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# KINSHIP AND SOCIAL MOBILITY AMONG THE MALAYS

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The question of how far kinship status and ties are affected by conditions of rapid social mobility in a modernising society is examined. Although kin and non-kin are not differentiated terminologically among the Malays, distinctions between the two categories can be expressed by certain behavioural diacritica. Material on urban and rural Malays illustrates how the transition from kin to non-kin occurs, using factors derived from the wider social structure and situation, where the emphasis is on status and honour reference groups and patronage, as opposed to fully developed notions of class differentiation.

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## I

The importance of kinship, both as a system for classifying actors in the social universe, and for defining certain rights and obligatory behaviours between these actors, has long been a staple topic in both classical and modern anthropology.

Earlier studies were relatively more preoccupied with defining the limits of particular types of kinship groups (e.g., descent groups), although more recently, greater attention has been paid to networks of kinship interaction and to aspects of the relationship which are not strictly 'kinship' in content. That is, the trend appears to be in the direction of regarding kinship behaviour as a branch of transaction theory and role theory respectively (cf. Parkin 1974). Instead of viewing kinship, as did, for example, Fortes (1949), as an 'irreducible principle' or a basic given, it merely becomes one facet of a relational and behavioural nexus upon which a variety of economic, political and prestige considerations impinge in different quantities and intensities at different times (cf. Van Velsen 1964). On some occasions, the 'kinship' component of a total role or relationship may be subordinate to others, or even dependent upon them. This approach leads us from the view of kinship as having a deterministic or predictive effect on behaviour. The idea of conflict between multiple kinship roles has already received attention in the literature, and this would seem to be a natural forerunner to the idea of conflict between kinship and non-kinship roles, which in turn can be developed to a point where the total abnegation of the kinship component in favour of others more compelling becomes a real possibility. It is this latter train of ideas that the present article follows.

As a testing ground for the relative importance of kinship and non-kinship roles in a given relationship, we may refer to some modern anthropological studies which concentrate on the fate of kinship ties and obligations in societies undergoing rapid modernisation and urbanisation, and the degree to which the former are honoured, modified, rationalised or rejected (e.g. Ross 1961; Bruner 1963; 1973; Parkin 1969; Gulliver 1971). Many of these studies have adopted a network

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approach and have tried to integrate their studies with the broader social environment in which their subjects operate.

One of the most intrusive factors in kinship systems is one of growing status difference between relatives in situations of differential social mobility under urbanisation and modernisation. To date, this has been accorded relatively little attention, and mostly in the context of a concern with stratification and the emergence of 'class consciousness' (cf. Lloyd 1966; Tuden & Plotnicov 1970; Plotnicov & Tuden 1970). On the basis of some African material, for example, it is pointed out that families are commonly divided by status differences, which precludes a full development of true 'classes'. The argument could just as plausibly be stated in reverse, however, *viz.*—that lack of a class ideology permits such a range of statuses within the kin group to exist, forcing it to find other ways of accommodating status incongruence. Somewhat inconclusive findings on the relationship between social mobility and maintenance of family ties have been reported by Adams (1967) and Aiken & Goldberg (1969) for the United States and for the United Kingdom by Bott (1971) and Bell (1969).

The question then arises as to how such status differences and changes in fortune affect traditional and verbally expressed ideals and obligations regarding kinship; how kinship in such cases is defined and distinguished from other types of obligations; and how the 'cut-off' point (from kinship to non-kinship) is established in changing circumstances. This is particularly an issue when kinship is viewed as both a process and a reference group rather than in terms of fixed descent groups, corporate or otherwise (cf. Gulliver 1971; Parkin 1974).

In the following pages the above problems and questions are discussed in the context of the perception and practice of kin relationships among the Malay population in west Malaysia, a people who are increasingly being subjected to the crises engendered by social mobility in the new occupations and opportunities afforded by their modern, rapidly urbanising environment. Both urban and rural cases will be considered.

## II

### *The Malay kinship system*

The traditional kinship system of the Malays is cognatic.<sup>1</sup> As such, there are no clear-cut descent groups,<sup>2</sup> and the boundaries of the kin group (*saudara*) are but vaguely defined (cf. Djamour 1965; Provencher 1971: 146). At the periphery, relatives merely 'fade out' from 'close' to 'distant' (*dekat* to *jauh*), although, as will be shown, this is not correlated in any direct or predictable way to kinship sentiment or obligation.

