

**MALAY FAMILY STRUCTURE:
CHANGE AND CONTINUITY WITH
REFERENCE TO SINGAPORE**

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FOREWORD

I am pleased to write this short foreword to introduce the Department's Seminar and Occasional Papers Series. The series provides the opportunity for staff members of the Department as well as scholars of Malay Studies in general to have their research findings on Malay subjects made known to a wider audience. It is also hoped that this initiative will provide the avenue for a beneficial exchange of ideas and viewpoints on Malay issues between town and gown.

The Department would like to thank Hotel Properties Pte Ltd for sponsoring the publication of the series.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the views expressed in the seminar and occasional papers series are those of the respective authors.

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Introduction

According to the 1990 Census, Singapore citizens categorized as 'Malays' made up 14.1% of the entire population of 3.01 million. In terms of absolute numbers, the Singapore Malay resident population consists of 382,656 persons of which 195,195 are males and 187,461 females - a slight dominance of males over females. Seen in terms of sub-groups the Malay resident population is made up of 68.3% Malays; 17.2% Javanese; 11.3% Boyanese; 0.4% Bugis; and 2.9% other Malays.

Though it is convenient for heuristic purposes to identify the categories or sub-groups coming under the rubric 'Malay' yet at the same time it is clear that there is growing homogeneity. All sub-groups are associated with the use of the Malay language at home. They practise the same religious faith viz Islam and they share certain elements of institutional life traceable to the customs and traditions of the Malays (Adat). The fact that the political system of Singapore recognises only four major ethnic groups viz Chinese, Malay, Indian and others has tended to de-emphasise the importance of ethnic sub-categories or groups as a basis of self-identity. Indeed, in recent years with Islam becoming a basis for a self-consciously evolving Malay identity, the term 'Malay-Muslim' community has come into vogue. This new term encapsulates all Malay sub-groups including Muslims of Arab and Indian descent.

Malay Family/Household Structure

Singapore Malay family/household structure will be explored in two inter-related dimensions viz in terms of (a) whether the family/household is a one family nucleus or a multi-family nucleus and (b) whether the family/household is made up of one, two or three generations.

The Census of Population defines a one family nucleus as "a household formed by one of the following, regardless of the number of generations: (a) a married couple, with or without unmarried child(ren) and/or a parent/grandparent and (b) a family consisting of immediate related members, without presence of a married couple eg one parent only with unmarried child(ren)". In contrast, a multi-family nucleus would be one where there is more than one family nucleus. Given the foregoing definitions, it can be expected (as indeed is the case) that both the one family nucleus as well as the multi-family nucleus can be structured of one, two, three or more generations. In this connection, the term family as understood is one with at least one parent and 'immediate related members made up of child(ren) and relatives of different generations.

What then are the salient characteristics and trends pertaining to the Malay family/household structure over the last 4-5 decades - a period marked by (a) rapid urbanization (b) mass relocation of the Singapore population in housing estates (c) fundamental restructuring of the Singapore economy and (d) the institution of a comprehensive transport system? Have these developments impacted on Malay family/household structure in any way and if so in what manner?

Data on Malay family/household structure are available from 1957 onwards although there is some variance in the manner the statistics are organised. For example, the data available in the 1990 Census differentiated between nuclear family structure of one, two and three generations whereas this was not done in the earlier censuses. Similarly, the 1990 Census differentiated between multi-family nuclei of two, three or more generations whereas the earlier censuses did not.

Be that as it may, among the Malay families enumerated in 1957 (Table I), 75.9% were of the 'one family nucleus' type and, 11.7% were of the 'multi-family nuclei' type. At the same time 22.7% of Malay households were recorded as having no family nucleus whether of one person or more. A household categorized as having 'no family nucleus' is formed by "a person living alone or living with others but which does not constitute a family nucleus". This latter category of households represent mainly migrants who had come alone to work in Singapore.

In 1970, the number of Malay households of the 'one family nucleus' type had increased to 80.0% with a concomitant slight fall in the number of households of the multi-family nuclei type (Table I). At the same time, family/household structure of the 'no family nucleus' type fell significantly to 8.6% - a situation most likely suggestive of (a) the growing number of non-local Malays settling permanently in Singapore and (b) the restriction on migration following Singapore's separation from Malaysia.

Ten years following 1970, with the publication of the 1980 census, the picture that emerged showed only modest changes. At this point, the number of Malay households of the 'one

TABLE 1

**PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS BY HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE AND
ETHNIC GROUP OF HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD, 1957, 1970, 1980 AND 1990**

Household Structure	Ethnic Group of Head of Household				
	Total	Chinese	Malay	Indians	Others
	1990*				
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No Family Nucleus	8.7	8.8	4.0	15.0	12.9
One Person	5.2	5.4	2.2	7.7	8.0
Others	3.5	3.4	1.8	7.3	4.9
One Family Nucleus	84.6	85.0	86.4	77.6	82.7
One Generation	7.1	7.3	5.5	6.4	12.3
Two Generations	68.4	68.7	70.6	62.6	62.8
Three or More Generations	9.1	9.0	10.3	8.6	7.6
Multi-family Nuclei	6.7	6.2	9.6	7.4	4.4
Two Generations	2.1	2.0	2.8	2.6	1.6
Three or More Generations	4.6	4.2	6.8	4.8	2.8
1980*					
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No Family Nucleus	8.2	7.5	3.5	23.0	11.9
One Person	5.7	5.2	2.5	17.0	7.3
Others	2.5	2.3	1.0	6.9	4.6
One Family Nucleus	81.0	81.9	82.8	67.5	81.1
Multi-family Nuclei	10.8	10.6	13.7	8.6	7.0
1970*					
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No Family Nucleus	16.8	14.5	8.6	45.0	19.3
One Person	13.1	11.1	6.9	37.0	13.5
Others	3.7	3.4	1.7	8.0	5.8
One Family Nucleus	71.5	72.7	80.0	49.5	75.9
Multi-family Nuclei	11.7	12.8	11.4	5.5	4.8
1957*					
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No Family Nucleus	25.7	21.3	12.4	61.7	22.2
One Person	20.7	17.0	10.3	50.5	16.3
Others	5.0	4.3	2.1	11.2	5.9
One Family Nucleus	63.5	66.6	75.9	34.5	69.4
Multi-family Nuclei	10.8	12.1	11.7	3.8	8.4

* Refers to resident households.

