

**THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS
IN A MALAY PEASANT COMMUNITY***

WAN HASHIM
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

SINOPSIS

Artikel ini membincangkan beberapa institusi sosial dan sosio-ekonomi yang terdapat dalam satu komuniti kaum tani. Institusi-institusi itu ialah: Kerah, Hantar Serah, Berderau, Meminjam, Gotong-Royong dan beberapa jenis kenduri, iaitu institusi-institusi yang 'memaksa' individu-individu hidup bersama sebagai ahli dalam satu komuniti atau masyarakat. Perbincangan mengenai ciri-ciri institusi-institusi ini memberi gambaran kepada kita akan keadaan kehidupan dalam satu komuniti yang kecil dan bersepadu di mana perpaduan, tolong-menolong dan bekerjasama di antara satu sama lain merupakan nilai hidup serta norma masyarakat yang dipegang teguh oleh ahli-ahli masyarakatnya. Penulis mendapati bahawa dengan kedatangan pengaruh dari luar seperti modenisasi dan ekonomi perdagangan, institusi-institusi ini sedang mengalami perubahan dan sudah menjadi kurang penting dan kurang berfungsi. Ini dengan secara langsung mencerminkan keadaan hidup komuniti itu pada masa kini. Ahli-ahlinya telah bertukar daripada yang mementingkan komuniti kepada yang mementingkan individu. Penulis juga percaya bahawa perubahan yang dialami oleh komuniti tani yang dikaji ini juga dialami oleh komuniti tani di tempat-tempat lain di Semenanjung Malaysia, walaupun kadar perubahannya tidak semestinya sama.

SYNOPSIS

This article discusses some basic social and socio-economic institutions in a Malay peasant community. The institutions are: Kerah, Hantar Serah, Berderau, Meminjam, Gotong Royong, and various types of Kenduri; i.e., institutions that compel individuals to come together as a group and as members of a community. The discussion on the characteristics of these institutions tells us the nature of a small village community which is closely-knit where group solidarity, mutual help and cooperation are the norm and ideology of the community. The writer agrees that through the process of modernization and commercialization, these institutions are undergoing modifications and in fact declining in their importance. This, to a certain extent, reflects the

*This article is based on a chapter of my M.A. thesis, "A Malay Peasant Village in Upper Perak—A Study on Integration and Transformations" submitted to the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Monash University, Australia, 1976.

present nature of the community studied. Through the impact of forces of change, membership of the community is being transformed from a community-oriented to an individual-oriented one. The writer believes that this process of change is similarly occurring in other parts of the peasant community in Peninsula Malaysia, even though the degree of change may not be the same.

I

INTRODUCTION

The traditional rural community is characterized by the norm and ideology of 'mutual help' (*tolong menolong*) and 'cooperation' (*kerjasama*) which are manifested in various forms of social and economic activities both for individuals and for the community as a whole. Such conceptions of social life typically emerged in a small closely-knit community where members of the community are dependent on one another in several aspects of their daily life. Social and economic activities are communally rather than individually oriented, emphasizing the importance of community living.

It is due to the persistence of the spirit of 'mutual help' and 'cooperation' which is based on *mufakat* (consensus) that solidarity among the community contrast markedly with those of the urban community since in the latter members are relatively individualistic, materialistic and self-centred.

In a Malay peasant community, mutual help and cooperation are expected at any time from kinsmen, neighbours and members of the village ranging from day-to-day activities to events that occur periodically and occasionally. As for individuals, there are instances where 'help' (*pertolongan*) is required to perform certain tasks which cannot be done individually. There are also cases where economic activities are efficiently done through group cooperation in the form of exchange of services on the basis of the rule of reciprocity. This type of service is conceived not as purely economic but also social, and participation in it is considered as both work and leisure. The division between the two is less clear-cut in a small community as compared with modern industrial society.

In other cases, services are required from members of the community to perform certain tasks which will ultimately benefit not just some individuals but the whole community. It is therefore obligatory for individuals to give their service voluntarily indicating that they are willing to cooperate and to work with others who are themselves permanent members of the village community.

