UNITY IN MALAY FAMILY

Yaacob Harun

Introduction

Unity within the family and kinship systems is the strongest, and it surpasses unity found in any other systems in human society. This is due to the fact that kinship is the basis of social structure, and relationships among kin and family members are key relationships in society. A person would first interact with his family members before he establishes any form of relationship with others in the society. It is only natural that family members help one another, organize activities together, and give priority and preference to one another at the expense of others (non-family members).

The following discussion focuses on the underlying factors that foster family unity in Malay society. These include: kin grouping, residential patterns, marriage, property ownership, economic cooperation, as well as social and religious obligations.
Kin Grouping

Kin grouping takes many forms, the smallest being the family, defined as "a group of persons related by ties of marriage, blood, or adoption; constituting a single household; interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister; and creating and maintaining a common culture" (Burges, et al., 1971:7). The family is the basic and the most integral unit in society. Its members share a lot in common as stated by Fletcher (1966:27), "[they] share the same name, the same collective reputation, the same home, the same intricate peculiar tradition of their own making, the same neighborhood. They share the same source of joys, the same source of profound conflict. The same vagaries of fortune are encountered and overcome together... the same losses and the same grieves are shared."

Unity in the family is strongest when all members stay together under the same roof. It could be just a nuclear family comprising a husband and wife and their children, or an extended family with the presence of other relatives, including grandparents. Children's attachment to the nuclear family shifts when they later marry, and move out to establish families (of procreation) of their own, or when they are independent (financially) and no longer rely on their parents for their every need. But this does not disrupt family unity. Even though they have left their natal home due to marriage, work, or other reasons, the children do not distance themselves socially or emotionally from their parents. In times of need or emergencies, family members would come together to offer assistance.

In Malay society, one is seldom left alone to fend for himself, especially in old age. He is a member of a particular family unit (nuclear or extended) at any stage of his life. With reference to Diagram 1, we find that during childhood, he is a member of his parents' family (A). Upon marriage, he could still continue staying with his parents' family (A) by bringing his wife along, or he could move to stay with his wife's natal family (B). Otherwise, he could establish his own family of procreation (C) and become a member of that family together with his wife and later, children. During old age, if he was alone, he could either join his son's family of procreation (D) or his daughter's family of
procreation (E). When one is incorporated into a particular family, he would practically be involved in all aspects of family activities and affairs, and subsequently, shares the joys and sorrows together as stated earlier.

Diagram 1: Flexibility of Family Membership
(Adapted from Kuchiba et al., 1979)

On a bigger scale, kin grouping exists in the form of a descent group (i.e., a lineage or a clan) and also in the form of kindred. In Malaysia, descent groups are only found among the Minangkabau Malays of Negeri Sembilan. The Minangkabau Malays trace their descent (keturunan) through the female line to a common ancestress or “moyang.” The descendants of the “moyang” belong to a common clan or “suku” and identify themselves genealogically and socially with the “suku.” It is within the “suku” that a person seeks protection and refuge. However, one’s relationship with the members of the lineage or sub-clan known as “perut” is more intimate, because in the “perut” all members know one another well, and share a lot in common, for example common residence and common property.

The kindred group or “kelompok sanak saudara” (blood relatives) is rather loose. It does not have elements that bind members together like those found in the clan or lineage systems. The strength of relationship and group unity are mostly based on the degree of blood ties and collateral distance between kindred members. Unity among members of the immediate family, the extended family group, and among other blood relatives up to the category of second cousins, is relatively strong. They
are close relatives (saudara dekat), whom one is expected to include in major family functions. On the other hand, relationship with distant relatives (saudara jauh) whose collateral distance between them is beyond the category of third cousin, is not close, unless they are staying in close physical proximity to one another.

Residential Patterns

An important factor that binds kin and family members together is the residential pattern. When they stay together under the same roof, or near to one another, they usually do things collectively. The matrilineal descent system as practiced by the Minangkabau Malays of Negeri Sembilan, for example, theoretically requires every “perut” member to reside on the hereditary [landed] property (tanah pusaka) collectively owned by them and which is registered under female names. Upon marriage, a man has to move to stay with his wife and children on the landed property which partly belongs to his wife.¹

In the old days, on every piece of landed property would be a big family house known as “rumah gadang.” When daughters got married, they would be given separate dwelling units within the “rumah gadang” where they would stay with their respective husbands, and raise their children. This pattern of residence is specifically meant to preserve the unity in the sibling group.