** Refers to total households as breakdown by resident and non-resident households is not available.

family nucleus' type recorded a 2.8% rise to 82.8%. However, at the same time, the percentage of Malay households of the 'multi-family nuclei' type also witnessed a rise of 2.3% to 13.7%. It is possible that both types of households benefited from the consistent and drastic fall in the number of Malay households categorized as having 'no family nucleus' which in 1980 recorded a percentage of 3.5% compared to 8.6% for 1970 and 12.4% for 1957.

It is perhaps in the 1990 Census that certain characteristics and trends in Singapore Malay family/household structure are better revealed. For the year 1990, the number of Malay households of the 'one family nucleus' type increased by 3.6% over the intercensal period to 86.4% (Table I). At the same time, the number of Malay households of the 'multi-family nuclei' type fell to 9.6% in contrast to 1980 (13.7%), 1970 (11.4%) and 1957 (11.7%).

There are then two general observations that can be made in regard to Malay family/household structure in Singapore over the last 3-4 decades viz, (a) the increasing tendency toward nuclearization and (b) the concomitant drop in the number of households of the 'multi-family nuclei' type. Increasingly, the nuclear family is fast becoming the norm. Whether this is necessarily a problem will be explored at a later stage.

What of the 'generation' dimension in Malay family/household structure? Discussion on this facet of Malay family structure is constrained by the fact that data for other years than 1990 are unavailable. Still, based on the figures published in the 1990 Census certain observations may be made.

As shown in the data (Table 1), Malay households are overwhelmingly of the 'one family nucleus two generation' type. This category makes up 70.6% of the total. Such a type of family structure would normally be made up of a married couple, their immediate children and one or more grandparents most likely on the wife's side though it is not uncommon to see on the husband's side as well. If the percentage for the 'one family nucleus three or more generation' type is summated with the 'one family nucleus two generation' type, the total is an impressive 80.9% - a fact that testifies to the on-going preference among Malays to maintain the extended family life-style based on the concept of 'saudara' (relatives). Indeed, the percentage recorded for this facet of family/household structure is the highest among the Malays when compared to the Chinese, Indians and Others. Alternatively, the percentage of households of the 'one family nucleus one generation' type is lowest for the Malays at 5.5% compared to 7.3% for the Chinese, 6.4% for the Indians and 12.3% for the others. These characteristics of the Malay family/household structure seem to suggest that though there is an increasing trend toward family nuclearization among Singapore Malays yet the multi-generational perspective of life is being preserved. Certainly, Malays have the highest percentage of households with three or more generations of family members living together, that is to say, 17% as against 13% for the Chinese and Indians.

Home Ownership and Family Structure

The foregoing is supported by some corroborative evidence from types of housing/dwelling associated with the Malays (Table 2).

In 1980, home ownership among Malays of HDB/JTC flats amounted to 49.7%. Ten years later in 1990, the rate of home ownership had risen to 92.3%. In the case of private

TABLE 2

HOME OWNERSHIP OF RESIDENT HOUSEHOLDS BY TYPE OF DWELLING AND ETHNIC GROUP OF HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD, 1980 AND 1990

Type of Dwelling	Ethnic Group of Head							
	Total		Chinese		Malay		Indians	
	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
Total	58.8	87.5	61.9	87.5	49.7	92.3	42.2	80.9
HDB/JTC	60.6	89.4	62.3	89.1	53.1	93.5	53.4	84.7
Private Houses, Condominiums and Private Flats	72.3	85.1	76.6	87.3	41.8	71.3	56.8	76.2
Others	46.0	56.5	51.6	60.0	40.9	46.5	15.8	34.0

Source: Singapore Census of Population, Households and Housing, Statistic Release 2, p 18.

houses, condominiums and private flats, the rate of Malay home ownership in 1980 was 41.8% but in 1990 it had gone up to 71.3%. This phenomenal rise in home ownership compared most favourably with the Chinese and Indians.¹ It testifies to the growing ability of Singapore Malays to become home owners - a situation quite in keeping with the importance Malays place on having a permanent and decent abode for the family.

More important, however, is the fact that Malay family structure (in particular, the two or more generation one family nucleus type) correlates positively with type(s) of dwelling preferred.

Table 3 shows that 71.6% of Malays who own landed properties (bungalows, semi-detached bungalows and terrace houses) are associated with the 'two or more generations one family nucleus type'. If the percentage for the 'two or more generations two family nuclei' type is included the figure rises to almost 80.0%.

Equally significant is the percentage of ownership of HDB/JTC three, four and five-room flats. Ownership of 3 and 4-room HDB/JTC flats among families of the 'two or more generations one family nucleus' type in 1990 amounted to 82.6%. Similarly, Malay ownership of 5-room HDB/JTC flats recorded a percentage of 68.0% for this group in the same period. If the percentage figures for the categories 'two or more generations, two

¹ In the case of Chinese home ownership of HDB/JTC flats the figures were 62.3% for 1980 and 89.1% for 1990 respectively. For the Indians, the percentages recorded were 53.4% for 1980 and 84.7% for 1990 respectively. In the case of Chinese home ownership of private houses, condominiums and private flats the figures were 76.6% for 1980 and 87.3% for 1990. For the Indians, the percentages were 56.8% for 1980 and 76.2% for 1990 respectively.

