

## Life Under the Freeway in Malaysia: Community Resilience amidst Modernization in Contemporary Malaysia<sup>1</sup>

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He let his mind drift as he stared at the city, half slum, half paradise.  
How could a place be so ugly and violent, yet beautiful at the same time?<sup>2</sup>

The squatter camps in the kampongs off Old Klang Road, which links Kuala Lumpur to the old port of Klang, were places full of stories of resilience and difficulty borne of simple day-to-day living. However, the people living in those extensive squatter settlements are being progressively 'relocated' into purpose-built high-rise housing units, under Malaysia's policy for 'zero squatter settlements'. As a Malaysian Indian, I had a curiosity about what life might be like in these communities of people with a similar ethnic background to myself. So when the opportunity arose to find out what the process of relocation would be like for them, I knew I had to begin by first finding out what their life had been like. I began this investigation of community life in a section of the squatter settlements that was overshadowed by a freeway, as part of a broader international study on what is happening to local communities in the context of globalization. I have visited the community on numerous occasions over the last two years, however, it was on my first visit that I met Akhilandam, a person who embodies much of the history of the place I have come to understand.

Akhilandam had come to the community forty years earlier as a young bride from an oil-palm estate in the district of Ulu Selangor. While living here, she gave birth to ten children in her hut beneath the freeway overpass. When I met her she had a job as a road sweeper. All her children had grown up and had gone to live with their own families, while her husband had disappeared from their home several years before. One of her grandsons had come to live with her because his parents were unable to cope with his moody and sometimes turbulent response to a world which he felt had abandoned him. She loves him and feels responsible for him, so she got a job

sweeping public roads, in a municipality about one hour away, in order to support him. All week she would look forward to Sunday afternoons, when she could enjoy a bowl of spicy chicken curry and a Sunday afternoon Tamil movie on her black and white television. She always hoped that her next-door neighbour – a lady who had immigrated from Indonesia more than ten years earlier and was running a small food stall in a school nearby – might visit her. While this friend did not understand Tamil, she enjoyed the songs and music in the Tamil movies, as well as the taste of a spicy chicken curry.

Akhilandam knew that her children would visit her when they needed some money or when her daughter needed to leave her toddler before going to work or a festival. Her daughter could not afford to pay her for the childcare, so Akhilandam shared her food with this grandchild as well. An extra mouth to feed but as the grandmother, as she put it, her sense of responsibility for the child 'is in the blood'.

However, things were already changing because the squatter houses were about to be demolished; Akhilandam Patti knew that she would have to leave her home of forty years. She knew, too, that she would have to put her hands up very high in order to be counted when the new low-cost flats were being allocated. This made her feel quite excited. Finally she would get to live in a house built of brick and mortar. No more the nailed-together wooden planks that fluttered dangerously whenever the rains pelted down or the winds found their way through the little lanes and corners of the squatter settlement. Of course, now, at the age of sixty-five, she would have to worry for the first time about mortgage payments and electricity and water bills. But she was hoping that her grandson would 'kick' his drug dependency and look for a job that would make him more self-sufficient.

Talking to Akhilandam led me to think about what Richard Sennett has written about autonomy having to be negotiated through the complexities of personal character as much as social structure.<sup>3</sup> However, this social structure must have a capacity to respond to very different personal needs and expectations. Akhilandam was not expecting anything from her children, and it made her very proud to think that she might be able to leave something for them, even if it was no more than the mortgage on a flat. As she put it, 'Well, I have got through this day. Who knows what will happen tomorrow? But I have survived today and I am happy'. Maybe it is in this twilight zone, in the unsettling embrace of tradition and modernity – experienced as a criss-crossing of connections and misconnections, breakdowns and compromises – that people like Akhilandam find a way to negotiate ways of living on a day-to-day basis.

How has living in one of the poorest areas, just outside Malaysia's sparkling capital city, shaped the way in which these people perceive themselves and live together as a community within a nation that seems fragile and prone to crises? How do such people negotiate the complexities of contemporary globalization? How does Akhilandam reconcile her role as a traditional

grandmother with the demands of her beloved grandson who wants to get rid of old objects and old ways? Does identity evolve or does it fluctuate between emergence and disintegration within particular situations at particular times? What are the emblems and symbols that might convey and support identity formation and how might they be used? How are changing identities manifested within broader social and historical contexts?

