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ADAT IN THE CITY: SOME PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES AMONG URBAN MALAYS*

Few terms in Malay are as commonly used or as variably interpreted as the word "*adat*".¹ *Adat* is a crucial underpinning of Malay life, but no two Malays can totally agree as to its precise nature or range of coverage. It is at once all-encompassing of the Malay way of life, yet can have very specific connotations in the ceremonial and religious spheres.

Formally and historically in the Malay peninsula two distinct types of *adat* are recognised: *adat temenggong* and *adat perpatih*. The first is usually described with reference to a system of kinship which follows a bilateral rule of descent and inheritance, whereas the latter, confined almost exclusively to Negri Sembilan where dwell the descendants of the Minangkabau immigrants from West Sumatra, is associated with a matrilineal rule of descent and a political structure based upon the kinship system. The other major concern with *adat*, both *perpatih* and *temenggong* in the research and literature, has been with so-called *adat-law*, or the definition of rights to property, rank and other privileges in traditional Malay society. Studies of *adat-law* have chiefly been

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¹ Originally from the Arabic, *adat* is normally translated into English by the all-purpose term "custom", and as such has a corresponding impreciseness and breadth of meaning. Some of the richness and range of meaning of the term *adat* was given excellent historical treatment by R. J. Wilkinson, as early as 1908 in his paper on "Malay Law" in the book edited by him, *Papers on Malay Subjects*, while some recent contributions are to be found under the editorship of Shirle Gordon in a recent volume of *Intisari*, "Islam and *Adat*: Two forces in Malay Society", Vol. I, Nos. 3 and 4. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter the vast territory of Indonesian *adat*, which has been the focus of some fine cultural studies. Suffice it to mention here, Van Hinloopen's *Dictionnaire de Termes de Droit Coutumier Indonesien*, in which *adat* is variously defined as "rules, precepts, law, customs, respectability, naturalness" (p. 4).

preoccupied with the question of its relationship to Islamic law (*hukum Shari'ah*) and the legal cases to which such conflicts have given rise.² The other, less formal aspects of *adat*, however, and the more general question of the significance of *adat* to everyday Malay life, does not seem to have received much attention to date. This is particularly true in the case of urban Malays.

Of late, *adat* has become the focus of a renewed surge of attention both as an essential element in the Constitutional³ definition of a "Malay", and more controversially, as the scapegoat, real or implied, for those basic attitudes and modes of thought which are sometimes said in official circles to account for the lack of progress of the Malays and for their failure to "attach importance to materialistic things".⁴ Such barriers (to development) are inherited from their culture according to one of the conclusions of a seminar on national development.⁵

In view both of the emphasis currently placed on Malay economic development and urbanisation as a means of "restructuring society",⁶

² See, for example, Michael Swift, *Malay Peasant Society in Jelebu*, London, 1965; Taufik Abdullah, "Adat and Islam: An Examination of the Conflict in Minangkabau", *Indonesia*, II, pp. 1-25, October 1966; de Josselin de Jong, "Islam versus Adat in Negri Sembilan (Malaya)", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Deel 116, pp. 158-201, 1960; and Ahmad Ibrahim, *Islamic Law in Malaya*, Singapore, 1965.

Of other treatments of *adat* from the legalistic standpoint, the most outstanding are those of E. N. Taylor and M. B. Hooker respectively; both dwell extensively on *adat berpateh*. See, for example, Taylor: "The Customary Law of Rembau", *J.M.B.R.A.S.*, 7, 1: 1-55, 1929; "Malay Family Law", *J.M.B.R.A.S.*, 15, 1: 1-78, 1937; and "Aspects of Customary Inheritance in Negri Sembilan", *J.M.B.R.A.S.*, 21, 2: 41-130, 1948. For an excellent and up-to-date summary of the relation between *adat* and law in a modern context, see Hooker, *Adat Laws in Modern Malaya: Land Tenure, Traditional Government and Religion*, 1972.

³ Any person in Malaysia who fulfills the following conditions is eligible for Malay status: one who is a Muslim, who habitually speaks Malay, who practises Malay *adat*, and who fulfills certain residence requirements.

⁴ A sentiment expressed at a seminar sponsored by the Ministry of National and Rural Development in Kuala Lumpur, January, 1972, reported in the *Straits Echo*, January 15th, 1972.

⁵ A statement by Dr. Mahathir, prominent Malay doctor and politician, at a Forum on the Role of Youth in the New Malaysian Society, sponsored by the Malaysian Youth Council, Universiti Kebangsaan, Kuala Lumpur, October 18th, 1971.

