

Migrant Subjectivities and Narratives of the *Kampung* in Malaysia

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Kampung figures prominently in a structure of feeling that contrasts rural and urban in Malaysia. While rural to urban migration and urbanization have proceeded apace in Malaysia, the *kampung* continues to play an important role in the lives of the country's Malay community and in Malaysia's national cultural geography. This article examines the place of the *kampung* in that cultural geography as it is related in the narratives of return migrants to the *kampung* of Sungai Siputeh in northern peninsular Malaysia. The article argues that return migrants are existentially engaged in fashioning their own lives in relationship to this discourse as they move between rural and urban spaces. Moreover, within rural Malaysia, their narratives shape the cultural geography of rural subjects.

Anthropologists are abandoning villages in Southeast Asia and around the world. Although village-level fieldwork continues to be the archetype (or at least stereotype) of socio-cultural anthropological investigation (Marcus and Fischer 1986, pp. 18–19, 21–22; Gupta and Ferguson 1997, p. 11), in recent years anthropologists have begun to follow their subjects into cities and across transnational and global cultural terrains (for example, Appadurai 1996), sensing that the local, predominantly rural worlds which they have sought to better understand are rapidly disappearing, consumed by a global, urban, industrial, consumer-oriented “world culture”. Moreover, researchers now question the meaningfulness of the village as a unit of sociological analysis (Kemp 1988, 1989, 1991; Shamsul 1991). The model of villages as closed corporate communities no longer holds, if in fact it ever did.¹ Many scholars now see the concept of the village and village-making practices as derivative of modern state-building practices (Kemp 1988, 1989, 1991; Nas 1989; Ruiters and Nordholt 1989). Shamsul (1991), for ex-

ample, construes the village or *kampung* in Malaysia as an “imposed social construct” of government and non-governmental agencies rather than a community standing in opposition to or outside of state practices.

While these trends have done much to expand the bounds of anthropological inquiry and invigorate a critical interrogation of sociological constructs, like “the village”, abandoning or dismissing the role of the village or more specifically the *kampung* in contemporary Malaysia misses the fact that the *kampung* continues to have much salience in Malay discourse and urban-rural relationships continue to loom large in the everyday lives of a significant portion of the population. While the *kampung* may not present itself as a neat unit of sociological analysis, we must nevertheless take into account the role it plays in peoples' lives and in Malaysia's national cultural geography. This article examines the place of the *kampung* in that cultural geography as it is related in the narratives of return migrants to the *kampung* of Sungai Siputeh in northern peninsular Malaysia.

The article draws on fieldwork conducted in 1993–95, 1996, and 1998. Sungai Siputeh is a settlement of some 150 households in the state of Perak, near the border of Kedah, and approximately 100 kilometres inland from the island of Penang. Established by Malay migrants from Patani (now southern Thailand) in the early to mid-nineteenth century, Sungai Siputeh shares many of the characteristics of a rubber-tapping *kampung* (cf. Bailey 1983; Wan Hashim 1988). The *kampung* has a long history of both inbound and outbound migration, related in part to local and regional economic boom-and-bust cycles (Thompson 2000). While out-migration, particularly of youths to urban areas, has increasingly been the norm since at least the 1970s, there are also substantial numbers of return migrants, circular migrants, and in the 1990s a large number of commuters working in government offices in nearby cities and towns and in the industrial zones surrounding Kulim and Penang. The *kampung*, both as a lived and culturally constructed space, figures prominently in these migratory routes.

Rather than approaching *kampung* in Malaysia sociologically, this article takes an explicitly discursive approach. *Kampung* is a keyword, in

Raymond Williams's sense (1983), in Malay discourse.² While rural settlements are the referent of the term, *kampung* embodies ideas about modernity, tradition, class, ethnicity, morality, belonging, and anomie. It appears ubiquitously in urban-dominated media, such as the national curriculum and schoolbooks, which along with other media convey an "official" discourse on urban and rural Malaysia.³ Malays, who are closely identified with the *kampung* through these texts, are not merely passive recipients of the mediated urbanism of schools (cf. Keyes 1991; Thompson 2000). They weave those ideas and images into their own lives, desires, and interpretations of subjective experience. Still, the authors of textbooks, following dictates of national curriculum standards and influenced by subjective realities of their own, largely control the content of the classroom and do so at a great distance from rural places in Malaysia.

While such formal media are significant, this article examines discourse on urban and rural that does not reside in formal institutions nor mass media, but in the ways that return migrants from the *kampung* of Sungai Siputeh talk about urban and rural places. These return migrants are especially significant figures in this discourse for two reasons. First, they are existentially engaged in fashioning their own lives in relationship to this discourse as they move between rural and urban spaces. Moreover, within rural Malaysia, their narratives (along with others, such as those of schoolbooks) shape the cultural geography of rural subjects.

