The village as a ‘community of practice’
Constitution of village belonging through leisure sociality

The notion of the village has been not only ubiquitous but also controversial in the anthropology of Southeast Asia. Traditional approaches taking the village as the subject of ethnographic description and as an essential analytical concept, and often collapsing the categories of locality and community, have been increasingly criticized since the early 1970s (Ruiter and Schulte Nordholt 1989). Jeremy Kemp (1988, 1989), one of the main proponents of this critique, defined the idea of the village presented in previous studies as a ‘seductive mirage’ derived from two agendas: a theoretical one, positing continuity and cohesion, and a methodological one, overstressing the importance of fieldwork and data gathered through personal experience. Following this critique, more recent approaches (for example, Kemp 1988, 1989; Hirsch 1991; Shamsul 1989) have tended to consider the village as a discursive category. This category appears to emerge from the partial correspondence between two discursive fields: the academic, in which anthropologists and other social scientists ‘created’ communities in their search for ‘holistic units’ and ‘corporate entities’ corresponding to a locality, and the political, in which governments ‘created’ villages as administrative units (King and Wilder 2003:77).

In the Malaysian context, Shamsul (1989:20) considered the latter aspect to be of particular relevance, as he concluded that ‘the “village” is the most powerful instrument through which administrative, political, and social control has been effected in rural Malaysia’. Thompson (2002:54, note 3) argues that the village (kampung in Malay) is the subject of a Malaysia-wide hegemonic discourse, which appears ubiquitously in urban-dominated media, primarily the national curriculum and school textbooks, as well as television, newspapers, and popular music. Within this discourse, the ‘kampung embodies ideas about modernity, tradition, class, ethnicity, morality, belonging and anomie’ (Thompson 2002:54). The discourse circulated by the media presents the kampung as ‘the residue of an unchanged past, where residents “still”

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(masih) engage in gotong-royong\(^1\) mutual self-help activities’, and people are placed outside of the consumer economy and infrastructure is still lacking (Thompson 2002:57). Applying Raymond Williams’s notion of ‘structure of feeling’, ‘a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities’ Thompson (2002:54) argues that the \textit{kampung} has an essential position in a ‘structure of feeling’ contrasting rural and urban Malaysia.

In this article\(^2\) I argue that the notion of \textit{kampung} is a folk notion used by the inhabitants of Kitau, a rural settlement in the East Malaysian state of Sabah, to refer to themselves as a group of people not only residing in an administrative unit, but also having a sense of common belonging based on the sharing of some common practices. The notion is central to a discourse circulating among villagers, which I will call ‘kampungism’ for want of a better term, that declares the autonomy of the village and its grounding in local practices and traditions, downplaying its integration within the regional, national, and global economic and political system.

The concept of village, therefore, becomes central to my attempt to understand the practices of Kitau residents – and more precisely those taking place during the time spent in the \textit{kampung}, leisure time – for its centrality in the discourse through which they make sense of what they do. As such I argue for the necessity to take it seriously, following Chua (2007) in using what she calls ‘native exegesis’ as the basis for an analytical framework.

At the same time, I consider the way in which the sense of ‘groupness’ is created in practice by applying Etienne Wenger’s notion (1998:45) of ‘community of practice’, which he defines as a group ‘created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise’ and based on the learning derived from engagement with each other, which results in the development of shared practices. The advantage of using the concept lies in the possibility it offers to define the unit of analysis in terms of what people do and the meaning they attribute to what they do rather than on fixed criteria of belonging.

My interest in the notion of community of practice also derives from the way it can be used to account for the formation of a sense of belonging among those sharing certain practices. In that regard, Wenger (1998) distinguishes communities of practice in terms of what he calls the ‘mode of belonging’ associated with them, that of ‘engagement’, consisting in the direct participation in social practices and in the constant negotiation of their meaning among their practitioners. This ‘mode of belonging’ is different from the other two listed by Wenger (1998:178-9, 181-3): ‘imagination’, the sense of being part of

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\(^1\) A Malay term referring to voluntary communal work occasionally carried out by villagers (see further).

\(^2\) The research on which this article is based was made possible by the support of Loughborough University Social Sciences Department as well as by a small grant from the Radcliffe-Brown Trust.
an ‘imagined community’ (see Anderson, 1991, from whom Wenger derives the concept) of people sharing some common characteristics or practices, even without being involved in the joint development of a shared practice, and ‘alignment’, involving ‘bridg[ing] time and space to form broader enterprises so that participants become connected through the coordination of their energies, actions and practices’. This classification is useful in distinguishing between ways in which the sense of belonging to a group – a ‘community’ as Wenger (and Anderson) calls it – is formed and sustained. Both the nation and the ethnic group can be considered, according to this typology, as communities of imagination but also, when they become the basis for any corporate form of action, as communities of alignment. The belonging to the village ‘community (of practice)’ on the other hand, in the case I am considering, derives from engagement in practice, and more specifically in social interactions between villagers taking place during their non-working time.

My argument is that the sense of belonging derived from such practices is very significant to the villagers as it is at the basis of a form of collective identification, the definition and meaning of which they are more in control of than is the case with other collective categories such as the nation or the ethnic group. This argument is in line with those of authors such as Vered Amit (2002), who consider social groups as being conceptualized primarily in terms of what is held in common among their members and as being constituted through the shared experience of participation in particular association and events, and Anthony Cohen (1996:804), according to whom ‘it is the level nearer to the experience of the individual […] that most commonly provides referents to one’s identity and that do “most of the work of identity”’.