⁶ "Restructuring society" is included as one of the major goals of government social and economic policy under the Second Malaysia Plan, and involves, among other things, increasing the participation of the Malays in the fields of trade and commerce to at least 30 % in comparison with the Chinese and Indians.

and for its intrinsic cultural interest, it would seem worth probing more deeply into what meaning the concept of *adat* holds for a segment of the Malay urban population in a large cosmopolitan Malaysian city,⁷ and to what extent the various elements commonly subsumed as part of *adat* still have active meaning in the social life of the urban Malay population. What seems to emerge is that *adat*, as defined by urban Malays, is less a body of fixed ideas and behaviours rooted in the historical past, but rather reflects the varying situations and needs of the modern urban environment. This does not mean that *adat*, a strong force in rural areas, becomes attenuated in the urban scene. Rather, *adat* appears to be infinitely flexible such that many modern dilemmas and perceptions come to be phrased in *adat* terms. Thus *adat* becomes a common idiom by which Malays can communicate to each other their problems, status concerns and even ethnic attitudes. The idea of *adat* may not die away in urbanisation, but expand to cover new contingencies raised by the urban experience.

The rest of this paper will examine some of the meanings that *adat* and its component parts have for the modern urban Malay,⁸ directing particular attention to differences in approach to *adat* by different sectors of the population.

⁷ The city studied is a port city of over a quarter of a million inhabitants in West Malaysia. The sample of 273 persons, 139 males and 134 females, whose responses form the basis for the percentages presented below, was drawn from two populations, one an urban village (or *kampung*), the other a block of lowcost, high-rise flats. These formal data are supplemented by further qualitative information derived from extensive participant observation in both populations as well as among more middle class suburban Malays. The figures from which the percentages cited are derived appear in a table in an appendix. It should be added that the interviewing was conducted partly by the author and partly by Malay student assistants, and information collected by both parties was congruent in both form and content. In view of this fact, it is less likely that the responses represent a reaction to a foreigner's questions alone.

⁸ Although *adat* is normally considered a Malay preserve, it must be appreciated that the urban Malays in particular comprise a spectrum from what might be termed "pure Malays" (*Melayu jati*), to persons of Indonesian (Javanese, Acheneese, Rawa, Minangkabau etc.) origins, Arabs and also a number of Indian Muslims. On some occasions members of these groups use their respective sub-ethnic identities, on others, they identify as Malays (see J. A. Nagata, "What is a Malay? Situational Selection of Ethnic Identity in a Plural Society", m.s. 1972). In addition to these sub-ethnic "Malay" groups, there are in Malaysia, of course, two other major ethnic groups, the Chinese and the non-Muslim Indians, many of whom immigrated in the earlier part of this century under British encouragement as sources of labour and skills in mines, plantations, commerce etc.

POPULAR CONCEPTIONS OF ADAT

The conceptions of *adat* as elicited from the urban Malays seem to fall into four major categories, or to seize upon one of four basic elements. The categories described below are based upon the first element mentioned by each informant, and where deeper discussion also indicated it to be the dominant attitude in the mind of the informant. It should be noted that of the 273 informants, some (59) chose not to define *adat* directly, preferring instead to express some kind of personal opinion or attitude, as described in the next section.

1. *Generic-Descriptive*: the most elemental and least specific of all. This category stresses basic and generic attributes of Malay life at its broadest, and frequently includes a descriptive inventory or trait list of Malay custom as perceived by the informant. For some, this includes everything that Malays think, believe and practise, ranging from styles of dress, etiquette (*sopan santun*, *budi bahasa*) and common behaviours (*kebiasaan hari-hari*, *kelaziman*), to such idiosyncratic items as not being permitted to sell beer. Typical responses in this category include: "all that we Malays do, a way of life" (*semua perbuatan orang Melayu kita*, *chara hidup*), "discipline, doing the right things" (*tata tertib*, *membuat benda kebajikan*). Other informants are more restrictive in their selection of traits, and focus principally on the ceremonial aspects of Malay life, mentioning rites of passage and ritual observances for special occasions only, e.g. "the customs of the old people, like engagement, wedding and death ceremonies" (*kelaziman orang tua-tua*, *saperti bertunangan*, *perkahwinan*, *kematian*), or highlighting distinctive features of ceremonies, e.g. feasts, eating yellow rice (*kenduri*, *nasi kunyit*).

Among those who adopt the restrictive, ceremonial listing, some also make spontaneous reference to the Hindu origin of many *adat* customs. Since the Hindu provenance of such practices as sitting in state on a throne for the individual undergoing the rite of passage (*bersanding*), ear piercing, ceremonies on the completion of religious studies (*khatam Koran*), and certain pregnancy rites (*melenggang perut*) have almost indisputably been traced to Indian sources,⁹ such statements are not surprising. What is of interest, however, is that awareness to, and particularly spontaneous mention of Hindu origins appears to be found among two principal segments of the population: those who are more highly educated hence presumably more schooled in the history of the

⁹ See, for example, R. O. Winstedt, *The Malays, A Cultural History*, London, 1947.