The ideal, and statistically most common,<sup>3</sup> form of domestic unit is the nuclear family, although, in practice, a variety of extended forms are also found, for economic, inheritance and other reasons (cf. Djamour 1965).

Inheritance, following Islamic law, requires the distribution of property between all the offspring, with each male receiving twice the share of a female sibling. In this respect, adopted children have identical rights with natural children. Commonly, among Malays, division of property (including land and dwellings) also means the end of effective co-operation, which is re-inforced by the oft-expressed desire

for 'freedom' and fear of family quarrels, especially when members are in different socio-economic circumstances. On the other hand, quite distant kin may once again come together for purposes of co-operation over matters of property and other resources, where common interests and desires can thereby be satisfied.

Malay kinship is essentially generational (Morgan's 'Malayan' or Murdock's 'Hawaiian'), the most important distinctions being those of generation, relative age and sex. Degree of collaterality outside the immediate line (lineals) is of secondary significance but can also be specified. The terminology<sup>4</sup> in ranking by generation and relative age is also a terminology expressing differences in status (*pangkat*), which may be applied by extension to non-kin (cf. Banks 1974; Provencher 1971), in accordance with the same principles of generation, relative age and sex. Thus the term for grandfather (*tok*) may be used to refer to a respected (but relatively young) man such as an *imam* (an Islamic religious leader). There is no unambiguous distinction between genealogical and non-genealogical forms of reference or address although where necessary, some circumlocution involving *darah* (blood) will be used to specify true consanguinity. Otherwise it is just this domain of ambiguity that makes the changing relationships between socially mobile kinsmen a difficult one to determine and interpret.

Ideally, Malay custom, reinforced by Islam,<sup>5</sup> enjoins certain obligations on kin, and these are constantly referred to verbally. Assertions as to the desirability of helping by small services and exchange of goods and resources between all close relatives (*saudara dekat*) as much as possible (*'sebanayak yang boleh'*) are frequently heard. These include, for example, sending money to aged parents, helping children of poorer siblings with their schooling, taking care of orphans, and receiving into the household indigent kin, as well as reciprocal labour for economic and ceremonial enterprises. It is also expected that rural dwellers will be assisted by their urban kin. This may take the form of providing funds for the improvement of the former's land, or permitting them to use houses and land inherited, but not utilised by the urban relative. There may also be exchanges of children from one household to another, whereby a rural child is enabled to receive an urban education, or an urban child obtain a much-prized form of special religious education normally only available in the rural areas.

All the above sentiments and forms of co-operation and assistance also have their parallels in the non-kin domain. A great amount of reciprocal exchange of gifts, services and resources, particularly in ceremonial activities, takes place between non-kin within the local neighbourhood. It is also incumbent upon wealthier members of the community to provide financial and other assistance, including gifts, for the poor and needy. Islam in particular requires the giving of aid and the taking in of indigent persons into the household, regardless of whether the indigent be kin or not.

However, running entirely counter to the strong cultural sentiments about kinship obligations is a parallel set of beliefs and attitudes which indicate a lack of harmony and co-operation among kin, and their tendency to quarrel (*gaduh*). Such statements underscore the fragility of the relationships, and are often invoked to justify say, rejection of kin as (business) partners, as co-cultivators of a piece of land or as co-residents of a household, particularly under conditions of a widening socio-economic gap between the kin involved, as will be illustrated.

At this point therefore we may provisionally state that:

- (1) in fact, similar kinds of behaviour and assistance are enjoined for kin and non-kin alike. This is reinforced by the use of a single system of terminology of reference and address for both kin and non-kin;
- (2) the ideals and reality of kinship behaviour are often widely discrepant and are popularly recognised to be so. This is exacerbated in situations of differential social mobility between kin.

What then distinguishes kin from non-kin?

