

Neighbourliness and Community: A Study of Changing Social Relationship Patterns in a Malay Rice Growing Village

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ABSTRAK

Kampung Paya (nama samaran) adalah sebuah kampung dalam Skim Pengairan Muda (MADA) yang penduduknya terdiri daripada pesawah. Kampung ini pertama kali dikaji oleh penulis pada tahun 1975 dengan menggunakan kaedah pemerhatian-ikutserta. Data tambahan telah dikumpul melalui beberapa lawatan susulan sehingga kali terakhirnya pada bulan Mei 2002. Data tambahan ini juga dikumpul dengan menggunakan kaedah yang sama seperti yang digunakan dalam kajian terdahulu (1975) iaitu pemerhatian, penyertaan dan temu bual formal dan tidak formal. Kajian ini adalah suatu penelitian mengenai pola perhubungan sosial yang telah muncul di dalam kampung ini sejak penerimaan penanaman padi dua kali setahun dan teknik-teknik penanaman moden oleh penduduk kampung ini. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa teknik penanaman moden yang digunakan oleh penduduk kampung ini telah mengurangkan keperluan bagi pesawah untuk berada di tempat kerja mereka (sawah) buat jangka masa yang lama. Ini pula mengurangkan kuantiti dan kualiti perhubungan sosial di tempat kerja mereka. Walau bagaimanapun, peningkatan pendapatan telah membenarkan mereka berbelanja lebih banyak wang di kedai kopi dan restoran kampung tersebut yang telah bertambah dalam beberapa tahun yang lepas seperti cendawan selepas hujan. Ini bermakna lokasi ini telah mengambil alih bukan sahaja daripada tempat kerja tetapi juga daripada masjid dan rumah mereka sebagai "pusat perjumpaan". Dalam beberapa tahun kebelakangan ini, telah muncul suatu pola yang menunjukkan kurangnya ziarah-menziarahi antara jiran dan rendahnya kehadiran semasa sembahyang berjemaah pada waktu zohor, asar, maghrib dan isya'. Ini bermakna tempat ini bukan lagi menjadi tempat tumpuan bagi penduduk untuk berhubung antara satu sama lain. Walau bagaimanapun, pada keseluruhannya, perhubungan sosial yang terdapat di kampung ini pada masa kini walaupun berbeza dari segi bentuk dan kualiti daripada pola yang wujud pada masa lepas, masih cukup rapat untuk meneruskan semangat kejiranan dan komuniti di kalangan penduduk.

ABSTRACT

Kampung Paya (a fictitious name) is a Malay rice growing village within the Muda Irrigation Scheme (MADA). The village was first studied by the author in 1975 employing the participant-observation method. Additional data was collected through regular visits to the village, the last visit being in May 2002. Additional data was collected using the same method as previously employed in the 1975 research project which was observation, participation and formal and informal interviews. This is a study of the pattern of social relationships that has emerged in the village ever since its adoption of double-cropping of rice and the accompanying modern techniques of cultivation. The study found that the modern cultivation techniques employed by the villagers had reduced the need for the rice farmers to be at their work place (the rice fields) for long periods of time. This in turn reduced the quantity and quality of their social relationships at the work place. However, an increase in income had permitted them to spend more money in the village coffee shops and restaurants (food stalls) which had mushroomed in the last few years, thus turning these locations into "meeting centres" for the villagers, taking over this role not only from their work place but also from the mosque and their home. In recent years, a

pattern has emerged showing that social visits to neighbours' homes were on the decline and that attendance at the mosque for the noonday, afternoon, evening and night time prayers has also declined. This means that these locations are no longer important foci for social relationships to occur. However, on the whole, the fabric of social relationship that is in existence at present, though different in form and quality from the pattern that existed in the past, is close-knitted enough to maintain neighbourliness and a semblance of community among the villagers.

