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Theresa W. Devasahayam

Asia Research Institute
National University of Singapore
aritwd@nus.edu.sg

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Asia Research Institute
National University of Singapore
Shaw Foundation Building, Block AS7, Level 4
5 Arts Link, Singapore 117570
Tel: (65) 6874 3810
Fax: (65) 6779 1428
Website: www.ari.nus.edu.sg
Email: arisec@nus.edu.sg

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A Culture of Cherishing Children: Fertility Trends of Tertiary-Educated Malay Women in Malaysia

Theresa W. Devasahayam

Growing Economies, Changing Family Structures: How Does Malaysia Figure in Fertility Theories

> I think we have many children because of culture…my mom only had two…she was working but she had problems conceiving…but my husband's family is big…he has seven siblings…and all his siblings have not less than five children each…if I did not have five children myself, I would feel out of place…when I had my fourth child, I decided on the IUD but when I got it removed, I immediately got pregnant again…I did not know I was so fertile.
>
> (36 year old, lecturer)

The phenomenon of shrinking family sizes has attracted the attention of demographers for many decades. That this has become a near universal worldwide trend, save for some countries, has been a focus of intense academic inquiry. Various theories have been generated to explain the reasons for this demographic trend. While the majority of theories have concentrated on the reasons for the downward pattern in fertility rates, fewer still such as the work of Leete (1989, 1996) and Jones (1990) on the Malayo-Polynesian region have attempted to provide an understanding for why certain people groups continue to reproduce above replacement level. This paper is a contribution to the collection of works dealing with this subject, focusing particularly on tertiary-educated Malay women.

The "demand theories," also called the 'new household economics,' propounded by neoclassical economists have explained fertility decisions in terms of rational trade-offs in raising children and the allocation of mother's time (Becker 1960, 1965, 1991). Central to this theory is that people will consume goods that give them the greatest satisfaction. By the same token, as long as children do not provide that satisfaction, demand for them reduces accordingly. An underlying assumption is that since women are empowered through access to education -- an argument which has been challenged by the work of others (see Dréze and Murthi (2000) for a review, as cited in Rasul 2003) – this has facilitated their greater involvement in the wage economy. As a consequence of more frequent interaction in the public sphere, women with greater levels of education tend to have fewer children and, as such, fertility rates decline (Mason 1999: see also Hirschman and Young 2000; Kirk 1996, for general trends). Along the same lines is Caldwell's (1976: 345; see also Caldwell 1982) "great divide," which states that when the economic disutilities are greater than economic gains, fertility rates begin to plummet. More explicitly, in Caldwell's *Theory of Fertility Decline* (1982), he explains that in pre-transitional societies, goods and services appear to flow from children to older generations. The reverse happens in

post-transitional societies, characterized by flows of goods and services channeled to children instead with the emergence of the child-centered nuclear family. Since care toward children in nuclear family societies is expensive, fertility rates have dropped.

Another school of thought combines modernization theory and fertility transition to explain the downward trends. Here, theory posits that agrarian societies view children as an asset because of their labor utility and the support they provide in old age. With the modernization of societies however, these advantages are provided by other alternatives. Thus, the economics of childbearing shifts such that a larger number of offspring is seen as a disadvantage. That economic contributions continue to drive fertility rates was also present in the theories of Leibenstein (1974, 1975) and Easterlin (1975) who essentially emphasize biological and social constraints that determine the economic decision-making underlying family size. While the "harder" approaches represented by the economic approaches to explaining fertility preferences have been in vogue for some decades, this has not entirely overshadowed the "softer" approaches, which stressed the long-term effects of culture on fertility that may become partially tempered by socioeconomic changes over time (Cleland and Wilson 1987; see also Kirk 1996; Cutright and Hargens 1984). This paper falls in this category in that it makes a strong argument for a cultural explanation for fertility preferences.

The nub of this article charts the reasons for the lack of dramatic decline in fertility rates among tertiary-educated urban Malays in Peninsular Malaysia. It shows that in spite of women working, they have chosen to have more than two children because of the cultural value accorded to having a large family. Although Malay fertility choices are reminiscent of agrarian societies where larger families were the norm, evidence which shows that fertility preferences for larger families are driven by utilitarian value rather than the intrinsic value attached to children is contested here since fertility rates for urban Malays are still well above replacement level. This paper, thus, argues that larger families continue to be the norm even among urban Malays for reasons of culture, which supersedes the influence of religion (Leete 1989, 1996) or the pro-natalist policy of the Malaysian government on fertility trends (Jones 1990), although not denying that these factors as well as differences in timing of marriage also bear an influence on fertility differentials. Moreover, that Malays seek after larger families is intertwined with women's mothering role being accorded positive value, which provides reasons for why family life continues to be significant and thereby invested with high prestige.

Examining Culture: Theoretically and Contextually

Anthropologist Marvin Harris (1999: 27) takes to task definitions of culture that start from the premise that ideas guide behavior, but never the reverse. An example is the following definition by Hammel (1990: 475) who views culture as the "impelling and constraining influences on the behavior of actors [in society]". However, Hammel further explicates the concept of culture to include a "recog[nition of] the agency of individuals in using behavior as symbol selected from a repertoire that has some coherence and endures over time, but that is created and maintained by patterns of selection by actors as well as by innovation" (Hammel 1990: 475), which suggests that behavior can also shape ideas and values. Thus, there exists a two-way relationship between behavior and culture, with each informing the other. And as

Harris (1999: 28) maintains, "in the short run, ideas do guide behavior; but in the long run, behavior guides and shapes ideas."

Throughout this discussion, culture is treated separately from religion – a distinction which emerged from the interviews themselves. In the Malay context, while culture refers to *adat* or local customs and traditions, *agama*, which translates into religion, includes practices, dogma and beliefs pertaining to Islam. Although a feedback relationship characterizes both behavior and culture and behavior and religion, differences are inevitable. Firstly, religion or Islam, in this case, is a foreign body of ideas, received into a society that had a different set of religious beliefs prior to conversion. Secondly, Islam has an aspect of fixity in that it leaves little room for interpretation or negotiation on the part of its adherers. *Adat* stands in direct contrast. While it is (re)produced by the people themselves, there is greater innovation and creativity around satisfying a human need or desire according to *adat*. What this also means is that culture can (and does) change over time, especially with changes in society.

In the context of the value of children among Malays, having larger families is not just "good to think" (to use a phrase often identified with Harris), but also "good to have." But children for Malays are not just "good to have" for material reasons; by and large the intrinsic value they possess for providing non-materialistic aspects – love, affection, and companion – is not perceived in light of the costs of having to raise children. Hence, the analysis here does not validate a rational approach in reaching goals through cost-benefit maximization, which has been the mainstay of many demographers examining the phenomenon of falling fertility. Instead this paper emphasizes that Malays are making decisions shaped by cultural values distinct from material constraints, which they in turn reinforce when they have large families. The cultural values that they are seen (re)producing, reinforcing and validating not only concern how children are socially perceived and received by others, but the ways in which Malay women view the mother role has had a positive effect on the number of children couples choose to have.