TABLE 3

MALAY HOUSEHOLDS BY TYPE OF DWELLING
AND HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE, 1990

TYPE OF DWELLING	NO FAMILY NUCLEUS		ONE FAMILY NUCLEUS			TWO FAMILY NUCLEUS			THREE AND MORE FAMILY NUCLEUS		
	One Person Household	More > One Person Household	One Generation	Two Generations	Three or More Generations	One Generation	Two Generations	Three or More Generations	Two Generations	Three Generations	Four or More Generations
Total	1,795 100.0	1,482 1.8	4,536 5.2	57,783 70.6	8,400 10.4	14 0.1	2,029 2.5	4,727 5.2	252 0.3	1,129 1.4	188 0.3
LANDED PROPERTIES (Bungalows, Semi-detached Bungalows and Terrace Houses)	76 7.7	56 5.7	35 3.6	573 58.2	132 13.4	-	20 2.0	58 6.0	9 0.9	23 2.3	2 0.2
HDB/JTC DWELLINGS	1,382 1.7	1,245 1.6	4,368 5.5	56,339 71.2	8,115 10.3	14 0.0	1,979 2.5	4,160 5.3	238 0.3	1,086 1.4	176 0.2
1-and 2-Room Flats	616 10.5	295 5.0	600 10.3	3,647 62.4	572 9.8	-	51 0.9	59 1.0	-	7 0.1	1 0.0
3-and 4-Room Flats	713 1.1	864 1.3	3,424 5.2	47,477 72.4	6,676 10.2	11 0.0	1,711 2.6	3,493 5.3	207 0.3	866 1.3	145 0.2
5-room Flats	53 9.7	86 1.1	344 4.9	5,215 68.0	867 11.4	3 0.0	217 2.8	608 7.9	31 0.4	213 2.8	30 0.4
CONDOMINIUMS AND PRIVATE FLATS	241 15.5	162 10.5	152 9.8	822 53.0	91 5.9	-	19 1.2	42 2.7	4 0.3	11 0.7	6 0.4
SHOPHOUSES AND OTHERS	473 37.0	431 33.6	36 2.8	222 17.3	61 4.8	-	18 1.4	22 1.7	4 0.3	5 0.4	8 0.6
OTHER PUBLIC FLATS	151 16.1	56 6.0	96 10.2	538 57.4	64 6.8	1 0.1	8 0.9	18 1.9	2 0.2	3 0.3	1 0.1

Source: Census of Population, 1990. Statistical Release 2, Households and Housing.

family nuclei' type and the 'two or more generations, three or more family nuclei' type are added, there is an increase of more than ten points to 92.3% and 93.7% respectively.

The Malay preference for larger or more roomy dwellings as exemplified by the high rate of ownership of bungalows etc and 3, 4 and 5-room HDB/JTC flats may be explained as the desire or need to maintain the traditional family structure constituted of extended kin relations encompassing two or more generations. In this connection, it can be stated that unless the family concerned is poor or has a limited kin circle, the general Malay preference is for a larger dwelling that would be sufficient to house the dependent old. Certainly, there are also supportive circumstances that make this possible: the most important being the government's special consideration for those who are related to live together or close to each other (such as for example, the 'two or more generations two or more family nuclei' household) in HDB housing estates; the increasing number of Malay women who seek employment in both the private and public sectors of the economy (hence necessitating the services of grandparents in child-care); and the rise of Malay family income consequent from it, thus making possible the purchase of larger and more costly flats.²

From a different perspective, it can be seen that the percentage of Malay households of the 'one generation, one family nucleus' type owning landed properties etc or HDB/JTC 3, 4

² It may be of interest to note that the pervasive use of Filipino housemaids among Chinese Singaporeans in particular has yet to catch on in a meaningful way among Malay Singaporeans suggesting that despite affluence and ability to afford, most Malay Singaporeans continue to prefer the services of their kin to provide child-care services. It is also probably correct to say that there is also a religious consideration in that as Muslims, Malays prefer people of the same faith to provide care and training for their children.

or 5-room flats is rather small, averaging about 4% and 11% respectively. It is possible that this percentage may increase in the course of time. However, it is highly unlikely that it would assume the proportion of a trend as would be made clear in a moment. The relatively low percentage of this type of household or family structure in contrast to the others discussed previously is indicative of the Malay cultural perception that in a normal family there must be elderly people whether they are grandparents or relatives of the grandparents generation to exemplify consanguinity (*hubungan darah*). More specifically, the elderly in the Malay family continue to enjoy fairly well-defined roles acting not merely as child-care providers in the family. The bond that binds the members of the kin group is not merely biological but social and spiritual as well. It is shown in the respect and honour accorded to grandparents in day to day relationships as well as in ritualised form on festive occasions. Moreover, the preferred mode of residence on marriage continues to stress matrilocality. This implies that Malay family structure would remain at least the 'two or more generations, nuclear family' type. Another related dimension is that a newly married couple would normally be unable to afford a new flat even if there is an intention to purchase one - not at least until they have worked for several years by which time they would have had children.

In dealing with the Malay family/household structure and its continuity, there is a need to add a cautionary note.