Malay peninsula and its early Hindu period; and those who, despite their usual self-identity as Malays in social and political life, freely admit to being predominantly of recent Indian descent and who are frequently labelled as "*Klings*". In the latter case this might be one means of justifying their claim to Malay status and of dissolving any sub-ethnic boundaries by stressing the elements they have in common. Possibly too, there is also a trace of pride that "*Malay adat*" is ultimately of Indian origin. When the Hindu origin of *adat* is mentioned by Malays of Arab descent, as it sometimes is, however, the critical terms used implied that this represents a less than desirable dilution of the religion of Islam, and sufficient reason for it not to be taken seriously or as a source of pride. Most Arabs therefore verbalise extreme detachment from *adat* practices.

Of all the informants who volunteered definitions, 74 out of 214, or approximately 34.5 % invoked the generic-descriptive definition of *adat* in its most inclusive form, while 27, or 10 %, followed the limited trait listing of ceremonials, and 21, or about 7.8 % of the total mentioned the Hindu origins of *adat*.

2. *Symbolic-Traditional*: this view of *adat* appears to represent an attempt by those who profess it to identify themselves as Malays, in both time and space, in relation to other ethnic groups. Twenty-seven out of 214 informants, or approximately 12.6 % fall into this category. A dominant tone here is one of emphasis on continuity with the past, an unbroken cultural heritage which only the Malays on this peninsula can legitimately claim, and which thus sets them apart from other ethnic groups. This is also linked to a more synchronic view of *adat* as symbolic of the "Malay race" (*bangsa Melayu*) vis à vis all others in Malaysia. Quotations representing the symbolic-traditional view are typified by the following: "practices inherited by the Malays which distinguish them from other groups" (*turun temurun yang di-amalkan orang Melayu untuk memperbezakan sesuatu bangsa*); "we follow our ancestors to show that we are Malays" (*ikut nenek moyang untuk menonjolkan bangsa kita*). Further discussion with many urban Malays reveals that attitudes to *adat* as defining a significant reference group are fairly widely held, although not in every case so salient as to figure in the initial statement as to the meaning of *adat*. Also the fear of loss of identity attached to any threat to *adat* is frequently expressed, if not as the *raison d'être* of *adat* itself. For example, it is sometimes suggested that in the present day some of the old *adat* could be discarded, but not so much as to be mixed with Chinese *adat*. It finds its most recent and

formal expression, of course, in the Constitutional definition of a Malay which specifies adherence to *adat*, without, however, suggesting how *adat* is to be interpreted. Thus even at the national level *adat* is still an important concept in defining ethnic exclusiveness.

A similar concern with identity and differentiation from other groups appears in the variant form which isolates the religious or Muslim element as the essential distinctive feature, which, of course, makes the identity of the groups themselves somewhat different. Examples of this variant would be: "to distinguish us from the unbelievers" (*untuk membezakan dari orang kafir*). This subtle shifting of focus from the ethnic to the religious reference group is most frequent among women and among those of lower educational status (see "Religious Definition" below).

A total of 33 individuals (15.4 %) seem to be principally preoccupied by questions of identity, the majority, 21, or about 63 %, being "pure" Malays.

3. *Social Sanction View of Adat*: some urban Malays see their attachment to *adat* primarily in the form of social obligations and the expectations of others. Their concern here seems to be less with defining the position of their ethnic and religious community in the wider society than with their own position in that community. Thus for many informants fear of loss of personal status is measured in *adat* terms. There is apprehension that if *adat* is not observed, "people will talk", "people will be angry or say I am proud" (*dikata orang; jika buang, nanti marahkan orang; orang nak kata sombong*). The main perceived function of *adat* is one of maintaining and improving social relations: "only to be sociable, to get the family together" (*baik untuk bermasyarakat, untuk mengumpulkan kaum keluarga*). Thus *adat* will be observed even if it is considered onerous and providing of no other benefit (*walaupun tak bawa apa-apa keuntongan*).

The social burden of *adat* appears normally, although not exclusively, to be associated with its ceremonial activities which are expected to be performed with as great a frequency and elaborateness as possible. It was made quite explicit by many informants in addition to those who raised it as the salient issue in *adat* practice, that were it not for the pressures and expectations of others, their own preparations would not have been so extravagant. One old lady would not have prepared a feast for her dead husband's memory (*aru'ah*) but was afraid of being called mean by her relatives; another was afraid that if she did not

make a large *kenduri*¹⁰ she would be accused of being proud. It could be argued that such statements merely provide a justification by the individual for excessive ceremonial indulgence which he quite voluntarily wishes to make, but which he has been taught is inappropriate in this new Malay era of thrift and delayed gratification and the goals of the Second Malaysia Plan. For there is no doubt that many urban Malays in particular are becoming sensitive to their responsibility in adjusting to new modes of thought and behaviour as the key to modernity. If this be the case, the implication is one of social pressures of a different, and conflicting kind. In other words, the modern Malay urbanite may be caught between two contradictory social forces: the narrower one of neighbourhood and community in which social relations are periodically re-inforced by the ceremonial cycle, and that of national development and Malay progress. The average urban Malay, however, is probably still more sensitive to the former pressure, and it is invariably this he has in mind when defining *adat* observance in terms of social obligations.