Where and How Data was Gathered

Malaysia is heterogeneous in its ethnic composition with the majority Malay constituting 58.8% of its population out of a population of 24.6 million (Department of Statistics 2002). From the early 1970s to the 1990s, Malay fertility was the highest, followed by the Indians and the Chinese (Leete and Alam 1993: 246). While fertility decline was found among the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups, the Malays provide a contrast as their fertility rates have not dropped to the same extent. Regression analyses show that between 1957 and 1997, the total fertility rate for the Malays declined at about 1.1 per cent per year, while it was 3 per cent for the Chinese and Indians (Tey 2002: 6). From 1977 to 1987, ethnic fertility differentials widened, with total fertility rates among the Malays increasing. The gap was less pronounced in the 1990s with the Malay fertility rate dropping while there was a slight increase for the Chinese and Indians. In 1998, the total fertility rate among the Malays was still significantly higher (3.8) than that of the Chinese (2.2) and Indians (2.6). The slight drop in fertility is also seen in the decrease in the crude birth rate. In 1998, the crude birth rate stood at 28.5, dropping to 27.4 in the following year. In 2000 and 2001, it saw a larger drop to 25.8 and then to 24.5. The drop in 2002 was very slight as the crude birth rate was 24.1. Yet across the ethnic groups, the proportion of families

(both urban and rural) with five children or more is highest among the Malays (Tey 2002: 8).

The analysis for this paper is derived mainly from ethnographic interviews, as it was felt that the qualitative data gathered would shed light on cultural reasons for fertility choices. Thirty Malay women residing in Klang Valley, an urban area in Peninsular Malaysia were interviewed. The women come from middle- and higher-income[1] households, and mainly held white-collar or professional jobs, assuming that fertility decline would be more pronounced in urban areas with income levels of households increasing and costs of living being higher. A list of open-ended questions was used in the face-to-face interview, which lasted for about an hour. The interviews were conducted in the privacy of these women's homes or in their offices. In addition, the author interviewed three gynecologists practicing in government-run and private hospitals in order to gain further information on how perception of children as well as family planning vary across the Malays, Chinese and Indians. As a supplement to the ethnographic data gathered, the author also relied on data on crude birth rate by ethnicity collated annually by the Department of Statistics from 1998 to 2002 since the survey covered a representative sample of women across Peninsular Malaysia.

What Culture Does to Fertility Choices: When Children Complete a Conjugal Relationship

For Malays, childlessness is unthinkable, and the whole notion of marriage is intrinsically bound up with starting a family. The two social facets – marriage and children – are understood as being a part of the other and, thus, the state of being married without children is perceived to be an anomaly and the couple is pitied (Strange 1981: 57). Having a family is also understood as being part of a natural cycle. A forty-five year old manager explains:

> Having children is a normal thing when people get married…it's instinctive…it is like nature taking its course…in order to tie the bond between the husband and wife, it is nice to have children…someone who will love unconditionally…the child also brings joy, and life is more meaningful to receive and give love.[2]

Here, marriage is not only a natural process, but the children that issue forth complete the conjugal relationship between the couple. Another comment that expressed how Malays perceive children to be the bonding element between the couple was demonstrated by this statement made by a twenty-seven year old lecturer:

> I am excited about having more children…marriage without children is not complete…marriage is just to have a soul-mate…but you want something to connect the two of you…sometimes we don't know what else to

[1] The women who were interviewed come from households that have monthly incomes of more than RM 3000 per month.

[2] Quotes from interviewees have been edited for grammatical purposes by the author in order to ensure clarity. It must be noted, however, that in so doing, effort has been made to preserve the original meaning of the statements.

> say…now we can talk about our child…it closes the gap between the two of us…and it is something physical…before that, it was just conversation.

In her work on Malay society, Carsten (1997) makes the point that sharing food cooked in the same hearth is significant for affinal bonding since the couple lack kinship relations. I argued in the same vein, when explaining the significance of why women cooked for their husbands on a day to day basis (Devasahayam 2001). The act of having a child and subsequently raising it has a similar effect. Children not only represent a tangible symbol of the conjugal relationship, but they reaffirm the bond in a processual way since efforts to raise the offspring occur at the everyday level. As such, children are an extension of the 'self,' cementing the relationship between 'self' and 'other' (in this case, the spouse) and, in a tangible way, they serve to complete the conjugal bond (see also Devasahayam 2003). The need for the 'other' must be understood within the context of Malay notions of how the 'self' is perceived in relation to the 'other.' This may be explained in terms of the Malay cultural practice of incorporating the 'other' into 'self' through processes such as feasting, living together, fostering, and marriage (Carsten 1997: 12). It is in this light that there exists the strong notion that the purpose of marriage is to bring forth offspring. A thirty-six year old assistant curator remarked:

> A person's life is not complete without marriage…If you're married, your life is not complete without children…what is the purpose of marriage…so that you can have children.

Another comment along the same lines was by a thirty-two year old senior executive:

> It's a package, isn't it?...once you get married, you are supposed to have children.

Hence, if a couple does not have intentions of wanting children, the conclusion drawn from people around them is that there exists no real reason for marriage and, in turn, its validity and its existence is called in question. Furthermore, should a couple not have children, the marriage raises suspicions. A forty-one year old director explains:

> It is our culture to have children…it is expected of a woman once she gets married…if she doesn't have children, people will think that there must be something wrong with her…for example, some may think she could be lesbian or gay…Malays will never think that the couple does not want to have children because they want their freedom.

A twenty-nine year old engineer makes a distinction between marriages with children and without children; her assessment is that the roles of a couple shift when they have a child:

> My ideal number would be five children…more than that would be overwhelming…I like them…I like a big

> family…if there are no children, the family is not complete…In the West, people do not have children and are not involved in family life…it is just the couple…but a husband and wife are different from being father and mother…there are different responsibilities and ways of caring.

Thus, Malays do not want only to be married and to enjoy the companionship of a spouse, but for them, it is far more valuable to become parents.

Mentioned frequently in conversation are Malay proverbs, which abound with references made to children, indicating their significance in Malay worldview. By and large, Malay proverbs underscore the central role children play in social life. Two proverbs are worthy of mention here. The proverb "*kera di hutan disusukan, anak sendiri mati kelaparan*" (while the monkey in the forest is nursed, you own child is left to die of starvation) has a positive ring as it condemns those who neglect their children at the expense of conducting charitable acts outside the home. In the proverbial phrase "*biar mati anak, jangan mati adat*" (let your children die, but never culture), culture is valued far more than children, even to the extent of sacrificing that which is highly valued, as it is regarded to be the social tool through which individuals become persons. If one were confronted with a situation where s/he had to choose between upholding culture or preserving his/her children, it would be logical in Malay eyes to uphold culture since persons would not be regarded human if not for their being socialized into Malay culture. Thus, great effort should be channeled into preserving culture such that if it were to 'die,' this would erase the very mechanism through which persons become human. Although a general reading of this proverb may suggest that other aspects of Malay life, such as culture, are of greater importance than children, the juxtaposition of the two is deliberate as it is premised on the fact that Malays value children greatly. A deeper reading of this proverb reveals an irony in that the desire for children itself has its basis in culture. In other words, having children may be understood as an effort to uphold culture – a notion that was repeatedly reported in the ethnographic interviews.