All the above characteristics summarize the nature of a small rural Malay community which is similar in its basic features throughout Malaysia. Most of these traditional values and ideology remain intact and continue to persist as long as the community is not greatly affected by modern

influences that are disseminated from urban centres. In the present day where modernization is a dominant process that integrates rural communities into the national society, almost all rural communities in one way or another are affected by modern influences that emanate from outside the villages. This tends to bring about the decline of traditional institutions which are community oriented. Members of the community may be transformed into individuals whose main concern will be their own welfare and economic well being. As in an urban community, individuals become more important than the community.

In this essay, I shall be examining the persistence of traditional social and economic institutions in the past and the manner in which some of these institutions have undergone changes over time. The materials for this essay are based on a fieldwork conducted in a Malay peasant village community in Upper Perak. However, I believe that the process of change taking place in the community studied is similarly occurring in other areas of the peasant community throughout Malaysia, albeit the degree of change may be different.

I shall first discuss the nature of these institutions and then see how increased contact with the wider society, that is increased commercialization and the intrusion of a modern economy, has resulted in their decline in importance. In my analysis, I shall also include discussion of institutions that existed in feudal Malay society like the *kerah* (corvee) system and *hantar serah* (sending offering) which manifest the nature of relationships, real and symbolic, between the ruling class and the subject class, and how these institutions have been abolished or declined in importance over time.

II

Kerah System and Hantar Serah

Some writers who make references to traditional Malay society have mentioned the existence of the *kerah* (corvee) system in feudal Malay society during the pre-colonial period (Gullick, 1958; S. Husin Ali, 1975; B.A.R. Mokhzani, 1973; etc). *Kerah* is an occasional service required and demanded from the subject class by the ruler and district chiefs. It is a forced labour rather than a voluntary one and refusal to participate in the *kerah* activities invites severe punishment and even death penalty.

Service required can be for public works like cutting footpaths or construction of roads, constructing canals and waterways or preparing trenches and fortresses required for defence in time of war. In some instances the services demanded could be for the personal interests of the ruler or chief like preparation for a wedding feast, the construction of a chief's house or the clearing of undergrowth around a chief's house.

The service of *kerah* was more regularly called for by the district chiefs than the ruler, for the latter had his own slaves and servants to work for him. The right to demand services from the subjects was in return for protection given by the rulers to the subjects. For this reason a powerful chief who commanded loyalty from a large number of subjects had more people to participate in the *kerah* than a chief who had a small number of followers under him.

The power of *kerah* was in the hands of the ruler and territorial chiefs only. Other members of the ruling class did not have the right to *kerah* but were exempted from it. Gullick noted that apart from the *raja* (aristocrats) and *syed* (descendent of the prophets), others who were exempted from the service were *haji* (returned pilgrim to Mecca), *lebai* (Muslim divine), *pegawai* (government official) and *penghulu* (Gullick, 1958:108-9). It was usually the *penghulu* or *ketua* who organized the *kerah* work force whenever it was required by the ruler or chiefs.

Kerah was a common activity in the pre-colonial era, when the institution of wage labour was absent. During the colonial period the system was abolished following the stripping of political and military powers from the rulers and territorial chiefs. The system was then replaced by the introduction of a wage labour system whereby services were paid for in the form of wages or salaries. The labour force was recruited by the government on a permanent basis to perform public services which were in the past undertaken by the *rakyat* under the *kerah* system without any payment.

Hantar Serah is a periodical gift or offering which is given by the subject class to the ruler. The act of giving or 'offering' manifests a symbol of loyalty of the subjects to their ruler. The *hantar serah* takes place only on special occasions — usually during the installation of a new sultan or the wedding of the sultan's children.

I was told that in the past, goods included in the *hantar serah* were those produced by the people in a particular area, such as rice, domestic animals and fruits and they were meant to be used in the feast held to celebrate the occasions. The goods were collected by the headmen of every village who would pass them over to the *penghulu* who then acted as the representative of his *anak buah*.

