

A Family Scene with Babies: Non-institutional Ethnic Child Fostering in Malaysia

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Abstract

This article focuses on the care of Malaysian children when they are not raised by their kins and examines two Malaysian community-centred institutions for unattached or neglected children in Penang. It first describes how two women in charge of these institutions work, as well as the ethnic landscape they move within. Then, it analyses what principles of relation they perfect and enact. Finally, it considers the interaction between the two homes and some outputs of the Malaysian State to highlight what imagination informs the caregivers and the state officers they relate to. It will be argued that the people who live in the two homes are powerful agents of the main social forces in Malaysia, and that they are not external or resistant actors, nor necessarily unfortunate and marginal in spite of the fact that they learn to use their marginality as a means of survival.

Key words: Anthropology, Malaysia, fostering, charity, children, ethnicity, marginality

Introduction¹

Malaysian modernity certainly shows massive signs of prosperity but also holds some specific, unsettling features. One concerns how Malaysian multi-ethnic society deals with unruly fertility, that is with early pregnancies, neglected babies and children and with ‘illegal’ births, while another concerns infertility or childlessness.

These topics are often discussed in the public spheres and by the media as well. Great attention is paid to the fairly large number of infanticides reported by the police in recent years: stories of “baby dumping” (infanticide by abandonment at birth) keep surfacing in Malaysian newspapers and on television, while macabre pictures circulate continuously on the Internet. Homes for abandoned children and orphanages also draw considerable media attention as the privileged targets of charitable actions and a good stage

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1 I would like to thank the reviewers for the precious suggestions. Special thanks to Rohaini Hussainsa, a good friend.

for politicians in search of visibility. Moreover, following a world trend, cinema and television stars are known for their adoptions, regardless of their marital state.

Such burgeoning media echoes a real concern for ‘illegal’ babies, those born from single mothers, sometimes migrant ones, as well as for the parentless and neglected children who cannot take advantage of the Malaysian economic boom. This article focuses on the care of these children and examines two Malaysian community-centred institutions for unattached or neglected children in Penang.² My aim is to describe some aspects of the deep need to belong, related to physical and moral survival, that informs people who are not in a clear coded position within a society. On the one hand, I highlight how these people, in this case the babies and the small children who are in the homes as well as the adults who are in charge of them, play an important role in the transformation of their social environment. On the other hand, I question their position of exclusion, opposition or resistance. Ferguson and Gupta (2002) suggest that we should not take the model of a vertical encompassment as the reality of what a State is and use concepts such as “civil society”, which is imbued with a sense of resistance, to designate anything which does not fit this model. I will show that the people who live in the two homes are powerful agents of the main social forces in Malaysia, not external or resistant actors, even when they adhere to an image of themselves as grass-root, engaged, local activists.

Birth control and ethnic demography

A great amount of unplanned pregnancies happen in contemporary Malaysia, especially among young migrant workers³, a phenomenon that calls for a brief review of Malaysian ideas and practices of birth control. Abortion is allowed in Malaysia until the fourth month of pregnancy only for medical reasons concerning the mother’s health, broadly speaking, and it is indeed practiced in major clinics and hospitals, including State hospitals (Kamalud-

2 The fieldwork this article is based on started in 2006 quite accidentally and was deepened little by little until 2013. This article is not centred on the ethnography of the children’s point of view, which would draw a different picture and will be the object of further publications.

3 Of course, it is extremely difficult to detect this phenomenon through statistics. Teenage pregnancies on the whole are decreasing, and illegal workers are difficult to be identified and counted, though the ethnic faces of the babies in orphanages often speak for themselves. Most migrants, who now are a significant portion of the Malaysian population, are neither citizens nor permanent residents and are bound by contracts which forbid marriage and pregnancy. In such event, they are likely to enter an illegal way of life. For an interesting discussion on existing data see Azrul 2012, Tan et al. 2010.

din 2010). It is also the object of great misinformation (Tan, Tohid, Su, Tan, Azimah, Khairani 2010). Many people I spoke to have unclear ideas of what is allowed in their country: they think that abortion is forbidden, or that it is forbidden for Muslims, that it is allowed only for married women and so on (see also Abdullah and Wong 2010). Specific religious ideas can hardly be held as a satisfactory reason of why abortion is often thought to be illegal by Malaysians. For Sunni Muslims, like the Malays, abortion is permitted until the 120th day of pregnancy, when the soul is thought to be entering the foetus and even after that, anyhow, it is not seen as murder but as a mistake (Hedayat, Shooshtarizadeh, and Raza 2006).⁴ Malaysian Hinduism does not condemn abortion in itself either (Subramania Aiyar, Perak College of Medicine). Buddhism seems to share the same attitude. Christianity, after all, with its clear-cut ideas about ensoulment and abortion, concerns a minority of Malaysians.

In my experience, the general attitude of condemnation towards abortion seems to be related more to ideas about the morality of sexuality rather than to specific debates about the beginning of life and personhood. Of course, religious orientations play a fundamental role in this regard, as pre-marital or extra-marital sex is a sin for the religions of the main Malaysian ethnic groups, but a general consensus about the moral dangers of “free sex” has become an important element of contemporary Malaysian politics (Ong 2009). Sex education has been turned down as a subject of formal teaching in schools, as it is considered either part of a biology program or belonging to a religious curriculum (Mutalip, Mohamed 2012). “Free sex” is not to be explored. When it is, marriage is often seen as a solution to the moral problem it creates as far as the communities are concerned (it does not erase the individual sin for the Muslims or for the Christians). This is why, especially within the Malay group, there is agreement about the opportunity of early marriages. This gives rise to an increase in underage marriages, even though everybody might agree about their inappropriateness (Khalib 2012).