Overall, the percentage of multi-family nuclei households recorded over the three census periods viz 1970, 1980 and 1990 has shown a consistent drop from a high of 11.7% in 1970 to 10.8% and 7% for 1980 and 1990 respectively (Table I). In the case of the Malays

the same trend is observable. From a high of 13.7% for families/households of the 'multi-family nuclei' type in 1980, the figure fell to 9.6% in 1990. At the same time, this type of Malay household is also associated with low income and educational attainment. For example, in 1980, 13.6% of the Malay households of the 'multi-family nuclei' type had no educational qualifications compared to 4.8% who had tertiary qualifications.

Furthermore, the 1980 Census showed that the average number of children born to each ethnic group was highest among the Malays at 3.9 as against 3.4 and 3.4 for the Chinese and Indians respectively. However, in 1990, the figures for all ethnic groups had fallen: Malays to 3.2; Chinese to 2.8 and Indians to 2.7. It is possible that the government's reversal of population policy in recent years to encourage larger families may cause a rise again in due course. Be that as it may, there are discernible developments that have a bearing on the future family/household structure of the Malays. These include (a) the growing number of Malays entering tertiary institutions (b) the quantum leap in the level of family income over the intercensal period 1980-1990³ (c) the smaller number of children born and (d) the postponement of marriage until later life (Table 4 and Table 5). All these factors may impact on the family/household structure of the Malays in future years assuming the developments as outlined become constant or cumulative. As of the moment, the dominant structural type seems to be the 'one-family nucleus, two generation' variety much less the 'one-family nucleus, one generation' type.

³ During the intercensal period, Malay incomes rose by 10.5% per annum compared to 9.7% and 7.7% for the Chinese and Indians respectively.

TABLE 4
RESIDENT EVER-MARRIED FEMALES BY AGE AT
FIRST MARRIAGE AND ETHNIC GROUP, 1980 AND 1990

Age at First Marriage (Years)	Total		Chinese		Malay		Indians		Others	
	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
	Per Cent									
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Below 20	38.7	22.2	35.0	18.1	55.9	39.9	52.9	35.9	25.1	18.2
20 - 24	40.4	43.1	42.2	43.7	31.5	41.0	35.1	40.4	45.5	44.6
25 - 29	16.2	26.9	17.9	29.7	8.8	14.6	9.7	18.3	19.6	27.1
30 - 34	3.4	6.0	3.6	6.7	2.4	3.1	1.6	3.9	6.5	6.9
35 & Above	1.3	1.8	1.3	1.8	1.4	1.4	0.7	1.5	3.3	3.2
Mean Age	21	23	22	23	20	21	20	22	23	24

Source: Census of Population, 1990. Statistical Release I, Demographic Characteristics

TABLE 5
WORKING PERSONS AGED 15 YEARS AND OVER BY MONTHLY INCOME
FROM WORK AND ETHNIC GROUP, 1980 AND 1990

Monthly Income From Work (\$)	1990					1980				
	Total	Chinese	Malays	Indians	Others	Total	Chinese	Malays	Indians	Others
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Below 500	11.0	6.9	9.4	17.6	57.4	63.4	60.2	81.7	68.7	31.9
500 - 999	37.1	36.8	47.8	38.9	16.1	24.2	26.6	15.7	20.2	12.7
1,000 - 1,499	23.4	24.5	27.0	21.7	4.5	5.9	6.7	1.8	4.8	7.4
1,500 - 1,999	11.3	12.4	9.4	9.5	3.0	2.5	2.9	0.5	2.1	5.8
2,000 - 2,999	8.9	10.2	4.6	6.8	4.4	2.0	2.1	0.2	2.3	9.9
3,000 & Over	8.3	9.2	1.8	5.5	14.6	2.0	1.5	0.1	1.9	32.3
Average (\$)	1,414	1,497	1,049	1,195	1,408	598	595	388	568	2,307

Source: Census of Population, 1990. Statistical Release 4, Economic Characteristics

Cultural Values and Family Household Structure

Several cultural parameters are of consequence in the future family/household structure of the Malays. The first is the bilateral nature of the family system. This means in effect that relatives on both sides of the family share equal consideration. In this regard, its implication for family structure maintenance is at least theoretically, if not in fact positive as dependents (especially elderly parents) could choose to stay with either their married daughter(s) or son(s) as the case may be depending on whether the parties are compatible with each other.⁴ The fact that the traditional residential arrangement preferred by Malays on marriage is matri local also conduces toward the maintenance of the extended family structure on the wife's side. To an extent, this may explain the fact that Malays in general have no strong preference for either male or female children - an attitude reaffirmed again in a recent survey of the Singapore family.⁵ Of the 206 responses received from the Malay sample, 60.7% answered they had no particular preferences; 3.6% expressed a preference for female children; 3.3% expressed a preference for male children; and 32.4% answered they were uncertain.

There is another powerful cultural dimension that may act positively on the maintenance of the extended family structure of the Malays viz the religion of Islam. While at the level of belief Islam stresses total obedience to God, at the level of practice it ennobles all acts

⁴ In the case of the Chinese who stress patrilineal descent and patrilocal values, it would not be regarded as 'appropriate' say for parents to live with their married daughters though this attitude is also changing.

⁵ *A Multi-disciplinary Survey of the Singapore Family Preliminary Report* (ed) Tham Seong Chee, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, NUS, Singapore, 1987 (Mimeo). 150 pp.

of devotion accorded to parents whether dead or alive.⁶ There is a complex of themes revolving around the special status of the mother in particular in a Muslim's life (themes exemplified in the social myths of the Malays as well) so that to neglect one's parents amounts no less to disobeying God.⁷ This religious awareness is widespread and can be expected to preserve the outlines of the traditional Malay family/household structure indefinitely in particular its modern variant the 'one family nucleus, two generation' type. Currently, the low rate of Malay utilization of welfare facilities for the aged in Singapore would seem to suggest the continuing salience of Malay beliefs in regard to family life and responsibility.⁸

To explore this fact of the Malay family/household structure, primarily to understanding its value dynamics, recourse to the findings on socialization obtained by the Multi-disciplinary Survey of the Singapore Family (1987) may help to throw more light on future trends. This is, of course, not the best way to gauge Malay attitudes toward the family/household structure considered ideal. Nonetheless without the benefit of a study on the subject, an exploration of the value orientations of Malays in socialization may suffice to some extent.

