

# Depicting the Malay Culture among Communities in Merbok, Kedah

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## ABSTRACT

Malay became Malaysia's sole national language in 1967 and has been institutionalized with a modest degree of success. This study describes the evolution of the Malay culture particularly among communities in Merbok, Kedah and how religion helps to change values, thus changes the culture of the communities. The methodology adopted in this study was through the adoption of the oral history method and was found deemed appropriate for this type of study. Culture can be defined as the integrated system that related to values, beliefs, behaviors, norms, artifacts and other works of any society. In the human history, this is the culture that divides human beings or separates one community from another. Specifically, Malay culture encompassed within the definition are the universal aspects such as philosophy of life, art, literature and language, means of livelihood, food, traditional ceremony, equipment, dress, artifact, building, traditional medical treatment and Malay norms. With modernisation, the community spirit among the Malays is slowly eroding.

**Keywords:** Malay culture, Merbok Kedah, livelihood, paddy

## INTRODUCTION

In the olden days, the Malay community of the Bujang Valley relied heavily on nature for their livelihood. The full-time occupation of the villagers was paddy planting. In those days, when the ties between the members of community were strong, the villagers co-operated by taking turns working each other's fields. This concept called '*berderau*' ensured that work could be done faster, particularly for tasks that required huge man-power such as transplanting and harvesting. Animals such as buffaloes were used to work the field while the animal droppings and dung were used to fertilize the land

The community spirit was apparently displayed come the harvesting seasons. The villagers would take turns holding *kenduri beras baru* - a feast of newly harvested rice. Dishes of freshwater fish, caught from the very same paddy field they worked on, would be served together with the newly-harvested rice during the feast. It was the practice at that time for a pond to be dug in each plot of paddy field. This pond was popularly known as *telaga ikan* or a fish-well. Towards the harvesting season, as the paddy fields dried up, fish that inhabited the plot would be driven to seek shelter in the pond.

Once harvesting was done, the menfolk would drain the pond to catch the fish. At that time, fish such as *haruan* and *keli* could grow to be as big as a man's calf. Other fish found were *puyu* and *sepat*. The *haruan* would be simmered in tamarind juice to make *masak asam* while the *keli* would be cooked with *kerisik* – dried grated coconut that was pan-fried and later pounded until it turned into oily paste. These fish as well as edible shoots gathered from the surroundings would complement the newly harvested rice to be served to the villagers who had toiled together in the paddy fields under the hot burning sun.

Unlike the practice of these days, the harvested paddy was not sold to outsiders. Each family would keep the harvested paddy in a small granary called *bekas padi* built in the compound of their houses. From time to time, the womenfolk, with the help of the younger male family members, would husk the paddy to turn it into edible rice. The labour was made easy by using contraptions made of bamboo and clay – handmade by a village elder known as Tok Chat. Tok Chat built two such contraptions and placed them in two neighbouring villages - Kampung Bujang and Kampung Sungai Gelam - to be used free of charge by the villagers. He also built a windmill-like contraption shaped out of bamboo that was used to hasten the winnowing process.

As Ramadan approached, the womenfolk would work hand in hand to mill the plain white rice and glutinous rice into flour. Amidst chatter, they would grind the grains of rice into fine rice flour using stone mills that were turned by hand. Some would be boiling coconut milk in huge *kawah* or huge cauldrons to make coconut oil. Their hearts would be filled with joy as they lined the containers, filled with freshly ground flour and newly produced oil, on the shelves in their kitchens after a day of hard labour. This labour was done so that they could have a brief respite from the tedious chores during the month of Ramadan. The villagers would prepare delicacies in huge amounts during Ramadan so that they could share the food with their neighbours. It was a common practice at that time to exchange food with the neighbours so that each family could enjoy more variety of food during the breaking of fast. This again demonstrated the existence of a community spirit that permeated the everyday lives of the simple *kampung* folks then.

At that time, money was hard to come by. At times they did not even have fifty cents in their pockets. Some villagers would rear chickens for their eggs and the eggs would be sold in town in exchange for cash. One family used to rear so many chickens that, on the average, they managed to collect up to fifty eggs a day. Some children would bring an egg to school every day. The single egg would then be traded at the shop run by two migrants from India – Karim and Ibrahim – who had married two local women and had set up a sundry shop in the village. For a single egg, the children would be given a few sweets and five cents which would be spent while in school. That was how poor the villagers were at that time.