Kampung Kitua: continuity and change

The district of Penampang, where Kitua is located, has historically been inhabited by the Kadazan, a sub-section of the Dusunic peoples (officially referred to as Kadazandusun),\(^3\) the majority indigenous ethnic group of Sabah, a population of rice farmers who used to live in longhouses and practise head-hunting but who have shifted to single-family dwelling already during colonial times (Rutter 1985; Glyn-Jones 1953). According to various ethnographic records (Glyn-Jones 1953; Appell 1968; Harrison 1974; Evans 1990), the village was the most important traditional political unit for the Kadazan and other

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\(^3\) The official term presently used in Sabah and Malaysia to refer to the ethnic group previously referred to as Dusun and then as Kadazan is Kadazandusun. In order to avoid the political undertones of the term Kadazandusun, I prefer to use the term ‘Dusun peoples’, which simply points to linguistic and cultural commonalities among most of the groups referred to by the label Kadazandusun.
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Dusunic peoples, being, according to Harrison (1974), ‘jurally and ritually corporate’, and it constituted, together with the domestic family, their major social grouping. Life in the village was regulated by *adat*, a corpus of customary laws passed orally from generation to generation that dealt with relationships between individuals and between individuals and the village, including incest prohibitions, rules for marriages, and inheritance regulations. The rules of *adat* were traditionally enforced by the headman who settled disputes and claims through its application and who presided over the village gatherings attended by all adult males, in which all decisions were made (Glyn-Jones 1953).

With the establishment of British control over the area starting from 1881, life changed for the population of Penampang, as the district became subject to an administrative and judiciary system that retained the institution of the village headman and codified native law, and at the same time de facto replaced the authority of *adat* with that of formal law and politics, a change that continued even more markedly in post-colonial times (Luping 1994). Other essential changes taking place during colonial and post-colonial times were the building of infrastructure, primarily roads, the settling of a significant number of Chinese, who mostly mixed with the Kadazan, and the establishment of formal education and the conversion of the local population by Christian, mostly Catholic, missionaries. As a result, the population of Kituau is at present almost completely Roman Catholic, with only five Muslim families and two practising the traditional religion. The village still has a chief *bobohizan*, a priestess of the Kadazan traditional religion, and two apprentices, all of whom are more than 60 years old.

The village of Kituau is located about 15 kilometres from the centre of Sabah’s state capital Kota Kinabalu, but just a few kilometres beyond the reach of its urban sprawl, as the city has gradually expanded into the surrounding rural areas where in the past only Kadazan villages were found. The characteristics of Kituau make it quite representative of the villages in the area, even if it is more dispersed than the majority, consisting of 132 houses mostly located, like traditional Kadazan villages, along a river, as well as along what is at present a sealed road. The official village population is about 1000, all Kadazan, but there are also about 200 illegal immigrants from Indonesia, the majority of whom are Bugis, living in huts in the forest and tapping rubber, while others are from Southeast Indonesia (*Timur*) and work and live in rented vegetable gardens.

While 90 per cent of the population own some land, none of the residents depend on agriculture for their livelihood, but rather they rely on a salary, some form of self-employment, or state pension. The salary earners are employed both in the public and private sectors, working either in Kota Kinabalu or in the main town of Penampang, Donggonggon, about 7 kilometres away, as there are no economic activities in the village apart from a
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grocery shop-cum-bar. Some of the residents (around 20) also work as unlicensed taxi drivers between Donggonggon and the nearby villages. A large proportion of the population is not economically active as about one-third is below 18 years old and more than 10 per cent are made up of pensioners.

While there are differences in wealth within the village, with a handful of families at the official poverty threshold and a few rich ones, the majority of the residents can be placed in the middle, belonging to a class of clerks, skilled labourers, shop assistants, or teachers, owning the house in which they live and some land. The villagers seem not to consider these differences in wealth in terms of social class, but rather they stress the egalitarian principles at the basis of the ‘village ethos’ and emphasize that wealth is just a resource that is useful in enabling people to take part in the feasting and cooperation required to be part of the ‘community’ (see further). In sum, the residents of Kituau tend to downplay differences in wealth between them and not to see fellow villagers in terms of social class, a fact that corresponds to an effective lack of stratification on the basis of wealth or occupation. An exception is constituted by two individuals who formerly were influential politicians at the state level and used to be patrons of a relatively large number of clients in the area, including some of the residents.

The main two political figures are the village headman, referred to by the Malay term ketua kampung, and the chairman of the Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung (JKKK, Village Development and Security Committee), a committee formed by residents, which deals with development and security issues. Both figures, however, are directly subordinate to political authority, as the former was appointed by the local assemblyman, and the latter requires the approval of local politicians for funds necessary to realize any project or work in the village. In conclusion, I would argue that the village economic, political, and jural autonomy is greatly curtailed by the power and control of the nation-state.