It was an academic preoccupation that first brought me back into the country I had emigrated from more than ten years before. I came to find a locale in Malaysia that could become one of the sites in the Globalism Institute's comparative and longitudinal study of the sustainability of local communities in the context of global change. However, when I first began visiting the squatter settlement under the freeway, I could not anticipate how important this exploration would become for me, personally. It was not just an academic curiosity that drove me but a deeper desire to understand the changing nature of community life in Malaysia. What I did not fully grasp then was that in selecting a research locale in Malaysia I was also choosing to negotiate my own subjectivities: the in-between spaces that come from being a Malaysian citizen living in another country. My interest in the culture, history and wellbeing of the people living in contemporary Malaysia is very real, yet I have also become something of an outsider. Malaysian society has undergone sweeping changes in the last two decades while I have been living elsewhere, actively constructing a nation at the intersection of globalization and everyday life. Striding towards an industrialized status, the forces propelling 'development' in Malaysia are not just a product of certain government policies but, equally, the result of a confluence of historical, social, cultural, economic and political factors. What I have learnt since my first encounter with the people living in the squatter settlement under the freeway is that their lives are a reflection of broader developments in Malaysian society. They have been at the cutting edge of urban, industrial development.

### **Returning to the Research Site**

Every time I approach Old Klang Road, especially the intersection where it joins Lebuhraya (Expressway) Damansara Puchong at Kontianer Nasional, a kind of nervousness mixed with a sense of excitement grows within me. I have undertaken this journey of research three times over two years and have greatly looked forward to each of those visits. I feel excited about meeting people I have come to know and respect, however, I also feel an anxiety because so much is happening for this community of 8,000 families. I try to keep in touch with them between visits, but phone calls and email messages can never really capture the stories of changing lives in changing landscapes.

Old Klang Road was one of the oldest links between Kuala Lumpur and the port of Klang, and the squatter settlement that I visit is located in the suburb of Petaling Jaya in western Kuala Lumpur, at the point where the old road is



Yaso Nadarajah (third from left, standing) and Kim Humphery (second from right) with community leaders at Impiam Baiduri Housing Development, Petaling Jaya.

now ‘buried’ under the intersection of three expressways. There are several squatter settlements off Old Klang Road, and the whole neighborhood is characterized by squatter houses made of wooden planks, traditional longhouses, and low-cost flats and terrace houses. It is largely populated by Malay and Indian ethnic groups, along with some Indonesian and Bangladeshi migrant workers. The majority of these settlers belong to the lowest income group of Malaysia, working as either daily wage-earners or in small factories and businesses. Many work as messengers and sweepers, and the neighbourhood has the highest rates of single-parent families, alcoholism, crime and prostitution in such urban settlements around the world. This neighborhood is, however, enclosed by a growing middle-class suburb and it has within it pockets of affluent housing and more modern high-rise buildings. It also has an entertainment complex and a non-local tertiary education institution.

### **A View of the Squatter Settlement in 2005**

People started squatting in this area during the 1960s, when rubber and oil palm plantations elsewhere in the country began to close down and the rural mining industry entered a prolonged slump. People came to the city to look for work and the only place they could afford to live was in squatter settlements. By 1999, the population in the squatter settlements had reached about 30,000, and that is when efforts began to move them out

into either temporary or permanent low-cost flats built for this purpose. In 2005, a 'zero squatter settlements' directive was issued by the Malaysian government and, at the time of writing, the plan was for complete relocation of all the residents by the end of 2007. The government directive may have been prompted by a week of violent ethnic clashes in the area in early 2001. Several academics and planners have suggested that these clashes were prompted more by frustration and anger over poor living conditions and marginalization than race issues, and that they unmasked the emergence of a growing disgruntled and frustrated underclass. Of particular concern is that this disgruntlement and prickly ambivalence appears to be echoing out of the heartland of a rapidly developing epicentre of West Malaysia.