### III

#### *Definitions of relationships: selection of reference group*

Although a number of anthropologists dealing with Malaysia have described the obligations of kinship, and have also documented growing economic and status inequalities among kin (e.g. Burridge 1957; Swift 1967; Syed Husin Ali 1964), the implications of these changes in verbal and other subtle inter-personal behaviours are unclear in their accounts. Accordingly, we must return to the circumstances in which these behaviours are found, and examine the perceptions of the situation by the parties involved. All the examples presented below are deliberately selected as involving close consanguines, i.e., siblings, siblings-in-law, parents' siblings and their children (first cousins), so that the variations in behaviour and normative definition of the roles under the influence of non-kinship factors will stand out the more clearly.

It is in the perception and verbal behaviour relating to the most common forms of interpersonal aid that boundaries between kin and non-kin seem most clearly to be expressed. Thus in the frequent rounds of ceremonial activity, such as attending weddings, funerals, circumcisions and other rites of passage, it is expected that a generalised reciprocity of goods and services should operate within the neighbourhood or local community, and this is known as *tolong menolong*. However, there are many occasions in which considerable asymmetry in the material content of the reciprocity occurs, and indeed it is expected that those in more comfortable circumstances should contribute more materially than individuals in less favourable situations. The normative content of the relationship in which this 'extra' contribution is reflected is in the way in which it is acknowledged and particularly the terminology used. When the role of the recipient of such an 'extra' is not regarded as one of a 'true' relative by the donor, the term used for the donation may be phrased as *saguhati* or *hadiah saguhati* ('something from the heart'), implying more than is really necessary, i.e., beyond the limits of normal kinship expectations. Anyone considering himself the consanguine of another would be grossly insulted were any extra service provided to be so defined by the donor, for it would imply that he was not doing his duty by honouring his kinship obligations. That is, to give *saguhati* is to lay claim to a social status increment by the donor, and is tantamount to denying the kinship by magnanimously and gratuitously offering something over and above what is required. This is not to deny that status differences cannot be incorporated into the kinship system, but that there are different kinds

of status rank, some of which are considered less appropriate to kin roles. Fieldwork revealed a number of examples where a change of status occurred, and the fact was made apparent to the 'disowned' relative by just such a subtle shift in terminology.

One case involved a woman whose contributions to the various rites of passage of her poorer sister had always been taken as part of the *tolong menolong* aspect of their siblingship. When the former's husband was eventually promoted to a fairly high post in the civil service the woman suddenly began to make reference to her generosity as *saguhati*, with the clear and stinging implication to her sister that this was the beginning of the end of their relationship as kin, or rather, that other status differences had intervened, making other roles more significant than the kinship one. It is important to note, however, that the terms of address and reference (the reciprocal 'sister' terms, *kakak* and *adek*) did not change, for as mentioned (note 4), kin and non-kin terms do not appreciably differ. On the other hand, when a woman whose brother had just provided her with funds for the bridal gown and decorations for her daughter's wedding was asked if this were *saguhati*, she exclaimed that he was her brother by blood (*darah*), how could it be so? (i.e., relatives do not give each other *saguhati*).

A second form of interpersonal assistance is a more direct provision of financial aid, particularly associated with dire necessity and crises. Remittances, money gifts and loans are expected in these cases, and as such bear no special mention or terminology among kin. For non-kin, similar obligations are enjoined by Islam, as a form of charity known as *sedekah*. Several cases were noted of individuals who regularly received financial assistance from richer relatives as part of the normal kinship order, but when the latter began to refer to their assistance as *sedekah*, this clearly signified a change in their perception of the relationship, thus converting it to one of rich patron providing aid to a poor client. Here, concern with socio-economic status was more important than kinship. Likewise, on the feast day (*Hari Raya Puasa*) following the end of the fasting month of Ramadhan, what would have been a customary gift from one man to his brother's family abruptly became *sedekah*, indicating that the former's increasing economic prosperity had elevated him to a plane where his selection of a reference group took more account of socio-economic status than kinship. Another man also resolved what to him was a similar case of status incongruence by commuting to *sedekah* his expected contribution to the first month hair-shaving ceremony of his wife's sister's newborn baby. In all these cases the aid was equated with the religious obligation of giving to the poor public (i.e., non-kin), thus by implication classifying their relative in this category. Again, it is important to note that the terminology of address and reference did not change, only the tenor of the relationship.