Today, both money and goods are collected from the people. But money seems to be more important than goods and the money collected is used to buy a gift of symbolic significance. In most instances, the village people do not seem to be directly involved in the *hantar serah*. It is often organized by the *penghulu* in cooperation with government officials, *Orang Besar Jajahan*, *Wakil Rakyat* of the area, and others. Money is collected mainly from government servants and Chinese and Malay businessmen. But it is clear that, today, this gift-giving does not directly

concern the village people or peasants. In particular, the relationship that the Sultan has is with government officials, people's representatives and businessmen, that is the 'new middle-class' rather than with the peasants in the rural areas.

Both the *kerah* system and *hantar serah* is a manifestation of relationship between the ruling class and the subjects. The exchange in the *kerah* system is an unequal one favouring the ruling class. The protection given by the ruler to the subjects is putative rather than real and the people were in fact held in servitude. Under the guise of protection and patronage, the system represents the dependency, economic and political, of the ruling class on the subject class, thus serving to perpetuate the traditional hierarchy of a rigid class society.

The *hantar serah* is a one way relationship symbolising the loyalty of the rakyat towards their ruler. In the past, the loyalty was demanded through coercion and by force. The goods and money collected from the people were obligatory rather than voluntary and there was very little that the rakyat would get in return from the ruler. However, it served to perpetuate the feudal system where the rakyat was the tiller of the soil and the provider of food for the ruling class.

III

Berderau and Meminjam

Berderau and *Meminjam* are two institutions which are widely practised among Malay peasants in traditional Malay society. Mokhzani's study of 'Credit and Malay Peasant Society' (1973) in Perlis observed the existence of similar institutions in the area. Swift's study of peasant society in Jelebu (1965) mentioned the existence of a similar institution to that of *meminjam*, although the term used there is *menyeraya*. Syed Husin Ali (1975) observed the existence of *berderau* in Kampong Bagan, Kampong Kangkong and Kampong Kerdau but made no mention of the *meminjam* institution. In the peasant community which I studied, both the institutions still persist even though they are not as significant as before.

Mokhzani (1973:40) defines *berderau* as "an institutionalized form of exchange labour" because service given is expected to be returned with service and the return of the service is obligatory. The exchange is more or less on equal terms.

In *berderau*, work is done by a group of members who have organized themselves in a work team consisting of three to ten households. The work is done by rotation, "based on the principle of service being given for service", (S.Husin Ali, 1975:178). In the process of *berderau*, service is given to members of the *derau* group to perform a specific task until similar work for all members of the *derau* group is completed. In the past when the

village population was still small and when an individual holding of rice land was relatively large and almost equal in size, about two to three acres per household, almost all rice cultivation was done on the *derau* basis especially during the preparation of the field, planting and to a lesser extent harvesting. Before the coming of rubber the cultivation of 'hill padi' (*padi huma*) was widely practised. This type of cultivation is heavily dependent on *berderau* work organization.

The above two factors, a roughly equal size of landholding and a large acreage of rice land owned by each individual, make it possible and also necessary for *berderau* activity to be organized. Reinforcing the above factors is the fact that in the past members of the community were relatively more dependent on one another than at the present time. The ideology of *kerjasama* or cooperation was highly valued, and village life was based on solidarity and consensus. Above all, urban influence was minimal. Villagers were communally rather than individually oriented, making it possible for activities which required group cooperation and mutual help to be easily organized.

Today, the *derau* work group is rarely organized. This may be attributed to several factors; firstly, the fragmentation of rice land, so that individual households now own an average of one acre or less. Also the method of cultivation has improved and this makes rice cultivation an easier task than in the past. Because the area of land owned by an individual household is relatively small, it becomes possible for an individual to cultivate his own rice land with the help of family members (wife, sons or daughters), and thus a larger, extra-familial work force is not necessary. Secondly, in the community studied, most rice cultivators today are also rubber tappers and a few of them are government servants who reside in the village. This makes it difficult for them to decide on the time of the day and even the days on which all the *derau* group members could make their services available to one another.

Underlying the third factor are the attitudinal changes among the people attributed to the impact of modernization discussed earlier. Their increasing individualism had led to the villagers of today preferring to work on their own and be less dependent on others than in the past. An informant describes this situation as: "*Masing-masing membawa diri untuk mencari makan*" (Everyone is going his own way to make a living). This is partly the result of increased differentiation of the villagers' economic activities and occupational structure.