One more element of the social landscape that structures unplanned pregnancies and the lack of sexual awareness in Malaysia is the natalist policy deployed in favour of the Malay community since the late 1970s (Hirschman 1986, Soon 1991). Contrary to the extensive effort on family planning as a means to fight poverty and child mortality carried out in many developing countries (see, for instance, the one child policy in China, the campaign of sterilization in India or the detailed spread of family planning in Indonesia), in Malaysia the strive towards development has gone together with the encouragement for the Malays to have many children. Pro-natalist policies range from substantial help in education to easier access to state jobs to better conditions for obtaining bank credit and are aimed both at developing

⁴ In Malaysia, the question is often debated.

an internal market and changing the ethnic ratio of the population. Even though the recent emphasis on the need to provide children with expensive health care and education has changed the trend among middle-class Malays, the actual Malay Malaysians can now be regarded as baby boomers (Perangkaan Penting 2011). This draws a picture of Malaysian society as one characterized by a tension towards fertility and early marriage as far as the Malays are concerned, while the rest of the population is more in line with other industrialized countries (Kohler, Billari and Ortega 2002, Perangkaan Penting 2011).

While unpredictable fertility is a noticeable feature of modern Malaysian Malay and migrant society, infertility is also growing or is more often experienced as a problem as the increasing number of assisted fertilization clinics testifies. The usual gender-based reasons are the following: women tend to marry at a later age because they are pursuing a higher level of education; they feel they need to have at least a stable job before venturing into motherhood; and a double income is needed (Manken 1985). The quest for babies, then, is as strong in Malaysia as it is in western countries.

In sum, different sections of Malaysian society have different attitudes towards sexuality and fertility, which are deeply embedded in recent history and politics. This means that unlike Europe, where it is very difficult for an infertile couple to adopt a newborn or a small child even through international adoption (Di Silvio, unpublished), Malaysian society is self-sufficient in this regard. The Malays and the migrants supply enough extra-babies for the whole society to be satisfactorily compensated in its infertility. Ethnic boundaries, though, make the circulation of children amongst the population less evident.

Adoption and fosterage

Babies or very small children who are not raised by their biological parents in Malaysia are dealt with in various ways. The murderous “baby dumping” solution is extreme and relatively infrequent albeit an increasing phenomenon (42 cases in 2009, 68 in 2010; Zakaria, Sawal, Hussin, Ngah 2012). With the intent to avoid such murders, a baby hatch has been opened recently by a private organization (<http://www.orphancare.org.my/>). Its website was instantly assaulted by aspiring parents from all over the world, but so far the hatch has hardly been used by the abandoning mothers who live in other, much poorer, surroundings and tend to keep away from any kind of public institution (Chua 2012).

Adoption and foster care are very common practices, especially but not solely among the Malays. The laws are very flexible. A woman can quit her parental right and designate the person or the couple who is going to be entrusted with her child’s care. This is not a complicated proceeding. After two

years, the foster parent can apply for legal, irreversible adoption (<http://jpn.gov.my/en/soalanlazim/adoption-children>). If a baby is abandoned at birth and the birth takes place in a hospital, or if an abandoned or neglected child is reported to the police or to the welfare officers, adoption follows a path which is more similar to what has been chosen by most European States. The child is brought to one of the State orphanages and is looked after until he or she is given for adoption or has grown up.

In 2008, when I visited one of the 5 state orphanages in Malaysia, the nursery was full. 5 newborn babies and 13 babies between 8 and 14 months old were there. The person in charge of the institution and the nurses all agreed that it would not take long for these children to be adopted. Healthy babies are of value. It must be noted that any baby who is brought to the state orphanages, unless requested differently by the mother, becomes Muslim and is named accordingly; he or she cannot be adopted by non-Muslims. It is not astonishing, then, that non-Malays tend to look elsewhere for their adoptable baby.

Adoption by single persons is allowed and practiced, especially by Malay women, sometimes by middle-aged women seeking someone to look after them in their old age (Vignato 2012). A few minor Malay TV actresses were much talked about when they decided to adopt. Other single Malay women I met during my fieldwork adopt or foster because they came to know of a specific baby in distress, and felt “pitiful love” (*kasihan*)⁵ for the baby, so that they accepted to adopt (*angkat*: literally, “pick up”). This is also what couples who already have children and who “bring home” (*bawa pulang*) a younger one say. Such babies are usually transferred directly from the mother to the foster parents and might or might not pass through the offices of welfare or through a legal procedure and might or might not be adopted in the end. Even if they do not have a birth certificate, as is frequent among migrants, legality is anyhow re-established when the child enters school and the foster parents are requested to provide a birth certificate. They then have to have made by the General Register Office, a procedure that has become increasingly complicated when the child is more than a few days or months old.

Within Malaysian multi-ethnic society, the Indians are said to be culturally less inclined to turn to adoption as a social practice. In the past years I have found a few cases of illegal adoption through simulated delivery among couples who either had no children or wanted an extra one, especially a boy. The importance of birth – under what stars, from what parents and, with all the historical mutations one has to acknowledge in Malaysian Indian society, from what caste – is probably at the root of this behavior.

5 The word *kasihan* is commonly translated as “pity” in Malaysia, like in the sentence “I pity her”, but the meaning conveyed is more centered on affection than on the sad feeling for an unhappy one.

This practice is apparently less frequent today in cities but of course, this is impossible to assess. As far as the Chinese are concerned, I was told by various welfare officers that many Chinese want to adopt, but they look for their children themselves.