When I visited the settlement in 2005, it was convenient to meet with community members at a popular coffee and lunch stall at Kampong Lindungan. The stall was built of nailed-together sheets of corrugated tin, and a couple of vinyl-covered round wooden tables and a dozen or so chairs were scattered under a tin covered verandah. Past a small counter, two concrete blocks on a raised platform formed a wood-fired stove, and a middle-aged man stirred a big old aluminum pot, three-quarters filled with a dark brown sauce, which emitted a delicious aromas of fresh chillies, coconut milk and curry leaves. Inside the darker part of the covered shed, there was a long table with a row of smaller pots containing different sorts of vegetables. A young girl, probably thirteen or fourteen years old – although I have commonly mistaken older people as being young – hovered over the tables, waiting to serve any customer who wandered in for a quick and inexpensive meal. I estimated that at least one person from every household visited this stall once a day. The wife might go in the morning and the husband in the afternoon or evening, very often to buy one or two small items of food or drink. Or the men would all congregate in the evening for a cup of tea or a snack. However, it was not a place of mere consumption, in the sense that we might know it in Australia, but rather a place for social activity and for sharing information about goings-on in the village.

### **At the Coffee and Lunch Stall with Residents of Kampong Desa Hormat**

After I had taken my seat at one of the tables, people from the village came to join me. One of the first things they told me was how bad my Tamil is, while adding that they were pleased to see me maintaining my use of the language and, by inference, my Indian heritage, despite living abroad. They told me that I might not understand what they were going through because I live in a cool climate and have rich food and talk in English all the time. I protested – albeit meekly, because of my stumbling Tamil – by telling them that I am forced to speak English all the time and miss my Indian food, my family and the opportunity to chat with folks like them. This made them laugh; they said that I tell a good story and sound like a politician. When I told them I could only be in the area for a week, there was a barrage of finger wagging. A week? How could I possibly miss the local temple festival the

following week? Was I not interested in the local children's concert? What about the discussion that the single mothers' self-help group was holding? Did I not care about all these events and happenings? And, with all this, I suddenly felt that I was once again right in the middle of this community, even if I have been away for several months and my Tamil had deteriorated further in that time.

After a while, we began to talk about what had been happening in this place. I asked if I might be able to interview one of them. We discussed my research project, as well as my ethical obligations as a researcher. They all nodded to indicate they were ready to talk. But when I switched on my digital recorder, they all shook their heads and teased me about being a 'modern spy'; certainly the gadgets gave me a certain caché and a touch of *je ne sais pas de quoi*. Well it all helps, especially when you know you can start a conversation (interview) with one person then find that you have about eight to ten people joining in. As I shifted from one person to another, in a matter of seconds moving in to what had become a group interview, I was certainly glad for the sophisticated equipment. I provided myself with prompts and the names of the people I was interviewing and asked their permission at the same time. Sometimes a member of the group took charge and asked people to introduce themselves before they spoke. In such relatively free-flowing discussions, meeting as multifaceted individuals and not as 'resource persons', there is, of course, digression and meandering. Sometimes I would despair as to whether or not my main questions would be covered in the time available. But, somehow, they generally were. Sometimes in the final inspired half-hour, one of the villagers would say, 'Let's hear what your questions are and get on with that'. Eventually, I would come away satisfied, and relaxed from the informality of chatting and laughing together. Informal rather than formal, expressive rather than instrumental, elliptical rather than linear, collective rather than individualistic; this process of engagement explores the diversity and complexity of not just these people's reactions to and perceptions of their own 'life-worlds' but also mine. It provides rich material through what Sizoo has called a 'vivid and profound polylogue'.<sup>4</sup>

In some instances, an interview was possible in a direct and informal way, but there were also many situations where many things had to be negotiated – uncles, aunties and elders to be consulted – before an interview could begin. And even when more formal processes had thus been attended to, individual interviews often spilled over into group conversations. If elders chose to sit in during such conversations, another complex layer of authority was added, and this enabled an exploration of intergenerational communication within contemporary Malaysian society. On one occasion, I was confronted by a carload of people who drove right up to the coffee stall. One man, presumably the leader of this group, demanded to know why I had not sought an interview with him. He was, after all, a very important leader of one of the main groups in the community. It was also apparent that he was also investigating if I might be a 'spy' for the government. He was

not impressed that my family would allow me, as an Indian woman, to visit an unknown place on my own.