By contrast, there were cases of other patronage relationships in which constant support was provided to indigent kin (e.g. mother's sister, brother's widow, etc.) and their families. When it was suggested that this support should be regarded as *sedekah*, both donors and receivers indignantly denied such an inference, for it implied a failure to honour the obligations of kinship. In each case, the interpretation of the situation was unambiguous to the parties involved.

A third obligation, incumbent upon kinsmen and non-kin alike, is the taking into the household by one who can afford it of any needy or infirm person. It often

transpires that kinsmen so adopted will reciprocate by performing a variety of domestic and menial tasks in the household, such that their appearance to the unprepared observer resembles that of a servant. Indeed, initially, this fieldworker was frequently surprised to hear the server at the table, or the woman washing dishes alone in the kitchen referred to, and introduced as, 'my sister' or 'my aunt' with the consanguineal tie even specified by the mistress of the household, while the former reciprocated with the appropriate kin term without any apparent sense of incongruity. Relatives in such positions are normally provided with all the necessities of life, including regular sums of pocket money, and in the case of those with school-age children, with school fees and expenses as well. But it was always made quite clear that such remuneration was not a wage (*gaji, upah*), and the client relative was not a servant (*amah, orang gaji*). In discussions of such arrangements, it was maintained by the patron of her client that, 'she doesn't need anything, she has everything she wants, we give her pocket money', i.e., 'why pay her wages?'. The kinship component of the total set of roles in the relationship was considered more salient than any other. In one or two special cases of Malays posted at some distance from home (including one family in Canada), it was explained that the female relatives in servant-like positions were being given a unique opportunity to travel or go overseas which would otherwise be out of the question for them. However, in one transitional case, there did appear to be some ambivalence over the status of a pair of cousins (mother's sister's daughter and her husband) of the woman of the household, who at first referred to them as cousins who 'live here and sometimes help; of course, they get pocket money (*duit poket*)'. When the head of the household was promoted to headmaster of his school and became an important informal leader in his neighbourhood, there was more hedging and it was admitted, 'well, they help us and we give them a little wage now and then (*mereka tolong, kita bagi upah sedikit*)', as though the status inequality were beginning to take priority over kinship in the relationship. It also happens in reverse that families may adopt an unrelated person or orphan and 'create' a consanguineal tie by avoiding the use of the term *gaji* or *upah* even where the patronage again resembles an employer-servant relationship (cf. Banks 1974).

Finally there is the kind of service rendered (outside the ceremonial domain) that pertains to the essential material facts of making a living and of access to property and resources. These may range from sewing a dress to permitting someone to use part of a house or land for residence or cultivation respectively. In the first instance, sewing for a relative in return for which some small consideration was received, would not be referred to as 'payment' (*upah*)<sup>6</sup>, for so to term it would be, as in the cases above, an affirmation of social distance or status distinction overriding those assimilable to kinship. Among relatives, these services are expected, but left unspecified and diffuse. The term *bagi upah* is used, however, to connote a difference in status greater than that of normal kin division of labour or obligation. In matters of property similar distinctions obtain. An individual with a larger house or piece of land than he requires may allow a poorer kinsman to use part of the property by virtue of the relationship—either occupying part of the household or sharecropping the land (i.e., providing the labour and half of the seed in return for access to the land and half of the crop). This is known as *bagi dua* (divided into two). Sometimes, the owner of the 'capital' gradually assumes a dominant role in the

relationship (whether he remains co-resident with the tenant or whether he is an absentee-owner living in the town), so that the difference in socio-economic status erodes away the kinship dimension and a form of landlord-tenant relationship supersedes it. This is signified less in a change in the material or economic arrangements, which remain of the same patron-client type, than in the way the relationship is defined, and *bagi dua* (sharing) gives way to *bagi upah* (employing). In the case of house-sharing, individuals who still consider themselves kin refrain from using the term *sewa* (rent), even if the dependant party contributes in cash, kind and labour to household maintenance. Even when these arrangements remain constant, the introduction of the insidious term *sewa* will appreciably reflect and change the character of the relationship in the eyes of all concerned. Once again this transition can operate in reverse. Non-kin may be incorporated directly into a *bagi dua* (instead of *upah*) relationship, which places them on a kinship footing with the property-owner and patron (cf. Banks 1974).