It is interesting to note that *berderau* is still being practised in some villages that are located further away from urban centres. Thus urban influences (modernization and commercialization) seem to be an important factor that caused the decline of the institution in the community

studied since the latter is closer to the town area than those other villages where the institution survives.

Meminjam is another form of traditional work organization which was widely practised in the past, and which is still practised to a certain extent at the present time. Like most other traditional institutions, *meminjam* is based on the traditional Malay values of 'mutual help' and 'cooperation' where service given is regarded as a 'help' and is dependent on one's generosity and willingness to cooperate with others.

Meminjam works on the principle of reciprocity, where service and kindness received must be similarly returned with service and kindness. The term *meminjam* itself, literally translated 'to borrow', has the connotation of exchange and reciprocity. What is 'borrowed' has to be repaid and in this case it is service and time rather than cash or goods that are involved in the exchange process.

Mokhzani classifies *meminjam* as a form of credit of traditional type. What is borrowed has to be repaid except that unlike *berderau*, where services received are immediately reciprocated, services given in *meminjam* are reciprocated in the future when the relevant situation arises. In other cases, the services exchanged may not be of a similar kind. For example a *tok guru* might give his service as a religious teacher, and what he receives in return is service in the form of help to cultivate his rice field.

In the village studied, *meminjam* is often called for by the *tok guru* for the cultivation of his rice land during the cultivating season. The services required are usually during the preparation of the rice land, done by men, and the planting of seedlings by women. The rationale is that services are given to the *tok guru* in return for the 'free service' he gives the villagers as a religious teacher who does not demand any cash payment for the service. A *tok guru* normally has a weekly class for the villagers and classes several nights a week to teach the children to read the Holy Book, *Al Quran*. Because it is regarded as the kindness of the *tok guru* to give his service, it should therefore be returned with kindness in the form of 'free service', as during the rice cultivating season.

Other than the *tok guru*, individuals who are injured or ill during the cultivating season also have the privilege of calling for *meminjam*. This is usually organized by kinsmen or relatives who will ask for help from kinsmen and neighbours to help the individual concerned who is unable to do the work himself. Kinsmen and neighbours are expected to be kind by helping him until he is well again. Similar help will be expected from him when others are in a similar situation at other times.

Other than rice cultivation, service is also asked for other purposes — for instance, to erect the structure of a new house or to lift a house from one site to another. The service required is termed *minta tolong* or 'asking help' rather than *meminjam* although the principle is the same as that of

meminjam. On all such occasions, food in the form of light refreshments is provided by the person who called for *meminjam* or *minta tolong*.

The institution of *meminjam* is not declining as fast as *berderau*. All activities mentioned above, 'free' service for the *tok guru*, sick relatives and neighbours and others who need help in one way or another, are still being given through *meminjam* work organization. The institution is still being kept up by the villagers for it is sustained by the Malay values of *tolong menolong*, which is the essence of village life. What makes it different from *meminjam* in the past is that today not everybody participates in it. It appears to them that *meminjam* is 'voluntary' and that it is not obligatory for everyone to participate. However, most of those who do not participate have their own reasons, like having a prior engagement or other work to do rather than just personal unwillingness. The villagers in general still believe that 'help' must always be given to those who need it.

IV

Gotong Royong*

Gotong Royong is simply a process of working together on a community basis for the benefit of individuals and of the community as a whole. In the case of an individual it is similar to *minta tolong* (asking help) mentioned earlier whereby help is given to someone who asks for, such as to lift a house from one site to another, for the erection of the structure of a new house or for draining away flooded water from a house. In this context the terms *gotong royong* and *minta tolong* is used interchangeably.

In modern times *gotong royong* for individuals is more difficult to call for owing to the lack of community cooperation and the increase of individualism of the villagers. In order to get a satisfactory response from the people the person who called for *gotong royong* would normally prepare good food to be served during the *gotong royong*. This makes it more attractive for people to participate in the *gotong royong*. Serving food in this respect is obligatory as a short-run return for the service given or otherwise very few people will participate in it.