Given the cultural nuances for having children in a conjugal relationship, a common occurrence is that newly married as well as couples who have been married for a number of years encounter pressure to have children from immediate family members and extended kin. A twenty-seven year old lecturer said:

> There was pressure for me to get pregnant when I was married…people would ask when we were going to have children…no one forced me, but people asked…I also remember being jealous when others around me were pregnant and I was not…to complete a family, I can now say I have a child.

Here, social pressure is not only felt through comments received from relatives, but feeling peripheralized as a consequence of being childless intensifies a woman's desire for children of her own. A fifty-year old childless woman described her unique experience:

> I felt the pressure to have a child in my first year of marriage already because I was from a big

> family….after a year passed, women came to me with different kinds of *jamu*[3]….my parents and my in-laws also went to see the *bomoh*[4]...my colleagues also tried bringing me to see their doctors…in fact, it is through one of my colleagues that I came to adopt my daughter.

That the pressure to have children is strongly felt by couples was further described by this woman's observation:

> Culture also plays a role in people having children…I have seen in my family…when couples are married for five or more years, their families will push them to have a child…the people around will keep asking why they do not have children…in my hometown, there was a childless couple who was married for ten years…they tried many things and still she could not conceive…then the man married a second time…he did not divorce his first wife…then the second wife had a child…you could see that the first wife felt very incomplete not being a mother…in fact, in Malay culture, if a woman can't have a child, the couple is usually afraid of seeing the doctor to see who has problems…in this case, both claimed to be healthy…and the man married again to prove that he could have a child…he did show this and the blame went on to his first wife…just recently, they divorced…when he remarried, he neglected the first wife…and she was upset and then they divorced.

Not only did women receive remarks when childless, but men were also tormented by such comments, which may drive some to seek out a second wife to ensure progeny, as the above anecdote tells us. A forty-year old manager made this point more explicit:

> There was pressure for me to get pregnant…it is expected of you…if I go back to my hometown, people would ask if I was pregnant…even my husband received pressure…I got married the same time as my sister-in-law…she got pregnant first…we had to wait…but I received pressure to get pregnant…my husband received pressure too…males would tease each other.

[3] *Jamu* refer to traditional herbal medicines made from different parts of a plant such as its leaves, fruits, roots, flowers and bark. Methods of preparation of *jamu* vary. While different parts of the plant may be boiled together, others are made into a paste and applied on the body. *Jamu* is used primarily for its curative or strengthening ends.

[4] A *bomoh* is an indigenous healer who uses supramundane means for curing and preventing illness. Their services may also be sought after when embarking on building new houses, attempting to win errant husbands, and increasing a fisherman's catch. Many are active today and work professionally (Laderman 1992: 192).

That it is Malay *adat* or culture that exerts a strong influence on fertility choices is reinscribed by contrasts made to other cultures. Women indicated that they were conscious that while Malay culture encouraged progeny, this was in contrast to Western attitudes toward children. A forty-year old lecturer described her experience of having studied abroad:

> But Malay culture definitely encourages you to have children…versus Western culture…when I was studying in Australia, I remember in Tasmania as an undergraduate…I found landlords who did not want tenants with children…they say that children will damage furniture…my friends will hide their children when they went in search of housing…I think this is so unkind…in UK also…I was staying in the residence hall…in the flats for couples…tenants were told that only those without children could rent…if a couple has children, they had to look for housing somewhere else…in these places, it is difficult to find flats if you have children.

What Culture does to Fertility Choices: How Many Should We Have?

> Culture encourages that we have more children…and this is my observation…all along I have never heard anyone say: "don't have children"…for example, whenever a couple gets married, people around can't wait for the woman to get pregnant…there is great excitement.
>
> (40 year old, banker)

It is no doubt that culture influences Malay fertility preferences, not only in stressing the value of children but also encouraging large family sizes. As such, having two children is thought to be inadequate to establish a family. A twenty-seven year old lecturer summed up this idea:

> But having two children for the Malays is not enough…they will say *terlalu sedikit* (too few)…if something happens to one child, there will only be one left…like for me…I actually had four [but now I have only three]…as one died of cancer.

Another comment that having two children was not the norm was stressed by a forty-year old manager:

> The ideal number when we first got married was four…after having two, we decided on the third child…but that should be it and not have the fourth…before marriage I saw the perfect number to be

> four…it is nice to have two boys and two girls…after one girl and one boy, we had another and I thought three was just nice….two is not enough…it's as if we are just replacing ourselves…there is not much continuity.

The notion of attaining *keturunan* (generations) was a concept that was often mentioned. Although 'continuity' by way of ensuring a lineage may already be achieved with two children, anxiety sets in when a couple fears losing a child to an illness or a fatal accident, for example.[5] Hence, having more than two children provides greater emotional and psychological security for the couple.

That women themselves were from large families was also a condition for fertility preferences. A forty-five year old manager who has five children said:

> I never had an ideal number of children when I first got married…of course, I wanted to have children…but not just one or two…I am from a large family…my husband is also from a large family…both of us enjoy large families.

The reason for wanting large families was often bound up with the feeling of warmth provided by kin during family gatherings, such as described by this twenty-eight year old woman:

> My mother had seven children…I want to follow my mother…I don't want to have only one child…my husband is the only child at home and I know how difficult it is…I talk to him, and he wants to have more children…his father died when he was three…his mother never remarried…he had no siblings…now when we go back to his mother's house for *Raya*[6], there is no one there.

Earlier on reference was made to Carsten (1997: 12-13) who discusses how Malays are inclined to transforming non-kin into kin through the "model of incorporation." That Malays would go to great lengths to forge kinship among people lacking any such ties, it is of no surprise then that there is immense excitement about having kin of one's own. At gatherings, while larger numbers of kin spell warmth, it is assumed that when families with few members congregate, this accentuates a sense of emptiness – a situation which Malays find discomforting and attempt to avoid[7].

[5] It is interesting to note that in spite of infant mortality rates being so low in Malaysia, people are concerned about losing children in contrast to Indonesia where rates are much higher, and yet these fears are not voiced as frequently (Gavin Jones, personal communication).

[6] This is the day that marks the end of the fasting month Ramadan. It is customary to visit relatives and friends on this day and the days that follow. Usually large amounts of foods and pastries are prepared.

[7] The sense of togetherness or *gotong-royong* was also reflected in work. Clifford (as cited in Gullick 1987: 150-151) records that Malay families worked on tin mines together, treating the activity as a "family outing."