The *kampung* figures prominently in a structure of feeling that contrasts rural and urban in Malaysia. Again following Raymond Williams, I take such a structure of feeling to be "a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or period" (Williams 1977, p. 131; 1973). The ways in which rural and urban Malaysia are discursively deployed in the late-twentieth century produce such a historically distinct, qualitative structure. This article seeks to provide some sense of that structure of feeling as it simultaneously appears in and emerges out of migrant narratives. At the same time, these narratives, both in relationship to one another and to other prominent narratives

such as those found in schoolbooks, demonstrate that the structure of feeling around the *kampung* is not a bounded or static structure. While certain associations, such as between the *kampung* and public surveillance, and distinctions, such as between the *kampung* and the city, are hegemonic within this contemporary structure of feeling, the structure is at the same time shot through with contradictions and contested meanings.

These contradictions and contests take place at three levels. First, they appear within the discourse itself, in contradictory statements or differences of opinion. Migrant narratives, for example, differ from other narratives (and among themselves) in assessing change in the *kampung*. Second, they take place in disjuncture between discursive assertions (such as the safety of the *kampung*) and social realities (for example, the presence of criminal activity). Third, the contradictions and contests play out in the relationship of differently positioned subjects to the dominant structure of feeling, as for example, in how subjects of different ages and sexual orientations relate to the public surveillance associated with the *kampung*. I argue that while there is a general structure of feeling regarding the *kampung*, it is a dynamic structure, historically emergent with many uneven edges (cf. Laclau 1990). As such, there is no one "migrant" or "Malay" point of view. While the hegemonic structure of feeling surrounding the *kampung* constitutes a shared discursive structure (what we used to call culture?) through which rural and migrant Malay subjects experience their world, no two subjects experience that structure the same way.

Migrant Narratives

The analysis of everyday conversation, especially as it pertains to a particular topic such as discourse on urban and rural, presents certain challenges when compared with the observation of formal institutions and texts. Although shot through with ambivalent, contested, and sometimes even contradictory messages, didactic schoolbooks, for example, tend to present relatively straightforward, transparent thematic structures when compared with the many voices of variously situated *kampung* residents and migrants. Moreover, with the advent of print and mechanical re-

production, such texts are accessible to repeated study, contemplation, and reflection. Second and third readings can reveal the details of a structure of feeling they contain that might only be implicitly sensed on first perusal.

By its very nature, everyday conversation is more fleeting. The way in which migrants or residents themselves represent the relationship of urban and rural, for example, manifests itself in offhand comments over a meal, gossip circulating at a wedding ceremony, an idle story told while waiting out a tropical downpour, or during a discussion of politics at a coffee shop. In the ebbs and flows of natural conversation, it is difficult to predict when someone might bring up experiences they had in Kuala Lumpur ("K.L.") or assert some general contrast about city life and life in the *kampung*. Nevertheless, when migrants talk about these things, like schools and mass media, they are an important source of information and opinion about ideas of urban and rural in Malaysia. In expressing their opinion they are actualizing private thoughts in a public domain, asserting their own subject position in relationship to identities of place and place-based identities. At the same time, they represent the relationship of urban and rural to others.

The following discussion draws mainly on recorded interviews with migrants along with observations and conversations overheard in the course of daily events in Sungai Siputeh.⁴ The sometimes lengthy and self-reflective narratives of interviews are not the same as sporadic everyday conversations and cannot duplicate the spontaneous, situated remarks migrants and others make, nor the various contexts in which they might emerge and various audiences to whom they might be aimed (for example, their own children, acquaintances from the same *kampung*, or members of a younger generation). Nevertheless, the discourse on urban and rural in this article presents a sample of how migrants construe the nature and relationship of urban and rural places in Malaysia.

In combing through numerous interviews and many pages of field notes taken over the years I lived in or visited Sungai Siputeh, several central recurring themes appeared that were associated with a structure of feeling surrounding urban and rural in migrant narratives. As the following sections will demonstrate, migrants generally represent both cit-

ies and *kampung* as changing places, but also as places differentiated by degrees of moral and physical danger predicated primarily on different degrees of public surveillance of individuals' activities. While drawing differences, migrant narratives also illustrate the dynamic interaction of urban and rural places and urban and rural subjectivities. And finally, migrant narratives highlight the articulation of the structure of feeling expressed in the discourse with the subject positions, for example, the gender, age, sexual identity, kinship status, and so on, of migrants who are at once narrating and enacting these narratives.

Signs of Change in Urban and Rural

In Malaysian schoolbooks, *kampung* most often appear as the residue of an unchanged past, where residents "still" (*masih*) engage in *gotong-royong* mutual self-help activities, where the doubly inflected "old people from the past" subsist outside of a consumer economy, and where a modern infrastructure remains to be completed (*dilengkapî*) (Thompson 2000). When return migrants and residents from Sungai Siputeh are asked about change in the *kampung*, a common, offhand remark is to say that there have not been any, reflecting this official discourse. But more often, they will point to a number of changes, especially those that they have witnessed in their own lifetimes.

When asked about the *kampung* now and in the past, the elderly Haji Rahim, who had moved in and out of Sungai Siputeh since the 1920s, responded:

Before, I felt like the *kampung* was really lively (*ramai*) and clean (*bersih*). Now, the *kampung* is not clean at all ... now, compared to before, it's different. Looks like there's no one to take care (of the *kampung*) ... the way I see it, people before were different than the way people are now ... they took better care of the *kampung* ... maybe because now so many people have left the *kampung*.

