PAPERS ON MALAY SUBJECTS.

[Published by direction of the Government of the Federated Malay States.]

R. J. WILKINSON, F.M.S. Civil Service,
General Editor.

LIFE AND CUSTOMS.
PART I.
THE INCIDENTS OF MALAY LIFE.

BY
R. J. WILKINSON, F.M.S. Civil Service.

KUALA LUMPUR:
PRINTED BY J. RUSSELL AT THE F.M.S. GOVERNMENT PRESS.
1908.
PREFACE.

In dealing with matters relating to Malay Life and Customs I have thought it best to divide up the subject into three pamphlets. This, the first, deals with the principal incidents in the life of a Malay. The second pamphlet will give some account of the conditions under which a Malay lives—the type of house he resides in, the clothes he wears, the furniture he uses, etc. The third pamphlet will treat of Malay amusements.

I am very much indebted to Raja Haji Yahya, Penghulu of Kota Setia, and to Messrs. H. Berkeley and R. O. Winstedt for valuable assistance in the preparation of this pamphlet. The details given are, of course, based upon Malay life in Perak.

R. J. WILKINSON.
LIKE most Eastern ceremonies the rites that accompany a Malay birth are very elaborate and very incongruous. The newly-born child is first spat upon by the midwife in order that he may be protected against the old Indonesian spirits of disease. After this he hears from the lips of his father (or from some learned man if the father be illiterate) the Moslem tenets, the *adzan* or "call to devotion," and the *kamat* or "final exhortation to prayer." He is then handed back to the midwife in order that she may imprint on his forehead the caste-mark of the Hindu. Having been thus received into three religions at once, the child is put to rest by his mother's side—along with a piece of iron, a quantity of rice and a number of other articles that the Malay considers necessary for the defence of infancy against its natural and spiritual foes.

The presiding authority on these occasions is a woman, the *bidan*, or midwife. The mighty *pawang*, or wizard, is also there, but he plays a humble part. He chooses an auspicious place for the birth and he surrounds it with thorns, nets, dolls and bitter herbs, in order to keep the spirits of evil from getting at the mother and child in the perilous hour of their weakness. He selects the exact spot by dropping some sharp-pointed chopper or axe-head and marking the first place where it sticks into the ground. Thorns are thought to be dangerous to the trailing entrails of the

---

1 Ante-natal ceremonies are dealt with in Appendix A.
2 *Durı mıngkuang* and *durı bulang*. 
vampire; bitter herbs are unpalatable to everyone; dolls may be mistaken for the baby; nets are puzzling to spirits because of their complexity, and even a much-perforated coconut is sometimes hung up over a Malay door in order to bewilder a ghost by the multiplicity of its entrances and exits. The *pawang*’s duty begins and ends with these primitive precautions. The elders of the mosque, great though they are on other days, are even less important than the *pawang* on the occasion of a birth; the *bidan*, is supreme. She has charge of mother and child; she takes the infant from the moment of his birth, washes him with the proper water, rubs him with the prescribed black cloth, and finally brings him to a proper sense of his position by banging a brass tray near his ear or (in extreme cases) by lighting Chinese crackers in his immediate neighbourhood. The midwife’s word is law: “obey the *bidan*” is a Malay proverb that is quoted to silence any fool who dares to dispute the word of an expert. The *bidan* gets ready the child’s first resting-place, the platter of rice on which he is laid and the iron nail that usually keeps him company. The honour of the first introduction she gives to the child’s grandmothers, for there is a local saying that “an old woman takes to a baby like an epicure to a sardine.”

Next in order of presentation after the grandmothers come the religious dignitaries of the mosque. They are not credited with any special love for babies, but it is the duty of these pious people to “open the child’s mouth;” and it is considered good form on the infant’s part if he anticipates the ceremony by indulging in a good “mouth-opening” scream as soon as he looks