The kampung at the intersection of national, ethnic and local discourses

As argued by Thompson (2002), the village is the subject of a dominant, ‘official’ discourse circulating in the main Malaysian urban-dominated media contrasting the village with the city and presenting it as the locus of authenticity. This discourse presents some ‘hegemonic associations’, such as those between the kampung and security and public surveillance of each other’s actions, and distinctions, such as the rural-urban one. According to Thompson (2002:68), another essential association is that between kampung and ethnicity, as the ‘spatial’ and ‘ethnic’ discourses reinforce each other.

While the national discourse identifies the kampung with the Malays, the
majority ethnic group and the one that mostly makes up the rural population, the same association can be made for the Kadazan and other Dusunic peoples. The local discourse I found to be recurrent in my informants’ expression of their views on the village and its members identifies the village as the centre and archetype of rural life, characterized by different economic and social relationships than those prevailing in the towns. The discourse also contrasts the alleged sense of closeness, sharing, and reciprocal surveillance of the *kampung* with the individualism and social fragmentation of the towns. Following the hegemonic association between village and ethnicity, the inhabitants of Kituau identify Kadazan-ness with the *kampung* way of life.

This identification was at the very basis of the attempt to elaborate a modern ‘Kadazan’ identity by a Western-educated ‘Kadazan intelligentsia’ (Roff 1969) through the selective re-elaboration and objectification (Winzeler 1997) of cultural traits and traditions starting from the early 1950s. This discourse has reached the rural masses together with the modern Kadazan cultural production mostly through the mass media such as the Kadazan sections of the public radio broadcast and local newspapers. The proponents of this modern culture always emphasized the alleged rural origin of the cultural elements they re-elaborated as a source of authenticity and continuity with the past. This stress on the village also presents an actual continuity with Kadazan tradition as the *kampung* was, according to Harrison (1974), not only the main political and jural unit, but also the most basic level of ascription for the Dusunic peoples. The inhabitants of Kituau consider their village to be a ‘Kadazan village’, a conception based on the fact that almost all its residents are Kadazan and that the village is situated in the predominantly Kadazan area of Penampang. This equation of the *kampung* with Kadazan-ness, however involves the exclusion of its foreign inhabitants.

Another essential aspect of Kadazan-ness, as perceived by the people of Kituau, is its link with Christianity, which has come to constitute an essential rallying point in difficult times (Reid 1997; Loh 1992; Luping 1994) as well as an essential form of distinction between the Kadazan and the Muslim Sabahans and, even more, the peninsular Malays. Again, the equation between the village and the Christian Kadazan community involves some ideological work leading to overlooking some intra-village differences, namely the presence of three families of Muslim villagers. The status of these villagers is highly ambiguous as their religion in some way, according to the hegemonic Malaysian discourse on ethnicity, gives them the possibility to be identified and to identify themselves as Malay, therefore partially denying their Kadazan ethnic origin. Fellow villagers respond to the ambiguous status of these families either by considering them as non-members of the *kampung*, or by allowing them membership by ignoring their religious affiliation or providing ad hoc justifications for their status, such as that they were under
certain pressure to convert in order to obtain a job, scholarship, or promotion, but that ‘deep inside’, ‘in reality’ they still are Kadazan. This treatment of fellow villagers can be attributed to an attempt to construct the village as homogeneous, therefore allowing for its identification with Kadazan-ness. On the other hand, this attitude can be seen as an attempt by the villagers to resolve their ambiguous status within the Malaysian ethnic system, which by classifying them as *bumiputera* (Malaysian, ‘sons of the soil’), citizens indigenous to Malaysia, bestows special privileges to them, but provides the basis for their assimilation with the majority of the *bumiputera* class, the Malays. This assimilation, which has often involved an attempt at Islamization, has been at times treated as implicit and natural and at times imposed upon the Kadazan and other indigenous peoples of Borneo more forcefully than has been the case with non-indigenous peoples.

Similarly to Thompson’s argument (2002:54) about the Malays, the Kadazan are not just passive recipients of national and ethnic discourses, but they ‘weave those ideas and images into their own lives, desires, and interpretations of subjective experience’. In the case of the Kadazan, however, this appropriation of national and ethnic discourses originates from the local discourse I have named kampungism.

The kampungist discourse stresses the primacy of the *kampung* as the locus of real belonging and authentic social ties, and it contrasts the togetherness of the villagers with the individualism of city dwellers. This ruralist, conservative discourse denies the suburban state of the village and its interconnectedness with the state capital and the wider Malaysian system. In the realm of economics, the kampungist ideology tends to conceal the fact that the resources necessary for the social practices that materialize the *kampung* derive from the urban environment. The *kampung* practices are also controlled by the urban economy in that they take place during residual and leisure time, when the villagers are free from working commitments, and these practices occur within a strict temporal regime regulating life based on clock and calendar time (see Postill 2006).

However, while Kuituau residents derive their livelihood from participating in the urban cash economy, either in the form of salaried labour, self-employment, or pension, their expenditure is mostly limited to basic items such as food, clothing and household items, bills, and petrol, which leaves a sizeable amount of economic resources to be spent in village sociality, especially for sponsoring feasts.

In this respect, they can be considered similar to the Muria Gonds, a tribal society of India described by Gell (1986:110), for whom ‘production adheres to the premises of one kind of economy, whereas consumption [in many cases] continues to be based on the premises of a quite different economy’.