Ethnography of two village-based homes

The two institutions I am going to describe must be situated within this national frame. They are located in two different villages in what was once considered a remote area but is now the target of housing projects precisely because of its relatively unspoiled environment. On top of that, the soon-to-open second Penang-to-mainland bridge is generating further investments in commercial buildings and infrastructure in the whole area. Still, the two homes hold on to a village-informed use of space and would hardly survive elsewhere, a theme I shall develop further.

An oversize Malay family

Faridah, Malay, aged 60 (2012) lives with her family in a rented half concrete, half wooden house in a village in the last rural area of Penang. She and her husband have 8 children now (2012) aged between 16 and 34. Some of them live permanently in the house, some come and go and others have definitely moved out. At the time of my last visit (2013)⁶, about 20 foster children aged between 2 and 17 lived in Faridah's house. Ten other girls used to spend all their spare time there but then slept in a boarding house nearby, at Faridah's own expense. Faridah or one of her daughters had an official letter from their parents, families or other tutors or from the court and the approval of the local welfare department. Some children were not yet legally acknowledged, and Faridah had obtained or was in the process of obtaining a birth certificate.

In the house, the boys and the youngest girls sleep in two separate rooms on the ground floor, whereas the babies or very young ones sleep upstairs with Faridah or one of her daughters. The girls who have reached puberty are sent to a boarding school because, in Faridah's words, there is no proper separate place for them to stay. Faridah's own children sleep upstairs in private rooms. The house is equipped with a big kitchen and Faridah's husband is in charge of cooking for everybody. As Faridah often repeats, not a single item in the house was bought and everything comes from direct or indirect donations. Apart from a double kitchen and some extra toilets, nothing distinguishes Faridah's house from the other kampung houses with their

⁶ As it is well known, doing research with children implies a constant change of biographical data; this is why it is so important to specify the year when each piece of information was collected.

courtyard and their vegetable garden. It is as if Faridah's family had just grown oversized.

The house is not the only place where Faridah runs her activity. She also rents a two-floor recently built terraced house in a nearby neighbourhood. She started to rent a flat in 2009, when more and more babies were handed over to her. In the flat lived her 90 year-old Acehnese mother, one of her sisters-in-law who is single and with a slight mental handicap, an Indonesian maid and 5 babies between 4 months and 2 years old. Faridah herself slept there when she did not feel too well because she said it was less noisy than the big house. In the present terraced house live some toddlers and two expecting women, an underaged girl and an illegal Javanese migrant.

Faridah's activity at the shelter, as she describes it by using the English term (she speaks excellent English thanks to her former role as a social activist), has been going on for 13 years now. Most of these children, those actually living in her home and those she patronizes, were "taken" in a traditional way. Faridah heard of a child in need, or somebody addressed her because they knew of a mother in great difficulty and distress, or a mother directly contacted her, and she agreed to look after the proposed child, for a while or for good. When I first met her in 2007, she would not accept babies because she said they required too much work. Her own youngest child was then 10 and she found it easy to add on a few more children of the same age. Two years later in 2009 the situation had changed.

Two social workers' "dream"

The Rumah Matahari ("Home of Sunshine") is not very far from Faridah's, in the same, less developed part of Penang. It, too, is a house from the Seventies in a quiet village. Unlike Faridah's place though, it is not a family home. The place was started by two women, Ganisma, an Indian⁷, and Mary, a Chinese, who used to work together as outreach nurses in the area. In the early 1990s, while moving around the island for their work, they were often in touch with extremely poor mothers and neglected small children in destitute conditions. Mary lived with her family, but Ganisma was a widow and her only son had married, so they decided to rent a house and start a home where Ganisma would live and be in charge. Today about 25 girls and boys aged between 2 and 17 live in the home. The number varies according to the temporary changes in the families of the young guests and to the emergencies that the home is summoned to face. Most of them are Indians and a few are Chinese and mixed.

7 Tamils are by far the largest group of Malaysians of Indian origins and in the public image tend to encompass other ethnic groups of Indian descent, such as the Sindhi or the Gujerati at large. The Sikh clearly set themselves apart because of their traditional gears, physical appearance and separate temples.

Ganisma and Mary consider their activity as “a project”, a “dream” – like Faridah, they, too, are fluent in English, the language they use with each other. They rely entirely on donations and on voluntary work. Many people come to the Rumah Matahari especially to help the schoolchildren with their homework and to take care of the youngest ones. Ganisma and Mary say they do not accept babies, but they actually do and hire someone to look after them.

Due to their former position as outreach social workers, they have a wider range of interventions than Faridah does. For example, they address the growing problem of childless or lonely elderly people who are in poverty. To a certain extent, they even rely on some poor elderly women to help out with the children; in exchange, these women are sheltered and fed. Like Faridah, Ganisma and Mary also rent a second house where they put up a few old ladies and are now considering hosting some old men who need 24 hour a day assistance as well.

Moreover, Ganisma and Mary try to assist families or single mothers in difficulty by settling them down in a room in one of the few flats the two rent on a permanent basis in a very cheap, run down housing project on the mainland, about an hour’s drive from their place in Penang. In this case, they provide the assisted people with everything they need – food, kitchen equipment, basic detergents and help in seeking a job

The *pondok* and the *asram*: religious models of receptivity

Both Faridah and Ganisma are inspired by a moral and political idea of themselves and the world. Faridah is deeply Muslim and considers her muslimness as a personal achievement. She describes her young self as a hothead who used to wear short skirts and go about bareheaded and “even” sing at singsongs with a band. She grew more and more interested in developing her piety while furthering her engagement as an activist, involved in various inter-ethnic environments. Shortly after her very active participation in the 1983 factory strikes, she started wearing a *tudung* (Islamic veil) and a *baju kurung* (Islamic long dress) and developed her knowledge about Islam. She is now used to being called *ustazah* (a respectful name for a woman well learned in Islamic doctrine) or *ummi yatim* (“the mother of the orphans”) and looks like a devote modern Malay matron, always wearing a large and long, black and brown skirt, a blouse and a beige or grey “veil” entirely covering her shoulders.