Another type of *gotong royong* is the organization of a work force to perform certain tasks which will benefit the whole community rather than just an individual or some individuals. Here, it is necessary to distinguish between the *gotong royong* which is government sponsored and the other which is not sponsored by the government. The latter is the traditional type organized by the villagers based on mutual interest and for the benefit of the whole community.

*The origin of the term is in Java to refer to work organization based on cooperation and mutual help (See S.H. Ali, 1975 : 53-57).

In the past all *gotong royong* for social services were voluntary and organized by the villagers themselves without any initiative from the government. They include all sorts of community work activities like clearing the graveyards, waterways or the compound around the prayer house, erecting a new prayer house, making bridges, constructing foot-paths for pedestrians and cyclists or even constructing canals and waterways. Participation in the *gotong royong*, or *berpakat* as it was commonly termed in the past, is obligatory for it is the responsibility of all to participate in all these self-help projects that are beneficial for them all. Success of these community activities to a certain extent is dependent on the personality of the headman who ought to be able to lead and also who should be well respected by the people.

Today, politicians who are engaged in an election campaign often make promises to deliver facilities like a community hall, a new prayer house, new bridges, new roads, and so on, if they are elected by the people in the coming general election. The consequence of this is that these projects are now being provided by the government rather than constructed or built by the people themselves through their own initiative by organizing the work force in the form of *gotong royong* or *berpakat*.

There are many works which in the past could be done by the people themselves that are now left to the government to sponsor. The people consider it the responsibility of the elected government to fulfill their wishes and to provide whatever is needed by them. The annual general meeting of the ruling party in the district capital is usually the occasion when representatives from every village are invited to meet the Chief Minister and the People's Representatives of the area to make application for capital works or whatever community projects are needed by the villagers. Grants are then allocated for villages and town council areas for the various projects which have been planned.

Realising that the community spirit among the villagers is gradually declining, the government has now introduced what is termed the 'government sponsored' *gotong royong* to distinguish it from the 'voluntary' *gotong royong*. This government sponsored *gotong royong* involves community projects which require government financial aid. The projects are those that usually cost between \$5,000 and \$20,000 and which could be carried through by the villagers themselves.

The headman is usually the leader of the *gotong royong*. The finance provided by the government is used to buy what is required for the project and to pay those who participate in the *gotong royong* by sharing among them equally the money left after expenditure on materials. Some of the projects undertaken in this type of work organization include building a new bridge, repairing the existing road, repairing a madrasah, and others. Participation in this *gotong royong* is not compulsory for all. In some

cases, only a specific number of individuals are required to do certain work.

This government effort to revive the traditional institution of *kerjasama* and *berpakat* seems to be quite successful. Rather than handing over the project to be done by a private contractor where profit making is the main aim, the benefit of gotong royong will go to those who participate in it, that is the villagers themselves. But bigger projects, like building a dam or constructing a new road, which require specific skills and specialised equipment are usually handed over to a private contractor or the Public Works Department to carry out.

V

The Kenduri: Marriage, Death and others

Daily life is periodically interrupted by events which, according to the villagers' conceptions, should be marked by social and communal observances, and which therefore require individual villagers to come together as a group in order to participate in these happenings.

Birth and death are considered natural processes. But whenever they occur they are made known to all villagers who will then pay a visit to the household concerned. The birth of a child is happy news since a new member is added to the family and also to the village. Friends and relatives will come to visit the mother who has safely given birth to the new baby to give their blessings and to share her happiness.

The occurrence of death is a grievous event when villagers will mourn together to share the grief of the family of the dead. It is regarded customary and even obligatory to pay a visit to the household concerned at any time of the day as an expression of grief indicating willingness to share the sorrow of fellowmen. A small token, usually a bowl of uncooked rice or sometimes in the form of money, is brought to the family to share the burden in preparing for the funeral, an expense which often amounts to \$300. The death is followed by a series of small feasts to give tribute and to offer prayer for his/her happiness in the life hereafter so that the soul will be blessed by God. The last of these series of feasts is the biggest one and it is held on the 40th day after the death of an individual. Those who attend these feasts are not only sharing the sorrow of the family of the dead but also making a contribution to them by offering their prayers and blessing to the dead.