His remarks reiterate a sense of absence common to local discourse about the *kampung*. Haji Rahim's comments on the waste and uncleanness in the *kampung* stand in contrast to images of clean living and natural beauty prominent in school textbooks. His measure of the activity and cleanliness (or orderliness) in the *kampung* comes from the

comparative observations available to him later in life and also from his movements back and forth from the *kampung* over many years. While gradual changes in the *kampung*, such as standards of cleanliness, are not imperceptible to residents, migrancy itself makes such changes more visible.

Changes in the *kampung* are most often registered in economic standards of living, the presence of consumer goods, and a built infrastructure, all of which have increasingly filtered into the *kampung* over the lifetimes of my informants and especially in the past twenty years. As Yunus, a man in his forties who had lived on and off between K.L. and Sungai Siputeh since 1969, recalled:

In the past, if *kampung* people wanted to buy a shirt they didn't even have enough money for that. Now things have really changed. All the *kampung* people have motorcycles. There are even some who have cars. Before, just buying a bicycle was hard for *kampung* people. Before, if a household wanted a bicycle, buying even just one would be difficult. Before, all of the roads were just dirt roads. Now we have these major roadways here. Didn't have that before ... People going to factories from here is really new.

These material changes in Sungai Siputeh, of clothing, modes of personal transportation, infrastructure, and economic endeavours, find parallels in Kuala Lumpur, though in the city the signs of change are of a different magnitude. As Pak Su, a contemporary of Yunus, recalled:

From the time I first went to K.L., a lot has changed. At that time, there weren't many tall, tall buildings. I've lived there twenty years. I've seen lots of buildings go up, lots of huge, huge international-standard hotels. Before, the very largest were six stories. Before, there weren't any one-way roads. In Chow Kit (a market in Kuala Lumpur) before, the main roads were two-way (now the main roads are one-way to ease traffic congestion).

Materially, be it through money for clothing or looming international-standard hotels, both the *kampung* and K.L. are changing. A sense of modernity, often singularly associated with urban spaces in textbooks and other media, exists in migrant narratives of the *kampung* as well. In this respect, migrant narratives contradict (to some extent at least) most "official" narratives in which *kampung* are unchanging and cities are sites

of transformation. But in other respects, especially in discourse tinged with moral messages, migrants tend to draw the relationship between the *kampung* and K.L. as one of difference.

Material and Moral Danger of the City

Despite material changes, for most residents and migrants the *kampung* continues to represent a lifestyle which couples (relative) physical hardship with a space of moral safety. By contrast, life in the city is usually portrayed as free (*bebas*) and easy (*senang*) but at the same time fraught with material and moral danger. Pak Teh, who returned to live in Sungai Siputeh after twenty years running coffee shops in Kuala Lumpur, encapsulated the interplay of these sentiments in reflecting on his decision to return to Sungai Siputeh and bring his teenage boys with him. The discussion I had with him turned first to his mother's house:

I don't have my own house in the *kampung*, just my mother's house. Since I'm living in K.L., my relatives help keep up this house. With the money I've made, I can build a new house. But I want to keep the traditional house (*rumah tradisional*) as well. That new house down there (gesturing out the window to a new house under construction), I'm building that one ... If I have a long life, if there isn't any problem, and if we're not so strong anymore, it's better if we return to the *kampung* ... better than the city (*bandar*).

Pak Teh construes the *kampung* as a site of tradition, embodied particularly in his mother's "traditional house". Pak Teh maintains a material connection to the *kampung* through this house in which he was raised. But over the course of his sojourn to Kuala Lumpur, the years he spent living and working in the city, the house was maintained by relatives, by brothers, sisters, and cousins, whose ongoing presence in that location sustained Pak Teh's connection to the *kampung*.

The *kampung* imagined as a seat of Malay identity draws on these continuing ties of kinship for Pak Teh and other Malays who live in the city or elsewhere. On returning to Sungai Siputeh, Pak Teh planned to build a new house, a physical embodiment of the wealth accumulated in the city. The wealth of the city becomes a transformative force in the *kampung*. At the same time, Pak Teh desired to "keep the traditional

house”, to maintain a tie to the past. In Pak Teh’s narrative, the *kampung* is figured as a location in which continuity can be maintained not only in the physical embodiment of the house, but also in which the values and knowledge of generations can be passed from one to another.

We can raise our kids here (in the *kampung*) ... I brought (my boy) back here to the *kampung*. If he were still in Kuala Lumpur, you know in Kuala Lumpur there are all kinds of things (*macam-macam*). (Near my house in K.L.), they put up this building, put up shops where there is karaoke, snooker, dancing. And kids at that age, sixteen, seventeen, are easily influenced. So one time, he went out and didn’t come back until eleven o’clock at night. And we could see that he was being influenced and changing. So when I came back to the *kampung*, I brought him back too. Let him go to school here. Let him know hardship. Have him go to school by bicycle.