Faridah’s house is run as an observing Muslim family home, but it is so crowded that it is reminiscent of a traditional *pondok*, where the pupils (*santri*) live in the teacher’s home and Coranic teaching is fundamental. She has no objection to non-Muslim children coming to her home, but only

Muslims consider her place as an option.⁸ She has encouraged her second son, Adi, to become an *ustaz* by graduating at an Islamic school, first in Malaysia and then – the boy proving quite resistant to school in general – in Southern Thailand. Adi leads the daily prayers, teaches the Coran (Faridah says she does not feel entitled to teach) and checks up on discipline, matching the archetypal figure of the young *ustaz*. In spite of the fact that Islam is Faridah's choice and her way of life, whenever she talks of her activity with the children, she never mentions it as a specific drive. Similarly, the caretakers of the House of Sunshine don't consider religion as an essential element of their "dream". Ganisma, though a Hindu by birth, declares she has no religious inspirations in her project, and so does Mary, who is a practicing Christian. Nevertheless, religion plays an important role in qualifying their foster children because it is forbidden, in Malaysia, to try to convert a Muslim and they, as non-Muslims, do not want to risk being suspected that they do. They are adamant: when some Muslim Indians have asked Ganisma for help she has redirected them to a Muslim environment. In one case she put up Muslim Tamil children for a few days just because they looked like Indians, and nobody would ask any questions.

It is true that in the Rumah Matahari the children do not receive any specific religious teaching, but Hinduism has no formal structure in learning, nor unity in its inspiration, so this is not very relevant. Ganisma has put on the complete image of an Indian widow ascete. She only wears a white cotton saree or salwar, never has any gold on her, eats small quantities of vegetarian food, drinks no alcohol and sleeps very little, as she gets up every morning at four in order to do her meditation. Moreover, on the premises, she has set up the kind of "meditation room" typical of non-theist Hindu or Buddhist, environments: an empty space with reproductions of lotuses, fire, lights and other general cosmic symbolic references. In the ashram, then, there are pictures and texts by Ramalinga Swami (1823-1874), a much venerated Indian Tamil saint and preacher. Ganisma calls him her guru and says she likes him for his ideas, not because she thinks he is a saint. She herself tributes no *puja* nor offers any food to his image, but some do it in the house.

A religious horizon also structures Ganisma's description of her own work and motivation. She often refers to the idea of service (in Tamil, *sevva*), which in the Hindu/Indian world conveys ideas of a sacred offer of oneself to a divinity or a much honored, maybe sacred person. "Service" is both a religious and a moral practice. It must be remarked that one of the historical institutions of Penang for poor Indian children, the Ramakrishna Mission,

8 The only Hindu who stayed there converted to Islam after 7 years of permanent residence, when he turned 16. This is quite easily understood, of course. The boy grew up there and had no reason to keep on being the different one.

invokes exactly the same principles: charity and service, and a meditation room for the children to develop their spirituality.

The children are vegetarian, and it is well known that food taboo is an excellent, ever renovating sign of deep differentiation. Malaysian Indians are not, generally speaking, a vegetarian group; by this choice, Ganisma is affirming both her ethnicity, which is dominant in the institution in spite of Mary's equal involvement in the activities, and the difference between her children and those of the regular Indian community.

Beyond fertility: self-rescue as a transformation of society

We need to look deeper into the two models of receptivity enacted by Faridah and the couple Gansima-Mary, lest they are understood as "traditional" because of their religious framework. We can observe their modernity in the type of relationship of care these women chose and in the successful and creative use of ethnicity they make.

Militant saviour, super grandmother: self-rescue through new Malayness

At the root of her baby rescuing, Faridah says, there is the fact that she likes children and wants small children around her. She actually opened her activity to babies some time after her youngest one had stopped being one.

In the 1980s Massard described how many Malay women developed their identity as mothers beyond biological terms by adopting children who could be their grandchildren – in some cases, they took their own daughter's baby against her will, using their matronal power to bring a younger life into their present situation (Massard 1988). Such tension towards the future is an element of Malayness which Carsten (1995) has described from a different point of view. Because coastal Malays are seafarers and migrants, geographically separated from their origin, they pay more attention to those who presently inhabit their houses, are fed and grow up in them rather than to an ancestral definition of the individual and his/her relations. Kinship is the main language of any relationship, regardless of a person's origins, and children and foster children are the weavers of this "culture of relatedness" as opposed to a culture of ancestry.