Another event that usually involves the villagers as a whole, and this includes those of the younger age group, is the wedding feast, *kenduri kahwin*. Unlike the mourning feast, the wedding feast is for everyone to enjoy and rejoice and at the same time to contribute whatever service is required from them by the household that holds the feast. The higher the status position of an individual in the village the bigger will be the feast

and the larger the expenditure on it. But even a small wedding feast will involve at least all the members of the village.

There is of course another type of marriage ceremony that is held on a small scale and only a small number of people is invited. This is the *kenduri nikah* and it is specially for someone who is marrying for the second or third time. It is not usual for this marriage to be celebrated openly on large scale like that of *kenduri kahwin*.

Nikah gantung or literally translated 'hanging marriage' is another marriage ceremony celebrated on a small scale. In this case the ritual and religious aspect of the ceremony is performed but not the customary communal celebration. This type of marriage is also termed as '*kenduri nikah*' rather than '*kenduri kahwin*' implying that only the obligatory aspect as required by Islam or *hukum syara*' is performed while the customary or communal celebration is not performed or is postponed to a future date. Only neighbours and kinsmen are invited to attend the ceremony. There are other smaller feasts like *kenduri doa selamat* (feast of blessings), *bersunat* (circumcism), *naik rumah baru* (living in a new home) *kenduri arwah* (feast for the dead), and some others. These feasts are smaller in scale and only a few people are invited.

All these events and activities, to a certain extent, require the participation and cooperation of the members of the village. The success of the events manifests the persistence of village communal solidarity and group cooperation among the members of the village. It is the responsibility of every individual to make each of these events a successful one either by contributing their service or even by just attending them. Those who attend the feast are considered to be expressing their willingness to cooperate with the hosts in time of need.

This aspect of village activities is part and parcel of village life and is still being practised and performed in modern times. There is no sign that this institution, the '*kenduri*', is declining in importance. There may be some changes in the contents of the activities to suit the modern situation but their relevance and meaning is still the same.

VI

Conclusion

My concern in this essay has been with institutions which bring individuals together to perform social and economic activities that require group participation, cooperation and in some cases an exchange of services. Most of the activities are undertaken in conformity with the traditional Malay values of cooperation and mutual help. Some are voluntary while others are obligatory. In certain cases it is a combination of the two. All these manifest the norm of group solidarity since they are institutiona-

lised means by which members of the village show their willingness to help one another in time of need through kindness and the sincerity of their hearts by providing their services to others whenever it is required.

Nevertheless the service given is not absolutely free and unconditional. In most cases the service given is in the form of exchange following the rule of reciprocity whereby service is returned with service. It is through this process that a strong network of social relations is maintained among members of the village community.

I have shown that some of these institutions are declining in importance while others persist. As for institutions like *kerah* and *berderau* their persistence is no longer necessary for they have been replaced by modern institutions which are more efficient than the old work organization. An institution like *meminjam* is still being preserved partly due to the effort of the tok guru and some elderly villagers who believe that *meminjam* is part and parcel of village communal life and sanctioned by Islam.

The various kinds of feasts described above are occasions that have undergone very little change. They are part and parcel of the people's customs and beliefs and have been passed down from generation to generation. Some of them are part of the Islamic tradition and their performance is thus a religious duty. It is, however, rather difficult to distinguish what is Islamic and what is not for the pre-Islamic beliefs and practices are closely intertwined with the Islamic ones through a long process of syncretization in the early days.

Reference Cited

1. ALI, SYED HUSIN: *Malay Peasant Society and Leadership*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur (1975).
2. GULLICK, JOHN: *The Indigenous Political System of West Malaya*, The Athlone Press, London (1958).
3. MOKHZANI, B.A.R.: *Credit in A Malay Peasant Economy*, PhD. Thesis, University of London (1973).
4. SWIFT, M.G.: *Malay Peasant Society in Jelebu*, The Athlone Press, London (1965).