While having large families is the ideal, having children of a certain age group in a household is strongly to be desired, even as one becomes older. A twenty-eight year old tutor remarked:

> My ideal is five children…it is an ideal number because if we get two…and then bring them up…we still have the young ones who will be with us…so it is important to space them out…that's why I use birth control.

A manager of a bank in her late forties said:

> I am glad I have children in my late forties…when I am sixty, they are still in the house…the youngest will still be going to school…it is a blessing in disguise…I will also have grandchildren by then because the oldest will get married.

Heather Strange (1981: 57) in her observations of Malays in the village of Rusila discovered that older couples also sought to adopt a child when their own children had already grown, indicating also that Malays seek immense fulfillment in giving of themselves through nurturing and caregiving.

Malay adoption practices are also indicative of the condition of culture in determining family size. In many societies, as well as in Malay society, when a couple is childless for a number of years, the assumed outcome would be to adopt a child. Usually in such a situation, relatives or close friends would present a child to the couple out of pity or sympathy since the couple has been childless.[8] This practice also serves another purpose in that it further cements the already existing kinship relationship or friendship between the biological parents and adoptive parents-to-be. Nonetheless, among couples with only female children, the incentive for having a male child becomes greater as it is seen as ideal to have children of both sexes. But this was not confined to couples with only girl children, as couples with only boy children would also desire for a female child. In this case, adoption would also be an option, although McKinley (personal communication) observed that it was more difficult to adopt a boy child[9]. Anecdotal evidence also shows that adoption also occurs when a couple already has children of their own, and the adopted child becomes the last child in the family (McKinley 1975). Usually a girl child is adopted in this instance, while even a Chinese girl[10] in some cases.

It is naïve to assume that professional Malays do not take into account the costs incurred in raising a large family, such as may be gleaned from this comment by a twenty-seven year old tutor with a one-year old daughter:

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[8] It is not uncommon for a childless couple to ask a pregnant woman if she has the intentions of giving the child up for adoption, especially if the woman and her husband have already had several children of their own. Only in cases when this seems impossible will Malays resort to adopting a Chinese girl child (Robert McKinley, personal communication)

[9] It is also possible that it was more common to find girl children given up for adoption since females are thought to be more likely to maintain social relationships more than males. Rather than the girl child being viewed as 'excess baggage,' she is valued for the role that she will play as a 'bridge' between the two couples/families.

[10] Chinese girls were often adopted as Malays saw them as being pretty because of their light skin (Robert McKinley, personal communication).

> At the moment, I feel that two children are just enough…it is not easy to raise and educate them…I feel that quality is more than quantity…it is nice to have a big family…in my mother's time, they had big families because of their lifestyle...it was not pressurizing and stressful as our own…she had it easier…now I work, I cook, and I take care of most of the household chores…I also have to take care of my husband…for me, it is different.

Similar comments came from other women, but interestingly all of them are in their late twenties. It may be assumed that a smaller family size is the preferred by them since they and their husbands are starting off in their careers, and may not be established financially. However, this does not mean that women with more than two children do not acknowledge the costs of raising a family. For them, the emotional gains from having a larger family clearly override the financial considerations. A forty-two year old lecturer substantiates this point by saying:

> What about stopping at two?...if you look at it financially, two or three is enough…but I enjoy having five children…at the emotional level, three, four or five is better because I come from a family of two…when you grow older…it makes a difference…it may be culture…I've seen my cousins from families of six, seven or eight children, when they have functions, everyone gathers, I can see the closeness of the family…but I feel like an outsider…they [my cousins] don't seem to need anyone else, but with us [my sibling] there was always the need for someone else…even in my husband's family like *Raya*…I'm envious of them…and I feel like an outsider…and then I feel like I always want to include others.

At the other end of the spectrum is this following quote from a forty-one year old director who did not see finances as a factor in planning her family:

> I don't use any contraceptives…neither did I stick to any financial calculations...but the Chinese[11] will start calculating…they tell me that they don't have more because they say they can't afford it.

[11] In a current study on fertility across the Chinese, Malay and Indian ethnic groups in Singapore, Teo You Yenn (personal communication) found that her Chinese informants, when describing their own desires for having a family, would sometimes contrast themselves with the Malays whose fertility rates in Singapore continue to be the highest. A common response would be that while they (the Chinese) found raising a family somewhat daunting with costs being one important factor, they wondered why this was such a difficult decision for them, when others (like the Malays) seem to find child-raising and the costs associated with it less troubling.

Hence, when a couple has the financial ability to raise a larger family, there is greater likelihood that others will question their decisions in family planning, as suggested by a forty-seven year old lecturer explained:

> Malay families tend to want to have as many as they can…if a Malay couple is married for a while, there will be pressure from those around them to have children…when they go back to the *kampung* (village), people will ask and say: you only have three children…you have so much money…you can afford to have more children…why only three?

When the financial factor plays into family planning decisions, it tends to have a positive effect by encouraging progeny. A cross-country three year project report mentions that a couple would seek to achieve the desired number of children provided that they have the economic resources to do so (Tey 1995: 28). Among middle- and higher-income families that have greater financial capacity, it appears that this factor has a lesser influence in curtailing family size. In other words, should a couple feel financially resourceful, the ambition is to have a larger family than a smaller one.

Theory also suggests that working women have fewer children because of the difficulties with having to juggle work demands and family commitments. Although women acknowledged that having a larger family meant more work in the household, particularly for them more than their husbands, this was not perceived as a major deterrent to higher fertility preferences. Middle- and higher-income Malay women have sought after different ways of providing for their families. Many women explained turning to neighbors who were providing nursery care, while others employed lived-in foreign domestic workers. Another channel of help came from female kin living close by. Yet mention was made of older children, especially girls, caring for younger siblings in the event their parents are absent from home.

While having families of two or more children was the ideal, women also mentioned having to be contented with two or three children because of a late marriage, which postpones and limits the timing of birth. A lecturer in her early forties mentions:

> I had my first child when I was thirty…the second child came three years after that…after five years, I had asthma and I was under constant medication…I also became pregnant but the birth was premature…the baby had weak lungs and did not live…and then age was creeping in…so I decided to stop.

An older mother can also mean a woman with health problems who is forced to put off childbearing because of the complications it brings about. Other women who found themselves with less than two children related the problems they had in conceiving.

What Culture Does to Fertility Choices: When Children Complete a Woman

It must be recognized that fertility is intrinsically bound up with the status women enjoy, as well as the prominence ascribed to family life. Although theory suggests that well-off women with white collar or professional employment in urban areas would have low fertility, ethnographic evidence reveals that among Malays, the family as a social unit in a community is accorded central importance and, as such, social groups and institutions beyond the family are not necessarily of higher prestige than the household. Hence, a familiar remark from women was that family took precedence over career, as exemplified in this statement by a forty-year old banker:

> My family is more important…career is career but if I lose my job, I can always find another…but if I lose my family, I can't find another…my career does not have a human touch but my family has that human touch…so it's two different things.