In such situations, I am made aware of the enormous complexities and difficulties involved in the comprehension of the 'other'. As Rabinow has suggested, fieldwork is a dialectic process, moving between reflection and immediacy.<sup>5</sup> However, both of these states are cultural constructs and neither the subject nor the object remains static. It is an ongoing construction of experience and understanding, a realm of tenuous common sense and inquiry, which is also constantly breaking down, being patched up and re-examined, over and over again.

### **Defining and Responding to Community Sustainability in the Malaysian Context**

Malaysia is made up of two distinct regions. Bordering Thailand to the north and Singapore to the south is the peninsula of West Malaysia and its capital city, Kuala Lumpur. Occupying the northern part of Borneo is the second region, East Malaysia, which is made up two distinct states: Sarawak and Sabah. Colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch and British (from 1854 to 1957), Malaysia has, since independence in 1957, had one of the fastest growing economies in the region. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of Malaysia is its cultural diversity. In a population of 23 million in 2003, Bumiputeras and other indigenous Malay groups accounted for 61 per cent, the Chinese 30 per cent and Indians 8 per cent, with numerous other ethnic groups making up the remaining 1 per cent.

Large-scale urban transformation is the most visible sign of a national development strategy aimed at making Malaysia a 'fully developed country' by the year 2020, an aim captured by the 'Wawasan 2020' (or 'Vision 2020').<sup>6</sup> From independence through to the race riots tragedy of May 13, 1969, through to the adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1970s, Malaysia's concentration on 'development' has been its prevailing political strategy. However, as Verma<sup>7</sup> has argued, the pursuit of rapid economic growth and 'development' has exacerbated social tensions and put new stress on the cultural 'fabric' of community life. This, in turn, has tested the capacity of the state and traditional institutions to respond to growing tensions. The process by which Malaysia makes its transition to modernity and the link between the cultural reality of everyday life and a state-defined notion of national identity is a crucial one, particularly in view of the difficulties of sustaining an effective nation-state in the global era.

Much has changed in Malaysia since independence in 1957, but the biggest changes have occurred over the last two decades, as the nation-building strategy has been pursued at a time when global processes have been reaching down to the very local aspects of everyday life. As mentioned earlier, the forces propelling Malaysia's development are not just a product of particular development policies but rather a confluence of historical,

cultural, social, political and broad economic processes. Political and social historians have often held up Malaysia as a classic example of the 'plural society'. However, more recent commentators have highlighted the impact of the prevailing neoliberal discourse on the goals of national development. A preoccupation of literature in 'Malaysian studies' in recent times has been the emergence of a 'new politics' that is seen as marking a shift away from the 'old politics' of race and ethnicity. The earlier interest in 'ethnic politics' and its influence on relationships between society and state has been replaced.

However, as Nair has noted<sup>8</sup>, scholarly literature on Malaysia has long been dominated by linear notions of development which find their origins in US literature of the 1960s and 1970s that focused on processes of 'modernisation' and their impact on the creation of new political systems. Much emphasis has been placed on an analysis of party politics, government policy and ethnic pluralism. Studies of nation-building in Malaysia have often been based very narrowly on a small number of variables, such as ethnic identity, and their sweeping claims about the nature of Malaysian polity cannot be trusted. While a few researchers have expressed concern about the role of the researcher/analyst/scholar in shaping the very production of knowledge, the modernization paradigm has dominated the development of contemporary Malaysian studies.

