

My Family Ethnography

A *Family* is defined as a group of kin with whom one shares a budget. It can also refer to one's close relatives, some of whom one lives with, some of whom one used to live with and some of whom one may never have lived with.¹

This essay seeks to discuss my family ethnography that is divided into two Malay ethnic groups that are the Banjarese (paternal side) and the Javanese (maternal side). I will explore on the themes of migration and residential patterns, educational and occupational patterns, marriage and kinship patterns, and patterns of language use. I will also try to explore these patterns in determining my ethnicity as to whether I regard myself as a Malay or a Banjarese or a Javanese.

Malays, Bugis, Javanese, Banjarese, Minangkabauese, Boyanese, Mandailings, Achehese and other sub-groups belong to the "Malayo-Austronesian group located in the area known as Hesperonesia – an area spanning the southern part of Taiwan through the Philippines, Borneo, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and westwards to Madagascar".² These groups are racially Malay but at the same time may be regarded as ethnic minorities within the Malay community in Singapore. As proposed by the Parliamentary Election (Amendment) Bill 1988, to be Malay, one must declare oneself as being Malay and at the same time be regarded as one by the core community.³ Both my brother and I are "Malays" in our identity cards, but our research into our roots brought us

¹ Evans, G., (ed.), *Asia's Cultural Mosaic : An Anthropological Introduction*, Singapore, Prentice Hall, 1993, p. 90

² Tham Seong Chee, *Defining "Malay"*, Seminar Paper No. 6, Academic Session 1992/93, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, p. 4.

³ *Ibid*, p. 16

back to the Banjarese and Javanese lineage. We have never paid much attention to our ethnicity but this interest emerged especially during a recent Banjarese gathering where all the Banjarese families in Singapore met up during the Hari Raya celebrations to renew kinship ties.⁴

Migration Pattern

According to Haji Abdul Rashid Taha, the oldest Banjarese in Singapore, the Banjarese came from South Kalimantan, Borneo especially from Banjarmasin (“*di kawasan pesisiran sungai Barito*”). These areas are padi cultivation areas and those who migrated to the Malay Peninsula were farmers, experienced in padi planting. However my FFF, Haji Mahmood bin Abdul Rahim was a diamond merchant who migrated to Singapore to trade. Besides trading, the Banjarese migrated to spread Islam to the region,⁵ to escape poverty, to escape from the cruel Dutch rule as well as to escape from the presence of wild animals which threatened their farms in Kalimantan.

My MMFF migrated to Singapore from Solo, Central Java in search of new business opportunities. Upon hearing that Singapore exercised free trade, Haji Md. Noor immediately set sail to Singapore, hoping to carve a niche in the trading industry. Both my Banjarese and Javanese ancestors settled and set up families in Singapore, only going back to their homeland for visits.

Migration was indeed a prevalent phenomenon among the inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago. Initially, the Singapore Malay population during the 19th century had comprised only of the “indigenous Malays” or the “*Orang Lauts*” (Sea Nomads), members of

⁴ “500 anggota masyarakat berhari raya bersama”, *Berita Minggu*, 14th February 1999.

⁵ “Ulama asal Banjar dikagumi di Timur Tengah”, *Berita Harian*, 12th March 1999.

the then Singapore royalty and their court personnel. This single group expanded to include subsequent immigrants from various parts of Malaya and the Riau islands who claimed to be “indigenous Malay” origins.⁶ However, in subsequent years as Singapore’s economic opportunities began to open up, it began to attract a larger proportion of immigrants who came from other parts of the Malay Archipelago.⁷

Patterns of Residence

My maternal Javanese family used to live in a bungalow at 73 Sultan Gate. Aunts, uncles, cousins would all live together under one roof. Family ties were strengthened through communal living. My paternal Banjarese family also lived within the same village at Lorong Marican. However this extended pattern became a nucleated pattern although “the multi-generational perspective of life is being preserved”.⁸ Presently we do not live under the same roof as before. Families now moved out into HDB flats provided for by the government.