That family life provides greater satisfaction than work life was also mentioned by a thirty-year old quality assurance officer:

> I value my three years of experience as mother more than my eight years of work experience…in fact, I would give up my job entirely if I can afford to be a full-time mother and housewife…the feeling of being needed keeps me going everyday despite hardships in life…it gives me a sense of purpose and something to look forward to when I wake up in the morning…motherhood motivates me to learn more about everything and to keep trying…the feeling of being adored by somebody with pure honesty is the best adrenalin booster you can get…it gives me a sense of accomplishment when I am able to teach him to do things…the reward is almost instantaneous when he hugs or kisses me or celebrates life and every little thing that I do for him.

However, prioritizing family over career may shift depending on the ages of the woman's children. If a woman's children were young, family life is demanding on her attention than if they were older and more independent; as they grow older, she may begin to channel more of her energies on work, as explained by a twenty-seven year old lecturer:

> Family comes first for me…previously it may have been career…I would work late nights…now somebody is waiting for me at home and so career is second…now he is small and needs my attention, so it's more like sixty percent of my attention goes to him and forty percent to work…at a later stage, it may be more 50/50 for work and family.

This re-orientation toward prioritizing children over careers occurs at a time when most Malay women are in their twenties, a period in which they would have to work hard to be successful in their careers. Yet many would choose family life over career. This is not puzzling especially when culture posits great prestige on the family, especially for women. While family is immensely important, it is ideal that for tertiary-educated women to be able to balance both career demands and familial commitments. Having a career means actively contributing to society, being financially independent, gaining prestige, raising their self-esteem and confidence, and an opportunity to meet others and broaden their life experiences. Many of these women also contrasted themselves to housewives, adding that they could never be content with only raising children and managing home. Thus, for married working women, careers are a site through which women gain financial and psychological benefits, although society expects that they also be mothers, as highlighted by this statement:

> I feel good I have a job…when I go out for a function with my husband…people look up to me because I am a mother also…and not just a housewife…being a housewife is good…but staying at home for so long is not…there's a gap between you and society…that's not good because you don't develop your mind…your surroundings only include your house and neighbours…since they are at home only, they only have limited experiences.

And the larger the family a career woman has, it is more likely that others view her with honor and applause, and even envy. As such, having larger families is seen to be status-generating, especially when the couple can afford it.

Although the numbers of women engaging in wage employment is on the increase, the model of male as breadwinner continues to be stressed in society. The perception of women's primary role is that of nurturer and caretaker, while their incomes are regarded as supplemental to the maintenance of the household should they be working (Heyzer 1986). Hence, a successful career woman with no children is seen as a 'social misfit' and an object of pity, as explained by a forty-two year old lecturer:

> Definitely a woman is not complete without marriage and without children…especially in Asian society…it is important here but not in Western society…it is our culture…for example, if I don't have children, Malays will look at me and see me as incomplete…Malays will think that although she has a high-flying job, it is still pitiful that she is not married and is not a mother…Asian society is very different from Western society…a single woman can adopt a child, and it is okay…it's the image of Hollywood…if you are a single here…how to declare the child openly…if you adopt the child as a single woman…people here will ask where is the father?

That having a family is accorded great cultural value also means that a woman's mothering role is imbued with considerable prestige. A cultural notion often articulated was that the experience of childbearing not only defines a woman symbolically, but that in a tangible way, it brings her gender identity to perfection. In particular, childbirth completes a woman, distinguishing her from a man. The process of raising a child is also granted importance in Malay society. McKinley (1975) who studied fostering practices showed the extent to which the activity of nurturing was highly valued especially for Malay women. A childless woman who has an adopted daughter said:

> I want to have a child of my own because it would make me feel complete…it's like a complete cycle…I want to also experience how to give birth…I want to know what the pain is like…If I die during birth, I will go to heaven…right now, I feel incomplete.

Men also feel inadequate should they be childless, thus accentuating the centrality of family life in Malay society. A forty-year manager describes this:

> I think having children is a way for me to prove that I am a real woman…but more so for husbands to prove that they are real men…men will tease each other…"what are you doing "shooting blanks!"…"give me your wife and I will try".

As a consequence of the household and family being accorded great value by society, this provides an impetus for married women to place greater attention on their caregiving role than on their role as wage workers. In a recent study on women's role in local cooperatives, it was found that women's participation increased slightly among those from ages thirty-six to forty-five, which was when their children were older than six years (Hjh. Hayati bt Mohd Salleh et al. n.d.), thus suggesting that women prioritized familial commitments over activities linked to the public sphere. Taking their mothering role seriously does not amount to false consciousness for these women as many do find themselves becoming more involved in activities beyond the household (to which they would have accorded little significance when they were younger women), when their function as principal caregivers to their children is not as demanding as when the latter would have been younger.

To What Extent Does Islam Influence Fertility Decisions?

Leete (1989) proposes that Islam or *agama* is the main force underlying Malay fertility trends. He says: "The spread of [Islamic] fundamentalism tended to reinforce and strengthen traditional values and perceptions about the role of women, as well as the actual social behaviour of women, particularly but by no means exclusively, in rural areas" (Leete 1996: 57), which had an effect on stalling the fertility transition from 1978 to 1985 (Leete and Alam 1993: 248). That Malays link fertility to Islam cannot be denied as evidenced in the following statements. A forty-seven year old lecturer whose husband's ideal was more than the number she ended up having affirms this idea:

> My husband wanted seven or eight children…God has determined for us that three is what we get and we've accepted it.

Religion is also practiced, especially when advocating the reciprocal decision of both the husband and wife in planning their family[12]. A forty-three year old engineer explained:

> I never had an ideal number when I was first married…I come from a large family…there were nine children…but I think that was too large…thought having anything from four to six would be nice…it depends on the mutual understanding (*anzal*) between husband and wife.

Islam also highlights the value of children through their works, as expressed in this comment by a forty-five year old manager:

> We believe children are *zuriat*…they are our generations…after death, only our children can pray for us…if we do not have children, the generations will end there…with more children, more are praying for you.

Here, children are transmitters of spiritual gains from which the couple benefits. That the refrain "*lagi banyak anak, lagi banyak rezeki*" (which when roughly translated means "the more children one has, the more *rezeki"* (income, spiritual wealth, and so forth) one receives) was repeatedly quoted attests to the extent to which Islam is significant in molding how Malays regard children[13].

Moreover, Islam shapes how Malays perceive children in another way. It is strongly believed that children are a gift from God. Hence, Muslim parents are encouraged not to be unduly concerned about how they are to provide materially for the child. This idea is encapsulated in this comment by a forty-nine year old director:

> In Islam, every time, we have a child, it is God giving you a gift…even if the child is deformed (*cacat*), but if you take care of it, God will give you back so much more…it teaches us about compassion…we are less judgmental about people…it is like a *hikmah* (hidden good)...the child is there for a reason…we may think the child makes life difficult but it is not difficult…the child is also seen as *rezeki* (fortunes)…God also says not to

[12] Rasul (2003) makes the point that whether bargaining power is held jointly by a couple or held more in the hands of the wife has a significant effect on fertility. Unlike the Chinese, he found that among Malays, bargaining power tended to be jointly owned. Thus, in an effort to bring down fertility rates, policies need to be targeted at men as well as women (Rasul 2003: 3).