However, they never felt want for anything as food was easily found in their surroundings. Fish were caught either in the paddy fields or the many tributaries of Sungai Merbok that ran behind the village. From the paddy fields they caught fish such as *haruan*, *keli*, *sepat* and *puyu* whereas a fishing jaunt to Sungai Merbok would yield them prawns, crabs and fish such as *siakap*, *gelama*, *loban*, *ketang*, *kacang-kacang* and *tanda* –to name but a few. Clams and other shellfish were dug out from the muddy mangrove swamps, while vegetables were grown in the compound of their houses. They also gathered edible young

shoots from the wild plants such as *cabang tiga*, *halban*, *samak*, *beluntas* and *goncar* that grew in abundance in the village. As a village elder summed up, “In the olden days it was hard to find money but it was easy to find food.” He also said that, if given a choice he would prefer to live in the olden days.

The menfolk, aside from working in the paddy fields, also made a living by depending on Sungai Merbok. Some regularly went down to the river to fish. Some would chop down the mangrove trees and collect the wood for various purposes. Mangrove wood known for its hardness was used for making a lot of things, from houses to fences. Some men would peel the bark of *nyirih* trees and gathered them to be sold in Sungai Petani. The liquid extracted from the bark of *nyirih* trees was used to preserve fishing nets. Soaking fishing nets in the liquid ensured that the nets would last longer and not be so easily torn when used at sea. Apart from that, they also collected the fronds of *nipah* plants to be made into roofing materials or *attap*. By doing these odd jobs, the villagers managed to earn a meagre income but that was enough to support their families.

The villagers also relied on nature for the remedy of their sickness and ailments. Two common symptoms of the diseases which infected them were *cabuk* (*tissue death*) and *puru* (*frambusia*). Based on current medical knowledge, these are possibly symptoms associated with diabetes. For the treatment of *cabuk*, the villagers would grate a piece of the *nipah* stem and put the paste on the infected part of their body. This would cause the dying tissue to dry out. As for *puru*, the villagers would use a concoction made from a certain type of flowers or plants which would lessen the severity of their conditions. For common ailments like bouts of coughing, the villagers would resort to drinking the juice of the *saga* leaves.

However, with modernisation, the community spirit among the Malays is slowly eroding. Many of the practices of the old, such as *berderau* and *kenduri beras baru*, have come to an end. Gone also is the herb-lore of the old. The younger generation now views the plants that used to provide sustenance and medications to their ancestors as weeds and wild plants. With the demise of the older generations, these tales and stories of the halcyon days would soon come to an end.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Oral History methodology was adopted in this study, followed with An exploratory research design used in this study where a qualitative approach is more useful for discovering the hidden tales in Bujang Valley. Adopting a qualitative approach in our research design makes in-depth data collection possible especially when the sample size is small. Snowballing sampling is used in this study starting with the researchers identifying the key informants. The key informants, Mak Ngah Wa and Mak Ndak Om, assisted and identified other informants living in the Bujang Valley. 10 core respondents who agreed to participate in this study were identified. From these core respondents, the samples snowballed into a bigger number of respondents. Interviews were conducted with several focus groups consisting of 1 to 5 respondents per group. They were people who either have blood ties or live in the same community where the tales originated. In total 18 respondents were interviewed.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Mukim Bujang as well as other *mukim* in Kedah used to be governed using a system that was endorsed by the Sultan at the time before the war. A *mukim* or a sub district comprised a number of villages grouped together and headed by a leader called *Penghulu*. The *Penghulu*, in turn was assisted by two village heads called *Panglima* with jurisdiction over

two or more villages. These *panglimas* were further assisted by village heads from every hamlet in the *mukim*.

Mukim Bujang consisted of three *qari'ah* (parishes) or mosques which were the Bujang Mosque, Sungai Gelam Mosque and Pengkalan Bujang Mosque. The Bujang parish included Pekan Sebelah, Kampung Masjid, Kampung Tua, Pengkalan Langgar and Kampung Langgar, among others. Sungai Gelam parish encompassed hamlets like Sungai Gelam, Titi

Tinggi, Teluk Che Lela, Kampung Jilid and Kampung Segantang Garam. Pengkalan Bujang incorporated hamlets such as Kampung Sungai Baru, Kampung Permatang Nenas, Kampung Kepala Lahar and Kampung Permatang Perlis .

The post of *Penghulu* used to be inherited but only once, in 1956, was the post contested. Later on, the *Penghulu* would be appointed based on academic qualifications whereby a pass in the Malaysian Certificate of Education was the minimum requirement. The post of *panglima* was phased out in 1976 and was replaced by what is now called the JKKK (Jawatankuasa Keselamatan Kampung - village safety committee).



Story Tellers of this oral research