

**Marriage and Divorce among Malays in Singapore:
'Nurture' Rather than 'Nature' as Key to Building Intact and Resilient Families
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At a two-day Marriage Convention in May 2016, a Malay language session titled “My Love is not on Paper” attracted a sizeable crowd of Muslim couples. Normally reticent Muslims were not holding back their show of romantic affection towards each other. There were tips on how to “rejuvenate love”, “strengthen vows in marriage” and even “beautify the language of love”. The facilitation was light-hearted interspersed with fun games, such as using a full-blown balloon sandwiched between each couple. To prevent the balloon from bursting or flying away, couples had to synchronize their movements, neither coming too close to each other nor veering too far in separate directions. The key idea is balance – the balloon symbolizing how fragile a marriage can be.

Malay households have had their share of broken-down family histories, so a marriage preparatory course may offer some help in turning the tide. A striking feature of Malay marriages in the past was their high rate of divorce although this trend is declining. But why was there a high rate of divorce and what could explain this change? To have a lasting marriage should there be a nurturance of skills rather than merely dependence on common wisdom and natural instincts?

In the 1950s, few Malays in Singapore remained unmarried throughout their life. Most women would be married between the ages of 16 to 19 years while for men they would be between 19 to 23 years. In terms of choice of marriage partners, there would be a match between families with similar linguistic, residential and income background. However, marriage was not necessarily a sacred union meant to last forever. This was observed by anthropologist Judith Djamour who studied Singapore Malay families during that period. Among Malays it was largely a social contract between two people fulfilling obligations and responsibilities to their children and close kin. Djamour described Singapore Malays as valuing harmony in “personal intimate relationships”. Even small measures of discontentment, such as emotional and sexual dissatisfaction could lead to conflict. Divorce seemed to be the easiest solution to this.

Before the 1950s, the frequency of divorce amongst Malays was very high. In fact, rates of divorce among Malays in peninsular Malaysia was among the highest in the world. In Singapore, about half of all Malay marriages ended up in divorce. Reasons for divorce recorded by Djamour included childlessness, personal incompatibility and conflict over issues such as place of residence after

marriage. While Malays hoped that their marriage would last forever they were also prepared that it would not. This high rate of divorce could also be due to the Muslim Personal Law which made it easy for divorce to take effect, as well as re-marriage to take occur soon after that. Divorce was less of a personal burden given that the extended family was ready to provide economic and childcare support whenever the marriage breaks down. Both parents had an easier access to their children even if no longer living together.

Today, family life, marriage and divorce patterns among Singapore Malays have changed drastically. Well-known demographer Gavin Jones has studied marriage and divorce trends in Muslim Southeast Asia and noted the sharp drop in divorce rates after the 1950s, from more than 15 divorces for every 1000 population to less than 5 in 1960. By the year 2000 there were less than 2 divorces per 1000 population. Similarly, a report by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) recorded a decline in Muslim divorce rates from 14.0% for the 2003 and 2004 marriage cohorts to 11.4% for the 2008 marriage cohorts. More Malay couples also tend to stay longer in their marriages before divorcing. In 1985, 45% of Malay divorces occurred among those married for less than five years. By 2013 the overall divorce rate for Malays was comparable to those of other ethnic groups at about 30%.

Over the years, age at first marriage among Malay brides has also risen. While most Malay brides were under 20 years of age in 1965, those who married in 1985 were between 20 and 24 years old. By 2013, the age range further increased from 25 to 29 years. A greater number of older Malay women aged between 30 to 34 years were also getting married for the first time.

Other findings of interest include the role of Muslim women in initiating their divorces. They comprised the highest number of applicants in Islamic divorce court proceedings. Infidelity is cited as the main cause for divorce among both males and females. We speculate that one of the reasons for infidelity being the case may be due to the Islamic provision for polygamy. This may have led to the high tendency among Muslim men to engage in relationships with women who could be their subsequent spouses. Financial problems was cited to be the next highest cause for divorce followed by domestic violence.

Perhaps in response to the distinctive trend and rate of Muslim divorce in Singapore, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) launched its Family Development Department in August 2004 with a focus on building “strong and cohesive families”. By 2011, Malay educational organisations such as the MENDAKI Community also started to emphasize the importance of the “intact” and “resilient” family.

The stress on how to nurture lasting marriages could be traced to the early 1980s. The then Ministry of Social Affairs (now renamed MSF) was already running its Marriage Preparation Programme for first-time married Muslim couples. By 2004 the ministry received 27,000 referrals in their counselling programmes. Perhaps as a result of such focused counselling, 44% of the referred couples did not proceed with their intention to divorce. Currently, the Muslim marriage preparatory programme is held under the auspices of the MSF and is given the moniker *Cinta Abadi*, or “Marriage of a Lifetime”.

The range of topics covered in these courses include communication skills, and financial and stress management. However, some courses tend to over-emphasize the unequal role of husbands and wives – males as providers and females as caregivers. Given the realities of Malay dual-income households where both men and women contribute materially and socially to the welfare of their households, this may need to be revised.

The Families for Life Council conducts an annual poll to gauge attitudes of couples towards marriage. In two successive annual polls, the majority of respondents in hindsight felt that it was important for couples to attend programmes that could prepare them for marriage. A majority also agreed that couples should improve their quality of marriage by attending marriage enrichment programmes. It goes to show that marriage is not a union in which two people can 'naturally' build their relationship merely based on love and attraction for each other, but an enterprise in need of careful nurturance. Perhaps it is like learning how to invest in it wisely. If a wedding can be hugely costly today, a divorce may even be more so.