INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

FACULTY PUBLICATION

TITLE	:	EDUCATION AND FAMILY LIFE IN MODERNIZING MALAYSIA
AUTHOR	:	PROF. DR. MUHAMMAD KAMAL HASSAN
SOURCE	:	CHANGE AND THE MUSLIM WORLD
PUBLICATION	:	-
PAGES	:	65 - 73

Change and the Muslim World
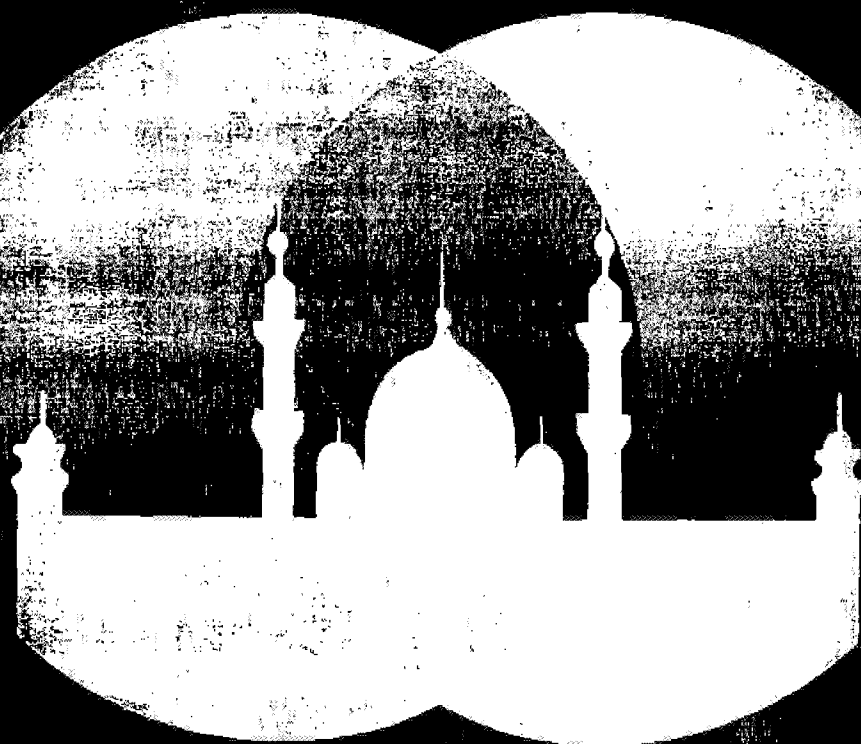
Edited by

PHILIP H. STODDARD, DAVID C. CUTHELL,
and **MARGARET W. SULLIVAN**

Contents

6

Education and Family Life in Modernizing Malaysia

Muhammad Kamal bin Hassan

ALAYSIA, WITH A POPULATION OF APPROXIMATELY 12.5 MILLION, is one of the few Asian countries which has attained a relatively high standard of living. Its per capita income—US$500 in 1970—is the third highest in Asia, after Japan and Singapore. Economic and political achievements notwithstanding, Malaysia has been grappling with a host of internal problems peculiar to a multiracial country* and a secular state in which Islam is the official religion and in which the Malays, who are the adherents of Islam, form the bulk of the economically poor.

One of the major problems of post-1969 Malaysia is the question of raising the economic status of the Malays in the rural as well as the urban sectors, so that by the year 1990 the Bumiputera (i.e., the Malays as well as other indigenous peoples of Malaysia) will have achieved a 30 percent equity in the modern corporate sector of an open-market economy traditionally dominated by the Chinese and by foreign concerns. This is the main objective of the New Economic Policy incorporated in the Second Malaysia Plan (1971–1975), the Third Malaysia Plan (1976–1980), and the forthcoming Fourth Malaysia Plan (1981–1985). The impact of this national policy of raising the living standards of the rural poor and transforming, as it were, the Malay into an industrialized *gesellschaft* with an entrepreneurial and

---

*The *1981 World Factbook* lists the population of Malaysia as composed of 50 percent Malay, 35 percent Chinese, 10 percent persons from the South Asian subcontinent, and 5 percent others.

managerial class of its own, upon the development of Islam and Muslims in Malaysia, is indeed a fascinating subject for all students of development and religion in the Third World.