INTRODUCTION

The picture of village relationships and community life painted by anthropologists over the years has fluctuated from one extreme to the other. At one extreme the villagers were seen by anthropologists like Foster (1967) as individualistic, suspicious and jealous of their neighbours, uncaring and uncooperative, reminiscent of Marx's "sack of potatoes". However, others like Lewis (1966) saw the village community as close-knitted, characterised by close and personal relationships and close cooperation among its members. Early writings on the rural society of Peninsular Malaysia tended to lean more toward the latter description of the peasant community. Anthropologists like Firth (1946), Swift (1965) and Wilson (1967) tended to highlight the close-knitted nature of the village society though not ignoring altogether the friction and factions found in these communities. However later scholars, writing in the era of modernization and the Green Revolution, began to dwell more on social and class differentiation and the friction and competition among the villagers in the local economic and political spheres (S. Husin Ali 1975; de Koninck 1993; Bailey 1983; Shamsul Amri Baharuddin 1986; Wan Hashim Wan Teh 1978; Scott 1985). One writer pointed out that even in colonial and precolonial days friction and resistance existed in the village (Cheah 1988). An anthropologist, Zahid Emby (1977), interpreted villagers' emphasis on maintaining good relations in economic terms seeing the maintenance of good relationships as essential for the much-needed exchange labour ("derau" and "pinjam") and even local wage labour to run smoothly. He argued that the institutions of "derau" and "pinjam", still important to the economic life of the villagers at that time would collapse if there were no good relations among the villagers. Reasonably priced local wage labour would also be threatened if relationships between villagers became bad as strained relations between employers and employees might encourage employees to demand higher

wages (Zahid Emby 1977). Another writer, Scott wrote about "on-stage" and "off-stage" behaviour, where "on-stage" one would see good, close interpersonal relationship being maintained, while "off-stage", gossips and frictions would abound. Aggression, violence, anger and expressions of class struggle were restricted to the "off-stage" sphere (Scott 1985).

The pattern of social relationships in the rural communities of Malaysia has been changing over the years. In more recent years, while the maintenance of good social relations and community life "hidup bermasyarakat" continue to be emphasised outwardly by the villagers, "on-stage" strain, friction and competition are also appearing more regularly in their relationships. Contributing factors have been scarcity of agricultural land, modernization and the Green Revolution. Rice farmers in irrigation schemes had to compete for land as well as for wage labour as "derau" had disappeared from the scene. Mechanization and the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides had brought changes to land ownership and tenancy patterns and this in turn brought changes to the village pattern of social relationships (Scott 1985; de Koninck 1992; Muhamad Ikmal Said 1985). Another factor was the changing work process which reduced face to face relationships. With the changing work process, villagers were finding it increasingly difficult to relate to each other daily as the amount of time they spent at their work place had been reduced drastically. This means that a lot of their social relationships had to be made at home, in the village or at the mosque or prayer house (surau). Even relationships among family members have changed over the years. Regular and frequent relationships among the villagers have become rare.

The Challenge of Maintaining Community: The Case of Kampung Paya

The researcher began his study of Kampung Paya (a fictitious name), a rice farming village in the Muda Irrigation Scheme (MADA), in 1975, employing the participant-observation method.

Since then, the researcher has visited the village regularly and observed and participated in village activities and interviewed various key informants. Kampung Paya is a small village of 146 households whose members earn their living planting rice twice a year on rice fields whose sizes range from 1 to 35 relong (1 relong equals 0.71 acre). The household heads consist of mainly owner-operators and tenants, with a few who are agricultural wage labourers "kerja kampung". Besides changes in the economic life, the village social relationships pattern also underwent change. This article addresses the latter issue. This is a description and an analysis of the pattern of social relationships that has emerged in the village, a pattern that is in many ways different from the pattern that existed in 1975, when the villagers had just begun adopting double-cropping of irrigated rice. Social relationships in the past were frequent and closely-knit. This was essential in an economy and culture that depended on the community and communal labour "derau", "pinjam", "gotong-royong") not only for community works (maintenance of the mosque and graveyard, village road and bridges, the "balai raya", etc) but also for rice production, house-building and house-moving, and the performance of important rituals and ceremonies that accompany births, coming of age, marriages and deaths. An absence of frequent and close social relationships would undermine communal labour and could threaten their economic and cultural life. However with the coming of double-cropping of rice and modern techniques of rice farming, communal labour was replaced by machinery and wage labour. Rice production was no longer dependent on communal labour, and thus the absence of frequent and close social relationships would not threaten their economic life anymore. But the community and communal labour was still needed in their cultural life specifically in the performance of rituals and ceremonies. Hence the need to continue maintaining a pattern of social relationships that was reasonably closely-knit, although not necessarily in the form that it existed in the past. The following discussion examines this altered pattern of social relationships which can be observed at the work place and other locations in the village such as coffee shops and restaurants, their homes and the mosque.