Figure 1: A Typical Minangkabau Rumah Gadang
(Source: http://www.peopleteams.com/minang/life2.htm)
In bilateral Malay society, however, there is no specific residential rule for married couples. They could either choose to stay with the husband's family (patrilocal or virilocal residence), or with the wife's family (matrilocal or uxorilocal residence), or reverse their decision later on for pragmatic and practical reasons. Unless both sets of parents are staying in the same locality (village = kampung), the couples could physically belong to only one family group, and it is with this group that they identify themselves, or establish close relationship.  

Generally in the rural areas, when married couples decide to stay together either with the husband's family, or with the wife's family, they do so during the first few years of marriage. Later, they normally move to stay in their own house, erected a few meters away from the parents' house in the same compound. Over the years, when all the other siblings get married, and they also choose to stay close to their parents' house within the same compound, there would be a cluster of houses (3-8 houses), forming what is known as compound households (Kuchiba, et al., 1979).

In many instances, a Malay village (kampung) besides being a territorial unit, is also a kinship unit. This is due to the fact that all the people staying in the village have kinship (blood) ties between them. Traditionally, a Malay village was founded by a person, and over the years, the number of its residents who have genealogical connections with the founder member, multiplies. In rural Malaysia, some villages are named after their founder members, for instance, Kampung Air Pak Abas, Kampung Padang Hassan, Kampung Mat Sirat, and Kampung Paya Sulaiman. The members of a Malay village normally have a strong attachment and sense of loyalty to the village. It is their place of birth, and it is also the place where they would want to be buried when they die.

Marriage

In Malay society, marriage is an important factor for group cooperation and unity. Marriage between relatives within the same kindred is preferable as it helps to strengthen bonds between kin. To the
[traditional] Malays, marrying someone who is not related by blood, though permissible, would result in "blood ties becoming thinner" (ikatan darah menjadi kian cair), and in no time, their relatives would hardly know them and behave like strangers. Apart from this, other factors like social status, economic position, religion, and ethnicity generally play a part in the Malays' choice of marriage partners. The adage, "pipit sama pipit enggang sama enggang" (birds of a feather flock together) has often been the beacon in Malay marriage, and this together with the factors mentioned above, lead scholars to assume that endogamy or in-group marriage is the norm in Malay society which resulted in purebred Malays.³

There are many reasons why in Malay society in-group marriage based on the factors mentioned above is preferable. To the Malays, marriage is not only contracted between two people, but also between two family groups. Compatibility between the two family groups is often regarded as more important than compatibility between the husband and wife. Married couples who come from diverse family backgrounds and cultures may face problems in getting support (financial, emotional, etc), from kin and family members, and there is a possibility they may not be invited to participate in important kin and family functions. To avoid the risk of being left alone outside the family orbit, one normally conforms to the (traditional) patterns and practices. Viewed from this angle, in-group marriage is functional in bringing about unity within the family group and within the society as a whole.

Among the Minangkabau Malays, exogamous marriage is the norm. Marriage is only permitted for couples who come from different clans. However, elements of in-group marriage based on factors of kinship, area of residence, economic status, etc., can still be found. The (traditional) Minangkabaus would prefer to have their children marrying people of their own kind, people who practice the same Adat laws. Cross-cousin marriage, i.e., marriage between a sister’s son and a brother’s daughter, is the most preferred. (Refer to Diagram 2).
A “Buapak” (maternal uncle), for example, would very much like to have his nephew who belongs to his own “suku”, marrying his own daughter (who belongs to his wife’s suku). To have a “peranakan” (maternal nephew) as a son-in-law is the best possible choice a man could ever dream of. Besides, such a marriage would bring the two “suku” which already have marital links closer to one another.