Faridah's inkling to set up a house where an endless number of children appear draws its strength from such typical Malay attitudes. Her maternal grandfather's story (he came from Aceh and founded a coastal village) is a common myth of coastal Malays – a Muslim seafarer who founded a new village; her own father was a Patani, that is, a Malay from Southern Thailand. Yet, in spite of her matching this archetype, and even though she speaks Malay of the utmost Penang variation and cares for old varieties of plants and "healthy food", Faridah wants to break with Malay conservator-

ism which, in her view, signifies narrow mindedness. She opposes the village morality about sex. It is true that she says that she only accepts children coming from “crazy, sick, underage or handicapped” mothers, or else the house would be full of the offspring of girls who “only want to have fun” and dump their child there for free, but she is not a cheap moralist. Addressing the most recent legislations about childhood, she thinks that any girl who gets pregnant under the age of 18 and who is unmarried is the victim of a rape and not an immoral merry-go-round. She talks angrily of families who reject their pregnant daughter or force her to give her baby away (she is constantly telling stories – which one can read in the newspapers as well – about girls who are raped and forced into repeated pregnancies by criminal organizations that then sell their babies to adoptive parents) and is ready to stand by any single mother whom she deems in danger. She is still the rebel activist who joined factory workers’ upheavals. She supports her politically engaged sister in battling for single women’s rights. She recently went to Kuala Lumpur to participate in Malaysia’s Bersih 2.0, a large anti-government public demonstration on civil issues, mainly electoral reform, and she excitedly reports that she had to run from the police. Beyond her personal liking for children, Faridah has always conceived her decision to foster children and babies as a militant act in advocacy of women’s rights.

Her activist anti-traditionalism surfaces in her talks about Islam, too. She lights up when she affirms that contrary to “the narrow-minded explanation of the Office for Islamic Religion”, it is not true that in the Coran it is written that the woman is a degree inferior to a man and that is why she has to be buried deeper in the ground. That precaution is only needed because of the womb rotting faster and more intensely than the male sexual parts, and thus needing a deeper burial, she says, calling for a scientific explanation of the different treatment of male and female corpses.

Standing up for the weak is Faridah’s own way to relate to a larger society, Malaysian society, by situating herself in a precise position: the helper, the caregiver, or the fighter. She once told me that she considers herself as the pregnant girls’ and their babies’ saviour. “Not really a *saviour*” she specifies. “I don’t want to *save* anybody to acquire merits (*pahala*), I am a *penyelamat* (“saviour”)”. By switching to Malay she wants to emphasize her intention to shelter, protect and empower those she assists on the material level regardless of their moral condition. She thinks that the children brought up in the larger state institutions are at risk of being ill-treated and trafficked. This is why she is eager to intercept unmarried girls whose term has come, whether underage or not, and convince them to entrust her with their baby’s care, rather than abandoning it at the hospital.

Given the strength of the Malay tradition of fabricating kinship, family is *the* ideology of Faridah’s innovative social action. She, unlike state or religious non-family based institutions, provides them with relatives. “I do not

only give them a mother or father” she says. “I give them a grandmother, a grandfather, an uncle, cousins, and of course a lot of younger and older siblings”. This is no general statement. She details how each new baby is attached to a specific member of her family: some are her unmarried daughter Dina’s children, others her live-at-home married daughter Nisah’s, but all are her grandchildren. They all learn how to relate to each other within a kinship structure, the apex of which is a grandmother. When facing problems with the welfare department, Faridah often says that she would never let go of her grandchildren: “where I go, they go, legally or illegally”.

Half-intentionally, Faridah has shaped her own family as a structure of reception for marginal children: some of her daughters have gone through social education studies and social work apprenticeship, her husband cooks for the community and her son has become an expert teacher in Islam. Through charity, the home is a sustainable family business, but in case of need the resident members are asked to find jobs outside the family and bring money back home. She did not impose her ideas on her children, and those of the 8 who went other ways were not stopped, but the fact is that many of them tend to stay there.

Of course, there is a double edge to this figure of super-grandmother, modern Malay feminist matron, and one of her daughters has quietly complained to me about having to grow up among orphans and handicapped children. Faridah knows that. Her father, who had a first wife in his original village, was old and often missing, so her self-supporting mother had to take a job as a *dhobi* at the old Muslim orphanage in Penang, where she was given a house: like her children, then, Faridah too, grew up in an orphanage with her own mother as the orphans’ informal granny. And like Faridah, her husband grew up in that orphanage as a poor and fatherless child: the place was the legacy of Faridah’s mother and it produced her marriage. Once again, she is both extremely traditional and very innovative.

In sum, Faridah manages to use the Malay social capital she has concentrated in her family, based on her own fertility, in order to weave relationships with the whole Malaysian society and to include its most excluded members. She is a socially engaged caregiver, and she can be as such by intentionally constructing herself as a modern Malay matron. The first marginal child who was included in Malaysian society, thanks to this device, was herself, so she knows what can happen. As remarked by Brujisse, (2011, p. 95-89), a person who is able to process a heavy personal exclusion becomes particularly effective in upturning existing models and very often it is not by lack of choices that she does it.

An interethnic friendship and the negative Sino-Indian ethnicity

While Faridah embodies a forever-renewed-fertility to transform an excluded orphanhood into a vital knot of kinship, Ganisma has removed all signs

of fertility, marriage or sexuality from herself and underlines that her home is not a family. She sometimes considers the children who have been brought to her when they were babies or toddlers as her grandchildren, but it is more a language of affection than of family structures: she is ready to give them up should a suitable foster family appear. Ganisma's only son sometimes visits her and regularly donates to the institution; her brother lives next door, and his wife is continually volunteering, but they have no special position within the ashram or for the children. She does not seem to draw strength from the principles of kin.

Ganisma and Mary call each other "friend". Ganisma insists on the importance of friendship as an interethnic bond. They can detail their fruitful relationship. Ganisma is the fixed pivot. She never leaves her home except to track the cases in the flats on the mainland, nor does she take any holiday or rest. Mary drives a car and is an excellent accountant. She travels about the island and the mainland and keeps contacts with the offices, the schools, the sponsors, and the doctors – she is in charge of all the relational and administrative parts of the institution. These two very different women have absolute trust in each other and do not interfere in each other's lives outside the Rumah Matahari's needs.