The change in family/household structure is marked by rapid urbanization, mass relocation of the population in housing estates, the fundamental restructuring of Singapore’s economy and the institution of a comprehensive transport system.⁹ Although each household consists mainly of a married couple, their immediate children, one or more grandparents (most likely on the wife’s side) will stay within the household. The family structure would still remain at least “two generations, nuclear family” type.¹⁰ The bond that ties the members of the kin group have not changed throughout the years as Islam, being the

⁶ Li Tania, *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy and Ideology*, Singapore : Oxford University Press. 1989, p. 93

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Tham Seong Chee, *Malay Family Structure : Change and Opportunity with reference to Singapore*, Seminar Paper No. 13, Academic Session 1993/94, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, p. 6

⁹ Ibid. p. 2

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 11

main religion of the Malays ennobles devotion accorded to parents as to neglect one's parents amounts no less to disobeying God.

Occupational Patterns

The Banjarese do not like to be employees (“*makan gaji*”) working in the government or private sector. They like to be self-employed; working either as farmers or businessmen. They preferred to spend their free time studying religious knowledge. However, my FF worked as an English teacher in Raffles Institution and the current Banjarese generations are often employees although some have set up their own businesses.

My MMF was the pioneer trader in the “*songkok*” (Malay caps) industry in Singapore. However, my MF was an account clerk with the British choosing not to follow his father-in-law into business. There are some Javanese uncles who have ventured into business, rekindling our ancestor's passion for trading.

Regardless of the occupational patterns, the Banjarese and the Javanese would try to save up as much money to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca (evident from the title taken up after the pilgrimage – *Haji* and *Hajah* for the males and females respectively). To them, religion is an important aspect in their lives. Even the young like me have visited the Holy City of Mecca.

Educational Patterns

Judith Djamour noted that few Malays had any education in English. “Parents were reluctant to send their children lest they became converts to Christianity”.¹¹ This is true as the Banjarese sent their children to religious classes. The rich Banjarese would send their

¹¹ Judith Djamour, *Malay Kinship and Marriage in Singapore*, London : Athlone Press, 1965, p. 9

sons to Arabic schools abroad especially in Mecca. An example would be my FFB, Haji Sanusi who obtained his Masters in Islamic Law from the University of Al-Azhar in Cairo.

However, besides being proficient in Islamic teachings, Haji Sanusi had a Western education, mastering the English, French and German languages. This passion to seek knowledge continues to the present generation where quite a number of my FCS / FCD have graduated from universities either in Singapore or abroad. The highest qualification obtained among my Banjarese cousins would be a Masters in Philosophy obtained from the National University of Singapore.

My Javanese ancestors also put an heavy emphasis on education. This can be seen when they sent my MMB, Haji Ibrahim, to Indonesia and Mecca to further his religious education. My other MMBs were also educated in English schools. Although my mother's mother was not allowed a secular education, nevertheless she was educated at home by a tutor who would teach religious knowledge and Jawi (Malay written in Arabic scriptures). Despite not having a western education, she insisted that my mother be educated in St. Anthony's convent, besides attending Malay and Islamic schools in the afternoons.

The majority of the Malays in the olden days did not feel comfortable about sending their daughters to English schools. The trend is changing now as more and more Malays girls are getting the same secular education as the boys due to changing societal expectations of daughters as well as economic opportunities which have opened up for the female gender. In a recent survey done by the Association of Malay Professionals (AMP), the number of female Malay graduates is surpassing the male Malay graduates !!

Marriage Patterns

The Banjarese preferred to marry within their own ethnic race so as to keep the “*harta pusaka*” (family wealth) within the family. So do the Javanese. This is evident when much unhappiness was aroused when my Javanese mother married my Banjarese father. However, the freedom of choice was given to my parents. Education and modernization no longer require the services of the matchmaker to arrange marriages. Polygamous marriage is also not in “fashion” nowadays. In contrast with my MMF who had 2 wives and my FFF who had 3 wives (Islam permits marriage up to 4 wives at the same time provided the husband can provide for the wives equally), monogamous marriage seems to be the only economically viable choice nowadays.