---

1 *Pénanggalan*: it has long pendent bowels.
on the faces of his benefactors. A cry of this sort, though it is welcomed as a sign of intelligent anticipation, does not release the baby from the prescribed formalities. The imam ceremonially opens the child’s mouth with a golden ring that has been dipped in a compound of sireh-juice and sugared and salted water: “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate—may He lengthen your life; may He teach you to speak fittingly in the courts of kings; may He give to your words the attractiveness of sireh, the sweetness of sugar and the spiciness of salt.” When this little function is over and the ring has been tied to the child’s wrist, another function begins. The baby has to be solemnly presented to the foster-mother or wet-nurse—a serious formality in a place where relationship by fosterage may some day be a legal barrier to marriage. Sooner or later this function also comes to an end; the guests go away; the child is put to sleep, and the bidan can devote all her attention to the mother.¹

During the first few days and weeks of his existence the Malay child is the subject of innumerable precautions against evil spirits. He is spat upon, morning and evening; his resting-places are smeared with sacrificial rice and with cosmetics that no ghost can approach; his cot is fumigated with the incense that the devil is known to abhor; his bath contains potent ingredients (such as manganese-dust and talismans of all sorts) that make the water purifying both to soul and body. On the seventh day the child begins to be taught the ways of the world. He is made to eat fruit—banana beaten into pulp and flavoured with salt. He is given a name, experimentally; but the

¹ The treatment is the very severe one of “roasting” (diang).
name may be changed afterwards if it seems to bring ill luck. He is shown to the neighbours and receives his necessary quantum of feminine adulation. He has his head shaved. A sacrifice may be offered up on his behalf; feasts may be given in his honour. If his parents are unusually proud of him they offer up vows at some shrine, to be fulfilled in later years when the child has survived the perils of infancy. In short, the seventh day is the celebration-day of a baby's birth and everything possible is done to honour the child on that occasion. From an orthodox standpoint the great event on this occasion is the religious sacrifice¹ that accompanies the ritual shaving of the head. The sacrifice should consist of two goats for a boy and one goat for a girl, and it may be offered up at Mecca on the child's behalf. But orthodox rites of this sort are not always the most important in the eyes of the Malays.

It is about the fortieth day after his birth that the child is first presented to the Spirits of the River. As soon as the sun is high in the heavens the infant is carried down to the river bank by a merry crowd of men, women and children, who take with them a quantity of parched rice,² yellow rice, purifying rice-dust,³ two coconuts, a fowl, an egg (of a black hen), a quid of betel, seven long packets of cooked rice,⁴ seven square packets of cooked rice,⁵ a light bucket of palm leaf, and a banana-flower. As the procession approaches the stream the bidan or homor in charge of the child stops for a moment, sets fire to a bundle of herbs and raises it aloft till all can see a column of dense smoke ascending into the air. Then, advancing to the edge of the stream, the bearer of the child makes

¹ Akikah. ² Béras bérteh. ³ Tépong tawar. ⁴ Lépat. ⁵ Ketupat.
an offering to the Spirit of the Waters—the egg, the quid of betel, the seven long rice-packets and the seven square rice-packets. The purifying rice-dust is sprinkled about like holy water to avert all evil influences; the grains of parched rice and yellow rice are scattered over the face of the stream, and the fowl and the two coconuts are put down into the water itself. The older members of the crowd now raise their voices in a loud song to drown any crying on the infant’s part as the bomor or bidan places one of the child’s feet on the two coconuts and the other on the fowl. The bucket and the banana-flower are next set adrift and float down stream bearing away any possibilities of evil that may still lurk about the spot. If the baby is a boy, a boy fishing further upstream should now catch a fish with his casting net; if the baby is a girl, the fisher should also be a girl. But in Upper Perak, at any rate, the baby himself should be caught under the net, along with a number of other young children who receive five cents each for being members of the finny tribe for this occasion only. After such an auspicious beginning it is considered unlikely that the infant will ever lack fish for his dinner.

When these river-rites have been concluded the crowd goes back to the house to witness the first cradling of the infant. The ceremony begins by the baby being allowed to loll in the lap of luxury, with cakes on all sides of him and and fifty-cent pieces for him to spurn beneath his restless feet. Meanwhile his swinging-cot is being got ready. It is draped or made by means of one or more (usually seven) long rolls of black cloth, the ends of which are festooned with cakes and hard-boiled eggs. As it is always possible that some unlucky influence may be lurking in the cosy folds of
smell keep the spirits at a distance while the bidan carries out the purification. On the return to the house the bidan is paid off and her duties are at an end.