Unlike Faridah, they are not explicitly driven by children. Ganisma, in particular, prefers to talk about "the needy" or "the poor". She often quotes Ramalinga Swami in his talk about hunger as a near metaphysical condition. Hunger, she says, is continually renovating itself, and cannot be solved once and for all. It is an ever tormenting evil, the worst.

Even though Ganisma and Mary are both fluent in Malay, English is their language. They have built a common ground and they downplay any religious attitude as the condition for their enterprise to work. This is a widespread attitude characterizing Indian and Chinese local groups in Penang, which plays out a common ethnicity vis-à-vis the State. If at a more institutional level, the two communities tend to relate in ethnically bound spheres, when it comes to villages or quarters the two groups are often mixed. On one side, this is due to the relative fluidity of their prevailing religious backgrounds, that is, Hindu for the Tamils and whatever the Malaysian Chinese may be described as – Buddhist, Confucianist, traditional Chinese and so on: Chinese participate in Hindu ceremonies and Indians pray at the Guan Yin temples. On the other side, because they are not Malay, they can be of the same religious group, namely of Catholic or Protestant faith. On top of that, they are not *bumiputra*, "autochthonous", a badly defined categorization for those Malaysian citizens who do not descend from migrants and are favored in terms of education and access to state jobs. This results in a negative ethnicity that is defined by non-belonging or by possibly belonging rather than by a vision of oneself and the world or even the universe. Ganisma's ethnicity is patent in the ashram – she is Tamil, speaks Tamil to

the children and to the other Tamil workers – but this is not relevant in terms of child-caring strategies. Voluntary work and disinterested service are played out as the fundamental relationship for the children to rely on. Ganisma and Mary are friends, other people help and this is what the children are supposed to learn.

At the Rumah Matahari, though, Tamilness does play a role. I have mentioned the fact that the children are vegetarian. In this case, vegetarianism goes with Ganisma's embodiment of the traditional power of an ascetic woman. Within the community, she succeeded in establishing herself as autonomous and respected in spite of being a poor widow mother of one; as in Faridah's case, engagement is also an act of self-rescue.

Charity children must know who they are and where they come from

The ethnic and religious attitudes deployed by the caregivers should not obfuscate the specific identities of their foster children. The latter belong to a few, typical groups. There are the children of drug addicted parents (drugs are a widespread problem especially for rural Malays, alongside criminality and unprotected sex work) and the children of illegal sex. Into this category fall, though for different reasons, those whose mothers were not married as well as the migrants' children.⁹ Another significant group of children are slightly or heavily disabled. Many of the (mainly Indian) children who stay with Ganisma have had parents who committed suicide or have had other, violent backgrounds¹⁰.

We have seen that the three caregivers' activities are inspired by the very opposite idea of what structures a baby hatch, where a baby is left by an anonymous mother to an impersonal structure for a new, virgin parental couple to bring home. They receive a child as a nucleus of relatedness who is inserted into another nucleus of relatedness, even when the child never practices any relationship with her biological parents, family or original environment. In fact, it is a phantasmal kinship they are keeping alive. Even though the caregivers insist they aim to enable families to take their child "back", only one child of Faridah's is likely to grow up with her mother and maybe three of Ganisma's.¹¹ The others are there on a permanent basis and the fact that they are older or ill makes them unlikely to be adopted. The home is their source of life, affection, money and future. They have little

9 The paradoxical nature of the idea of illegal birth in its Malaysian acceptance is well described and explored in ChorSwang Ngin 2010.

10 I often met Indian Malaysians who had a case of suicide in the family or who, sadly, later committed suicide themselves, but no Malay. My impression of ethnic difference is confirmed by the psychiatric literature (Morris & Maniam 2001).

11 Faridah's own son would like to marry this child's mother. An exam of his personal story would need a chapter to itself, which cannot be approached in these pages.

knowledge of their past even though, with the exception of the most violent cases (like those of parents who are on a death sentence for example), the caregivers make no effort to conceal it. The shelter home stands between the children's original habitat – very poor environments, irregular or illegal relationships, or illegal citizenship – and the State orphanages and adoptive families to make sure these children remain aware of their past but are not destroyed by it. At the same time, the home creates its children as a specific category of citizens.

The children who stay in the two homes are made aware they are “charity children”. Faridah is very outspoken in this regard. She tells them they are poor (*miskin*) and do not have to dream about impossible things, but must be thankful for what they receive from all the gracious benefactors who do charitable activities for them nearly every weekend. Indians and Chinese who want to celebrate birthdays, fulfill vows or propitiate their destiny by offering a (more or less) strictly vegetarian luxurious meal to the Rumah Matahari children have to book largely in advance or they risk having to postpone it for a full year. It should be noticed that charity is welcome as such. Ganisma was furious, for example, that a TV channel had “used” (as she put it) the children for a political purpose; the children are constructed as intrinsically needy of social support, like the mentally or physically disabled children they share their daily life with.

The “family scene” as a vital symbolic tool

If we look at Faridah's and Ganisma's homes from the structural point of view, we see two models similar in their function – an elderly woman hosting children in a big house in a village – albeit withholding many variations at the symbolic level. Thanks to this organisation, the children live the same life as their neighbors. They play in the garden, can stroll in the village, attend school, and are able to grow up while being cured of illnesses and eat good food, and as we can see from those who were there at the beginning of the activities of the two homes, they marry and work. They also relate to each other in an affectionate way as they often keep visiting their old house once they have moved out of it.¹² Despite being looked after by a super-grandmother and an ascetic, they also have an idea of fertility as they see new babies arrive all the time.