The position of youth in relationship to the *kampung* and K.L. is especially prominent in Pak Teh’s account. Pak Teh himself moved to K.L. as a young man and earned his fortune there. But as old age encroaches (Pak Teh was just forty-one at the time of the interview quoted above), and youthful energy wanes, the *kampung* seems preferable to the city. Pak Teh is clearly ambivalent regarding the city as a location for younger people, especially teenagers and children. His own children, who disappear — accompanied by peers — among the snooker halls and karaoke parlours, who question and resist their father pulling them from the clutches of the city, are attracted to the city and seem discontent (though not disobedient) in the *kampung*. While he, too, desired the city as a boy and young man, as a parent, Pak Teh assumes the role of protecting his children from the city, shifting his own experience of and relationship to this general structure of feeling around the *kampung*.⁵

Transportation (motorcycles, buses, bicycles) also plays a central role in the moral danger suggested by Pak Teh. The mobility provided by mechanized transportation, which is also the technology that connects *kampung* and city, at the same time puts young people in moral and sometimes physical danger. A motorcycle, Pak Teh explained, would provide easy transportation to school, but also deprive his son of the moral lessons of the bicycle. Moreover, by bicycle, his son could only

travel from the house in the *kampung* to school and back. A motorcycle or bus would allow a greater range. As Pak Teh told me during the same conversation, his son could travel after school to the town of Selama, change clothes on the bus, and go play at the supermarket or who-knows-where. The bicycle operating under the energy and sweat of its rider, and limiting the range his son can roam, instils the moral lesson of *kampung* hardship.

By contrast, a fifth grade social studies (*Alam dan Manusia*) textbook presented bicycling long distances to school as a condition which would keep people from living in the *kampung*. In Pak Teh’s account, it is a hardship, but one that bears an underlying moral lesson and builds character for his son. The authors of the school texts and Pak Teh present the same event rather differently, coming as they do from different subjective positions — as government scribes on the one hand and a *kampung*-oriented parent in an urbanized world on the other.

Motorcycles, buses, and the like are widely used and enjoyed in Sungai Siputeh. But they can also carry young people out of the range of moral surveillance and protection. Motorcycles and buses not only provide access to the moral danger of urban areas, they can be locations of moral danger in and of themselves. Even the *kampung*, which could protect Pak Teh’s son from the social ills of the city, could not protect his daughter from the ordeals of the bus trip to and from school. So Pak Teh sent her away to the moral safety of a religious boarding school.

Crime in the City and *Kampung*

In other narratives similar to Pak Teh’s story, the moral danger of the city is often coupled with a sense of physical danger and fear of crime, in contrast to the relative safety of the *kampung*. Pak Teh worried that his son might become involved in criminal activities — drugs or stealing motorcycles. More often, migrants discuss a fear of crime in cities directed at themselves and their families. These dangers associated with the city, which also appear in textbooks, are related in migrants’ discourse through recurrent, somewhat generic, themes and tropes as much as recollections of particular experiences or events. Talking to a visitor attending a wedding feast of his relatives in Sungai Siputeh, the man

advised me (as others often did) that cities, such as Alor Setar where he lived, are dangerous. City residents have to lock their gates when they go out, and even when they are at home. This is especially true during office hours, he said, from eight in the morning to four at night, when people are out at their jobs and offices, since thieves are known to favour these hours. But in the *kampung* people are always around. And people in the cities would not look out for their neighbours, he told me, reiterating the common theme that in the *kampung* everyone knows everyone else. So at a wedding feast such as the one we were attending, everyone comes together to help (*gotong-royong*). Others who were eating at the same table during the feast nodded and mumbled in agreement with this guest's views.

Migrants and others discuss particular events or firsthand experience of crime more rarely than they relate a general sense that cities are dangerous places, where one must take care to protect person and property. When particular instances of criminal activity, from theft to drug use, do emerge in conversation (for example, when Pak Teh related that his clothes and belongings were stolen by a co-worker) they are frequently spun into the structure of a dichotomy between rural and urban. Particular instances of crime that occur in urban areas reinforce the general feeling of urban danger. Crimes that occur in the *kampung* or rural places, by contrast, do not get parlayed into a general structure of feeling around the urban and rural or they are used as negative, aberrant examples. During my stay in Sungai Siputeh, local youths broke into the primary school on more than one occasion. While teachers and others talked about these events, discussing the "bad kids" involved, and the objects of desire — such as audio-visual and sports equipment — that inspired the break-ins, I never heard these events being used to indicate a general social malaise specific to the *kampung* as a moral community.

Similarly, when residents of Sungai Siputeh caught three teenage boys and a teenage girl smoking marijuana and engaged in illicit sexual liaisons in an abandoned hut, Ustaz Amin, the local *imam* (a religious official) interpreted this event as a reflection on the *kampung*. But, for him, they marked an aberration rather than a normal condition in the

kampung. As he said to me shortly after this incident, sadly shaking his head, "this *kampung* has been here for generations, for hundreds and hundreds of years, and nothing like this has ever happened before". As a member of the religious and civil authorities instrumental in arresting these youths, he was familiar with this case and others that have occurred in recent memory. But several elements of his characterization of the incident inclined me to take his declaration more as a moral discourse on the *kampung* than as a statement of fact: his insistence on the complete absence of similar events; his appeal to a depth of history exceeding the 150 or so years of settlement in the area (a history with which he was familiar); and the fact that he was portraying the *kampung* to an outside observer in the wake of events that stirred a ripple of rumour for days and weeks afterwards. As a religious leader, he was reasserting the public face of the moral community of the *kampung* in spite of evidence to the contrary.