Although the terminology of address and reference does not initially change, there is evidence that once the status distinction has been established, and the kin role related to a lesser significance, the terminology may eventually adjust to the new 'reality'. In the next generation it is likely that more senior terms will be used to refer to higher status 'kin' than those which strict biological age and generation merit.

It is not appropriate to see kinship and patronage as mutually opposed categories, for a form of patronage clearly exists in *bagi dua* and adopted household-helper situations. Here kinship has not yet been subordinated to the demand of the other roles or strands of these multiplex relationships, or at least, status inconsistency can be accommodated. Patronage becomes more pronounced, however, once a real or perceived change of socio-economic status produces feelings of status incongruence and the different roles cannot readily be reconciled. Thus it is the definition of the situation, not the situation itself, which causes the switch from the kin to the non-kin domain to be made (so establishing the nearest thing to a 'cut-off point'). Following Paine (1971: 15), I would maintain that the genesis of this kind of non-kin patronage in fact reflects the ability of one party to assert his own definition of the situation and to have his contributions or services accepted on terms of his own choosing. This may be equated with Gouldner's 'starter mechanism' (1960), (or here possibly, a 'finishing mechanism'). Usually this follows a significant change in circumstances of one party vis-à-vis the other, or a form of social mobility as a result of urban migration, a higher status job, higher salary, etc. It does not automatically follow mobility, however, in which event we have a sort of patronage *within* the kinship domain, as described.

#### IV

##### *Absence of class awareness*

One fact is quite striking in the Malay context. This is the absence of notions of 'class' differences, whereby status distinctions (whether within the kinship domain or not) are expressed in terms of class membership. Malays talk about 'rich and poor', those 'in comfortable and difficult circumstances', but invariably in relative terms, either in relation to the speaker, or as a form of dyadic relativity, but with no absolute frame of reference in the form of a fixed class membership. So far,



such western concepts seem to have little meaning for Malays as in other south-east Asian countries (cf. Evers 1973; Wertheim 1974). Status differences and status incongruence tend to be expressed, where perceived as important to the parties concerned, in other more subtle usages, although in matters of kinship terminology and surface appearances, the original relationship persists. It is not so much a question of kin versus non-kin as a personal selection of role relationships (effective versus non-effective kin) within a broader universe where ideals of behaviour between kin and others are not significantly different.

Aside from a lack of class consciousness in this area of the world, the system described may in part be attributable to 'role transparency' (cf. Frankenberg 1966). By this is meant that individuals of different socio-economic status, who in many societies would be residentially segregated and socially insulated, in Malay society are typically exposed to one another in both settlement and social life. For one striking feature of Malaysian towns in particular is that ethnic residential segregation far outweighs segregation by socio-economic status,<sup>7</sup> so that social distance as a result of mobility and status differences in general have to be marked in other ways (cf. Van den Berghe 1960). In a sense, it may be said the 'top' and the 'bottom' of Malay society in terms of rank are spatially very close, hence social distance mechanisms are relatively highly developed and subtly expressed, as in the kinds of terminological and other nuances of interpersonal behaviour described. This probably lies at the base of much of the Malay preoccupation with etiquette<sup>8</sup> and correct behaviour (cf. Provencher 1971). Where social mobility is also accompanied by geographical mobility the problems are reduced, although similar strategies for defining relationships still appear to be adopted on occasions of interaction.

## V

### *Conclusion*

In the situation as it exists among the Malays, where the kinship system is cognatic, where common terms of reference and address span both kin and non-kin, where class ideologies are but embryonic and a high degree of role transparency results from ethnic residential segregation, a number of conclusions may be drawn concerning the effects of social mobility on kinship.

First, under conditions of differential social mobility, the 'cut-off' point between kin and non-kin can only be inferred from particular behavioural and terminological usages, recognised by the Malays themselves as subtle indicators of the nature of the relationship. This distinction usually lies in appeals to different systems of values and norms of reciprocity, and may better be described as marking the boundary between effective and non-effective kin.