It appears clear that there is a contradiction between the fact that while
the kampungist discourse supports the idea of the autonomy of the locality, it is hardly local in origin, but rather it is a local re-elaboration of national and ethnic discourses. The kampungist ideology appropriates the structure of feeling revolving around the kampung, and by equating Kadazan-ness with kampung life, regulated by adat and by the principles of equality and cooperation, declares it as belonging to Kadazan-ness, and the practices in which it appears and out of which it emerges as being in continuity with Kadazan traditions and values.

**Tensions between the local and the national: the kampung and modernity**

The issue of modernity is central to the relationship between the national discourse and kampungism, which reflects the ambiguity present in the relationship between the Kadazan and the Malaysian state. While, on the one hand, the state rhetoric presents its rural population as the repository of traditional values and lifestyle, on the other, and particularly with indigenous peoples of Borneo such as the Kadazan, it presents them as people in need of modernization and a change in their ‘mindset’. This ambivalent position towards the rural population is expressed in discourses of nostalgia on the one hand and development on the other. The Kadazan, on their part, aspire to the development and well-being promised by the state, which should allow them to ‘walk abreast “along the path to prosperity”’ (Postill 2006:109), while they wish to be able to keep their culture and way of life. Realizing that, as Rosaldo (2003) argues is the case for most minorities of Southeast Asia, the Malaysian state asks them to stop being what they are, the Kadazan react, on the one hand, by emphasizing their sense of belonging to the kampung and, on the other, by proposing an alternative narrative of modernity to the one brought forward by the Malaysian government.

Similarly to Malay villagers (Thompson 2002:57), the residents of Kituau consider modernization mostly in terms of infrastructure, economic development, and change in lifestyle as well as having an international position as a country. As various villagers whom I asked about their life history contended, those belonging to the senior generation have seen the majority of these changes taking place and have experienced them as changing their way of life, in terms of providing them, in most cases, with some level of formal education, enabling them to carry out manual or clerical salaried jobs, progressively replacing rice farming as a source of subsistence. They have witnessed the building of the first sealed roads in the rural areas and the development of a modern hospital and other infrastructure as well as the reshaping of the rural and urban areas. Their life has been made easier by the availability of electricity, piped water, telephones, cars, air-conditioning and diffusion of
many other technologies. Those who have experienced these changes mostly told me that they considered them as positive, making life easier and more comfortable. They identified most of these changes as having taken place in the post-colonial period, and therefore attributed these developments to Malaysia, which they consider the most powerful source of modernization in the recent past and present time.

At the same time, however, more than one villager implicitly attributed modernity to the influence of the orang putih, the ‘white man’, who initiated all these changes by introducing their superior technology and political organization during the colonial era, and who were the first to establish education, infrastructure, and Christianity. On the basis of this account of modernity alternative to the one promoted by the narrative presented in state propaganda, many villagers implicitly advocated the possibility of a different form of modernity from that promoted by Malaysia, involving development in infrastructure and material conditions of life but not at the expense of cultural homogenization and surrender of their cultural uniqueness.

The local discourse, which constitutes the result of a negotiation with local, national and global discourses and relationships of power, which on the whole corresponds to what Wenger (1998) calls an ‘economy of meaning’, informs the meaning of the villagers’ practices, through which, as I argue in the next section, they generate a sense of belonging to the kampung.

**Kituau as a community of practice**

Wenger (1998) considers the main defining feature of a community of practice to be what he calls ‘mutual engagement’, being engaged in actions whose meanings are negotiated between members. Together with mutual engagement, he presents two other dimensions that are essential in constituting a community of practice: ‘a joint enterprise’, its raison d’être – defined in the very process of being pursued – and a ‘shared repertoire’, a set of ‘routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice’ (Wenger 1998:83). The notion of community used by Wenger (1998:76-7) refers specifically to groups that ‘arise out of engagement in practice and not out of an idealized view of what a community should be like’, and it does not have connotations of mutual support or peaceful coexistence.

In my case study, the community can be considered to include a subset of the village residents, which however constitutes the majority of the inhabitants, comprising those actively involved in the social life of the kampung. This understanding of the community of practice shows a significant correspon-
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dence with a folk notion expressed by some of my informants, who happened to be among those most involved in village sociality, assigning ‘full’ membership in the kampung only to those who demonstrated an active participation in the life of the village and a concern about its affairs. This folk notion of membership in the kampung was reflected in the scornful attitude towards those who do not participate in other families’ celebrations or who simply do not buy a round of drinks when it is their turn. An extreme example was offered by the case of a family whose members, because they never attended the celebrations of other villagers, became in fact excluded from the community, a fact that resulted in their having to hire people to participate in the funeral of a family member.

In spatial terms, the great majority of the members of the community of practice live within the geographic boundaries of the village. The practices in which they are involved also take place mostly in Kituau, but also in nearby villages, where residents of Kituau visit friends or relatives or attend their celebrations, and in Donggonggon, where they go to the local market (tamu), shops or supermarket, kedai kopi (coffee shop), or restaurant or, in rare cases, to one of the pubs or karaoke bars. With the notable exclusion of those commuting daily to Kota Kinabalu for work, the horizon of most villagers is mostly limited to the Penampang district, where the majority of their relatives and friends live and where they are able to carry out the majority of tasks necessary for everyday life. Many villagers also tend to express an aversion towards going to the capital, often adducing that it is too busy and hot⁴ there.