Public Surveillance and Moral Community of a *Kampung*

The space of the *kampung* is endowed with a sense of community which entails both caring about one's neighbours and surveillance. Residents and visitors in the *kampung* consider themselves to be known to others in the *kampung*. Michael Peletz has referred to the sort of regime of surveillance in the *kampung* not as one of an omniscient big brother, but rather of many little brothers and sisters (Peletz 1996). While a feeling of public surveillance in the *kampung* by neighbours and kin (and the corollary lack thereof in urban areas) is almost universally acknowledged and reiterated, differently positioned subjects express varying attitudes towards this surveillance. Some consider it benign and even valuable, while to others it is potentially malicious. Aside from concerns about crime and drug use, the discourse on public surveillance arises mainly in relationship to freedom and sexuality.

Reflecting on life in the city and the *kampung*, one fifty-year-old resident of Sungai Siputeh, who had spent much of his adult life in the army before returning to settle in his mother's house in Sungai Siputeh, weighed the tradeoffs between freedom and surveillance this way:

Some people say that they prefer to live in the city (*kota*) because it is freer (*lebih bebas*). But I feel freer — more content (*senang hati*) living in the *kampung*. In the city, we can be free but we can't be content. People like to get away from the *kampung* and go to the city to get away from the eyes of their families. But in the city all they do is work and think about money. They often don't know their neighbours, because each lives separately, and goes off to work separately, and they don't even meet. Even though I've worked and lived in a lot of places, I never felt free (*bebas*) there because I was always thinking about the *kampung*.

Throughout our conversation, as in others, freedom (*bebas*) was associated with the city, and especially with young people going to the city. But this freedom is paid for with a loss of contentment and equanimity (*senang hati*). Differently positioned subjects must make personal decisions regarding migration in relationship to this point of ambivalence in the structure of feeling around the *kampung*.

A strong moral discourse militates against *bebas*. The Malay press, Prime Minister Mahathir, and others in Malaysia favour the term *terlalu bebas* (too free) which frequently appears in discourse on both youth and cities. The ex-soldier quoted above also associated *bebas* with other negative values, especially irresponsibility (*tak bertanggungjawab*). When young people go to the city, he said, they are only thinking of their freedom now. They are not thinking of their freedom in the future (*bebas di masa depan*). He added a religious dimension to this observation, noting that such shortsightedness is a big loss for these young people, especially for those who are Muslim. The future he referred to was not only their time on earth but also in the afterlife. It was not uncommon for young people to echo similar sentiments, especially in explicitly religious contexts.

This general discourse on freedom (*kebebasan*) most often takes shape in specific events associated with sexual relationships. The surveillance in the *kampung* is commonly said to regulate sexual (meaning heterosexual) interactions more closely than in cities. Reports of suspicious activities by residents of the *kampung* led to the extraordinary events surrounding the arrest of the four teenagers mentioned above. But such arrests and raids are at least as common, if not more common, in ur-

ban areas. Newspapers frequently report arrests of Malay-Muslims for breaching Islamic restrictions on *khalwat* (close proximity) and *zina* (adultery). Most of the reports come from Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding state of Selangor. The difference between cities and *kampung* described by migrants and *kampung* residents usually does not have to do with such dramatic instances, but with the customs of courtship for young, unmarried couples. Pak Su's description of his experience getting married is typical:

At that time, I was living in K.L., when I came back to get engaged and to get married. I didn't know that woman at all. My mom knew her. I met her at her house only, the day we took the *hantaran* (gifts for the bride) to her house. But I just got to know her at her house, I didn't take her here and there, that's the custom of people in the *kampung*, you can't take a person's young daughter anywhere. You can in the city (*bandar*). In the city, if you know them you can just take (*bawa*) them (he laughs) ... you can go shopping, go see a film. In the *kampung*, you can't. If you want to meet a girl you have to go along with others. I went with my brother to their house.

Pak Su offered his opinion of urban customs (the opportunity for men to "just take" young women) in the context of a wide public and press discourse on *bohsia* (promiscuous girls)⁶ and using the language of that discourse (*bawa mereka* — "take them"; see Stivens 1998; Thompson 1997). Others reiterated Pak Su's opinion that the rural and urban customs expressed in his story of his experiences in the 1970s continued to be true in the 1990s.

However, interactions between young men and women are not always so restricted in Sungai Siputeh. The ability of young men and women in the *kampung* to interact is usually premised on the ability to travel outside of the social and physical space of the *kampung*. In 1995 a recently married man of twenty-five, whose search for work and income saw him frequently moving between Sungai Siputeh and nearby urban areas, recounted that when he and his wife were courting, they took frequent trips together outside of the *kampung*. His twenty-year-old fiancée, who commuted to work at a factory an hour away in Kulim, was also from Sungai Siputeh. It was impossible for them to spend time

alone in the *kampung*. But once they were engaged, they rented or borrowed a car to take trips to Penang and other nearby locations without objection from their parents (though, had they not been engaged, the reaction of their parents might have been quite different and less accommodating).