An essentially growth-oriented program of development in Malaysia based upon a diffusionist model of development implies a considerable degree of secularization of culture and society. As such, the manner in which Malaysian Muslims respond to the processes of secularization in economic development, education, law, culture, and politics is indicative of the force of Islam and of the unresolved conflicts within the Muslim community. The issue between tradition and change in the Malaysian context, then, does not arise out of "modernization versus Islam" but out of a particular type of approach to development coming into contact with a particular type of Muslim religiosity and consciousness which ranges from the secularist, the accommodationist, to the wholistic or from the legitimizing, the permissive, to the puritanist. The scope of the encounter is too large to be treated in this essay, which will focus on two areas of Muslim life affected by the process of modernization in the form of the national development programs: education and family.

EDUCATION

It is stated in the Rukunegara (the official ideology of the state) that Malaysia is dedicated "to achieving a greater unity for all her peoples; to maintaining a democratic way of life; to creating a just society in which the wealth of the nation shall be equitably distributed; to ensuring a liberal approach to her rich and diverse cultural traditions; to building a progressive society which shall be oriented to modern science and technology." The way to achieve these goals is by following the five principles: "Belief in God; Loyalty to King and Country; Upholding the Constitution; Rule of Law; Good Behavior and Morality." In accordance with these objectives of national integration, building a science and technology-oriented society and redressing economic imbalances—particularly between the Malays and the Chinese—education in Malaysia becomes a major instrument of socioeconomic and cultural change.

The Mid-Term Review of the Second Malaysia Plan, 1971–1975, observes that there has been a significant expansion of educational programs to enable a greater number of Malays and other Bumiputera to meet the requirements of racially balanced employment and a viable Malay commercial and industrial community. Expansion of facilities and opportunities for education in science, mathematics, and technology-oriented disciplines also took place. One of the major thrusts of the Third Malaysia Plan (1976–1980)

is that education and training systems are geared to equip youth with the knowledge and skills necessary for their effective participation in developing the economy. For this purpose the teaching of science and mathematics at primary and lower secondary levels is strengthened; science, technical and vocational courses in upper secondary education are also expanded. In tertiary education, the intake of liberal arts students is progressively reduced and priority is given to diploma-level courses to meet the sizeable demand for manpower at the subprofessional level. Meanwhile, continuing efforts are being made to increase enrollments of Malay students in local and foreign universities to bring about a balance that accords with the long-term objective of restructuring the ethnic composition of employment in professional, technical, and managerial occupations.

The bias for science and technical education presumably will continue to be a significant feature of Malaysia's educational policy for a long time to come, considering the recent realization among Malay political and intellectual élites that, after ten years of the implementation of the New Economic Policy since 1971, the achievement of Malays in the economy has been dismally low: they have only acquired ten percent ownership of the economy. It was also revealed in the Third Bumiputera Economic Congress in Kuala Lumpur in May 1980, that "since independence till this day, we [the Malays] have only 527 engineers compared to 4,572 non-Malays, 218 doctors compared to 2,840 non-Malays and 45 architects compared to 457 non-Malays." It was disclosed that in the University of Malaya—the biggest and oldest university in the country—out of 253 students who graduated in engineering in 1979, only 79 were Malays, 31.2 percent of the total. In the case of medical students, only 68, or 42 percent, of the 162 graduating doctors were Bumiputera. In the science faculty 378 or 40.9 percent of the 925 graduates were Bumiputera. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya was quoted as saying recently that Bumiputeras only achieve 10 percent of the total number of graduates who obtained first class and second class (upper) honors degree, whereas at the lower levels of the bachelor's degree, almost three quarters of the graduates were Bumiputeras.

The leaders of Islamic opinion in the country generally support the idea of having more Muslim technocrats, doctors, and other professionals. If they have voiced any concern, it was directed not against science education or technology-oriented education as such. It was the divorce of education and training, at home and abroad, from Islamic moral and spiritual values which drew the criticism from Islamic quarters. The serious criticisms did not originate from the *ulema* presumably because of their lack of access to knowledge regarding the state of modern sciences and the intellectual and cultural challenges currently facing Muslim students in British or American universities. It is not surprising, therefore, that the voices of concern

regarding the independence of scientific and professional disciplines from
moral and spiritual values came largely from the Malay-educated élites who
were the products of secular English education, either during the colonial
period or after independence in 1957.