Social Relationships at the Work Place

In Kampung Paya, the work place (the rice fields) had ceased being an important place for the villagers to meet and socialise and exchange information and gossip. In the rice-growing village of Kampung Paya, the rice-fields which used to serve as the work place as well as an important meeting point for the villagers, had ceased to be so. Rice-farming had changed in nature. The farmers no longer worked the fields themselves. Most of the work was done by machines and wage labour. In preparing the fields, the farmers, be they owner-operators or tenants, hired workers to plough the fields using tractors. They only dropped by on-and-off to see that the work was properly carried out. At this stage of the rice production process, a farmer would spend at the most a total of an hour or so a day in the field, visiting it in the morning and the evening. However, since each farmer would select the time most suitable for him, the farmers might not even see, let alone relate, with each other during their brief visits to the field. This was quite different from the time when the farmers ploughed the fields themselves, either with the buffalo or the tractor, and thus spending practically the whole day there. They would, throughout the day, take short breaks from the ploughing and these breaks would normally be spent talking to each other, exchanging ideas, information, gossip and stories. Nowadays, only the tractor drivers spend the whole day in the fields. Thus at this stage of the production process, the work place serves as a social gathering point only for a limited number of people, mainly the younger people of the village who are hired by the farmers as their tractor drivers. Some of these drivers are the sons of the richer farmers who own the tractors and use them to plough their own land as well as hire them out to the smaller owner-operators and the tenants who cannot afford to buy tractors of their own. The farmers (owners or tenants) could no longer use the rice field as a place to meet and socialise during the ploughing season as they do not spend much time in the fields during this season.

The rice fields during the planting or transplanting season were at one time equally important as a work place as well as a place for villagers to meet and interact. During breaks or even while working, the women would communicate with each other. During this

labour-intensive process of transplanting there would be people working in various parts of the field; everywhere, work and recreation seemed to merge.

However, in the last few years changes have occurred. Transplanting has been replaced by direct seeding. Local village women who traditionally used to transplant the rice seedlings are no longer required to do the job. Thus, during this season farmer participation in the cultivation process has again been reduced to brief visits to the field to check on the workers who are hired to do the direct seeding. An hour or so in the morning and an hour or so in the evening is all the time that farmers spend in the field. As direct seeding requires only a limited number of people, the rice fields ceased functioning not only as a work place but also as a place where villagers meet for interaction and recreation.

The period between transplanting and harvesting used to be the period of least activity in the rice fields. However, after the introduction of irrigation, double-cropping, wage labour and mechanization, it has become the period that the farmers are at their most active in relation to the other stages of the production process. The need for regular application of chemical fertilisers and pesticides and the need to control grass and weeds meant that farmers had to spend more time in the field as compared to the days of single-cropping (farmers tended to do this work themselves rather than using wage labourers). The high yielding variety (HYV) of rice grown in the irrigated areas including the village under study required that fertilisers and pesticides be applied at regular intervals while the rice plants were growing. This variety also had to be protected from grass and weeds which grew rapidly in the rice fields, especially during the off-season when low water levels in the field gave the grass and weeds an advantage over rice. In order to control them farmers had to spray herbicides or use the mower regularly. Thus, the farmers had to spend from three to four hours per day for this work depending on the size of their land. It was only during this stage of the production process that farmers could be found in late morning or in the evening interacting with each other in the field.

The harvesting season in the past was the most popular season among the cultivators, be they labourers, tenants or owner-operators.

Working in the daytime as well as on moonlit nights, labourers and farmers, men and women, adults and young teenagers, would be together in the fields, harvesting and threshing. Work, socialising and recreation became one.