As was the case with Pak Teh's son, mobility and surveillance are at odds in the moral discourse of the *kampung*. In the 1970s and 1980s, the mobility of young women working in factories made them a target of sexual gossip and innuendo (Ackerman 1991; Ong 1987). By the mid-1990s, discourse in the press and elsewhere on female sexuality shifted to the urban-associated *bohsia* phenomenon — closely tied to a discourse on *lepak* or loafing. *Bohsia* were seen as young women or even school-aged girls with too much time on their hands. They were not primarily portrayed as factory workers (Stivens 1998; Thompson 1997). In the everyday discourse of the *kampung* as well, I rarely heard reservations raised about women engaging in factory work. On the contrary, it had become almost an expected part of young women's life trajectories. During the late 1980s and 1990s, a shift took place away from housing in dormitories and towards commuting between outlying *kampung* and factories in industrial zones (registered in Yunus' comments above regarding work in the *kampung*).

When I was living in Sungai Siputeh, it was usually not the factories that I heard talked about as sexually charged spaces, but the modes of transportation between factories and the *kampung* (similar to the centrality of transportation in Pak Teh's narrative). Workers, predominantly young women, made their way to and from their factories by large, blue factory buses or fleets of vans operated by private owners under contract with factories and driven almost exclusively by (mostly young) men, who often came from nearby *kampung* as well. These vans developed a sexually charged aura in the discourse of the *kampung*. As one young man from Sungai Siputeh remarked disparagingly, guys who drive those vans are really horny (*gatal*) and do that work just because they want to meet girls. From the point of view of the *kampung*, vans and other modes of transportation made evasion of public surveillance possible and perforated the *kampung's* moral boundaries.

Ambivalence and Resistance to the Moral Community

Public surveillance gives a certain identity to the *kampung*, as a place where residents watch after one another. It also has a bearing not only on interactions between men and women but also on the subjective relationship of different residents and migrants towards the *kampung*. For parents, this aspect of the *kampung* makes it a desirable place to live. Many young single men and women, on the other hand, desire the relative freedom of urban areas. *Kampung* surveillance also impinges on sexual identities and the desirability of cities or *kampung*. Michael Peletz has argued that, despite an increasingly hostile public discourse in Malaysia towards homosexuality since the 1970s,⁷ Malaysians, including those living in *kampung*, have maintained a relatively tolerant attitude towards *pondan* (male transvestites) and public surveillance in *kampung* is generally aimed at heterosexual interactions while ignoring homosexual activities (Peletz 1996, pp. 116–32). While this may be generally true of same-gender interactions, the public surveillance of the *kampung* interrogates the subjectivity of those who embody a *pondan* identity.

With his husky yet high voice, feminine gestures, and use of cosmetics to highlight his facial features and paint his nails, Yunus (mentioned earlier) is recognized as one of a small number of men in the *kampung* who are considered by others in Sungai Siputeh to be outside of heterosexual norms. Occasionally, residents of the *kampung*, especially young men, conspiratorially warned me about Yunus and others, pointing them out and saying in hushed tones: *dia seorang gay* (he's gay; *gay* being a neologism that has entered Malay from English).⁸ Yunus (understandably) never directly identified himself to me as a *pondan* or homosexual, though he was forthcoming enough to say that he had no interest in women. When I asked (probably inappropriately) about his marriage plans or prospects, he replied, his voice becoming quite animated:

No, I don't want to. When I see a woman, I don't have any desire (*tak suka*). How am I going to do it, I don't know?! When I look at a woman, there's no effect. Malays say, no effect, no desire (*tak ada mut*). Other men, they look at women and they have desire (*ada mut*) ... Where I used to work, there were lots of women who wanted to marry me. They invited me to marry them. But I said I didn't want to.

Yunus, who resides sporadically in Sungai Siputeh and was there on and off during my year of residence in the *kampung*, talked to me about his ambivalent relationship to both the *kampung* and city. Contrasting the two in general, his comments were quite typical in differentiating city from *kampung* people:

The character of people here, *kampung* people, is different than city people (*orang pekan*). City people, they don't care, they don't care about anything ... *Kampung* people, sometimes they don't like people who are different from themselves ... But in the city, people don't care about other people's business.

The indifference of city people marks their character among nearly everyone I spoke to in Malaysia (and also portrayals in the press and schoolbooks). But highlighting the corollary to the inclusive, caring, *gotong-royong* spirit of the *kampung*, Yunus also recognizes the exclusions that such an inclusiveness can create, when based in part on certain moral convictions. For Yunus, the dislike of difference he associates with *kampung* people takes on a personal dimension and makes the anonymity of urban life more appealing.