A relevant yet extreme example of such an attitude towards the city is given by an elderly woman who has never been to Kota Kinabalu and told me she saw no need to go there, ‘To find what? Heat, noise and too many people’.

In the next section, I develop the frame of analysis based on the concept of community of practice through the examination of specific leisure social practices I have observed during my stay in Kituau. The cases I present include the occasional informal meetings of groups of friends – especially those of a group of adult males who frequently meet at the house of my host, prayer sessions carried out at people’s houses during Lent, and classes of Kadazan traditional dance held for children in preparation for the annual harvest festival. Moreover, I also consider the organization of special one-off events such as celebrations for life-cycle events of some village residents and gotong-royong. The gotong-royong (a Malay expression common in popular and official use in Malaysia and Indonesia; see Bowen 1986) is communal work occasionally carried out by villagers for the maintenance of the local

⁴ While I heard the Malay term (panas) being most often used in this case, it is interesting to note that the Kadazan term for hot (ahasu) traditionally also carried the connotation of ‘spiritually hot’, a notion referring to a negative state often caused by a breach of adat that needed to be redressed by appropriate offerings to the spirits.
infrastructure, such as roads or bridges, or to clear rubbish from the area. The life-cycle events include the ‘full moon birthday’ – held when a newborn baby is one month old and corresponding, in Kadazan tradition, with the first shaving of the child’s head – engagements, weddings, funerals and death anniversaries, house-warmings, and birthdays. Considering the number of people each individual is connected with through ties of kinship and friendship, everyone will have an invitation to a party or celebration on most weekends, and at times more than one on the same day.

_Mutual engagement_

The community of practice constituted by the engagement of residents in village leisure is sustained by a great investment of free time, money, and other resources by most of the villagers, which can be considered as one of the main elements of mutual engagement that Wenger (1998:74-5) refers to as ‘work of community maintenance’. This is particularly the case for what concerns the organization of feasts to celebrate life-cycle events, which constitutes a considerable economic and organizational burden for the families holding them, with an expenditure that ranges from as little as RM 100\(^5\) for a simple birthday to several thousands for a big wedding or engagement. Guests are expected, if they can, to contribute some money towards the expenses for holding bigger celebrations such as weddings and funerals. These are given in the form of _angpau_,\(^6\) an envelope with some cash, the amount of which depends on the relationship linking the guest to the host as well as the economic means of the former. In line with the folk notion of membership outlined earlier, my informants put the emphasis on the social duty of participating in celebrations rather than on contributing economically and stressed the freedom of participants to choose the amount they give and can afford.

The importance and character of present-day village sociality in Kituau show significant continuities with the tradition of the Kadazan and other Dusunic peoples, which involve a great number of religious and life-cycle celebrations (Evans 1953, 1990; Rutter 1985; Glyn-Jones 1953; Phelan 2001).

Another important form of investment in the community is the voluntary offering of labour in the case of _gotong-royong_, which usually ends with a small feast, in which drinks and food are sponsored not only by the participants but also by those who have not taken part, who are asked to contribute at least financially – a contribution that is usually also requested from drivers

\(^5\) Corresponding to about USD 25 at the time of my fieldwork, but equivalent to USD 100 if compared to the cost of living in Malaysia.

\(^6\) The term, and the practice of giving money in a sealed envelope, usually red in colour, is borrowed from the Chinese.
passing by the road or the bridge where the work has been done. On other occasions, also referred to by the term gotong-royong or the Kadazan mitata-bang (‘working together’), village residents voluntarily offer their help to a single family for some work requiring a great amount of labour. On one such occasion in which I participated, about 20 village men offered their help to build a cement platform at the back of a house so that the owners could have some extra space to welcome the guests during the forthcoming wedding of a family member. The family benefiting from the work fed the members of the gotong-royong party and offered drinks and more food at the end of it. The remark made by one of the participants – who said that considering the amount of money spent on food and drinks, including expensive whisky, by the host family, it would have been cheaper for them to hire some Filipino workers – shows how ‘community maintenance’ can be an end in itself as well as a pleasurable and rewarding activity.

The work of community maintenance does not only take the form of special occasions such as feasts and gotong-royong, but also frequent visits of villagers, on their own or in groups, to other villagers, and gatherings of one or two friends which grow into a small party with the others joining in.

Friendship is one of the main relationships at the basis of the community of practice under consideration, the other being kinship and neighbourhood. These ties between people at the same time give rise to the community of practice and are reinforced through it. As the members of the community of practice interact frequently and, are in many cases related to some extent, they can mostly be considered to be connected by what Granovetter (1973) calls ‘strong ties’, characterized by a relatively great amount of time spent together, emotional intensity, mutual confiding, and reciprocal services. The predominance of social interaction between people linked by strong ties gives a substantial basis to the contrast between village and urban areas made by the kampungist discourse, differentiating the village social forms from those prevalent in the urban environment and in the workplace, which arguably include a higher proportion of weak ties.

Another essential character of communities of practice considered by Wenger (1998:75-6) is that their existence does not entail homogeneity, but rather that differences as well as similarities can be created through mutual engagement, and each participant has a unique place and identity within them. The unique place and identity accorded to its participants is an element that is stressed by the villagers of Kituau, who often make reference to the unique character and personality of individuals, their ‘style’ as Jacob, my main informant, calls it. This ‘style’ usually corresponds to typical patterns of behaviour or speech, for example, a villager is called ‘loudspeaker’ for obvious reasons, another is known for his silence, and another is named ‘the starring’ for his frequent attempts to take centre stage, which sometimes involves
starting a fight with people who are physically much bigger and stronger than him.