⁶ A well-known Malay verse that captures this sentiment is as follows:

Kasih ibu, kasih sahaja
Kasih bapa menurut perintah
Kasih adik sama ada

⁷ Both the Koran and the Traditions of the Prophet (Hadith) are replete with God's as well as the Prophet's commands to obey and love one's parents.

⁸ A recent study on the Malay aged in Singapore is found in Myrna C Blake, *Growing Old in the Malay Community*, Centre for Advanced Studies, NUS, Occasional paper 10, Times Academic Press. 1992.

The Survey sample was made up of 1960 families of which 308 (15.7%) were Malay. On socialization, respondents were asked to list the three most important values they would like their children to learn; how they learnt these values and whom they thought would be the best person(s) to teach these values to their children.⁹

The seven most cited values (Table 6) can be grouped into 3 essential categories viz (a) those stressing personal morality (honesty/integrity, discipline/obedience); (b) those stressing social morality (filial/respectful, religious/moral, caring/compassionate); and (c) those stressing achievement and mobility (hardworking/diligent; initiative/boldness).

It can be seen that each category of values have both a historical-cultural as well as contemporary ideological underpinning. Stress on personal morality is in consonance with the traditional value syndrome 'nafsu' which interpreted broadly means 'desire, appetite and lust'. Among Malays 'nafsu' left uncontrolled or undisciplined constitutes the main threat to Islamic morality. Given this conceptualization, a variety of behavioural forms driven by appetitive needs could be regarded as 'nafsu' including as well neglect of one's dependents (parents, children, siblings) for the pursuit of personal pleasures or gratifications.

Stress on social morality as another value syndrome (exemplified most clearly in respect for elders/parents and responsibility toward their welfare) reflects not only a pervasive cultural but also religious theme in traditional Malay life. Current government policies to promote the family as a supportive system for the ageing and aged not to mention its

⁹ On the sampling technique, objectives of the study and findings, vide: Tham Seong Chee (ed) *Multi-disciplinary Survey of the Singapore Family, Preliminary Report*, NUS. 1987.

TABLE 6
THREE MOST IMPORTANT VALUES

Seven Most Cited Values	Value 1		Value 2		Value 3		Total Frequency	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Number	%
Honesty/Integrity	49	19.8	67	29.4	42	21.3	158	70.5
Discipline/Obedience	67	27.0	43	18.9	32	16.2	142	62.1
Filial/Respectful	39	15.7	34	14.9	32	16.2	105	46.8
Hardworking/Diligent	24	9.7	34	14.9	27	13.8	85	38.4
Religious/Moral	40	16.1	22	9.6	26	13.2	88	38.9
Initiative/Boldness	14	5.6	16	7.0	23	11.7	53	24.3
Caring/Compassionate	15	6.1	12	5.3	15	7.6	42	19.0
TOTAL	248	100.0	228	100.0	197	100.0	673	

Total Possible: 308

Source: Multi-disciplinary Survey of the Singapore Family, 1987.

essential ideological harmony with the teachings of Islam will re-inforce social morality as a syndrome of values. In that respect it would conduce toward the maintenance of family structure among the Malays. Both the stress on personal and social morality are logically and meaningfully integrated. Its impact on Malay attitudes toward care for the ageing and aged (including other dependents related by blood) can be expected to continue and as a consequence strengthen family structure of either the 'one family nucleus, two generation' household or the 'two family nuclei, two/three generation' household. Given these factors, it is highly unlikely that the strictly 'nuclear' family of the Western type would emerge as a norm.

TABLE 7
PERSONS RESPONSIBLE FOR TEACHING VALUES

Persons	Value 1		Value 2		Value 3	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Parents	228	78.9	195	70.4	182	69.5
Siblings	0	0.0	1	0.4	0	0.0
Grandparents	1	0.3	3	1.0	2	0.8
Relatives	1	0.3	1	0.4	3	1.1
Teachers	7	2.4	18	6.5	18	6.8
Friends/Colleagues	4	1.4	5	1.8	12	4.6
Religious Teachers	3	1.0	5	1.8	2	0.8
Mass Media	1	0.3	1	0.4	1	0.4
Self-Taught	24	8.3	23	8.3	23	8.8
Govt Policies	3	1.0	4	1.4	0	0.0
Society	16	5.5	21	7.6	19	7.2
Others	1	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
TOTAL	289	100.0	277	100.0	262	100.0

Total Possible: 308

Source: Multi-disciplinary Survey of the Singapore Family, 1987

Finally, stress on the values of achievement and mobility is in character with the current existential demands of Singapore society as a whole. Given the Malay aspiration to perform and succeed well, it is not at all surprising to observe a strong commitment to such values.

As in the choice of values, the sources of value acquisition as identified tend also to stress the role and importance of family/household heads (Table 7). This suggests that the family remains to be a clearly structured reality in the minds of the respondents.

For respondents, their sources of value acquisition were mainly: parents (approx 73%); teachers (approx 5.3%); friends (approx 2.6%); self-taught (approx 8.5%); and society (approx 6.8%).¹⁰ When respondents were asked whom they considered to be the most appropriate persons to teach the values to their children, the answers obtained were consistent: parents 76.2%; teachers (7.4%); self-taught 4.6%; society 8.3%; and friends 0.9% (Table 8). The argument as presented thus far could be made stronger had the percentage of responses for 'grandparents' been significant. This would have provided the necessary supportive evidence that grandparents have a prescribed role in the family, thus validating their inclusion in the household.