[13] Women have also related that there exists pressure to have a male child, which induces a couple to strive to have more children until they have children of both sexes (Tey 1995: 28). Although some women have cited Islamic rules to inheritance as a condition for their having a boy child that in turn, induces them to keep trying for a male child, which increases family size in some instances, this is more likely a Near Eastern or Arab kinship practice rather than an Islamic one.

> worry about raising the child…He will be responsible for the child's *rezeki*…on our part, we should not think about anything like abortion.

While middle- and higher-income Chinese and Indians would seek medical tests to screen out an abnormal fetus, the Malays even having undergone these tests are more likely to keep the child even if it is found to have physical defects. For the majority of them, the tests are seen as a way to prepare the couple for the child and its unique needs rather than as a means of screening out a pregnancy that is not wanted. While this immense love of children may be attributed to Islamic teachings, anecdotal evidence also point to the fact that the acceptance of a child with deformities was also common before the 1970s when Islamic fundamentalism had not become evident in larger segments of the Malay community[14].

Given the rise in fundamentalist Islam, it is widely held that abortions are forbidden by religion[15], especially since children are regarded a 'gift from God'. In Malaysia, abortion, other than for medical reasons, is illegal[16] and, hence, not available in hospitals managed by the national healthcare system. Thus, when unplanned births occur especially among the married, the couple is most likely to keep the child[17]. This point was demonstrated by a statement made by a forty-year old manager who did not achieve her ideal family size:

> I wanted to stop at two children…but accidents occur…I was not on birth control, and I got pregnant…the third child was a miscalculation…and the fourth was another accident.

However, should a woman insist against keeping the pregnancy, this is most likely to be the decision of a middle- or upper-income working woman who has already had a few children, and finds the prospects of keeping the child difficult as it conflicts with her work demands. Termination of such pregnancies is routinely carried out in private clinics managed by general practitioners or gynecologists[18]. Another scenario in which abortion are sought are among women who have had affairs with lovers, as having a child out of wedlock is regarded a stigma (see also Strange 1981: 68).

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[14] Conversations with older midwives who had worked in Malaysia in the 1930s to the 1950s also verified this point. Their observation was that whenever a Chinese woman had a malformed child, it was highly likely that the child was abandoned, forcing the midwives to make a report to the Department of Welfare. The response of Malays was in stark contrast, according to these two women. No matter how deformed the baby was, the Malay woman would take her child home with great delight, showering affection on it regardless of the child's physical disability.

[15] The general opinion I received from my informants on abortion was that it was sinful.

[16] What this means is that a woman is allowed to terminate a pregnancy should the fetus be abnormal or the pregnancy is a threat to the mother's health. While terminating a pregnancy for medical reasons is legal, terminating a pregnancy for social reasons is illegal. "Social abortions" result from failure to space pregnancies, pregnancies as a result of being unwed, and failure to use contraceptives.

[17] Strange (1981: 74) mentions that "if a growing family presents a problem, there is more than one way of dealing with it," suggesting that the child may not necessarily be aborted. In such a case, adopting the child out to a relative would be an option.

[18] Not all gynecologists are quick to carry out an abortion as it placed their practice at risk. While some counsel a woman first, others would only terminate a pregnancy only when the fetal heartbeat is yet to be picked up by the ultrasound scan.

That Malays do not have access to abortions has been one of many arguments put forth for explaining higher fertility rates among Muslims in contrast to non-Muslims. This argument is a fallacy since it is still possible to terminate a pregnancy for reasons other than medical complications arising from a pregnancy. Furthermore, that there exists traditional means of ending a pregnancy also suggests that women would make a choice to abort a fetus irrespective of religious injunction[19].

Although there is a general consensus that abortion is sinful, Malays are well aware that Islam does not forbid family planning (El-Zayyat 1954: 11, as cited in Strange 1981: 74). That contraceptive use is not prohibited means that couples may actively decide the number of children they wish to have. Among tertiary-educated women whom we can assume are likely to be more aware of the different kinds of contraceptive options available to them, fertility rates are relatively high in spite of choices to space their pregnancies. That women are making active choices for birth control was succinctly explained by a twenty-eight year old tutor:

> Islam encourages us to have more children but it is not obligatory to have many children…Islam does not forbid us to use birth control and in fact encourages us to space out our children…it depends on our capacities too…my decision to have five is not because Islam says so…In Islam, more children means it is better…at the same time, it is not unlawful for you to arrange your births.

Hence, Islam is not stridently pro-family since it is open to family planning through its permission of traditional contraceptive use[20] and breastfeeding, both of which have had the effect of reducing fertility. While traditional contraceptive use was rare, nearly all the women interviewed reported to having breastfed their children, which also had the effect of reducing fertility as explained by some[21]. Particularly among tertiary-educated women, they have been found to use modern, efficient contraceptives to curb family size[22], whether or not permissible according to Islamic

[19] Found in a situation with an unwanted pregnancy, a woman may turn to herbal remedies or the help of an indigenous healer to end the pregnancy. Laderman (1983: 79) describes how traditional methods such as ingesting an abortifacient of pineapple, yeast and black pepper were solutions to end a pregnancy. In Merchang where she conducted fieldwork, abortion was not thought to be un-Islamic, especially during the first two months when the fetus is only coagulated blood (Laderman 1983: 79; see also Strange 1981: 74). Laderman (1983: 82-83) also found that a fetus of less than five months old is never given a formal Islamic burial because it is thought to share the same soul as its mother. This may suggest that if the fetus is aborted during the first few months, this act may not be considered sinful since the fetus is not a person.

[20] Women had varying opinions about the kinds of contraceptives that were permitted by Islam (see also Saw 1989: 33). While some said that modern methods were allowed, others mentioned that the only natural means of contraception recommended by the Prophet Muhammad himself are the withdrawal method as well as breastfeeding. Page, Lesthaeghe and Shah (1982, as cited in Leete and Alam 1993: 246) note that breastfeeding has been traditionally favored for a period of two years.

[21] Aside from medical reasons for breastfeeding as breast milk was thought to be healthy for the child, cultural reasons such as the building of kinship bonds with the child was also cited (Devasahayam 2003).

[22] Common methods of contraception are the pill and intra-uterine device (IUD), which also account for two-thirds of all contraceptive practice worldwide (United Nations 2001: 2). Injectable hormones see a fairly widespread use. Condom use was rarer. Some have also turned to ligation as a form of contraception, usually encouraged by the doctor once a couple has reached their ideal family size. A fewer number said that they used *jamu* or traditional herbs to prevent pregnancy, although there is no

law. Yet their fertility rate is intermediate rather than low[23], suggesting that couples are still seeking to have relatively large families.

While Islam may be said to encourage larger families, there are exceptions, such as among women in poor health. A twenty-seven year old lecturer who has health problems said:

> I don't think Islam forces people to have children…it's still up to the individual...in my situation, health is a factor more than religion.