The fact that the community of practice is not homogeneous is aptly shown by the remarks of a resident in his fifties, Marcus, who, in the course of an interview, talked about what he considers to be one of the main divisions in the village, namely age. He expressed these differences in terms of a local discourse I have encountered on other occasions in the village, that of the ‘generation gap’, distinguishing between a senior generation, used to the traditional life and to practise agriculture, and a junior one, having grown up when life had already become ‘easy’ (senang). This is how he expressed the concept:

Marcus: ‘In this village there are two different groups, one is the senior citizens, that is all of us here, the other is the junior. The youth are different from the senior citizens.’
Question: ‘Can they mix together?’
Marcus: ‘They can be mixed, but the attitude is different. When there is a gathering all mix, but for what concerns the development of the village they are different.’
Question: ‘Why?’
Marcus: ‘Because of many changes in the world… too much TV and they forgot manual work, planting paddy, tapping rubber’.

Joint enterprise

Kituau residents share the joint enterprise, ‘defined by participants in the very process of pursuing it’ as a ‘negotiated response to their situation’ (Wenger 1998:77), of making their lives better under the conditions in which they live. This involves enjoying themselves in their free time while establishing meaningful and satisfying relationships with other villagers. Reaching these goals gives the members of the community of practice a sense of fulfilment based on a feeling of belonging and of being rooted in a familiar environment that complements other fulfilsments they might derive from other practices and aspects of their lives such as work. This corresponds to what Warde (2005:142-3) defines as the ‘internal rewards’ of a practice, in which the fulfilment is derived directly from the practice. On the other hand, Warde (2005:142-3) argues, practices also provide external rewards, consisting in the prestige, economic advantage, or access to privileged social networks enjoyed by the practitioners. In the case of Kituau residents, the establishment of relationships involving collaboration and mutual help, which provide a useful form of local welfare can be considered an ‘external reward’ of sociality practices. Examples of this form of help are provided by the contribution of fellow villagers to the work and expenses needed to organize celebrations and to carry
out improvements in each other’s houses that I have described earlier.

Another essential enterprise shared by the villagers is that of maintaining what they perceive to be their tradition, such as language, religion, some aspects of adat, and, more generally, their ‘way of life’. An example of the efforts to maintain such traditions is constituted by the teaching of sumazau to school-age boys and girls. Sumazau is the most traditional Kadazan dance, formerly used in shamanic rituals connected with traditional religion and with successful return from headhunting, which has become an iconic marker of the Kadazan, of which they are very proud and for which they are renowned all over Sabah. Boys and girls participated in practice sessions held in the dewan raya – a wooden structure standing in the middle of every Malaysian village which is used for any type of village-level meeting or celebration – and were taught the right steps by a local schoolteacher, Benson, who regularly devotes some of his free time to teach sumazau. While I was in Kituau, these sessions took place almost every afternoon for about three months in the period before the harvest festival, during which the boys and girls were trained to perform in dancing competitions and other events taking place in the festive period.

Learning the beautiful eagle-like arm movements and characteristic footwork and war cry characterizing the dance constitutes a significant example of the constitution of ethnicity through primary socialization (Jenkins 2008). The form of learning Kadazan-ness taking place through learning sumazau corresponds to the locus classicus of acquisition of habitus considered by Bourdieu (1977:89), constituting a ‘structural apprenticeship which leads to the em-bodying of the structures of the world’, inscribing Kadazan-ness in the children’s bodies. As argued by Bentley (1987) and Jenkins (2008), in their development of Bourdieu’s ideas (1977), primary socialization is essential not only to the development of categorization, but also to a sense of self-identity that takes the form of a deep sense of belonging and oneness with those sharing similar early life experiences. In this case, the children learn physically, through their bodies, to be Kadazan by moving as Kadazan, by acquiring physical skills that not only make them able to properly court a suitable partner, but also unequivocally express their Kadazan identity and distinguish them from outsiders.

Another essential element of a community of practice is that the negotiation of a joint enterprise determines relations of mutual accountability between its members (Wenger 1998:81). In the case of Kituau, this mutual accountability takes the form of the need to respect the unwritten rules of the community as well as to solve conflicts when they arise. This form of mutual accountability can be attributed to the beliefs belonging to Kadazan tradition,