While Professor Syed Muhammad al-Naquib al-Attas is the principal
exponent of the philosophical-metaphysical approach to educational issues in
Malaysia—his major contribution being the exposition of the Islamic theory
of knowledge—a more typical, down-to-earth criticism of contemporary
secular education in Malaysia may be seen in Dr. Nik Abdul Rashid's essay
entitled "Islamic Education Checks Value Crisis and Moral Decadence." A
professor of Western law, Nik Abdul Rashid sees the rising incidence of urban
crime, prostitution, gambling, corruption, misuse of power, and other aspects
of moral decadence in urban Malaysia as manifestations of a crisis of values
created by a development strategy aimed largely at economic growth and
material prosperity. Technical education and professional training which
ignore moral and spiritual values also contribute to the decline of ethical
standards in Malaysia's cities. "Only through Islamic education," he said,
"could moral decay be checked if not entirely eradicated." Other critics have
also suggested a correlation between corruption, bribery, abuse of power, and
mismanagement in governmental and financial institutions involving Malay
technocrats, bankers, managers and political leaders, and the lack of ethical
content in the educational background of those élites.

It would be incorrect to suggest that the government has completely
ignored Islamic education in the national system of education. Since
independence in 1957, Islamic religious knowledge constitutes a part of the
curriculum (i.e., 120 minutes per school week) for Muslim pupils of
secondary schools wherever there are 15 or more Muslims in a class. But
since it is not necessary to pass school examinations in Islamic knowledge, it
has not received serious attention by the pupils. However, with the creation of
the Division of Religious Education in the Ministry of Education in 1975,
many important steps were taken to strengthen Islamic education in the
country. The Ministry has recently announced that by 1983, moral values will
be taught as a school subject to be taken by all non-Muslim pupils, while
Islamic knowledge is being given to the Muslim pupils. A new subject,
Arabic, will be introduced in all secondary schools in the near future. Prayer
halls for Muslim pupils have already become a familiar feature of secondary
government schools in Malaysia. The Ministry also allows Muslim girls to
wear the headcover and long dress to school, which formerly was the practice
of only the pupils of the religious schools (*madrasahs*). The curriculum of the
religious schools administered by the Ministry has also been changed to
accommodate more non-religious subjects.

The MARA Institute of Technology too offers a three-year course on Islamic civilization, while the five universities in the country provide courses on Islam. However, only two universities make it obligatory for all students to take special courses on Islam at the undergraduate level. In the universities it is not uncommon to see female Muslim students in the science, medical, or social science faculties wearing the traditional Islamic headcover, which has now become one of the visible indicators of Islamic consciousness. It has been observed that the consciousness of Islamic identity tends to be stronger among science and technical students than among the social science students, both at home and abroad. One discerns a yearning among the younger generation of educated Muslims today for inner contentment and self-identity. Many of them are seeking direction in the moral and spiritual development of their personality which, through education, seems to be caught between new cultural forces operating in urban society in the form of permissive lifestyles, utilitarian individualism, and the ostentatious living of the nouveau riche, on the one hand, and on the other, a religious vision of emotional stability, moderation in consumption, concern for the underprivileged and undernourished masses, a reenactment of the timeless value of moral rectitude in the face of crass and shameless materialism, and an idealistic environment.

Without this insight into the psychospiritual orientation of the present-day Muslim intelligentsia who are witnessing the grave consequences of the process of secularization in national development efforts, it would be difficult to explain fully the case of a group of university graduates deciding to leave their professions and lucrative jobs in Kuala Lumpur in favor of migrating to a rural area and establishing a sufi-type religious commune. Similarly, it would take more than employing the structural opposition concept of some social scientists to try to understand the case of several university students in the natural sciences and in the humanities joining a large "fundamentalist" religious community known as Dar-al-Arqam on the outskirts of the city of Kuala Lumpur. This community aims at self-sufficiency and self-reliance in its economic activities and runs a clinic and a school system of its own to provide the kind of education that it perceives as most relevant to the needs of society.