When it comes to an exploration of community life, the word 'community' is often used uncritically. As British historian Eric Hobsbawm has noted, the word 'community' is being used more indiscriminately, in a broad range of literature, at the very time when actual communities – as the term has been understood by sociologists – have become much harder to find. Attempts to replace the word community with other, more precise, terms have failed because a desire for community remains as strong as ever. However, it is important to understand that community life, in all parts of the world, has been radically transformed and that a sense of community must now be constantly created and recreated. There are now many expressions of 'community', ranging from social entities, such as tribes, clans, or small rural hamlets, defined by kinship and face-to-face relations, to urban networks embedded in locality, work, ethnicity and identity in industrial cities, to virtual communities facilitated by the internet. On one level, community can be understood as a relatively homogenous grouping of people, living within a defined area and sharing an expression of a common life and some personal bonds. At the other end of the spectrum, the term community can express an ideological sense of what should be rather than what is.<sup>9</sup> How then is the term 'community' being used in the context of these squatter settlements in Petaling Jaya? How do these people define their sense of community? Who makes up their community? What do they expect from their community? How does the term 'community' relate to the concept of nationality?

These questions were explored in a 'Community Sustainability Questionnaire' that the Globalism Institute took to Petaling Jaya as part of our broader investigation of community life in such settings. Not surprisingly the responses suggested that people were unclear or ambiguous about what their community is. About 40 per cent of respondents described community as their neighbourhood, whilst 50 per cent did not know how to determine who was in their community. Around 50 per cent of respondents felt that they belonged to more than one community, whilst 37 per cent indicated that they did not know if they belonged to any community at all. Of course, it is important to point out that many of those who responded to the questionnaire were in the process of moving from the squatter settlements to the new Desa Mentari housing complex; many of the village huts were being demolished around them. At such a time, the prevailing view might be that this is a community in the process of disintegration rather than transition.

It will be interesting to find out if or when a new sense of community might emerge in the new setting and what that sense of community might owe to the one which had existed in the squatter settlements. The squatters had forged a sense of community following an earlier transition from rubber and oil palm plantations to the city, and we can also return to that experience to learn something about the construction of community through a process of transition.

Given that the former rubber and oil palm plantation workers and their families had little choice about where to settle when the first came to the city, it is interesting to note that 40 per cent of respondents considered 'neighbourhood' as critical to a sense of belonging. For many of those who migrated to the city the neighbourhood became their community, a place that is familiar and supportive at times of great difficulties. In moving across to the new housing complexes, such as Desa Mentari, a sense of neighbourhood has to be re-established, and while this is happening there is, over a period of time, a sense of loss of community. Once again, these people who have to find ways to share scant resources must go through the process of making new friends and negotiating ways to share space in more densely packed, high-rise living. As one resident told me:

I feel alone now. I feel I have been left on my own – not even my children look after me. I feel abandoned. In the kampong, it was different then – we knew each other and had to rely on each other. I could talk to people and they would say 'hello'.

For now, the old kampongs off Old Klang Road serve as a powerful memory of 'community' even though the housing was poor and the conditions were tough. The planners responsible for the new housing complexes might think the residents lucky to move from their shacks into more modern housing units but the residents are more concerned about rebuilding the

social networks that gave their life meaning in the old setting. I spoke to one person who was having trouble finding an old friend in the new complex:

I didn't have any quarrels with her. She is Malay, but that doesn't matter. We were good friends [in the Kampong], we had the same problems with family and children and money. She looks out for me and I look out for her. I don't know where she is in this new place. I must find her. In the flat, there is no neighbourhood at all; there is no neighbourhood left. We go up and then we stay inside the flats, and we don't know what is happening outside. In the Kampong we know so quickly. We know immediately when something has gone wrong. Even when we have a festival we can hear the noise and the celebrations, and everyone takes part. Of course, too, now, in these flats, our expenses are very high. We have to pay mortgages for at least fifteen years, more. People now have to work overtime and make more money. So people are so busy. There is no time to go out and meet friends or visit their neighbours.

One of the challenges facing those responsible for urban re-developments, such as the relocation of people from 'unsightly' squatter camps, is that a sense of neighbourhood belongs to a place and a sense of belonging to that place in particular. Over time, people might build a sense of belonging to a new place, replacing the memory of community with new experiences, but much could be done in the planning of relocation to speed up this rebuilding of community. Low-income communities may be resilient, and this can help them cope with change, but their past achievements in building community in the midst of adversity need to be properly understood and respected.