7 The foremost annual celebration of the Kadazan and other Dusunic peoples, known as Pesta Kaamatan in Sabah, takes place during the whole month of May and culminates in the public holiday on 30 and 31 May.
according to which a breach of adat would create a state of spiritual heat, ahasu, which was dangerous and which had to be ‘cooled’ down by paying an appropriate compensation, the sogit (‘cooling’), usually an animal to be sacrificed during a ritual feast in which the whole village participated (Glyn-Jones 1953; Harrison 1974). Despite the erosion of the importance of adat determined by the growing importance of written legislation and politics and by the fact that many domains traditionally regulated by adat have become secondary to the life of most villagers, some of these principles are still valid in present-day Kituau. An instance of their application I had the opportunity to observe during my stay there was a monogit (Kadazan ‘to cool’) or makan sogit (‘eating the cooling’) feast, which entailed the slaughtering of a buffalo, as a compensation prescribed by adat offered by a young man who had made a young woman pregnant outside wedlock. Following the tradition, the buffalo was eaten at a feast held at the house of the aggrieved party where every villager was welcome and no formal invitations were sent out; nor was there any expectation placed on guests to contribute to the expenses, which were paid by the family of the offender. The event, which was attended by the majority of the villagers, was a significant example of the role of festive events in creating social cohesion and allowing for the reconciliation of offenders with the community. This traditional approach to the breach of adat forms an important aspect of the way Kadazan individuals are mutually accountable for their actions even if all but a few villagers do not – or at least affirm not to – believe in the spiritual dangers connected with the breach of adat.

Shared repertoire

The villagers of Kituau also form a community of practice by sharing a repertoire of ‘routines, words, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions’ produced or adopted by the community and which have become part of their practice (Wenger 1998:83). This repertoire reflects the history of mutual engagement and provides a set of established interpretations, which, however, do not necessarily constrain the generation of new meanings. In the case of the kampung, the repertoire involves both cultural traditions inherited by its present members and stories and understandings generated within their mutual engagement. The two, however, should not be seen as completely different, as even traditions dating back to an unidentified past and considered part of an ethnic culture are constantly appropriated and negotiated, and sometimes changed, by individuals through their engagement in practice.

An essential element of the villagers’ shared repertoire is the notion of aramaiti, a Dusun word (more commonly used than the Penampang variant alamaiti), deriving from the Austronesian root ramai (‘many’), and which might
be translated as something like ‘being many together’, describing a joyful meeting of people. The term expresses both a Kadazan notion of commensality, connected with traditional values of equality and hospitality, and the pleasure deriving from it, and the actual social gatherings in which it is practised. The social gatherings referred to by the term aramaiti often involve the consumption of alcohol, a practice so common in Kadazan gatherings that the term is commonly used by all Sabahans to mean something like a drinking session or feast.

A part of the shared repertoire of the kampung community of practice consists of a shared taste and understanding of the different value and prestige of different practices and products involved in aramaiti. On ordinary occasions, these evaluations are mostly limited to the alcoholic beverages consumed, which are placed on a scale that goes from the least prestigious home-made traditional drinks – talak⁸ and lihing⁹ – to beer, to the most prestigious and expensive whisky and cognac. The evaluation of festive events, on the other hand, takes place at different levels: the quantity and type of drinks and food offered, the place at which the celebration is held, the presence of a band playing live music or of a competent speaker, and the type of decorations used. The inclusion of imported elements offers many more possibilities for the display of extravagant, expensive, or grand features which, while bearing witness to the ‘modernity’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ of the host, are not necessarily perceived by guests as being of a higher quality. Nevertheless, some imported practices have already become established as local traditions, as is the case with the serving, along with some Kadazan delicacies such as hinava,¹⁰ of Chinese-style dishes. This mix of local and adopted practices and elements also distinguishes the Kadazan of the Penampang plains from other Dusunic people of the interior, where, as I observed on one occasion when I attended a wedding, feasts tend to be more simple and traditional. This comparison between Penampang and the interior is also expressed by the Kadazan themselves, who consider their celebrations to be more ‘modern’, while a person from the interior confirmed this view telling me that their celebrations are more traditional and that the people of Penampang are very ‘sophisticated’, to the point that at times they can become ‘arrogant’. While the association of a different value and prestige with different products and practices according to widely shared ‘tastes’ can be considered as an incipient form of ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu 1984), the prestige deriving from the offering of highly esteemed products and practices by a host is only limited to the event, and does not build into a higher status or become associated with a class. For the Kadazan,

⁸ A Kadazan rice liquor traditionally distilled by all families and still made at home by some women.
⁹ A traditional drink made from fermented rice.
¹⁰ A Kadazan dish comprising pieces of raw fish marinated in lemon juice, with the characteristic sour taste of the seeds of bambangan, a local fruit similar to mango.
as for the Muria Gonds (Gell 1986:119), ‘social feasting and drinking is not undertaken in a competitive spirit, in order to demonstrate superiority along the lines of Melanesian ceremonial exchange, but is intended to demonstrate commitment to the village and to [ethnic] values’. This fact can be attributed to the enduring Kadazan egalitarian ethos as well as to the limited presence and importance of class distinction between residents.

**Boundary**

Another essential characteristic of communities of practice is that, unlike communities generated through imagination or alignment, the former are bounded. The fact that they are bounded, however, does not mean they can be considered in isolation, but, on the contrary, they can be understood only in relation to other communities formed by other practices (Wenger 1998:103).

Despite the fact that the boundaries of the community of practice under study are not clearly marked, its members seem to have no doubts about who belongs and who does not. The most striking aspect of the definition of boundaries is constituted by the exclusion of the immigrant population residing within the geographic space of the village. While they work for Kadazan landlords, they are rarely invited to the houses or celebrations of Kadazan villagers, and the contact with them is kept to the necessary minimum. This exclusion was epitomized by Jacob who, when I asked him whether any of the immigrants spoke Kadazan, replied: ‘Of course not, we Kadazan would never want to teach them our language’.