There was no record of anyone marrying out of the religion. Inter-racial marriage is no longer frowned upon. As long as the chosen partner is of the same faith, the Banjarese and Javanese communities will welcome him or her with open arms.

Kinship

Both the Banjarese and Javanese have practiced until today, the bilateral form of descent. This is characteristic of the Malays in general as Judith Djamour had observed in that the “kinship system of Singapore Malays is bilateral, or cognatic, in the sense that equal or almost equal importance is attached to kin on the father’s and on the mother’s side”.¹² Singapore Malays trace their descent from their father although they have no family surname. They practise the Islamic system of naming using the “*Bin*” or “*Binte*” for males and females respectively. An example would be my name : Nor Hidayah binte Mohd. Amin; meaning Nor Hidayah, daughter of Mohd. Amin. (“*Bin*” would mean son of).

¹² Judith Djamour, *Malay Kinship and Marriage in Singapore*, London : Athlone Press, 1965, p. 23

Djamour also argued that “there are no different sets of kinship terms used (either in address or reference) for paternal and maternal relatives”¹³ Perhaps this is only applicable if relatives from both sides are from the same ethnic group. In my case, I called my Banjarese FF, “*Kyai*” while calling my Javanese MF, “*Datuk*”. Most Banjarese daughters call their fathers “*Abah*” although most Malay daughters call their fathers “*Ayah*” or “*Bapak*”.

Adoption is very widespread among the Malays.¹⁴ The person adopted would be treated as though he had been born into the family. This is evident in the 1920s and 1930s where many Malay families adopted Chinese babies (the Chinese preferred sons to daughters and tended to give away their newborn daughters). My mother’s adopted sister, Rahimah was Chinese by birth but she was given the same treatment in terms of education and wealth. Until today, there is no discrimination as to the treatment of the adopted “*saudara*” (group of one’s siblings).

Pattern of Language Use

Both my brother and I have no knowledge of the Banjarese language. Even my father’s sister who provided me with the most information regarding the Banjarese’s genealogy, cannot speak the Banjar language. This is perhaps due to the fact that there is a small number of Banjarese in Singapore and most of them are more inclined to speak Malay. The older generation of Banjarese has somehow forgotten to speak the language or even if they do remember, their children might not be inclined to learn it.

However, my mother’s mother would speak to us in smattering Javanese so that we are able to learn the language. Javanese words such as “*terkewan*” (bathroom), “*ngodok*” (walk bare-footed), “*gombal*” (rags), “*kelemeran*” (slow), “*siogoh*” (to dress up)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 30

are interweaved with the usage of Malay at home. The understanding of these Javanese words is made easy as she was living with us. Therefore close interaction is important for the learning of the language.

The declining use of the Banjarese or Javanese language has been influenced by several factors. They are the education system that emphasizes the use of the English language, the loss of the Banjarese or Javanese identity, the lack of pride in the language and the declining and in many cases, the non-existent use of the language at home and among relatives.

Conclusion

In determining my ethnicity, I am still as confused as before I started researching on my family's genealogy. There are a few limitations such as the lack of information on the Banjarese that hampers my research. However, having interviewed family members and attending gatherings that enhanced my understanding of both cultures, I am proud to be associated as a Banjarese and a Javanese. Perhaps in this case, ethnicity is not so much of an issue. To me, being Malay means being proud to be part of the Malayo-Austronesian family. No matter what definition one puts to the terminology of "Malay", we are after all "*serumpun bangsa*" (from one racial stock).

ABBREVIATIONS:

FF	:	Father's father (paternal grandfather)
FFF	:	Father's father's father (paternal great grandfather)
FFB	:	Father's father's brother (paternal granduncle)
FCS / FCD	:	Father's cousin's sons / Father's cousin's daughters (paternal second cousins)
MF	:	Mother's father (maternal grandfather)
MMB	:	Mother's mother's brother (maternal granduncle)
MMF	:	Mother's mother's father (maternal great grandfather)
MMFF	:	Mother's mother's father's father (maternal great-great grandfather)
HDB	:	Housing and Development Board

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