If a child is born to a Sultan of Perak after his accession to the throne the child cannot be brought up in the palace by his mother. He is called an anak banta and must be given over to adoptive parents. He is believed to bring great ill-luck to his adoptive father and mother until he comes of age, and great good fortune to them afterwards if they survive the perils that dog them during his minority. This rule applies to children of both sexes and has been illustrated in the case of two sons and several daughters of H.H. the present Sultan. By a curious set of coincidences misfortune has steadily pursued the families into which these princes and princesses have been received, and it still remains to be seen whether the blessings of the future will make up for the evils of the past. The theory itself is not hard to understand; in the days of Malay rule the intrigues of a palace could not have been healthy for the children of rival queens.

The ceremonial treatment accorded by Malays to a girl-baby does not greatly differ from that which they give to a boy. The girl has the "exhortation to prayer" repeated in her ear, while the boy hears the "call to devotion." The boy's "caste-mark" is said to differ sometimes from that of a girl; the former has a broad-arrow, the latter a cross. The votive sacrifice for a boy is two goats while that for a girl is only one. These differences are in favour of the boy and suggest a certain religious or ritual preference for male children;

1 Skeat, "Malay Magic," p. 336; but in most places it is a cross for both girls and boys.
but they do not imply that the Malays as a race are indisposed to welcome the birth of daughters. "While the elder sister is still only able to lie on her back may the younger be born," is a proverbial Achehnese good wish that expresses a welcome to girl-children and a desire for many more. As we might expect from their old matriarchal customs, the Malays are as ready to offer up vows on behalf of a daughter as they are on behalf of a son. Of course there is not the slightest trace of anything like female infanticide having been prevalent among them.

At first the baby is wrapped up in some simple swaddling clothes—the lampin and the bedong—to keep him from injuring his limbs by over-indulgence in aimless kicks. After some months the child is promoted to wearing a barut, a sort of broad wrapper of the cholera-belt type, designed so as to leave him free to exert himself and learn the arts of crawling and walking. Later still, he is promoted to the very superior class of Malay children who wear no clothes at all. But such a promotion is only attained after many preliminary stages of culture. The development of a child is measured by his prowess in infantile arts. A crawler is regarded as superior to a child that can only lie on his back, and as the peer of all other crawlers; but when compared with a toddler he is a very inferior being indeed. The grades of infantile aristocracy are as follows: first comes the stage at which infants can only lie on their backs; then comes the ability to turn over, to crawl, to toddle, to walk, to run—and so on. The proud mother does what she can to expedite her child’s education and to make rival mothers jealous. She teaches him to eat banana, fruit-mash and rice-pulp long before such a diet
is good for him. She introduces him to the great world by taking him outside the house with very little thought of the temperature and innumerable precautions against the malignant spirits of envy. She encouragess him to crawl, and teaches him to walk by fastening him to a sort of windlass that revolves on a pivot at a convenient height above the ground. She weans him as soon as possible by the simple process of rubbing bitter herbs upon her breast. These attempts to accustom a child to the life (and particularly to the food) of later years are probably responsible for the heavy mortality among native children. Malays notice this death-rate. They see that certain mothers seem incapable of bringing up children—‘like the tuman fish that eats its own young’—and they attribute such an incapacity to a horoscopic incompatibility between mother and child. In cases of this sort they hand over the custody of later children to a more successful matron (Abdullah himself was so treated), or they give the infant an unattractive name like Hudo (ugly) in the hope that Death will not think the child worth snapping up.

In no case are Malays fond of high-sounding names for children; they prefer nicknames as more usefully descriptive. A West Indian negro may call his son “George Washington” and a Tamil Moslem may name his boy “Sultan Muhammad,” but the Malay policeman is content to fire his son’s ambition with some modest and practical appellation such as Peral or “Corporal.” Although every child must be given an Arabic name, that name is usually abridged to an easy mouthful—Mat for Muhammad, Pin for Arifin, Pihi for Shafei, Din for

---

1 This ceremony, turun ka-tanah, coincides and corresponds in details with the presentation to the Spirits of the River (turun ka-ayer).