The consideration of the boundaries of the communities involves an understanding of the space within which it is situated. Its inhabitants associate the village with leisure, relaxation, shorts and sarongs, in opposition to the space of the city, characterized by work, big buildings, air-conditioning, and formal wear. The two environments are differentiated also in terms of leisure: while in the village free time is spent in socializing with fellow members of the community, free time in the city means ‘entertainment’, comprising practices relatively alien to most adult villagers such as going to the cinema or shopping, as well as ‘less respectable’ activities such as going to the karaoke bar.11 The village space is also a familiar space, which, as defined by Edensor (2002:54), ‘forms an unquestioned backdrop to daily tasks, pleasure and routine movement’, constituting ‘a habitat organised to enable continuity and stability, and which is recreated by [...] regular existential practices’. Space, he argues, is understood and experienced not only cognitively, but

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11 Karaoke bars in Kota Kinabalu and Donggonggon are usually staffed by young, attractive women and these bars are comparable to nightclubs.
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also through sensual, practical, and unreflexive knowledge. Edensor uses the notion of taskscape, ‘space to which inhabitants have an everyday practical orientation’, not determining actions, but allowing a certain range of actions and limiting others. Edensor (2002: 57), however, argues for expanding the notion of taskscape, which he considers to be useful to allow an appreciation of the ‘unreflexive constitution of spatial belonging’, with the consideration of ways of inhabiting space that are not connected with specific tasks, such as relaxing and resting.

An important intersection point is constituted by the only village shop, a *kedai runcit* (grocery shop), which offers the opportunity to consume beer and home-made *talak* on a few tables placed in the compound or to watch television, or play snooker or cards at the premises. The shop, called Usang after its owner, an enterprising Sino-Kadazan, is the only public space – apart from those with special functions such as the school or church – available in the village. It is a male domain, as women and children generally stay only for the short time necessary to buy some provisions. The shop is also the normal meeting point for a group of men who drink together almost every day after work, but other groups of men, including that of my main informants, also often go there. Usang is also the main place where the residents meet the immigrants, who often spend their free time in the shop. The interaction, mostly consisting of short discussions or playing cards or snooker together, offers some boundary-crossing while at the same time reinforcing the boundary, as it is rather different from that between the members of the community, and it is limited to a ‘neutral’, non-domestic space.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have described the way in which the village presents itself as a central nexus of the relationship between the state and the local in a village in the Penampang area of Sabah, Malaysia. On the one hand, the village is the subject of what Thompson (2002) defines as a hegemonic national discourse, presenting it as the locus of a traditional way of life and repository of Malay-ness. On the other, the same discourse is appropriated locally by the residents of the *kampung* I studied. This appropriation retained some of the key associations connected with the discourse, but it substituted the national dominant ethnicity, Malay-ness, with that of the inhabitants of the village, Kadazan-ness. It also presented itself as a dynamic element in a narrative of modernity different from the one offered by the government propaganda, one connected with Christianity, Western-influenced values, and a stronger connection with the West. The local version of the national discourse, which I call kampungism, stresses the alleged independence of the local from the extra-local and
the allegiance to local and ethnic values of cooperation and sharing, denying its own dependency on the national discourse in the same way in which its proponents deny theirs on urban salaried labour.

This local discourse, with its stress on locality and its alleged independence, is based on the strength of ties between villagers and on the prevalence of intra-village interactions during the free time of the majority of its inhabitants. On the basis of the importance and frequency of these interactions, I have classified the village through Wenger’s notion (1998) of ‘community of practice’, considering it as a ‘community’ constructed through a shared engagement practised by the majority of its residents. The concept seems to offer the great advantage of allowing serious consideration of a powerful ‘folk notion’, concentrating on what people actually do in practice while at the same time retaining the attention to discourse typical of social constructivist perspectives.

Another advantage constituted by the application of the community of practice approach lies in the way in which it enhances the understanding of the connection within practice and identity, and more particularly of the way in which a sense of collective belonging is constituted through the mutual sharing of time and activities. The stress on the construction of a sense of belonging through participation in shared practices resonates with the main characteristics of the kampungist discourse, its stress on the alleged local autonomy, and the great investment of time and resources made by the majority of villagers in community maintenance. These findings seem to be in line with those of scholars (for example Amit 2002; Cohen 1996) stressing the importance of the mutual sharing of time and experience over categorical identities in the formation of a sense of identity.

This aspect supports the conclusion, which is consistent with other aspects of my research, that Kadazan villagers in Penampang feel a stronger sense of belonging to the village than to the nation, which I attribute to the fact that the local identity is not only closer to direct experience, but also that it offers a higher degree of control over the definition of its meaning, therefore affording a higher degree of agency to people who feel excluded from or who feel as though they are second-class members of the national community (Rosaldo 2003).

As a result, I think this article makes a case for a renewed interest in the village at various levels: as a ‘folk notion’ to be taken seriously, as the subject of a hegemonic national discourse and of local versions of it, and above all as a ‘community’ not only imagined but defined through the sharing of common practices and which can constitute the basis of a strong sense of belonging, felt as authentic and empowering. The latter in particular is an aspect that shows the importance of the village as a discursive but also practical nexus of the interaction between the state and the local in Malaysia as well as, possibly, in other parts of Southeast Asia or of the world.
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