A total of 32 out of the 214 informants (just under 15 %) defined their primary concern with *adat* in terms of social sanctions. Of these, it is interesting to observe that the majority, 24 or approximately 75 % of this category, are women. It is not unusual to find females more conservative than males in sensitivity to local social pressures or in attachment to the ceremonial round associated with rites of passage, and they are frequently most active in these matters.¹¹ It is also the domain and enjoyment of women to discuss the preparation of special foods for *kenduri* and to become creatively involved in the decoration of the bridal throne (*pelamin*) for the marriage ceremony, and also the room in which this is held. Indeed, it is not unusual for women to compete in these respects, and some, who become known for their skills in these domains, are widely sought for their services by others. Since such activities comprise an important part of a Malay woman's life, she is unavoidably vulnerable to the sanctions of non-participation. The Malay preference for residential propinquity to other Malays, as for example, in urban *kampongs*, tends to re-inforce these activities and sanctions.

¹⁰ A *kenduri* is a ritual feast at which prayers are often read, and which attends most ceremonial events.

¹¹ Female preoccupation with ceremonial activities is mentioned by Djamour in her *Malay Kinship and Marriage in Singapore*, and, for a cultural contrast, by Bott for her London sample in *Family and Social Network*, also by Willmott and Young in their *Family and Kinship in East London*.

4. *Religious definition*: a number of urban Malays do not distinguish between *adat* and religion and tend to define the former in terms of the latter. This does not mean that such individuals are unable to distinguish between the two, particularly when questions are probed more deeply. It is merely that in most social situations there is little need to be explicit about the differences, which normally receive little formal or systematic consideration. It is undeniable that many of the major ceremonials marking rites of passage include both *adat* and religious elements, while the syncretism of Malay Islam with traditional beliefs of more ancient, pre-Islamic heritage, is well-known. Even those informants who quite clearly do not confuse *adat* and religion rarely mention the possibility of conflict between the two belief systems unless pressed by specific questions. Had more of them been familiar with *adat perpateh*, such possibilities might have been more frequently perceived, since in the latter greater discrepancies with more repercussions for the social organisation have resulted from such conflicts (see note 2, above). Some Malays are prepared to state quite categorically that "all Islamic beliefs, like prayer and the giving of alms, is Malay *adat*; *adat* and religion are the same", (*apa-apa keperchayaan Islam adalah adat Melayu, saperti sembahyang, sedekah*). There is some overlap between this group and those who invoke the symbolic-traditional definition of *adat* (see above), for in both cases one of the critical features seems to be the need to define group boundaries vis à vis a wider social universe.

Out of a total of 27 individuals who define *adat* in terms of religion, the majority, 21 or approximately 77 %, are women. This may reflect the generally lower level of formal education, as mentioned above, for in general most adult women have strikingly lower educational qualifications than men, even women whose husbands are professionals. In this connection it is worthy of note that those men who perceive *adat* as an extension of religion in general also tend to have lower educational qualifications than the mean. Indeed, taking a reverse approach, all those (males and females) who spontaneously, without any prompting or questioning, made a clear distinction between *adat* and religion in their initial definition, are significantly of higher than average educational status, i.e. either educated at least to the fifth form of secondary school or English-educated or both. This does not necessarily mean that failure to distinguish between *adat* and religion is a sign of backwardness, but that those exposed to more advanced education are more likely to raise the intellectual or theological points spontaneously.

Finally, a tendency to define *adat* in terms of religion emerges most clearly among those of Indian or "*Kling*" descent. 15 out of the 27, or 55 %, of those using the religious interpretation are, by self-definition, of Indian ancestry; of those 55 %, 11 or 70 %, are women. Thus Indian-descended females comprise the largest group in this category. Other than the educational factor mentioned, one possible reason for this view may be that their awareness of their immigrant origin, of not being quite "pure Malay" (*Melayu jati*) may lead to a stress on what they undeniable have in common, namely, religion. Holding the education factor constant, as many as 21 % of all the Indians in the sample, but only 6.5 % of the "pure Malays", used religion to define *adat*.

By contrast, those who most rigorously and unambiguously distinguish *adat* and religion are the Arabs. Although most of the "Arabs" in present-day Malaysia are several generations removed from the original emigrants from Arabia and cannot speak Arabic, they are usually extremely proud of their connection with the Holy Land and of the purity of their religion, untouched by *adat* syncretisms. For them it is therefore a point of honour that they do not practise local *adat*; *adat* is usually described in generic-descriptive terms with a clear appendix to the effect that it does not include religion.