However, with the introduction of double-cropping, the work pattern has undergone changes and with this the patterns of social relationships at the work place, the rice field, have also been altered. The combine harvester made its appearance in the village in the late 1970s and since then has taken over harvesting completely. Manual harvesting and threshing and the transport of rice from the field to the farmhouse by bicycle, motorbike and the "anok" (a sled pulled by a buffalo) have become things of the past. During the harvesting season only the harvester (with driver and assistant) was seen in the field, with farmers appearing now and then checking to make sure that their fields were properly harvested and all the rice harvested loaded directly on to lorries waiting for the harvester by the road side. The farmers would only spend more time in the field if problems cropped up. As only a few harvesters, owned and driven by outsiders, would be working at one time, this would mean that only a few farmers would be in the field during that time. Social relationships among the farmers would thus be minimal during this season as even when a few of them were in the field, they would be some distance from each other and too occupied with their work of checking and supervising the mechanised harvesting to have time to interact and communicate with each other. The pattern of social relationships between farmers at their work place during the harvesting season would be different in quality and quantity from that of the premechanised harvesting days. Whenever interactions occurred in the field, it was seldom random, unplanned or for socialising only. The interaction that they embarked on was normally to discuss problems that had arisen in the course of the harvesting. The social interaction was hence professional rather than recreational.

The rice field in this village had thus become a work place in the real sense of the word where socialising and recreation had been reduced to a minimum. Rice cultivation as work and recreation combined had disappeared. The growing of rice had become an income-generating occupation, separated from recreation. The recreation had to be sought

elsewhere. As a farmer stated (confirmed by others):

"Buat bendang dulu seronok. Meriah. Ramai orang kat padang. Tapi la ni malas rasa nak pi padang. Sunyi. Tak ramai orang".

(Planting rice used to be fun. Great fun. There were many people in the fields. But now I do not feel like going to the field. Quiet and lonely. Not many people around).

The farmers who owned rubber smallholdings which they established some miles away from the village by clearing the forest also expressed the same view regarding work on their smallholdings. People were spending less time on their holding, the young preferring easier work elsewhere, and the older farmers, due to their age, visiting their holding only irregularly. In the past they would be sure to see other people working. But in the last few years they could work the whole day without seeing anyone else. The term "sunyi" (lonely) was also used to describe working in their rubber holdings. In other words they could no longer take short breaks from their work to socialise with others as they seldom met other people. Social interaction and communication in the rubber smallholdings was thus minimal. The pattern of social relationships at the work place, both the rice fields and the rubber smallholdings, had been reduced to irregular and infrequent contacts.

The merging of work and recreation had been characteristic of village life in the past in all the communities studied. In fact the maintenance of good relations among villagers owed a lot to social relationships embarked on at the work place. However, with the advent of modernization in agriculture, the introduction of cash crops and the conversion of rice into a commercial crop, work had become separated from recreation, and the work place ceased to be a place where people met, socialised and exchanged news, information and gossip. Regular, daily face-to-face social interaction at the work place became irregular or ceased to exist altogether. Daily social relationships were left in the other spheres of village life only. When this occurred a large portion of daily social interaction which contributed toward the maintenance of good relations among villagers ceased to exist as well.

Social Relationships at the Village Coffee Shops/ Food Stalls

Other than the work place, the village itself was another area in which interaction took place. Certain areas in the village, especially the village coffee shops, were "meeting centres" where villagers stopped to talk and while away their free time. These places were visited by various villagers throughout the day. The village coffee shops were crowded early in the morning with villagers buying breakfast to take home or to be consumed on the premises. The afternoons would normally be quiet in the village as villagers would be staying home, out of the hot midday sun. "Life" would return to the village in the evening as villagers would once again leave their homes to stop by the village "meeting centres", to talk and relate with each other. Some would stop there briefly before going to the fields or when returning from the fields.

In Kampung Paya, the seven coffee shops and small restaurants or food stalls formed popular meeting places for these villagers as well as other residents of nearby villages. The three coffee shops were only open in the morning while the four small restaurants would open in the evening and remain open until late at night. It was to these shops that villagers would come to spend some of their spare time interacting with other villagers and catching up on local news.