Ethnicity and Urban Transformations

The discourses and practices that militate against certain sexual activities and identities in the *kampung* are paralleled by a degree of ethnic exclusivity. Residents and others frequently portray the *kampung* and K.L. as ethnically specific spaces. Cities are seen as the domain of Malaysia's Chinese community (who make up about one-third of the population of the country), while the *kampung* is the terrain of Malays. These spatial and ethnic discourses are mutually reinforcing; part of what makes Malays Malay is that they live in the *kampung*; part of what gives the *kampung* its character is that it is Malay; part of what makes Chinese Chinese is that they live in cities; part of what gives K.L. and other cities their character is that they are inhabited by Chinese (cf. Rogers 1993; Wilson 1967). While this dichotomy is often reiterated, it is also described as a situation that is changing with the growing number of Malays in K.L. and other cities. And the city from the Malay *kampung*

perspective, while Chinese, is also a place notable for its variety, inhabited by people of all kinds (resonating with school textbook portrayals of a Malaysian ethnic mosaic; see also Nagata 1979). Yunus's description is typical of what many said of the ethnic composition of urban and rural places in the 1990s:

There are more Chinese in the city (*bandar*). Malays are in the *kampung*. But in K.L. now there are increasingly more Malays. You could say that (now) Malays and Chinese are about equally involved in business (*niaga*). In the past, where was there a Malay who knew how to run a roadside business? But now there are many who do business. Before there were only one or two Malays who ran businesses. Now if you go to Chow Kit (market), all of them are Malay. There are only a few Chinese. Now Malays are already a bit smart; young people are smart. I went to K.L. in 1969, just after the events of May 13. At that time, I lived in Taiping. In Taiping too everyone was scared, how could you go out? People just stayed in their houses ... for two or three days they didn't go out ... By the time I went to K.L., all that was past, like normal, there wasn't any tension. When I went there, I felt afraid, but by the time I was there, I enjoyed it, lots of good friends from all over. Friends from Kelantan, from Kedah ... Malay, Chinese, Chinese who had become Malay even! Chinese, but he had already become Malay (*masuk Melayu*); become Muslim (*masuk Islam*). Until he was just like a real Malay, I thought. He didn't look Chinese at all.

Yunus's narrative is haunted by the events of 13 May 1969, when inter-ethnic violence in Kuala Lumpur and other urban areas between Malays and Chinese led to the injuries and deaths in the hundreds (Comber 1988, p. 71). But in Yunus's account the passage of time and ethnic blending in K.L. overcame the fear that those events provoked. In the city, Yunus befriended people from various regions of Malaysia and different ethnic groups. He even sees a Chinese man transform into a Malay.⁹ The sort of close friendships with Chinese that Yunus describes may be somewhat out of the ordinary and have some relationship to the particular sub-culture of *pondan* and transsexuals within which he circulated (though this is not unique to that sub-culture). But even migrants from Sungai Siputeh who do not say that they made the same sort of close non-Malay friends often note the frequent interac-

tions that they have with non-Malays in urban areas as opposed to in the *kampung*.

In moving to K.L. and other urban areas, Malays from Sungai Siputeh and other *kampung* may transform the city as well. Recalling his own experience moving to K.L. and later to the block of low-income housing that he and his family lived in for many years, Pak Su told me:

Now there are many more Malays in the city (*bandar*). Before, *kampung* people didn't like going to work in the city. They were still scared. In the city, how were we going to find work? We didn't have any schooling. Now, there are lots of opportunities to work. When I went to K.L., my experience was a little out of the ordinary. At that time, there were still very few people who went to Kuala Lumpur ... For me it was easy. I had an older brother there. Lots of people would have liked to go, (especially) kids, but they didn't have anywhere to go to. Once some people had gone there, like after I had already lived there a long time, then when other people wanted to go, they could come, ask about (how to) find work, (how to) find a place to rent. And we could help. Before if they wanted to go there but didn't know anyone, how could they? It would be difficult. Back in the eighties and before, city people were rude (*sombong*). But now it's OK, because lots of *kampung* people live in the city. So they've brought their way of life, their way of interacting, from the *kampung* to the city. Before, people who lived next door to each other didn't know one another, you know? But now, I know everyone in the apartment block where I live. I know where they are from and what they do for work. Most are Malay. We have parties (*pesta*) to get to know one another. At Hari Raya (after Ramadan) we do that all together, the whole apartment block. We collect donations for charity; have a small feast (*jamuan*). We do it two weeks after Hari Raya, because at Hari Raya everyone returns to their *kampung*. After about five days they come back to the city. So they all relax, tell all their stories from *kampung*, then we have our get-together. In that apartment block, there aren't any other people from Sungai Siputeh. There is one other person from Selama. A lot of the people there are from Melaka and Negeri Sembilan, and also Perak ... One apartment block like the one we live in has more residents than all of Sungai Siputeh!

Pak Su's account echoes the feeling that movement from *kampung* to cities has become a normal expectation among rural Malays and recounts the sort of social and kin relationships that have enabled this cir-

cuit of migration. He also notes how it is not only the city that has changed Malays, but Malays have changed the city. Pak Su's description of the *kampung*-like apartment block where he lived in K.L. is, by his own admission, somewhat unique. He compared it to Sungai Siputeh with a sense of irony. After returning to Sungai Siputeh, Pak Su said he felt that the area where he lived in K.L. was more like a *kampung* than the *kampung*, referring to his own experience and position in each community and to a general sense of what a *kampung* should be.