Thus considerable variability characterises the perception of *adat* by members of the Malay urban population. What is of particular interest is that no informant, in any context whatsoever, has referred to *adat* as a legal concept, as a basis for (royal) authority or for kinship, which have been the manifestations of *adat* most commonly reported in the literature. This somewhat truncated view of *adat* may be understandable in the case of Malays of long-term urban residence, particularly in a city located outside the traditional Malay states and consequently with no tradition of a sultan. On the other hand, no differences on this score are discernible between this population and individuals who quite recently migrated from other areas in traditional Malay states, rural or urban, suggesting that these views are not exclusive to this city alone.

Aside from definitional differences, a number of further observations regarding *adat* belief and practice deserve attention.

DEGREE OF COMMITMENT TO ADAT OBSERVANCE AND PERFORMANCE

Expressed attitudes as to the necessity of *adat* observance vary all the way from those who stress its inviolability and integral connection with

Malay identity to those who quite blatantly advocate discarding *adat* practices in the interests of Malay progress. In between the two extremes are those who enjoin a selective approach, whereby some *adat* observances are to be preserved and cultivated while others are to be dropped: (*mana yang baik patut diambil; yang tidak baik dibuang*); "some are important; others bring no benefits and impede progress" (*setengah saja yang mustahak; adat yang tak berfaedah patut dihapuskan sebab menghalang kita nak maju ke hadapan*).

As has already been noted, the first category, i.e. those committed to *adat*, tends to be dominated by women, whether explicitly from sensitivity to the pressure of social sanctions or from a more generalised commitment: "*adat* cannot be dropped, it's good, just right for us Malays" (*memang tidak boleh ditinggalkan; bagus; patut diturut; sesuai dengan kita; senang-lah*). Some are unabashedly against any modification of *adat* whatsoever, and will in all seriousness quote the familiar proverb: "even if the child dies, the *adat* must continue", (*biar mati anak, jangan mati adat*). 81 % of those professing the latter sentiments are females (or 34 out of 42). Individuals whose *adat* loyalty stems largely from ethnic pride, however, seem to be divided evenly between the sexes.

It follows from this that the third category, viz. those cavalierly prepared to discard *adat*, whether in the interests of progress or merely because of its onerous social and financial obligations, are largely males. Men are usually the first to stress the wasteful aspects of extensive *adat* observance: "it's only a wasteful habit; if you haven't got the money, it's not important" (*hanya ikutan saja, membazir; tidak mustahak, boleh ditepikan kalau tiada duit*); or: "*adat* has no use in the present day" (*tiada guna lagi pada masa ini*). Further, men do not seem to be so vulnerable to community pressures for *adat* conformity since, in contrast to their wives, many more of their social activities take place outside the immediate neighbourhood, in coffee shops and eating places in other parts of town. It may also be related to a near-universal lower level of male interest in ceremonials of all types, particularly the finer decorative details which absorb the women. Of the two major components of many *adat* ceremonies, *kenduri* and *bersanding*, fewer individuals of either sex are willing to drop the *kenduri* (less than 7 % of the total sample), but about 33 % of those who declare they have no use for *adat*, although many more would be prepared to relinquish the *bersanding* (15 % of the total sample or almost 78 % of those disenchanted with *adat*).

In most cases it is clearly the financial liabilities entailed that motivate

men to reject *adat* (this will be discussed in greater detail below), and much disapproval is voiced over the wastage involved. Another possible motive for the vilification of traditional *adat*, that of the religious purist or reformer who would like to see Islam in Malaysia purged of much of its syncretic Hindu- and animism-derived *adat* content, however, can probably be discounted. Despite the existence in the city, in the years preceding World War II, of a significant, if small, Islamic reform movement¹² represented by a group known as the *Kaum Muda* (literally, the "Young Faction"), few of these men or their spiritual descendants are now left, and they exert but a negligible force upon the socio-religious thought of the Malayo-Muslim population. Some informants indeed have never heard of the *Kaum Muda*, and of those who have, the majority claim to disapprove of their ideas.

Those who advocate selectivity in the practice of *adat* also usually caution against financial indebtedness or otherwise jeopardising economic interests. *Adat* which is considered "good" or "decent" or "appropriate", however, (*elok, sepatutnya, sesuai*) varies substantially, and depends upon how *adat* is defined. Most individuals follow the generic-descriptive view of *adat*, and for them selectivity means that many of the major (and most costly) ceremonials are dispensable, whereas other basic attributes of Malay life and culture should be retained. Thus the quality and moral tone distinctive of Malay life would be lost were they to allow the lapse of such qualities as honesty (*kejujuran*), to give way to cheating (*tipu menipu*), or the loss of good manners (*budi bahasa*) and sense of moral discipline (*tata tertib*).

In practice, however, there does not always appear to be any direct correlation between expressed attitudes and actual behaviour with regard to *adat*. It transpires that some of those who protest most loudly against excessive and costly *adat* observances are in fact quite conservative¹³ in actual practice. For example, when questioned formally, almost everyone in this category asserted that it is better, on the occasion of a wedding, to give a small tea-party instead of a large *kenduri* and *bersanding* and to invest the balance saved in a new house and domestic equipment for the couple. Invariably, however, these same individuals ignore their own advice. The implication here is that most of them

¹² For a description of this movement in the pre-war years, see William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 1967.

