form of development must be concerned first and foremost with the understanding and development of people. As in the majority of countries of the so-called "third world," the backward segment of the population of Malaysia, and of Malaya in particular, includes the rural sector, or the "rural masses," as one ideology terms them. National development in any shape or form is in large part rural development, and in Malaya the Malays are the rural sector. The Malays of the village of Jendram Hilir, who are the subject of this study, are in many ways typical of that segment of the Malay population of Malaya living on the west coast and depending on rubber tapping for a livelihood.

Any phase of development, any policy to be implemented, is affected both by the nature and culture of those who direct development and those to be developed. The entire process, or set of processes, is carried out only through the interrelationships of people, and these relationships are invariably asymmetrical. The developer is an outsider to
the villager, and, as will be shown below, each outsider as he enters into relationship with a villager is categorized or pigeonholed as a variant of a stereotype. No matter how demonstrably true or false the stereotype, it provides the plan of conduct for the villager, who proceeds to follow his own definition of the situation. Thus, for example, no matter what the intentions or personality of any individual Chinese may be in any situation with a Malay, the latter will always proceed in the belief that the Chinese is an infidel—dirty, cunning and deceitful. Equally, it may be averred that the Chinese acts according to his stereotype of the Malay—lazy, naive, and incompetent.

These stereotypes, assumptions, and ideas of appropriateness about people, their behavior, and their culture (i.e. values) are in part derived from first-hand experience and in part derived from imagination informed through various ways and means, the most important of which are described below. Basically, in Malaya at least, the villager interacts with an outsider in a formal, unidimensional status. He knows a particular Chinese or Indian or bureaucrat only as a merchant, employer, manager, clerk, or official, and not as a friend, a relative, a family man, a man with a sense of humor, or a religious believer. The gaps in the humanistic view are considerable and can be filled only by hearsay, imagination, generalization, partial observation, and restricted information. The very limited nature of interaction only feeds back into the stereotype. Nor should this proclivity toward categorization he considered either surprising or unusual. It is probably universal, but we as outsiders have a tendency to think only in terms of gross categories of "natives" (or Malays), and we are often surprised to discover the "natives" differentiating themselves into more refined categories using criteria that we may often consider irrelevant or unscientific. So, for example, Europeans may consider the racial characteristics of Chinese (skin color, epicanthic fold, face form, etc.) to be the major criteria of definition; whereas to Malays, the racial (i.e. biological) differences are quite unimportant and the Chinese passion for pork (a culture trait) is far more significant.

The first chapter describes Malay villager stereotypes of the people with whom they come into contact, and the context of contact is also described. The second chapter is concerned more with villager reaction to outside events and processes which in various ways form part and parcel of Malaysian development. The third chapter deals with the economics of the village, because of all phases of contemporary life it is this which sucks the villager into active contact with the outside world and it is the economy which is the major focus of development. However, rather than
dwell on statistics and techniques, I am mainly concerned in this chapter with the nature of social relations arising out of economic activities. Finally, Chapter 4 describes the basis of social relations among villagers and the structure of village social life. This is of critical importance, since it provides the social and cultural paradigm, the ideal type, by which all social relations are judged and planned.

The use of the village as a unit of study and description is more for convenience than it is a reflection of the social structure of Malay society. The Malay village is primarily a coresidential unit, and it displays little or no unity arising out of the interlocking of social relations among villagers. Malay social relations focus on the individual rather than any large aggregate of persons, although there is some aggregation in certain spheres such as the religious and the administrative. This is, however, imposed from the outside.

The primacy of the individual in Malay social structure and the intangible nature of "values" make generalization difficult, and perhaps suspect. The rendering of a datum into a statistic by no means makes it objective or valid, although there are some who would have it so. Nowhere is this more true than in respect to values or in the attempt to describe what we think other people think. Since this report describes values and thoughts, the following study makes absolutely no claim to be definitive. Presented here are interpretations made as impartially as the circumstances of my own cultural background would allow. All information was obtained as informally as possible; no tests were administered and no formal interviews were held. Both tests and interviews have the disadvantage of presenting the informant with an abstract problem in an artificial context, so that for many purposes both are unreliable as sources of information. As far as possible, therefore, information was obtained from informal, spontaneous conversations in which I participated directly or which I overheard, especially in the coffee shop. Observed interaction and relations, some degree of direct participation in village life, and, whenever possible, direct questioning all yielded information. All work was done in Malay, an easy language to speak badly and get by on but one with many subtleties to deflate the overconfident outsider.