To sit down at a table in the tin shack coffee house at Kampong Lindungan was to begin a fascinating journey into the community life of those who remain at the fringes of urban redevelopment in 'modern' Malaysia. In a sense, however, what is at stake is not simply the navigation and renegotiation of the ideologies of power within the contemporary Malaysian nation but rather a profound reflexive encounter with the ontological and epistemological co-ordinates that underpin this process of nation formation. What can be learnt from a critical, imaginative investigation of daily life, with a particular emphasis on questions of ambivalence and resistance in different responses to modernity and its structures of domination? Our investigation is aimed at developing a practical social theory that can give people more agency in coping with the challenges and complexities of the contemporary world. To do this we must use research methods that not only allow the researchers to better understand the social, cultural and political framing of community life but which are also attentive to the shifting and ambiguous realm of Third World cultures and peoples. We need to understand that in such contexts cultural processes are about integration and resistance, and that they are evolving and ambivalent at the same time. Our study in Malaysia is part of a broader investigation of community life at the

intersection of tribalism, traditionalism, modernism and postmodernism, which seeks a more grounded understanding of relationships between the local, the national and the global.

While we can begin to draw out some conclusions about community formation in times of great change, we will continue to map the experiences of 'ordinary' people like those who came to interrogate me at the coffee house. Long may we work together to make sense of this complex and, at times, frightening world.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This article is drawn from the author's essay-in-progress, 'The Outsider within'. It is an attempt to describe a process of research engagement with a Malaysian squatter settlement in a period of large-scale urban transformation. Situated at the intersection of what was once the main road linking metropolitan Kuala Lumpur to one its main ports, Klang, this squatter community is currently relocating into new low-cost housing flats, a result of Malaysia's enactment of a 'zero squatter settlement' policy. This study is part of a larger Local-Global community sustainability research project, attempting to come to grips with the complexities of contemporary community life, enabling temporal as well as global comparisons.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Abani, *Graceland*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2004, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Sennett, *Respect in a World of Inequality*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Edith Sizoo (1997) uses the term 'life-worlds' to describe what people (in her study, Sizoo focused on fifteen women) personally consider and appreciate as basic dimensions of their own lives, their sources of strength and the things that bring meaning to their lives. Rather than objectively addressing the socio-economic position of people in various cultural contexts, the term 'life-worlds' encapsulates a more subjective perception of lives, the environment and the forces which drive people in shaping their lives the way they do. For more details of this study, refer to Edith Sizoo, *Women's Lifeworlds : Women's Narratives on Shaping their Realities* (International Studies of Women and Place Series), Routledge, London, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1977.

<sup>6</sup> 'Wawasan 2020' or 'Vision 2020' is a phrase (slogan) in Malaysia that stands for a vision of a more developed future Malaysia. This means an industrialised, self-sufficient and modern nation, underpinned by an economy that will be eightfold stronger by the year 2020. The slogan was coined by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia Datuk Mahathir Mohamad.

<sup>7</sup> Vidhu Verma, *Malaysia: State and Civil Society in Transition*, Strategic Information Research Development in arrangement with Lynne Rienner Publishers, Kuala Lumpur, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> The impact of the positivist movement on the study of politics and culture in Malaysia during the 1980s and afterwards had a profound impact on the way Malaysian studies were formulated. Nair (2005) notes that linear notions of political and social developments dominated the scholarly literature which was largely influenced by US social scientific thinking about 'modernization', 'political systems' and the societies these embraced. Concerned mainly with explaining elite politics, party politics, government and ethnic pluralism, literature on Malaysia, particularly through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, tended towards analyses based on a modernization paradigm.

<sup>9</sup> Summary of findings from 'Local-Global Malaysia' report (Kim Humphrey, Paul James and Yaso Nadarajah) presented at a meeting organised for the Globalism Institute by the Malaysian National Economic Council (Prime Minister's Department), August 2006.

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