¹³ It is, of course, not unlikely that when expressing verbal opinions to a foreigner or to other university-educated questioners, concessions are made to the kind of image that is considered acceptable by such persons. However, even

succumb to social pressures. Alternatively, the fact that verbal attitudes do not correspond precisely to actual behaviour may, as mentioned above, be in part an uneasy response to current official exhortations to the Malay population to waste less on *adat* ceremonies and to save or invest their money instead, thus creating a certain ambivalence. For others, the dilemma is caused by concessions to the wishes of parents and old people. Or there may be practical consequences, for example, if the pregnancy rite is not performed in the seventh month and the midwife called to participate, she may refuse to co-operate at the time of the birth. Some Malays do, however, manage to make a careful and strategic selection of those occasions that call for *kenduri* and of the guests who must be invited and those who may be ignored. Thus all the closest neighbours (i.e. those in adjacent houses in all directions) must invariably be invited, but it can be a negotiable matter with kin from greater distances that all will not expect to attend every *kenduri*. Or it may be decided to send out little packets of yellow rice (*nasi kunyit*) to selected neighbours to avoid the expenditure of a full *kenduri*. Likewise the decision might be made to omit the *bersanding* but to hold the *kenduri*, as is often done, for example, after a son has been circumcised or just completed his first Koran reading. Or several *bersandings* may be held on a single occasion, with one *kenduri* to serve them all. Thus the occasion of a marriage may be used to co-incide with one or more circumcisions or *khatam Koran* by other members of the family. As most Malays seem able to compartmentalise effectively what they feel is a sense of ethnic and even national responsibility and social obligations, it cannot be predicted from an individual's stated attitudes to the requirements of *adat* alone his degree of conservatism in actual behaviour.

The order of preference and frequency of actual performance of the major *adat* ceremonies, for 166 households from which the 273 informants were drawn, is as follows:

in conversations among themselves, many individuals tend to express greater caution about excessive *adat* performance than they actually observe. To make a rough assessment as to conservatism of *adat* practice, a list was compiled of the most common *adat* ceremonials each with its attendant *kenduri* and *bersanding* (where relevant), viz. wedding, circumcision (*sunat*), completion of Koran reading (*khatam Koran*), ear-piercing (*chuchok telinga*), pregnancy rite (*melenggang perut*), feast for the dead (*aru'ah*), and child's first hair-cutting ceremony (*akika*). Out of a total of a possible 11 observances in connection with these rites, those who practise 8 or more are classified as very conservative; 5-7: conservative; 3-4: average; less than 3: progressive.

Ceremony	No. of households which perform where appropriate	
	Number	Percentage
1. Wedding <i>kenduri</i>	133	80
2. Wedding <i>bersanding</i>	133	80
3. <i>Aru'ah kenduri</i>	114	69
4. <i>Khatam Koran kenduri</i>	95	58
5. Circumcision <i>kenduri</i>	93	56
6. <i>Melenggang perut</i>	78	47
7. <i>Akika</i>	46	28
8. <i>Khatam Koran bersanding</i>	40	24
9. Circumcision <i>bersanding</i>	24	14.5
10. Ear-piercing <i>kenduri</i>	23	14
11. Ear-piercing <i>bersanding</i>	8	5

ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF ADAT

Reference has already been made to the ambivalence created among Malays caught between their commitment to social obligations on the one hand and the constant pressure by the mass media to "change their way of thinking" and to cultivate a new sense of financial responsibility on the other. It is clear that in some cases even financial indebtedness is not a sufficient deterrent to the undertaking of ceremonial obligations.

Consistent with the findings reported above, it is the women who are most prepared to make costly outlays for *adat* ceremonies. A typical reaction is: "if you have the money, then the bigger the better" (*jika duit banyak, panggil orang ramai*), "as much as you can, according to circumstances" (*sejauh yang boleh, ikut keadaan kewangan*). 28 out of 37, or approximately 77 %, of those who expressed such sentiments are females. More males, on the other hand, (20 males versus 11 females, out of a total of 31, or approximately 65 % and 35 % respectively), stress the importance of not going into debt, or on those occasions where ceremonies must be held, to do so with moderation only (*jangan mele-behi belanja, jangan berhutang; buat kechil-kechil untuk mengumpul adek-beradek; sederhana saja*). A debt for one man, however, may not be so perceived by another: borrowing small sums here and there from a variety of different relatives is considered a perfectly normal kinship activity, hence not true indebtedness. Further, the frequent custom of pawning gold or other items is not regarded as debt (*hutang*), but rather

the use of a legitimate savings resource. Very few Malays will take formal loans from banks or other institutions, although some do use the Chettiar¹⁴ moneylenders for such purposes.