Another mechanism for preserving family unity through marriage is the institution of “ganti tikar” practiced by the Malays. “Ganti tikar” (literally: to change the mat), a version of sororal marriage, allows a man to marry one of his sisters-in-law upon the death of his wife. The marital link that exists between the two family groups remains intact despite the death of the female spouse. The man’s relationships with his parents-in-law (mertua) and with his other affinal kin (keluarga semenda) would also not be much affected by the new marriage. However, his [new] wife has to readjust herself and realign her position with regards to her relationship with the members of her husband’s natal family. It would not be a difficult task for her though, because she is no stranger to her husband’s family and relatives.

### Property Ownership

Collective ownership of property is another unifying factor in the family and kinship systems. In Malay society, there exists the concept of joint
property (harta sepencarian), i.e., property acquired by the family after marriage. As long as a couple stay married, the joint property remains intact, and all family members, including the children, could put a common claim to it. However, if the couple were to divorce, the joint property would be divided among them. Upon the death of parents, the property would also be sub-divided among the children. Under these circumstances, the joint property ceases to be a functional factor in family unity. If the parties involved do not concur to the established process and rules of sub-division, the family property would turn out to be the likely source of family conflict.

Hereditary “tanah pusaka” (landed property) in Minangkabau Malay society also binds family, or rather lineage members, together. A piece of “tanah pusaka” is owned collectively by members of a “perut”. Every lineage member has the right to use or to work on the land, but nobody is allowed to dispose of it without the permission of the entire lineage group. In this regard, the “tanah pusaka” does not only provide a source of livelihood for lineage members, but most importantly, it helps to maintain lineage unity for generations.

Economic Cooperation

Generally, economic activities and cooperation between kin or family members exist in many forms, such as mutual help and services, sharing of family income, maintaining a common budget, and giving other kinds of financial support and remittances. These integrative elements found in the Malay family system, basically bind its members together into cohesive units.

Until today, the production process in the peasant economic system of rural Malaysia still relies heavily on family labor (Kuchiba et al., 1979). Every adult member contributes to the manpower needs of the family and shares the family income. Normally, the husband goes out to earn for the family, while the wife handles the cash. In most cases, she acts as the family banker. Rosemary Firth (1966) in her study of Malay housewives in a fishing community in Kelantan, shows that in any economic transaction, the husband would always refer to the wife and discuss with her before he could give a definite answer. Djamour
Unity In Malay Family

(1965) also mentions that bitter conjugal quarrels would erupt if a man spends a large share of his earnings without his wife's approval. Husbands who attempted to cheat by keeping some money for their own personal use, would be severely reprimanded by their wives.4

In some economic activities, the Malays in rural Malaysia still rely on their kin and family members as well as neighbors for their contribution in manpower. In traditional Malay society, there was a widespread practice of communal labor in the form of "tolong menolong" (mutual help), "berderau" (rotating work system), and "pinjam tenaga" (borrowing of manpower). The absence of hired labor in those days led to a situation whereby kin and family members were heavily dependent on one another in fulfilling their need for manpower, resulting in unity in the family as well as in the society.

Family members in Malay society are expected to support one another, or to offer assistance in times of need, especially to parents and other members of the immediate family. Remittances between parents and children flow in both directions. However, financial assistance from parents would cease when the children are economically independent, or when they start earning their own income. Working children are also required to support their aged parents and younger siblings when parents become less capable in earning enough income to meet the family needs. It would be unbecoming of a person to neglect his parents and not offer them any assistance while he has more than enough for himself.

Social and Religious Obligations

In any family system, there are a number of rules and modes of conduct that each member has to comply with, to ensure the functioning of the family institution itself, and the society as a whole. These rules and modes of conduct include: performing expected role positions; observing established patterns of behavior; and fulfilling certain expected family obligations.

In Malay society, especially in the rural setting, one is expected to inform his kin and family members of any important activity to be held. He could not act alone, for fear of creating tensions in his relationships.
with his family and kin groups. It is normal for every family member
to know what the other members are doing, to get involved in their
activities, and to offer assistance if necessary. Decisions on important
family matters are also often made collectively or upon consultation with
family members. A person who disregards his family would be branded
as “lupa asal usul” (forgets his origin), or as “kacang lupa kulit” (literally:
the nut that forgets its shell). To live alone (sebatang kara) with no family
to turn to for help, for advice, or for emotional comfort, is no less than
being dead.