It is for this reason that medical abortions are available in order to save the mother whose life may be at risk as a result of her pregnancy.

The overwhelming credit given to Islam for inducing large families may not be a strong argument explaining the Malay context (Leete 1989, 1996) where culture has also been recognized to be a critical factor in family planning. A forty-year old banker made this remark:

> I think the influence of religion is not strong…it encourages but the influence is not strong…like for me, I have a health problem…I didn't think about religion in this case.

Women need not be aware that religion allows for family planning if the woman's health is at risk. For some women, religious injunctions and health occur to them as separate issues.

In a study that attempted examining fertility rates among Muslims and non-Muslims across four countries, it was concluded that fertility rates continued to be high among Muslim women because of the lack of autonomy they hold, which seriously compromised their ability to control fertility (Ghuman 2003: 419). Ironically the author quotes Wazir (1992) whose central assertion is that *adat* continues to be a "counterveiling force to Islamic orthodoxy," suggesting that *adat* continues to play an equally or even more important role in the lives of Malays in spite of being Muslim (Ghuman 2003: 421), indicating that Malay women are considerably powerful contrary to what Western feminists have thought since much of their power is derived from *adat* (see also Hutheesing 1994; Wazir 1995; Nagata 1996; Devasahayam 2001, 2003). Upholding *adat* for them takes a myriad of forms, including according great importance to the family[24]. Thus, it is a fallacy to connect Malay fertility rates to the lack of autonomy thrust upon women by Islam, especially since *adat* continues to assert considerable importance in the everyday life of Malays. Hence, I argue that

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medical basis for whether these alternative methods are effective. Traditional forms of abortificients are sold under the name "*jamu untuk kitaran haid*" (herbs to regulate menstrual cycle) in local herbal remedy stores. Nonetheless, as for modern contraceptive methods, prevalence levels range from forty to forty-nine percent (United Nations 2001: 11). Among the women interviewed, I found that a few did not use any form of contraceptives.

[23] While low fertility refers to having less than two children, intermediate fertility is having three to five children (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, n.d.; see also Gubhaju and Moriki-Durand 2003: 42).

[24] I am not suggesting here that Islam does not stress family values and, hence, the mother role. But what needs to be noted is that Islam accords men greater power within the family set-up, thus accentuating the asymmetrical relationship between the sexes. This is in contrast to *adat*, which clearly accords women status and power, especially within the household (Devasahayam 2001).

when tertiary-educated Malay women continue to seek out larger families, it is linked to the *adat*-endorsed value accorded to the mother role.

As mentioned earlier, while culture encourages adoption as a way to ensure progeny or even enlarging a family, it must be noted that Islam places restrictions on this practice, thereby to an extent discouraging potentially larger families. For Malays, there are religious implications when adopting a child, as there are strict Islamic rules to be followed. According to Islamic law, should the child be a boy, the adoptive mother avoids all physical contact (*sentuh*) with him once he reaches puberty. The same principle applies to a girl upon reaching puberty; her adoptive father is forbidden from having any kind of physical contact with her. Although the desire to adopt may be very strong, I was repeatedly told that religious laws are the deterrent for their doing so. What this also means is that Islam or *agama* has the potential of setting up obstacles against the cultural practice of desiring larger families. However, these religious laws pertaining to adoption need not deter some women, like this forty-one year old director and a mother of six children:

> I will adopt, I think…it is a tough question, but I think more likely I will…in spite of rules and regulations…I will adopt…my first two children are not living with me…if all my children are older, I may adopt if not I will go nuts…I want to adopt deprived children who do not have a chance in the world.

To What Extent Does Government Policy Influence Fertility Decisions?

The current government policy on fertility is to encourage births so that the population of Malaysia reaches seventy million by year 2020 (Jones 1990: 526). Government incentives vary from extending the maternity leave from one to two months to granting paternity leave as well. In the public-sector, the workplace has become family friendly by way of the availability of on-site childcare centers[25]. Moreover, health benefits have also been extended to children.

Arguments have been made that Malay fertility rates have not dramatically declined because of institutional factors that have favored one ethnic group over the other. Jones (1990: 528), for example, has explicitly pointed out that Malay fertility rates need to be considered in the context of their majority status and, the fact that they receive government support. Thus, although the government policy on fertility is not explicitly targeted at the Malays, since the Malays have privileged access to economic resources given their *bumiputera*[26] status, this has given them greater motivation in having larger families. Here, I contend that Jones' (1990: 530) point about institutional factors coming into play to determine Malay fertility trends is overstated at the expense of a cultural explanation. That the NEP has had varying

[25] In an on-going survey conducted by the National Population and Family Development Board, Malaysia, which is yet to be wrapped up, it was found that Malay women have begun to desire smaller families because of the lack of institutionalized childcare services (personal communication, Rohani Abdul Razak). That many women nowadays live-in the nuclear family set-up away from relatives has increased the demand for such services, which would not have been the case in the smaller towns as families lived closer to each other.

[26] The term *bumiputera* is used to include those who are indigenous or who claim indigeny to the Malayan Peninsula. The Malays constitute the largest group in this category, while the other groups include the *orang asli* (indigenous people groups).

outcomes on fertility choices across the country shows that it may not necessarily exert the kind of influence on family size as Jones (1990) argues. Evidence for this comes from the East Coast states where fertility rates have continued to be relatively high (Govindasamy and Da Vanzo 1992, as cited in Leete 1996: 56)[27]. Moreover, to conclude from a survey that the Malays altered their family size according to the government's pro-natalist position is fairly simplistic (Leete and Tan 1993: 146; Jones 1990: 527, citing Arshat et al., 1988), as the study here also found that fertility decisions tend to be more nuanced.

In spite of their advantaged position, women spoke about ultimate decisions for family planning resting on the couple. A forty-three year old engineer and a mother of four children explained:

> I am aware that the government can promote lots of things…but it is really up to the individual family to cope with raising a large family.

It was also recognized that the ultimate responsibility of providing for the child depended on the couple's financial ability rather than government support, as evidenced in this statement made by a fifty-year old librarian:

> Having children is expensive…especially nowadays…you have to give them things…now everything is so costly…education may be subsidized but opportunities to go to the college that you want may not be there…so the couple must allocate their money…how can we depend on the government.

From the interviews, it is generally held that government policy does not impinge on family planning in any explicit way. However, the women I interviewed recognized that government policy may have an indirect bearing on family planning decisions as seen in the absence of strict laws limiting family size, which in turn facilitates larger families, as succinctly captured by this twenty-seven year old lecturer:

> I think indirectly government policy has affected us…in China, they can only have one child per family…people are de-motivated…here, we're free to have as many as we want…there is no fear of getting pregnant and having children…there is a freedom about it.

It is more likely that people are not actively planning their families in accordance to government policy, but rather view the current policy to be granting them autonomy in deciding family size. Hence, the argument made for government policy being critical in family planning decisions is an inadequate explanation for why tertiary-educated Malay women continue to reproduce above the replacement level.