As with signs of change in cities and *kampung*, Pak Su's comments not only portray both as changing places, the values associated with each can even become inverted. In his assessment of social life in Sungai Siputeh, Pak Su felt that people did not help each other out as much as his neighbours in Kuala Lumpur. People in Sungai Siputeh seemed much more isolated from one another, especially with so many young people leaving the *kampung* and so many others leaving everyday to go to work in the city, or even going off to their orchards. The *kampung*, some twenty or thirty years on, seemed empty to Pak Su compared with the *kampung* that he had left. Still, from his description above, the social values which appeal to Pak Su are rooted in the *kampung*. They are not indigenous to the city, but must be brought there by migrants from the *kampung*.

Conclusion

Malaysia has become a highly mobile society where urban-bound migration among rural Malays has not only become the norm, the alternative of not migrating has become extremely rare. As Haji Rahim observed above, "so many people have left the *kampung*". But they are not abandoning the *kampung* altogether. It remains a salient feature of Malay life, both discursively and in the lived experience of circular migrants, return migrants, and increasingly commuters (such as young factory workers and a significant number of others who live in the *kampung* like Sungai Siputeh but work in an urban area). The choices that rural subjects make, the possibilities open to them, and the trajectories their lives take are often measured through censuses, demography,

and an economics of “rational choice”. But the values embodied in the cultural geography of urban and rural is at least as important to the decisions they make and existential dilemmas they face. Their understandings of what it means to live in a rural or urban place (identities of place), or to be a rural or urban subject (place-based identities) shape their experiences of dwelling and migration — to return with teenage children to the *kampung*, for example, or to escape the public surveillance of the *kampung* by entering urban spaces.

Migrant narratives concerning the structure of feeling around the *kampung* (of which it has been possible to present only a small sample in this article) play an important role in shaping this structure of feeling. Moving in and out of the *kampung* itself provides migrants with a perspective and degree of authority from which to comment on the relationship of rural and urban places. At the same time, the diversity of their own subjective experiences, some based in particular subject positions they inhabit, others due to the idiosyncrasies of personal histories, provide, here and there, counterpoint, nuance, or alternatives to “official” (and more fully urban-dominated) discourse on the rural and urban in Malaysia. James Ferguson, writing of Zambia, has shown how urban-centred concepts of a rural idyll among return migrants to rural areas there come crashing down in the face of highly contentious rural communities (Ferguson 1997). Return migrants in contemporary Malaysia have not generally experienced the same dissonance between their expectations and experiences of rural life. Rather, through their narratives they at once become active agents in shaping the structure of feeling around *kampung* and position themselves within that discursive field — constituting themselves (as Laclau would put it) on that structure’s uneven edges.

NOTES

1. Ethnographers in Malaysia at least have always found pinning down the concept of the village to be tricky and even frustrating (see, for example, Bailey 1983, p. 14; Banks 1983, p. 41; De Koninck 1992, pp. 9–11; Husin Ali 1975, pp. 39–70; Scott 1985, p. 87).

2. Malays make up slightly over half of the population of Malaysia. As will be discussed below, Malay ethnicity is particularly associated with rural *kampung* (in contrast to Chinese and Indians, the other two most prominent ethnic groups in the country).
3. Television, newspapers, and popular music (to name a few) are other important media in this respect. I discuss school books and television at much greater length in the larger project of which this article is a part (Thompson 2000).
4. The material quoted or referred to here is drawn from several dozen open-ended interviews centring on the topic of migratory experiences and expectations with men living in Sungai Siputeh or from Sungai Siputeh living elsewhere. The article also draws on daily field notes recorded over a total of fourteen months in the 1990s and a survey of fifty-eight households in Sungai Siputeh.
5. While many parents like Pak Teh are inclined towards raising children in the *kampung*, it is not a site that is generally seen as holding any future for children as they grow into adulthood. Rather, the genetal expectation is one of migration of young adults out of the *kampung*, a subject I address in greater depth elsewhere (Thompson forthcoming).
6. The term *bohsia* is derived from Hokkien meaning “no sound”.
7. Peletz’s study, as well as my own fieldwork, occurred prior to the events surrounding the arrest and trial of the Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on charges of sodomy. These events have generated a very public discourse on male homosexuality in Malaysia and have likely sharpened the already growing negative attitudes towards homosexuality (especially male homosexuality).
8. It should be pointed out that *pondan* (male transvestite) and “gay” (homosexual — usually male) are distinct terms and identities. The two are not always identified as one and the same. It is also common for some men to have sexual relationships with *pondan* without considering themselves to be *gay*. But it is also very often the case, as with the incidents and conversations I mention here, for *pondan* and *gay* to be conflated (cf. Oetomo 1996).
9. The association between converting to Islam and becoming Malay has a long history in Malaysia (Andaya and Andaya 1982, p. 55; Milner 1982).

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