A variation is found in the similarly low percentage of responses for 'religious teachers'. In some sense this is a puzzle but in another it is not. Stress on the role of parents as persons considered most appropriate to teach values is a fundamental cultural-religious

¹⁰ The percentage is derived by averaging the scores for Value 1, Value 2 and Value 2.

expectation based on the concept of 'natural justice'.¹¹ Similarly, the religion of Islam makes clear stipulations regarding the responsibilities of the mother on the one hand and on the other those of the father in the upbringing of children. Fundamentally, it is also a matter of how consanguinity is perceived. For ego a parent, his/her parents are as closely related by blood (*darah*) to him/her as his/her own children are. For his/her children, however, the grandparents are one generation remote and therefore less close but nonetheless united by shared '*darah*'. Mention of teachers as a source of values merely iterates an existential fact in modern society where so much of the growing process involves formal schooling.

The Malay conceptualization of the family as an institution cannot be divorced from his/her understanding of what constitutes a faithful Muslim. Islamic injunctions pertaining to the family stress two inter-related precepts viz (a) the family as the source of religious training for the young and (b) the family as a structure of mutual ties and obligations binding all those related to each other by blood. Malays, by and large, have endeavoured to live by the two precepts.

Given the empirical and valuational aspects discussed thus far, it can be surmized that Malay family/household structure of the 'one family nucleus, two generation' type is likely to become the norm in future years with at the same time a declining number of the 'two family nuclei, two/three generation' type.

¹¹ This is exemplified in various Malay saying eg *Bapa borek, anaknya rintik* (if the father is spotted, the offspring will be speckled).

TABLE 8

PERSONS CONSIDERED MOST APPROPRIATE TO TEACH VALUES

Persons	Value 1		Value 2		Value 3	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Parents	233	80.1	207	74.7	191	73.7
Siblings	3	1.0	5	1.8	4	1.5
Grandparents	0	0.0	1	0.4	0	0.0
Relatives	0	0.0	1	0.4	0	0.0
Teachers	20	6.9	23	8.3	18	7.0
Friends/Colleagues	2	0.7	1	0.4	4	1.5
Religious Teachers	0	0.0	4	1.4	3	1.2
Mass Media	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Self-Taught	11	3.8	12	4.3	15	5.8
Govt Policies	1	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
Society	21	7.2	23	8.3	24	9.3
Others	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
TOTAL	291	100.0	277	100.0	259	100.0

Total Possible: 308

Source: Multi-disciplinary Survey of the Singapore Family, 1987.

Impact of Divorce on Stability of Family/Household Structure

The rate of Malay/Muslim divorce in Singapore for 1991 was recorded as 21.4 out of every 100 marriages. Ten years ago it was 15.4 out of every 100 marriages.

Seen in terms of absolute figures the number of Malay/Muslim divorces recorded for the years 1981, 1986, 1991, and 1992 was 614, 786, 1021 and 1002 respectively.¹² At the same time, the number of Malay-Muslim marriages has also been increasing from 1560 in

¹² Department of Statistics, *Report on Marriages and Divorces 1982-1991*.

1961 to 4806 in 1991. This does not include the number of Malay-Muslims who have contracted civil marriages with non-Muslims which in 1982 amounted to 56 persons (M = 15, F = 41). Between 1982 and 1990, the number of such marriages fluctuated between 50 and 70.

A number of problems confront the investigator when dealing with Malay-Muslim divorces as they relate to family/household stability.