Second, the transition is usually idiosyncratic, and depends upon other personal, political, economic and relative prestige factors, rather than being structurally determined. The normative content of the relationship is frequently determined by one party only (the upwardly mobile one), who as patron, can dictate the terms of the relationship (and thereby redefine it).

Third, by the same token that individuals can gradually be eased out of the consanguine category, so others can be eased in and genealogical ties 'created', as existing roles and statuses become more compatible with the norms of kinship.

Fourth, kinship is not so much an independent variable or an 'irreducible factor', but rather dependent on other roles and elements in a relationship. It is merely one role or reference group among several possible ones, and is sometimes subordinated to others, particularly when incongruence becomes intolerable. While the ideals of kinship are strong, they do not necessarily correspond with actual genealogical ties, and indeed may exist independently of them.

Finally, a general absence of class consciousness permits the continuation of the kinds of patronage described, particularly under conditions of differential social mobility, while fostering the development of an elaborate system of etiquette and refined social usages which indicate relative statuses (or those selected in a specific situation) where grosser class terms or total social and physical segregation are not possible.

## NOTES

I wish to thank the Ford Foundation for the provision of a Fellowship and grant for the years 1971-3, which enabled me to pursue the research from which this article is one of the results.

The observations reported are drawn from my fieldwork among two urban Malay populations, one in a large cosmopolitan port city in northwest Malaysia, the other from a smaller, more traditional royal town in the northern part of the country. These materials were supplemented by findings from a shorter period of rural research in a village near the east coast of West Malaysia.

<sup>1</sup> With the exception of the Malays of Negri Sembilan, descendants of immigrants of the matrilineal Minangkabau from west central Sumatra, who retained much of their unilineal kinship structure and organisation.

<sup>2</sup> On occasions, when Islamic law predominates, this is sometimes skewed towards the paternal side, e.g. in cases of guardians who dispose of females in marriage. On the other hand, this is balanced in the other direction by the traditional Malay tendency for an immediate (and sometimes extended) period of post-marital uxorial residence, and for relatives through females to maintain more extensive and enduring ties.

<sup>3</sup> In my own sample of urban Malays in two cities (N=218), 68.8 per cent. of the families were nuclear. The second most common type was a horizontal extended family (11.9 per cent.), and the third, a vertical extended type (9.6 per cent.).

<sup>4</sup> The generic term for kin is *saudara*, which can also merely mean 'friends', hence its precise meaning on any occasion must be determined contextually. By general principle, all males of the first ascending generation are called *pak* (father) and females *mak* (mother); those of the same generation are called by a sibling term; and those of the first descending generation by a form of *anak* (child). Most of these forms may then be graded by relative age, in order of birth of each member of the same category, e.g. *pak long*, *pak su* (oldest and youngest respectively of all members of a category of males in the first ascending generation from ego). Similarly, within ego's own generation relative age is important. Thus *abang* (older brother) and *kakak* (older sister) versus *adek* (younger sibling) are distinguished, but no distinction is made in the descending generations. Collaterality (of any degree) is marked by the addition of *saudara* (sometimes *penakan*) to the basic generation/relative age term, thus *pak saudara* (any uncle), *anak saudara* (any niece, nephew). In the same generation as ego, the suffix *se-pupu* is added to the sibling term to denote cousinship, e.g. *abang se-pupu* (older male cousin, to any degree). Any of these collateral terms may also be used for non-kin in conformity with the same general principles of generation, relative age and sex.

<sup>5</sup> All Malays are of the Muslim faith.

<sup>6</sup> *Upah* refers to some kind of irregular payment, but of a definite contractual type, as opposed to the more regulated and set equivalences implied in *gaji*.

<sup>7</sup> My own data for the two cities studies show that the index of dissimilarity in residence between Malays and non-Malays for the entire urban area studied averaged 41. This means that as many as 41 per cent. of the Malays would have to move from any given area in order to achieve an ethnically uniform distribution of the population.

<sup>8</sup> I have not, for reasons of space, been able to discuss here the elaborate system of honorifics and titles used by Malays in addition to the terms of kinship derivation already described (but see Provencher 1971). Indeed, there is a considerable overlap between 'kinship' terms and honorifics within the overall *pangkat* system (see note 4), and titles may replace 'kinship' terms where appropriate, between both kin and non-kin.

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