The three coffee shops opened for business at about 7.00 every morning and closed three to four hours later. Starting from opening time a stream of villagers would visit the shops, stay awhile and then leave to be replaced by others. This went on until closing time. The villagers who dropped by and stayed briefly were mainly heads of households. These shops were not popular "hang-outs" for the younger members of the village who preferred the small restaurants which opened in the evening. The four small restaurants were only visited by the older members of the village for a purpose, that is to buy food. They might remain awhile if there were other older villagers in the restaurant. Normally they would not. Thus, there were two "meeting centres" for the village, one for the young and the other for the older residents. They came to these places to socialise and interact with village members of their own age. Thus, through their interaction at these shops and restaurants villagers kept in touch with each

other, maintain good relationships, and contribute to maintaining the village as a community.

The socialising and the whiling away of free time at these shops contributed greatly to maintaining the community spirit. At these gatherings, villagers conversed, joked, told stories and exchanged news and experiences. Through these activities villagers kept in touch with each other and obtained news of planned and past village activities like "gotong-royong", weddings and funerals. The village as a community remained in the collective mind.

VISITING FELLOW VILLAGERS

Regular visits of fellow villagers had become an activity of the past in Kampung Paya. Visits of one's neighbours were becoming rare as villagers got more involved with meeting their personal needs than community needs. In the past, visiting one's neighbours was recreational, but in recent years visiting was becoming a chore and responsibility. For the most part one would visit one's neighbours only when one was invited (to a wedding or a feast) or for a specific reason like visiting a sick person or to discuss a problem.

In Kampung Paya, farmers recalled the days of single-cropping and the early days of double-cropping, when television was rare and the main form of entertainment at night was visiting friends and neighbours when they would spend hours talking. The author experienced a similar situation during his short stay in the village in 1975. The nights were for socialising and there was a lot of movement at night even though at that time the village had no electricity supply. The few houses that had television sets (powered by generators) became the foci of social gatherings. Visiting friends and neighbours was indeed a form of entertainment and recreation.

However, after the introduction of double-cropping of rice and electricity, most people in the village seemed to have lost interest in visiting friends and relatives be it in the day or at night. When they did visit a friend or relative normally it was for a reason. When a friend or relative was sick, when there was a problem to be discussed or when it had become too long since the last visit to an older relative's house, then the visit would be undertaken. Visiting had become an obligation to these villagers. It is no longer for entertainment and recreation. The changing values and attitudes of the villagers had altered

their perceptions of the importance of visiting in maintaining good relations and a sense of community.

Social Relationships at the Mosque

The mosque did not play a very important role in encouraging social relations among villagers in the village studied. This was demonstrated by the fact that attendance at the mosque for afternoon (Zuhur and 'Asar), evening (Maghrib) and night (Isyak) prayers was low. The mosque was visited in the main by the older people of the village. Only a few of the younger members came. This low percentage of villagers visiting the mosque regularly meant that widespread interaction among villagers did not occur at these places.

In Kampung Paya, Maghrib and Isyak prayers at the mosque were attended by fewer than twenty people, most of whom were from neighbouring villages.

This was not the case in 1975 when attendance was much higher and thus the mosque played a more important role in bringing villagers together.

CONCLUSION

Casual social interaction at the work place, in the village and at the mosque, which had in the past held the people together and knit them into a community had become infrequent and irregular in recent years. The fabric of social relationships in the village were no longer closely woven. This "loosening" of the fabric of social relationships in village society meant that the existing pattern of social relationships would be quite different from the pattern found in the village in the days prior to modernization and development. The social relationships had become "purposeful", undertaken in order to achieve a certain objective. For some, even their visits to the coffee shops were for a purpose – to keep in touch with what was happening in the village and to "show their face" so that others would not accuse them of not being "friendly" and uninterested in village affairs. Thus neighbourliness and a semblance of community still exist. This "loosening" of the social fabric, which in the past would have undermined their economic life (rice production was dependent on communal labour), does not do so at present as the production process is dependent on machinery and wage labour, not communal

labour. However, as villagers still need the community in the performance of the important rites of passage (birth, puberty, marriage and death) and community works, neighbourliness and a semblance of community has to be maintained. The fabric of social relationships that exists in the village at present is sufficient to ensure the participation of villagers in ceremonies and rituals sponsored by fellow villagers and to a lesser extent in community work. Their participation in these ceremonies and community work in turn help to strengthen the fabric of village social relationships.

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