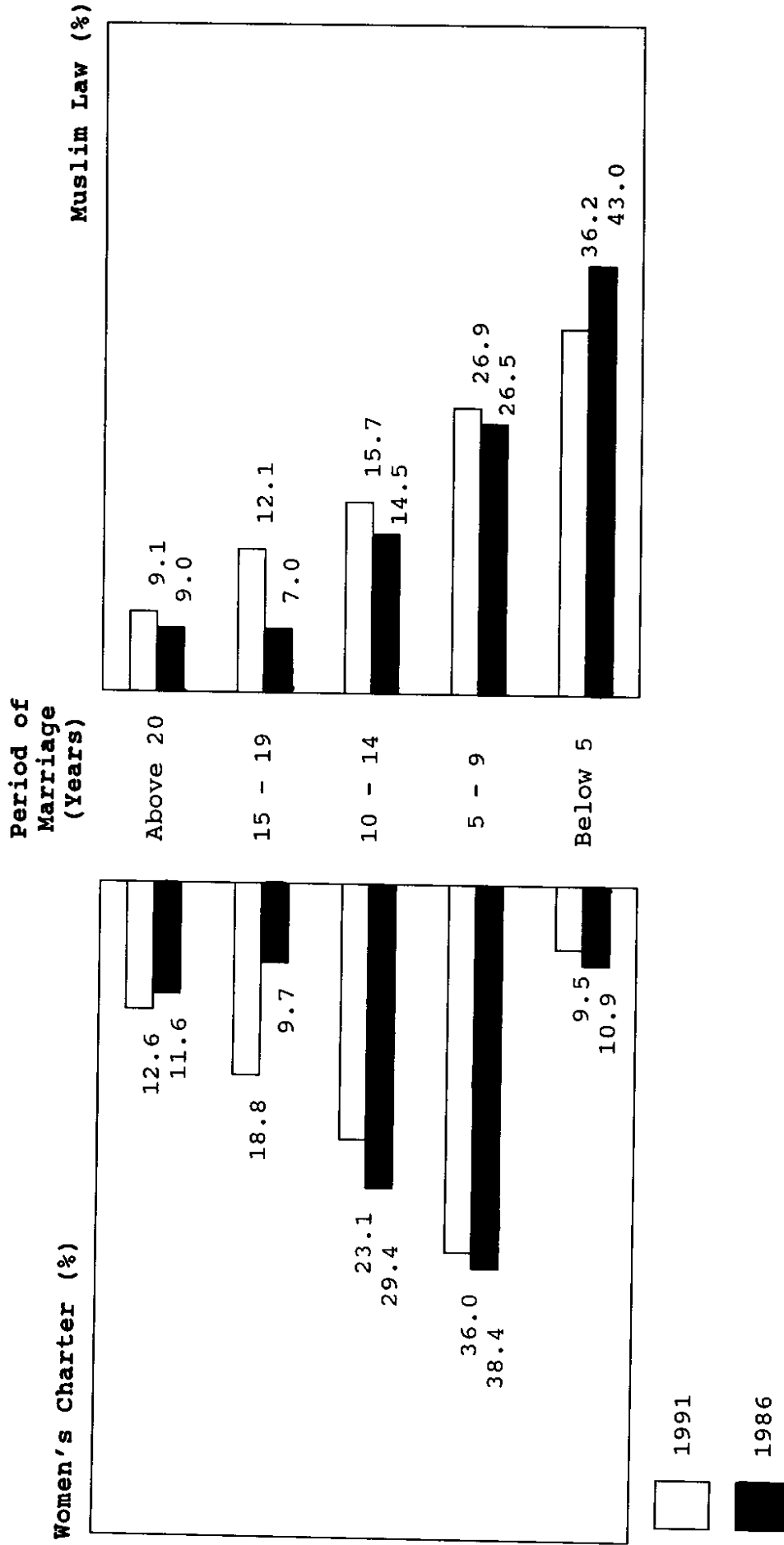
First of all, there are no figures available to show the correlation between family/household structure and the incidence of divorce. For example, is divorce more prone or less prone as the case may be in the 'one family nucleus, one generation' household or in the 'one family nucleus, two/three generation' household or the 'two family nuclei, multi-generation' household etc?

Secondly, data currently available on Malay-Muslim marriages are not presented in a manner that yield information on (a) the number who re-marry following divorce (b) the frequency of re-marriage following divorce and (c) the time lapse between each re-marriage.

Thirdly, data are also not readily available on the socio-economic statuses of Malay-Muslim divorced persons, principally their educational and income levels including occupational background.

TABLE 9

DIVORCES ACCORDING TO YEARS OF MARRIAGE



Fourthly, data on marriage stability or instability as the case may be of parents of divorced Malay-Muslim persons are unavailable, and if available, may throw light on possible background factors contributing to divorce among their children in later years.

Be that as it may, what is known is that a high percentage (36.2%) of Malay-Muslim divorces occur during the first five years of marriage (Table 9). If the ceiling is raised to ten years, the percentage rises to a significant 63.1%. However, marriage instability declines cumulatively with years of marriage - a situation which may explain that Malay-Muslim divorced persons on re-marriage tend to maintain stable married life after that. In other word, the number of persons who remain divorced throughout their lives could be quite small. The fact that many Malay-Muslim divorces occur when the divorced persons are still relatively young makes possible remarriage. The mean age at first marriage for Muslim grooms for 1991 was 27.4 years and for brides 24.4 years. If that is the case, the negative consequences as perceived of divorce may to some extent at least be mitigated. If previous observation is any guide, many Malay-Muslim divorced persons do re-marry and remain remarried for the rest of their lives.

In order to understand the impact of Malay-Muslim divorces on marriage stability including as well family/household structure, it is also necessary to adapt a broader time perspective. Up to 1950, for every 100 Malay-Muslim marriage registered, there were at least 50% divorces registered for the same year.¹³ The number of revocations (rojok) varied between 5% and 15%. The rate of Malay-Muslim divorces fell steadily in the 1960s and 1970s to

¹³ Djamour, J. *Malay Kinship and Marriage in Singapore*. The Athlone Press, University of London, 1959, p 117.

TABLE 10
DIVORCE RATES OF MUSLIMS AND NON-MUSLIMS, 1960 - 1991

(a)

%	Year	1960- 1969	1970- 1974	1975- 1978	1980- 1984	1985- 1988
Muslims		20.9	9.9	10.8	13.4	17.6
Non-Muslims		1.41	1.24	2.54	6.6	8.2

(b)

%	Year	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
Muslims		12.5	13.9	11.1	15.5	14.2	16.2	17.9	17.8	18.6			21.4
Non-Muslims		5.3	6.0	7.1	7.8	6.8	6.9	9.5	8.1	8.2			11.1

Source: Statistics on Marriages & Divorces, 1992, Department of Statistics.

almost 15% until it began to rise again to the present 21% (Table 10). Figures available for 1992 again show a slight fall in the number of divorces from 1021 to 1002.

The high Malay-Muslim divorce rate in the past (going back from 1970 to 1960 and earlier) could be said was related at least partially to the large number of unattached young Malay-Indonesian men and women who sought work in Singapore. Being without family ties in Singapore, they were therefore more prone to fall in and out of marital arrangements. In 1957, almost 25% of the Malay households were made up of persons with no family nucleus and in 1970 the percentage was almost 17%. Admittedly, there is some degree of conjecture given the absence of reliable data.