[27] Gavin Jones (personal communication) has said that fertility rates have continued to be high in the East Coasts because of the strong influence of *imam* who regard any form of family planning as being unIslamic.

Why A Culture that Cherishes Children Continues to Flourish: A Note to End

The context of Malaysia is unique given its ethnic politics. As a consequence of the ethnic riots of 1969, Malays have become increasingly concerned over their ethnic identity, and Islam has been regarded the last bastion of defence for asserting their Malayness. Since then, it is evident that *adat* and *agama* (religion) are both contesting for the hearts and minds of Malays, especially with Islamic fundamentalism on the rise in recent decades. Yet *adat* appears to be a powerful force in the lives of Malays. That *adat* continues to assert an influence on fertility choices is also evident from the ethnographic data presented here. Having large families is one out of many ways that Malays continue to uphold *adat*. In other words, when Malays continue to reproduce above replacement level, this decision is premised on the fact that having large families is a cultural value that clearly defines Malay identity. Hence, having larger families is a means of asserting ethnic identity in a social milieu where fertility rates are dropping, especially among the other groups.

Leete and Tan (1993: 144) mention that "value systems - including cultural norms that are less susceptible to the prevention of births or to the spread of modern birth-control methods - have had as great an impact on Malay fertility." More than culture reinforcing the prevention of births, culture validates the value of children, as it has been discussed here. In another paper in the same volume, Leete together with Alam emphasise "a heightened awareness of fundamentalist Islamic principles leading, among other things, to a strengthening of traditional cultural values and a consequent decline in the use of modern contraception, and was reinforced by the impact of the government's pro-natalist population policy of the early 1980s" (Leete and Alam 1993: 248). The thesis here departs from this argument as it not only makes 'visible' culture as a significant factor in shaping fertility rates, but also treats culture as an anchorage factor in strengthening its effect on the religious values of children rather than the other way round. Leete and Alam (1993: 252) also recognize that "Islam *per se* does not preclude a wide range of reproductive behaviour." They say that: "in so far as religion has a direct bearing on factors that support high fertility, such as the status of women and restricting the use of modern methods of birth-control, it can also have a powerful influence on fertility." More than religion, *adat* continues to be an important aspect of social interaction, especially of how women are perceived and treated (Wazir 1995; Devasahayam 2001, 2003). With reference to fertility outcomes, Malays have large families as a consequence of also upholding culture, on the condition that culture does not come in opposition to *agama*. That Malays clutch on to culture is also evident in everyday practices when women continue to cook irrespective of Islam mandating the provision of food in the household to be the role of men (Devasahayam 2003). Given that women are the principal caretakers of children, they have granted greater importance to family life, as well as reinscribing the nurturer role over their engagement in wage employment. It is this confluence of a culture that cherishes children and women's sensibility in locating their primary identity in motherhood that conditions relatively high fertility rates. As such, there is ample evidence to show that Islam need not be the ascending force for fertility choices. That Islam need not be the primary force in fertility outcomes was found in other social contexts. In Bengal, for example, cultural transformations had the potential of transcending religious values, which ultimately led to fertility decline (Basu 1996; Basu and Amin 2000). Thus, I hoped to have shown in this discussion that while Islam may be to an extent responsible for Malay

fertility, it must be recognized that culture should be featured more prominently in the analysis of fertility trends among Malays.

Albeit stressing the critical role of institutional factors for determining fertility trends, Jones (1990: 509) states that "cultural differences…cannot be entirely ignored in seeking a nuanced explanation of the intriguing differences in the paths of fertility change in the Malay world." Here, in examining the extent to which culture determines fertility preferences and in stressing that the culture factor should be made more 'visible' in the analysis of fertility trends, it is logical that attention be shifted to the other societies in the rest of island Southeast, which share cultural elements with the Malays. By contrast to Malaysia, fertility rates fell much more in Indonesia, as they did among Singapore Malays. In both countries, the decline in fertility has been attributed to successful family planning policies, which have overridden the factor of culture. In Indonesia more specifically, family planning, which started in the late 1960s, was tied up with being patriotic to national efforts toward modernizing the country (Alam and Leete 1993: 149, 161; for details, see Hugo, Hull, Hull and Jones 1987 and Alam and Leete 1993). Development stirred up conditions for family planning, which was implemented with some degree of coercion (Hull and Hull 1997, as cited in Jones and Leete 2002: 118), at a time when female education and literacy rose dramatically, and when the country achieved political stability and was heading toward economic growth (McNicoll and Singarimbun 1986, as cited in Shiffman 2002). The country's total fertility rate dropped from 5.2 in 1970 to 1975 to 2.9 in 1991 to 1994 due to the rapid rate of growth in contraceptive use, which resulted in a more drastic drop in fertility among rural than urban women (see also Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations n.d.: 143)[28]. Others have shown that state-society relations were instrumental in the family planning board's efforts to propagate fertility regulation (Shiffman 2002). In this case, is it possible that the idea of reducing fertility as an effective path to modernization was effectively propagated in the rural areas to the extent that people bought into this message with the hope of a better future? Conversely, should social and economic conditions improve, it would be interesting to note if fertility rates would revert to earlier trends. Also standing in contrast to the Malaysian context is Singapore where Malays were forced into having small families in keeping with the two-child family policy (Saw 1989). Only of late have the fertility rates increased among Malays, while rates among Chinese and Indians are generally low, even though the policy was removed (see also Leete and Tan 1993: 145; see also Jones and Leete 2002: 122). Could this suggest that cultural forces are once again at play as seen in the increase in fertility rates among Malays?

Bearing Indonesia and Singapore in mind, it can be concluded that institutional factors are a significant force in determining fertility rates, leaving a culture that cherishes children at the mercy of structural forces. This also means that cultures can (and do) change, as pointed out earlier in the discussion. However, the destiny of culture would depend on whether those in more powerful positions in society wish for it to be changed. Thus, the argument here by no means dismisses the significance of institutional factors, recognizing that people in powerful positions in society have to a greater extent than ordinary people the capacity to bring about cultural change. Since governments have been seen to impose policies draconically on people in order to reduce fertility rates, institutional factors may be seen to have the potential of snuffing out a culture that values large families by making this issue a

[28] Although a country with a majority Islamic population, "religious leaders have for the most part given their support to the Indonesian government's family planning programme", which was instrumental in bringing fertility rates to a low (Leete and Alam 1993: 249).

public matter rather than a private concern. As such, while policies can reduce fertility, reversing this effect through policy may not be necessarily easy in some instances. As such, I acknowledge that the political environment is important to the extent that it allows for a culture (and to an extent a religion) that cherishes children to flourish, while also curtailing this culture (and religion) depending on the strategy it adopts. Hence, I expect to have shown here that in the context of Malaysia, when a culture that promotes a love for children is allowed to flourish, Malays uphold this cultural practice of having large families and, consequently, fertility has not plummeted as dramatically as it has among the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups.

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