¹² This is a personalized attitude that other private institutions do not encourage. When I visited a Catholic home in Penang, in 2009, I asked if I could meet some former guests, but they were not able to tell me about them. I was told that they did not particularly encourage the children to stay in touch with their former institution. “It is the children's right to ignore their past” said the director.

The two homes put forth the *scene* of a family, a powerful, protective scene, drawing from widespread social agreement, but because this scene does not correspond to a clearly coded functioning or social subject, the relationship of the two homes within the surrounding society, institutions and regulations of the Malaysian State can be at times quite problematic.

On the first ground, everybody in the village and in Malaysia considers the activity of a shelter meritorious and deserving of respect, but the village is not always happy of its presence. In Faridah's words, villagers see her and her children as troublemakers, not only because the children are noisy and massively present and call for a continuous coming and going of charity-driven attenders (groups of students, people bringing some donations and so on), but also because unlike other institutions they evoke unruly sex and sin. As Faridah explains:

People in the village (*orang kampung*) talk. They think of sex. It's not the children, it's the mothers. In themselves, the people in the *kampung* (*orang-orang kampung*) are nice, but on the whole, they are concerned about morals. And they are envious.

The Department of Welfare too has its say about Faridah. She does not want to obey their rules, they say. Not only does she not comply with all the hygienic requirements about toilets, width of the rooms, fire exits and similar, but she also brings up babies without having a specific license of *taska* (*taman sekolah kanak-kanak*, nursery school).

In fact, Faridah expresses an autonomous power and claims she does so. She says she does not need the village well-thinkers, or the state's money. She would never be able to afford the structural changes she is asked to have completed by the welfare department and, in a certain way, does not want to either. She says that the people in the village are envious of her autonomy: she has children, she has power. When a new home for children was built in the small town nearby, some matrons of the village came and asked her to "give them" a few babies, but she fiercely refused. She affirms that she is the only safe haven protecting the children from a rapacious society – the state or the well-thinkers, who are only interested in their own image or spiritual elevation. She does not trust the Department of Welfare because she does not trust the State. She has outplayed the mark that the Malaysian State would impose on fatherless Malay children who cannot be registered "with the *bin*" (*pakai bin*) that is, as "son of"¹³, by registering all

13 Until recently, fatherless children were all registered as bin Abdullah, literally, "the servant of God", a name used in Malaysia for new converts to Islam. Apparently this practice was put to an end in order to avoid discriminating these children when enrolling in school and, so it is said, to avoid causing problems to the real sons and daughters of men called Abdullah.

her children with a double name (Emalisa Fauziyana, Rizka Aisha ...) in order to confuse, for example, the children's schoolmates. "If the State tricks you, you trick the State" she explains. At the same time, the more she claims her independence the more she is excluded, for example, from financial support for her home and her children. In order to survive, she relies on a network of charity that is wider than the village or the island itself. She continues to establish new relationships and fears no barriers. While her son networks with Islamic environments, her daughters look overseas.

Faridah, who relies on Malayness, fears being overwhelmed by dominant Malayness. She disagrees with the Department of Religious affairs and with the Welfare Department, the two main branches of the Malaysian State which she is bound to deal with. She denies being an institution and relies on the idea of affiliating a lot of grandchildren to her individual family.

Apparently, Ganisma and Mary are less rebellious than Faridah is. They have succeeded in raising enough donations to build a new home, to be inaugurated soon, which keeps up with all the hygienic and security requirements and looks more and more like an institutional home – but they think they are likely to revert to a different standard as soon as the welfare officers have checked the requirements. They do not fear to be assimilated by the State because, as they declare, "as we are not *bumiputra*, nobody pays much attention to what we do", but they want to determine their affiliation and are not ready to "relinquish their freedom to dream".

Because the "family scene" is unopposable, it allows disturbing realities such as Faridah's and the Rumah Matahari to flourish and be effective. Thus, the family-like homes for marginal children relate to the Malaysian State and the established institutions in a patient dialogue where opposition goes alongside with negotiation. In this way they aspire to play the role of what Derrida called "counter-institution": another institution that, in an interminable process, will come to replace institutions that are oppressive, violent and inoperative. [...] a counter-institution, neither spontaneous, wild nor immediate." (Derrida 2001 in Wartham 2007, p. 213). In fact, much though Faridah's and Ganisma and Mary's homes might be opposite, they share the same categories of citizenship and belonging as the Malaysian State, where ethnicity matters and is constructed along religion and cultural belonging. They draw their strength from separate ethnic symbolic reservoirs which they do not criticize in depth, even though they do criticize on some precise and important matters. As Bellagamba and Klute (2008) say, it is useful to see them as a "continuum within which the State and alternatives to State power have shown themselves to be mutually constitutive and interdependent" (2008, p. 11).

Margins

As we saw, Faridah, Ganisma and Mary live a village life and their children move within the space of a village. Faridah has a vegetable garden and chickens; under her patio, Ganisma can seat 50 children and as many guests for a common meal. One might argue, where you fit 10, you can also fit 15, and villages in some ways echo an under-populated nation where a home could easily include new persons, whether babies or migrants. The fact that Faridah's grandfather migrated from Aceh, Ganisma's grandfather migrated from India and Mary's grandfather migrated from China cannot be erased from the picture, although each of these migrations withholds specific features. The three women's homes are similarly inclusive although, as we have seen, they are inspired by different ideologies.