It must also be recognised that many Malays do not even regard the taking of a formal loan, as from the Chettiars, for purposes of *adat* ceremonies as true indebtedness. *Berhutang* or being in debt is usually reserved for non-*adat* related debts which are placed in a separate category.

In view of the varying economic circumstances of different individuals, it is impossible to make any meaningful comparisons of absolute *adat* expenditures. There is no evidence to suggest that upward economic and social mobility, combined with moves to suburban residential areas and achievement of middle class status alone significantly alter attitudes to *adat*. Indeed, bearing in mind some of the qualifications noted above with regard to sex and sub-ethnic differences, a general correlation can be observed between rising income and rising *adat* expenditures. Middle class Malay families will not uncommonly call 2-3000 people to a wedding and spend up to M\$ 5,000. The style of the ceremony may also change with rising income, e.g. such traditional forms of entertainment as *ghazal* (music and singing of Indian origin) will be replaced by pop bands, Malay costume by western bridal dress, more cosmopolitan dishes will decorate the table and guests will eat with spoons and forks instead of their hands. Other ceremonies likewise, e.g. *aru'ah* and *khatam Koran*, are held on a more elaborate scale. One wealthy Malay businessman indeed, in order to celebrate his son's *khatam Koran*, not only gave a *kenduri* and *bersanding*, but even paid for the Koran teacher to make a pilgrimage to Mecca to show his gratitude. The correlation between rising incomes and conspicuous *adat* consumption, however, is modified if level and language of education is also taken into account. Those with higher secondary and/or more English medium education tend to pay less attention to *adat*, and it is the better-off Malay entrepreneur rather than the government servant or teacher who is more likely to be lavish in *adat* display.

In the reverse situation, i.e. where extreme poverty prevents indulgence in *adat* activities, it will often be rationalised away by those so affected with a claim to "progressiveness" and to the fact that such observances are not really necessary: (*kalau buat elok; kalau tak buat pun baik juga*), or as "not required by religion" (*tidak diwajibkan*), although were the resources available they would most likely be performed.

¹⁴ A group of Indians whose major occupation is moneylending.

Where the religious argument is used therefore, it should not necessarily be construed as inclinations towards Islamic reform.

ADAT AND THE MODERN URBAN WORLD

It is clear that *adat* for the Malays has no universally accepted referents, nor is it a fixed or unambiguously-interpreted body of ideas and practices. There is no evidence that *adat* is declining in significance in the modern urban situation, and it is obvious that it has some meaning, whether positive or negative, for almost every Malay, for it is constantly invoked in different circumstances to justify some action or non-action or as the basis of beliefs expressed. Few Malays seem neutral to, or totally unaffected by *adat*.

There is some evidence that a number of uniquely urban and modern problems are now being expressed in *adat* terms. There is, of course, the familiar example of the use by political leaders of *adat* as a form of scapegoat for unprogressive Malay thinking and action, and to equate economic advance with the relinquishing of *adat*; even while, somewhat paradoxically, *adat* is still used as one of the criteria by which a Malay is judged to be a Malay according to the Constitution. Thus the two separate objectives, of assimilation¹⁵ to Malay culture (especially among Muslims), which is defined by the practice of *adat* on the one hand, and of Malay progress, which is defined by the rejection of *adat* on the other, are both being encouraged simultaneously.

The urban environment is also one in which experience with other ethnic groups is most common. In many cases ethnic awareness comes to be voiced in *adat* terms, as when the importance of *adat* is seen to lie in its symbolic distinction vis à vis other groups, or else as the last bastion of morality and integrity, good manners and honesty against the encroachment of alien values, both western and Chinese. Thus Malay *adat* must always be kept distinct from *adat China*, and can also provide the appropriate moral defence against such activities as drinking liquor or cheating, or even against "mixing with other races" (*jangan campor dengan bangsa lain*). *Adat* is also invoked, as mentioned above, to affirm sub-ethnic distinctions, as do the Arabs who use it in a negative sense, by claiming religious purity through non-practice of *adat*. On other occasions, when these same Arabs are claiming Malay status for purposes of certain loans only granted to Malays, for example, they will sometimes admit to *adat* practices too, on the grounds that they live in Malaysia hence follow local custom: (*sebab kita orang*

¹⁵ For a discussion of Malay assimilation, see J. A. Nagata, op. cit., 1972.

Malaysia sekarang). Finally, traditional Malay customs, such as those which denigrate business or discouraged women from going to school, but which are no longer considered appropriate in the present day, are dismissed as "old-fashioned *adat*" (*adat kolot*).