Nonetheless, adoption of a broader perspective would yield two observations viz (a) that overall, taking into consideration a span of 40-50 years, Malay-Muslim marriages have become more stable and (b) that the increase in divorce rates in recent years is also paralleled by increase of divorce rates for the non-Muslims. Thus, if one were to start from a selected baseline, say 1960, where Muslims witnessed a 20.9% divorce rate as against 1.4% for non-Muslims, the improvement achieved by Malay-Muslims compares quite well with the non-Muslims.

The rise in divorce rates throughout the 1980s for both Malay-Muslims and non-Muslims could be due to other than ethnic-cultural factors: an important one being gains made by women in education and the increasing number among them who have become economically

independent.¹⁴ Certainly, in the case of Malay-Muslims, the commonest ground cited for divorce among men and women in recent years is that of 'personality/temperamental differences', testifying to the growing sense of selfhood among Malay-Muslim females.

To conclude, it can be argued that marriage stability among Singapore's Malay-Muslims appear to have no apparent impact on the family/household structure. Three observations support this conclusion. One is the fact that those who divorce do re-marry at a later stage and in that sense maintain the ideal of the 'one family nucleus, two generation family'. Secondly, as the data show (Table 9), marriages which survive the critical first five years, tend to remain stable. Finally, despite the high divorce rates in the last 4-5 decades, the Malay-Muslim family structure has remained stable. It can be expected that more families will converge toward the norm of a 'one family nucleus, two generation' type or a 'two family nucleus, two or more generation' type. An aspect of consequence when divorce occurs is for the divorced female and her children to return to her family for shelter and support. According to Malay-Muslim practice, relatives on both sides are bound by duty to assist her, at least temporarily.

Concluding Remarks

Family stability and its maintenance is a major concern in the Malay-Muslim community of Singapore. Partly, this is driven by the on-going challenge of high divorce rates and partly also because it is so central to the teachings of Islam. Such a concern is also in

¹⁴ The most common reasons cited for divorce among Malay-Muslim women are: personality/temperamental differences; inadequate maintenance; infidelity; and drug addiction. For Malay-Muslim men the main complaints are: personality/temperamental differences; infidelity; neglect; nagging; desertion, and inadequate maintenance.

harmony with the overall thrust of Singapore's social development policies: the idea that the family should constitute the building block of a stable, humane, prosperous and gracious society. In this connection, the family is not only seen as a place for the upbringing of children but equally a support system for the elderly and dependent. The fact that a high proportion of the divorces among the Malay-Muslims in Singapore involve the young makes it all the more urgent to take the challenge of promoting stable family life by the horns. In this, the Muslim Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) and its executive arm, the Registry of Muslim Marriages (ROMM) plays a significant role.

Over the years, MUIS has instituted a variety of strategies, including the upgrading of procedures already in force, to achieve the objective in question. For example, marriage among minors is discouraged.¹⁵ Pre-marriage intervention to educate intending couples on the responsibilities of marriage is carried out by MUIS as well as selected mosques and voluntary organisations. The Syariah Court has tightened rules pertaining to divorce and doubled its efforts to achieve reconciliation through counselling. Every case of divorce is investigated carefully by Muslim Social Case Workers appointed by it.¹⁶

Last but not least, MUIS as well as mosque based groups continue to organise courses on

¹⁵ A person is considered a minor, if he/she is below the age of 20 years. In 1991, 2.4% of Muslim marriages both male and female involved minors - a figure about three times higher than non-Muslim (WC) marriages. The mean age at first marriage of Muslim grooms and brides has, however, increased in recent years from 26.6 to 27.4 (for grooms) and from 23.8 to 24.4 (for brides) between 1986 and 1991.

¹⁶ It should be mentioned that the Syariah Court has no jurisdiction over maintenance and custody. These come under the jurisdiction of the civil court. In offering counselling, couples intending divorce are also encouraged to reconcile by going through a 'trying out' period of three months. To ensure that this will work a couple is told what the rights and responsibilities of each one is to the other.

parenting skills stressing the importance of planning the household budget, patience and understanding between husband and wife and adequate attention to the needs of children.

In September 1993, MUIS through its Deputy President announced that it was preparing a comprehensive action programme to deal with the problems of high divorce rates and family instability in the Malay-Muslim community.¹⁷ The action programme as envisaged will address the immediate problems of high divorce rates and at the same time incorporate strategies for long-term stabilization of the family. It can be expected that MUIS would give appropriate attention to promoting the family as a support system for the aged and dependent as well. The overall effect of the programmes and strategies initiated thus far as well as in the projected future will no doubt have a positive impact on the structure of the Malay family/household.

The trends as they appear, suggest that the Malay family/household structure is converging toward a norm viz, that of the 'one family nucleus, two generation' type. Not only does this find meaning and identity with the Malay family/household structure of the past but equally in the teachings of Islam on family life. Empirical support for this is found in the high proportion of Malay ownership of larger residential units (3-5 rooms) in HDB/JTC estates. Preference for such a residential arrangement is both economic and social: economic, because of the Malay ability to meet the costs of such residential units and social, because of the desire to maintain the extended family network involving two or more generations. A further dimension is the current perception toward values. Not only do Singapore Malays stress parents as the source of values but equally moral concerns that are

¹⁷ *Berita Harian*, 4 September 1993.

socially integrative. These it is argued will conduce toward the strengthening of the family/household structure of the 'one family nucleus, two generation' type as a norm.

The relationship between divorce and stability of family/household structure is difficult to ascertain at this juncture. Further findings will have to be obtained to throw light on this issue. However, what can be said at this juncture is the fact that high divorce rates over the past two decades do not seem to have affected adversely the cumulative tendency of the family/household structure of the Malays to assume the 'one family nucleus, two generation' type. With the real and projected programmes and strategies put in place by MUIS to promote family stability, it is fair to expect that this would be the case.

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