This revival of Muslim educational tradition, though on a small scale, is significant because another traditional religious educational system common to both Malaysia and Indonesia, namely the *pondok* (or *pesantren* in Java) system has become a dying institution. This once-flourishing, rural-based and privately owned voluntary educational institution centering around the personality of the *alim* (religious scholar) is indeed an endangered indigenous educational system. This has happened because it has not been able to adjust itself—in terms of curriculum development, organization, and

physical growth—to the needs of rural development, rural-urban migration, the winds of political change, and the expansion of the modern religious schools and colleges. Many Muslim leaders and educators express regret at the loss of a vigorous religious education which was generally pursued not because of its economic worth, but for the sake of knowledge and piety.

On the question of the Muslim family in the context of modernization. I shall focus on three areas of contemporary interest: 1) the position of the Malay urban squatter families in and around Kuala Lumpur: 2) the issue of the poor Malay village girls who migrated to the city to work as factory workers; and 3) reforms of the administration of Muslim personal law.

As a result of socioeconomic, historical and political factors, the most important being the "pull" factor of rapid industrialization in the urban areas which had to depend on abundant cheap labor to sustain the new growth centers, and the "push" factor in the increase of landless peasants, rural unemployment and rural poverty in general, Kuala Lumpur and its outskirts have the highest number of squatter families in the country. About one-quarter of the population of the Federal Territory in which Kuala Lumpur is situated is made up of squatters, many of whom are poor Malays who migrated from the villages to work as manual laborers, factory workers, officeboys, washer women, bus drivers, gardeners, etc. Living in illegal squatter settlements and slums in the city, these rural-urban migrants and their problems accentuate the "culture of poverty" as one of the consequences of unbalanced development which gives priority to industrialization.

The Muslim family entangled in this culture of urban poverty lives in constant fear of the antisocial elements that are involved in crimes and other forms of deviant behavior, such as drug abuse, robbery and extortion, rape, sexual promiscuity, and prostitution. According to the Deputy Prime Minister, there are approximately 360,000 drug addicts in the country. Of those seeking medical treatment for drug addiction in the state of Johor in 1976, for example, 72.2 percent were Malays, 21.5 percent Chinese and 6.3 percent Indians. Drug abuse in the Malay family is not confined to the lower-income groups; it is also found among upper middle-class Malays as well.

As far as changes in the function of the family are concerned, there are studies to show that with the increasing trend toward the nuclear family among Malay urban squatters, the family as an economic cooperative unit is declining because the children of marriageable age are expected to find their own means of subsistence, thus contributing to the increase of neolocal families. Although the type of extended family peculiar to some traditional rural communities is relatively rare in the squatter settlements owing to various economic and spatial constraints, it should not be assumed that traditional bonds of the rural-urban migrant with the larger kinship group in the village are giving way under the impact of creeping individualism,

urbanization, and the highly competitive market economy of the city. In the case of the lower-income group of Malays living in the urban slums, the physical separation of the individual from his rural environment is not to be mistaken for the breaking of familial ties. Many of the Malay migrants who leave their spouses and children behind in the villages send back monthly remittances to maintain the family and to buy property in the rural areas. In spite of the physical distance, family ties are still strong among the Malays as a whole, more so in the case of the poor Malays.

There has been increasing concern, however, about the generation gap in the well-to-do sections of the Malay community, but the influence of religious values transmitted through informal educational channels, such as the regular Koran reading classes, Sunday religious lectures at the nearby mosque and the greater visibility of religious awareness in the city, helps somewhat in keeping the family together, and the influence of Islamic values and norms regarding the relationship between the young and the old in the Malaysian context cannot be underestimated.

It has also been shown that among the squatters, there is a greater tendency to observe certain Malay customs related to village life if those customs possess religious significance, such as the practice of circumcision, marriage ceremonies. *Isra* and *Miraj* (ascension of the Prophet) celebrations and Maulud Nabi (birthday of the Prophet).

The case of the female Malay factory workers in the city also deserves attention because it is related to the situation of the squatter families in the tension between traditional values and urbanizing lifestyles. Like their male counterparts. these village girls who come to live and work in the industrial areas are exposed for the first time to the insecurities of highly congested living conditions in the slums, away from the congenial atmosphere of their original homes in the village. They have not been conditioned or adequately equipped, educationally or economically, to face the prospects of living by themselves for a long period of extended adolescence forced upon them by the need to support the larger family back in the village. Under the circumstances, relations with the other sex tend to be liberal, for one reason or the other, in some groups, and this has led to rumors about the alleged laxity of sexual behavior among the "factory girls."