Businessmen are among those who most commonly refer to the taboos against cheating and excessive profits as *adat* relevant to their way of life, and will often use this as a reason for their lack of success in comparison with other ethnic groups. One hears rationalisations to the effect that no self-respecting Malay would wish to resort to the sharp practices of other ethnic groups, and that adherence to *adat* and preserving its distinctiveness from *adat China*, for example, is more important than high profits. Some entrepreneurs, however, claim that *adat* can potentially reinforce business success, for example by paying attention to politeness (*budi bahasa*), honesty (*kejujuran*), and respecting one's clients (*melayan pelanggan*), phrases which are used by Malay traders with constant, almost monotonous frequency. According to such men, even *adat* ceremonies can become occasions to invite one's clients and thus to obtain their goodwill. Entrepreneurs who express these views are predominantly small-scale, one-man retail shop-traders who prefer *kampung* residence and are still very much part of its social life, hence deal largely with Malay clientele and have limited direct competition with other ethnic groups.

It is significant that those businessmen who run larger enterprises, in areas where competition with other ethnic groups is more direct, will often invoke *adat* to support a reverse argument, viz. that *adat* actually retards business success which depends on cultivating the qualities developed by the Chinese: "business is business, and has nothing to do with *adat*; in fact some *adat* proscriptions must be forgotten if business is to prosper", (*meniaga tidak bersangkut paut dengan adat; semua adat mesti ditinggalkan jika nak maju ke hadapan*). Even a little cheating and other non-*adat* "Chinese" practices must be tolerated in the interests of success. These men also regret that so many potential Malay entrepreneurs, especially women, are "ashamed" (*malu*) about becoming involved in commercial activities, such as those who make cakes at home, but commission Indians to take over the actual sales for them, which is attributed to *adat*. For these men too, *adat* ceremonials are also unnecessary. The above illustration thus shows how *adat* can be invoked to support either of two opposing and contradictory views; in both cases, however, *adat* is regarded as a significant factor.

Age as a factor in influencing attitudes to *adat* seems to be less

significant than more advanced and/or English medium education. Since there are relatively more younger people in these educational categories, however, there does appear to be some trend among the youth to greater sophistication in distinguishing *adat* from religion and in being selective, if not highly critical of many *adat* practices, particularly expensive ceremonies. Again, this may reflect more the oft-heard injunctions of school and mass media than an intellectual superiority over those less highly educated. Where educational factors are held constant, however, *adat* observance, whether through social pressures or personal conviction, "we must do what the old folks do" (*mesti ikut orang tua-tua kita*), must still be seen as a potent force.

CONCLUSION

To the modern, urban Malay population *adat* no longer seems to be identified with traditional Malay kinship, legal or political authority. Rather it represents a more generalised concern with a way of life, with ceremonial rites of passage and, in some eyes, with religion. Considerable variation in definition and interpretation of *adat* and of its significance for different segments of the Malay population further underscore its generalised nature. It is in this fact, however, that the continuing strength and resilience of *adat* apparently lies. For *adat* can be invoked in a wide diversity of contexts, some of which are only relevant to the modern, urban scene, to cover new and unprecedented situations, e.g. ethnic and sub-ethnic identities and modern business enterprise. Although *adat* can even be used to support sometimes conflicting arguments or courses of action, the very fact of its invocation is testimony to its continuing importance in the life of the average urban Malay.

Appendix

Table 1
INFORMANTS BY SUB-ETHNIC CATEGORY AND SEX

	Total	Male	Female
Indian	71	43	28
Indonesian	20	7	13
Arab	34	23	11
"Pure" Malay	146	66	80
Other	2	0	2
Total	273	139	134

Table 2
DEFINITIONS AND OPINIONS EXPRESSED BY SUB-ETHNIC
CATEGORY AND SEX

Opinion	Male				Female					Total
	Ind.	Indon.	Arab	Malay	Ind.	Indon.	Arab	Malay	Other	
A. Definitions										
Generic-descriptive definition	9	3	3	15	13	2	2	26	1	74
Ceremonial listing definition	3	0	0	5	5	4	2	6	0	27
Mentions Hindu origin of <i>adat</i>	7	1	1	4	5	1	0	2	0	21
Symbolic-traditional definition	3	1	0	12	4	4	0	9	0	33
Social sanction definition	2	0	0	6	8	2	4	10	0	32
Confuse <i>adat</i> and religion	4	1	0	1	11	2	0	8	0	27
B. Attitudes										
Committed to <i>adat</i> : "must be followed"	0	2	0	7	8	1	2	21	1	42
<i>Adat</i> not necessary: can be dropped	8	3	9	15	5	1	5	7	1	54
<i>Kenduri</i> not necessary	3	1	3	5	1	0	3	2	0	18
<i>Bersanding</i> not necessary	8	2	5	13	4	1	3	5	1	42
Selective use of <i>adat</i>	12	2	1	12	8	0	0	12	0	47
Spend as much on <i>adat</i> as you can afford	4	0	0	5	9	1	1	17	0	37
Don't go into debt	4	2	0	14	4	0	0	7	0	31

N.B. As mentioned on p. 94 above, the totals in neither the section on "opinions" or "attitudes" alone add up to 273, since some individuals chose not to give a distinct definition, and a different number and combination of attitudes was given by each individual.

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