While the individual is the center of social relations, Malays share a common basic culture (adat) and a common religion (Islam). In the broadest sense they are a united cultural group vis-a-vis the other cultural groups of Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Consequently, except in those contexts where differences between villagers are important, it seems reasonable to assert that there is a consensus of basic values or
cultural norms. Any validity of generalization for points made below rests on these assertions.

P. J. W.
Sunapee, N.H., 1966
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Human Relations Area Files for not only making possible what turned out to be a most pleasant and rewarding experience but also for the pleasures of an association that has lasted several years, and which I hope will continue. Particularly with respect to their help in many and various ways in this project my sincerest thanks to C. S. Ford, Frank W. Moore, Frank M. LeBar, George R. Bedell, Elizabeth P. Swift, and Gladys G. Page. The field research on which this book is based was conducted during 1964-65 under the sponsorship of the Human Relations Area Files, allocating funds provided by the Department of Defense as part of a project for collecting and organizing ethnographic data on a number of societies.

In Malaya my gratitude to the people of Jendram Hilir is beyond the means of my expression. Especially I would like to record the thanks of myself and my wife to Datok, Moyang (Nenek), Emak (Mak), Adik, Noriah sama semua keluarga! To Penghulu Mohsin bin Mahsein go our thanks for help in his official capacity and for the delights of his friendship. Dean Robert Ho of the University of Malaya amicably extended the necessary support of that institution, thereby smoothing the way through formalities.

To Dr. Peter Chapman and family the Wilson family owes innumerable thanks for the maintenance of both our physical and social health. Peter and Inge Goethals cheered us, guided us, and stood us on our feet at a time when we were utterly inverted.

Professor Raymond Firth of the London School of Economics and John Bottoms of the London School of Oriental and African Studies gave generously of their time and knowledge, thus making preparations for the trip that much easier.

And then, to my wife, whose labors under trying field work conditions were indeed prodigious, terima kaseh banyak. She looked after me and gave birth to our first son.
PERPUSTAKAAN NEGARA MALAYSIA
CHAPTER 1

Ethnic and cultural diversity and complexity is an outstanding feature of the organization of the population of Southeast Asia—a diversity admirably documented in the recently published Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia (LeBar et al. 1964). This group diversity is further complicated by the patchwork of politically defined national boundaries being drawn, erased, and redrawn throughout the region. While simplification of this diversity inevitably leads to distortion, a reasonable generalization, adopted by most scholars who treat the region as a whole (a recent example is Burling 1965), is that which distinguishes a tribally organized population inhabiting the upland regions and a politically dominant but socially amorphous peasant population living in the lowland areas. Not only is the lowland population politically dominant but its culture dominates the politically defined nation (as in Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam) and is economically more sophisticated. Whereas the lowland population of each nation draws its cultural boundaries to coincide approximately with its political boundaries, the upland hill tribes straddle all national boundaries. Among the major problems in the development of Southeast Asian nations are reconciling the highland and lowland populations and hastening a political jell of the highland tribes.
Having crudely indicated one of the most distinctive features of Southeast Asia, I must now focus on the exception to the generalization—Malaya. Here the ethnic diversity of a politically boundaried population cannot be reduced to upland tribes versus lowland peasants. Such tribal peoples as there are in Malaya—the Jakun, Senoi, and Semang—are so few in number as to constitute only a minor welfare problem for the nation. Malaya’s (and Malaysia’s) national population problem resides in the possibilities for coexistence and integration of two demographically balanced but culturally distinct ethnic groups, the Malays and the Chinese. An added ingredient, though of the significance of spice rather than flour or water, is the Indian segment of the population. A viable nation can rise only from a smooth blending of these three ethnic groups, among whom there is approximate parity of sophistication, in the mastery of those elusive skills and alien ideas whose acquisition and application we term "development."

The coexistence of two or more demographically significant but culturally diverse populations within a single political unit is commonly termed a plural society. However, it may be preferable to reserve this term for a colonial situation where those sections that comprise the mass of the population have severely limited access to political power, which is vested in a fraction of the population whose power derives from outside the entire community. With the demise of the colonial power, political power in the new nation becomes available to the resident population segments, and their attempts at distribution of this power and the concomitant control of the economy, the two foundations of an independent nation, provide the mainspring and impetus for either the integration or the estrangement of the ethnic components of the national population. The