Rural villages are rapidly disappearing from Penang Island. Faridah, too, is constantly at risk of disappearing from the landscape because she can't cope with the rising prices and with the lack of space, let alone with the villagers themselves. She often says that she is ready to move to a larger home even on mainland Penang or in another state but as her daughter underlines, she can only run her activity in Penang where she is well known, knows the people and knows the ropes.

Ganisma and Mary, instead, have managed to build a larger, higher, stronger building to resist the winds of developers that would eagerly sweep a one-floor village house away in a matter of minutes now that the area is developing at high speed. Thanks to the new building, the two friends have inscribed their home into the flourishing landscape of luxury residences and shopping premises that leads to the second Penang Bridge. They have given in to a certain amount of transformation of their habits as they have had to comply with new hygiene informed State rules but by resisting in that very place they are acquiring value; the foster children grant the whole activity to be kept in place and the place is becoming expensive. In an overall spacial perspective, not only have the two homes prospered in a marginal condition, but they are also vitally clinging onto it and partly affecting its definition.

Other homes in Penang occupy different margins. Two new shelters have been recently opened inside one of the oldest Chinese cemeteries on the island¹⁴, as the rich Chinese Kong-si which owns it was happy to let the premises for free. These shelters too are in a marginal condition and they

14 The anthropologist cannot avoid remembering that cemeteries are the example chosen by Michel Foucault to exemplify the notion of "heterotopia" that is, "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1984, p. 46). That two homes for children are hosted in a cemetery withholds a certain symbolic suggestion concerning life and death that deserves further attention.

too, like the others, are acquiring value by being there. Many promoters highly covet the Penang Chinese cemetery, which is located on beautiful hills that have been cleared from forests and are not yet encumbered by other constructions and are not far from the urban areas. It is however, them, the “unlucky” children who, for the moment, are living there, in a luxurious garden and with a nice view at a time when poor people live in rundown, badly connected concrete blocks of flats instead. “We are so lucky” says the resident caretaker, pointing at the beautiful trees outside the window.

More homes were recently opened on the mainland part of Penang and in neighboring states like Kedah and Perlis. Many of them are in new housing compounds because there it is cheaper and easier to find large houses. Because they give birth to a quite localized network of small donors they, too, create links and change the social value of their isolated neighborhoods.

For all the homes, typical problems of spacial marginality appear, first of all problems from transportation to school to sanitary structures or to whatever family the children still have. But by moving from one kind of margin (the degraded blocks of flats) to another kind of margin (the village, the cemetery, the far away housing complex) the young people who are in the homes also unknowingly help re-qualifying those very same margins. They become the focus of a network of relationships that do not correspond to that of the original place they come to inhabit: they are in a village but do not farm; they are in suburbs but are not suburban families; they are in cemeteries but are neither religious nor dead.

Successful marginals

I would like to conclude by narrowing my focus on what first drove me to write this article, that is, that the care of unattached babies and small children reveals an important feature of Malaysian modern society.

The first point I make concerns the plasticity of ethnicity as a social and symbolic system of relationships. Faridah, Ganisma and Mary bear witness to the power of ethnicity as a practical and cognitive resource for those who face a difficult situation. Without contradicting a general agreement about the necessity to care for children regardless of their ethnic, religious or national affiliation, Malaysians see each specific baby or child as ethnically bound and both Faridah and Ganisma and Mary end up shaping child members of their ethnic community.

Although it speaks the language of tradition, ethnicity prospers in transformation. In order to look after babies or small children the three women activate cultural paradigms which are determined by strongly untraditional ethnic feelings and practices. Their act of care contributes to defining their own ethnic boundaries and to creating differences within them. Faridah, Ganisma and Mary preserve from oblivion the children’s past, which is un-

fortunate, sinful or violent by definition, and indeed shape an idea of the future where the children are still a part of their past. While this is a personal, psychological option, it also includes and brings to light the collective suffering of the ethnic and national society. Because of this clear recognition, any child who is raised in Faridah's and Ganisma's ethnic "family scenes" becomes aware that beyond his or her ethnic group, he or she belongs to the group of the needy, the poor, the illegal, the irregular or the sick. At the same time, through (or despite) such recognition these children acknowledge that in a controlled marginal condition and thanks to the family scene, they can have an ordinary life. They then fathom the boundaries of their condition of vital marginality without experiencing destitution or personal risk.

The capacity of local groups, in this case ethnically connoted, to develop relationships of care in a fruitful dialogue with institutions, even when they contradict dominant trends and moralities, is a specific feature of contemporary Malaysia.¹⁵ A great number of grass-root organizations, often with a religious affiliation, can find some kind of response within the institutions as long as they do not directly defy the ruling political coalition (Weiss and Hasan 2004).

For these reasons the second and last point I would like to make concerns the importance of the relations of care when addressing a human being's need to belong to a group for the sake of survival. This is well known and studied in cases of illness and the systems of healing. Here, the young people involved are not sick, they are "only" young and marginals. They embody both a condition of suffering and the promise to outgrow it (children always grow up) which eventually becomes meaningful to the whole of Malaysia, a country more and more worried by its systems of care and education of the young and the elderly. This worry empowers those who take care of them and makes space for whatever other specific feature they stand for, whether it is a different Malayness or a common Hindu-Chinese piety.

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¹⁵ I first experienced and reflected upon this feature of Malaysians while enquiring about Malaysians' reactions to the spread of HIV, at a time when the daughter of the Prime Minister could openly support groups of LGBT activists and pro-safe sex social workers in a country and at a historical moment when politicians could be imprisoned with the accusation of sodomy.

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