The religious authorities have become alarmed at the reports of *khalwat* (close proximity between an unmarried couple) cases among them, and steps are being taken to prevent the recurrence of such deviant sexual behavior by organizing religious classes, and prayer meetings, as well as sending anti-vice officers to apprehend overly promiscuous couples. The religious authorities in the state of Selangor, which is the center of industrial growth in Malaysia, have also approached various factory managers to ask them to allow the Malay workers to be given permission to attend the Friday

congregational prayers and to have prayer facilities on the factory premises, so that the Muslim workers, male and female, could perform their prayers at the prescribed times of the day. The results of the negotiations have not been very fruitful.

Meanwhile, the press reports an increase in *khalwat* cases in the states in Selangor, Melaka, and Johor. The director of Selangor's religious department attributed the increasing incidence of *khalwat*, among other causes, to the congested living conditions of the squatters, the lack of decent accommodations and the living together of bachelor men and women resulting from such straitened circumstances. As a solution he suggested that the employers of these factory workers provide proper housing for the migrant workers, along with such facilities as running water, electricity, and modern sanitation. "If these workers were given proper accommodation by their respective employers," said the director, "not only could there be greater control of their sexual behavior, but religious teaching and preaching could be better organized for them."

The state which has the highest number of divorces in Malaysia is Kelantan, which is one of the least economically developed states. Although the number of divorces from 1948 to 1977 has been steadily declining, (11,625 in 1948 to 4,279 in 1977 compared to Selangor's 1,017 in 1970 to 811 in 1975), it is still considered very high. According to the Chief *Qadi* (judge) of Kelantan, financial problems are the main causes of divorce in that state. It is well known in Malaysia that Kelantan has the highest number of male migrants of peasant origins seeking blue-collar jobs in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. The income they obtain in the cities is not always sufficient to support their families left in Kelantan. "Sometimes for months and years, the wives did not receive money from the husbands who had joined the ranks of the urban squatters. In the end the wives filed a complaint to the Islamic Shariah Court and divorce was obtained," explained the judge of the Court.

Another factor which contributes to Kelantan's high rate of divorce is the weakness in enforcing Islamic law. Besides, some of the officials who are entitled to register marriages and divorces derive their income from the commission deducted from the registration fees. The administration of Islamic personal law is not uniform in all the states, since each state has its own religious bureaucracy which regulates the administration of Islamic law in its own way.

Selangor's administration of Islamic personal law appears to be more efficient and more responsive to the demands for reform than that of most other states for a number of reasons. First, it has a very able director who is oriented to solving problems. Second, being the most advanced state in Malaysia (and the site of the capital), Selangor's administration is constantly exposed to the opinions and criticism of the country's élites. Third, the

Muslim women's organizations in Selangor have a long record of showing great interest in the welfare of Muslim women. As a result of constant prodding from these feminist pressure groups, Selangor has come up with new ideas aimed at improving the administration of Islamic law and giving the female members of the Muslim community the kind of just treatment they deserve from those who administer God's law.

The steps taken by Selangor's Department of Religious Affairs have been lauded by the Minister of Public Welfare, who is herself a fighter for better treatment of Muslim women in the country. Thanks to the untiring efforts of the leaders of the women's movement in the country, including the above-mentioned Minister, a Draft Administration of Muslim Personal Law has been completed. If passed by Parliament, it will be the first attempt at standardizing the administration of Muslim family law in the country.

CONCLUSION

With the increasing consciousness of the relevance of Islam to all aspects of national life, one can expect stronger pressure in the future for a greater accommodation between Islamic values and Malaysian society and culture. Liberal and manpower education, as well as secularizing urbanization, would have to come to terms with the constant Muslim demand for the infusion of Islamic moral values in the process of economic, political, and sociocultural changes. There is, therefore, an urgent need for the government and the Muslim pressure groups to start communicating with each other so that both parties can understand and appreciate their respective positions.

The plight of the Muslim family and the education of the future generation are matters of serious concern to the morally conscious Malays in the government and to the Muslim community. The preservation of Islamic values ought to be maintained by both parties without incurring the sacrifice of the beneficial aspects of development. This balance between stability and change can only be sustained if the government and the Islamic groups can both express their concerns objectively, i.e., without being motivated primarily by selfish political party sentiments.