For the Malays, maintaining close relationships with kin and family
members is not only an obligation, but also a religious and moral duty.
Islam prohibits quarrels or feelings of hostility between family members.
Islamic family values that emphasize kindness, close family ties, fulfilling
family obligations, etc., show that the religion (Islam) places great
importance on the family system in society. A person is not considered
faithful to the religion if he disregarded his kin and family members and
turned them down in times of need and desperation.5

In addition, there is an abundance of Malay sayings and proverbs
that foster family goodwill, cooperation, mutual help, and above all,
family unity. Among the popular ones are: “cincang air tidak akan putus”
(literally: water can never be cut); “cubit paha kanan paha kiri akan terasa”
(literally: when the right thigh is pinched, the left thigh also feels the
pain); “biduk lalu kiambang bertaut kembali” (literally: when a canoe
passes by, the water lettuce merges back); and “ludah ke langit jatuh ke
batang hidung sendiri” (literally: if one spits up to the sky, the saliva will
fall onto his own nose). It is up to the Malays to treasure these sayings
and proverbs and realize the inherent philosophy in them for a more
meaningful family life.

Conclusion

Rapid social change that occurs in our midst today has resulted in a
breakdown of the family system with negative effects. Most devastating
is an erosion of family values; mutual aid, support, care, feelings of
togetherness, and shared sentiments are no longer the same as they were
in the past. We cannot predict what the situation will be in the ensuing
years. In the case of Malaysia, the effort taken by the government in its Vision 2020 to create a caring society built on a stable and resilient family system is really a good move. In my opinion, irrespective of the pace and rate of change, the family and kinship institutions have to be strengthened, and kinship values, especially with regards to sustaining kin and family unity, have to be preserved. The bad experience encountered by the family institution in the West, which threatens to lead to its "demise", is a lesson to be learnt by all members of society who still place a high value on love, affection, companionship, selflessness, cooperation, mutual help, family protection, and the like.

Notes

1 The husband who is not a member of his wife's "perut" is required by the "Adat" to work on her land. However, he is also required to discharge his duties as head of his own "perut", and from time to time, he has to go back to his natal family to attend to those duties.

2 Unlike the Malays, there is a fixed rule of residence after marriage among the Iban of Sarawak. The married couple would be members of the husband's "bilik" family or the wife's "bilik" family, and it is with this family that they identify themselves, and share the family land, and other family belongings, even sharing the family's "ayu" or spirit (Freeman, 1970).

3 The Malays are said to have poorer characteristics because of their habit of family in-breeding or marrying relatives, especially between first-cousins (Mahathir Mohamed, 1970:29).

4 However, the nature of economic relationship and cooperation between Malay spouses today is not the same as it was before. If both spouses were working, they tend to have separate budgets and maintain separate bank accounts. Besides, they could no longer help one another at work as both may be involved in different occupations. Even if they were engaged in the same occupation, their respective role positions may not be the same. In this case, one ponders whether the changing conjugal roles in today's family would lead to conjugal harmony, or to a weakening of marital bond between the spouses. In my opinion, if they were to compete with
one another economically, their marriage and family life might suffer, and surely this works against family unity.

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) once said, “Best of my people is the man who shows his family not harshness, but perfect kindness and goodness.” And again, “Best amongst you is he who treats his family well: and I am kindest of all to my own family.” [Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari, “Islam and the Family”.

On the authority of Jubair bin Mut’im (may Allah be pleased with him), who said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “He who breaks off the ties of blood will not enter Paradise.” (Bukhari and Muslim).

On the authority of Ibn ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him), who said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “He who just returns the visits of his relatives does not completely fulfill the obligations of relationship. But he who ignores the mistakes of his relatives, forgives them, and visits them in order to bind the ties of relationship when they are broken does fulfill the obligations of relationship.” (Bukhari)

On the authority of Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him), who said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Of the dinar you spend in the way of Allah, the dinar you spend for the freedom of a slave, the dinar you give away in charity to the poor, and the dinar you spend on your wife and children, the highest in respect of reward is the one you spend on your family.” (Muslim).

References


Websites:

http://www.peopletreems.com/minang/life2.htm;
http://www.aalulbayt.org/html/eng/books/history/islamic-articles/family.htm;
http://www.islamland.org/php/h003.htm;