Abstract: This paper explores the Malaysian practice of balik kampung or return to hometown, as a category of domestic travel. Although this is an important social practice which is generally valorized by most Malaysians and is potentially an emergent element in national integration, there is scarcely any specific policy or research initiative that addresses this potential. At the global level, most if not all societies, experience this category of mobility both at the international and domestic levels. Yet in terms of research coverage this return-to-hometown phenomenon seems neglected. Through personal reflections and ‘auto-ethnography’ I shall first describe balik kampung as a social event, its significance and structural characteristics, before analyzing its evolution in terms of form, function and significance attached to the practice.

Keywords: Balik kampung, Malaysia, national integration, cultural mooring, shared experience.

Introduction

Balik kampung as a phrase means going back to the village where the person was born (Abdullah and Ainon 2010, p. 30). The kampung, however, has fluid meanings which can mean a birthplace, a location where one’s parents live, a hometown, a vicinity where one’s extended family lives. According to the 1886 Hobson-Jobson Anglo-Indian Dictionary (cited in Shamsul 1998, p. 39), kampung is a Malay version of the word ‘compound’ which is the immediate space outside the house. A more recent viewpoint, however, states the opposite - that ‘compound’ “…was originally derived from the Malay word kampung” (Sanusi and Amin 2016, p. 15). It nonetheless brings the connotation of a place of emotional significance that one feels connected to with a degree of belonging. At the national level, balik kampung as a concept has become more inclusive as Malaysians of all ethnic backgrounds embrace
return to natal homes as a social act of choice during festive seasons when a corollary practice of ‘open house’ is also practiced by many residents. This shared value favoring social cohesion emerged without deliberate government policy. At the household level, however, the much-mesmerized family reunion which was fully appreciated by the first generation rural-urban migrants, is not always shared by their offspring owing to the lack of shared experiences with the latter who are often more engrossed in their ICT driven activities during their brief stay in the kampung. Conceptually, this is a case of weak cultural mooring on the part of the second-generation returnees who are more familiar with the mobile media culture than their primordial roots.

Returning home is an emotional call for many, but may not be so relevant to some whose attachment to the birthplace or to the place they used to call ‘home’ has weakened. A body of literature has touched on the issue of place-attachment and sites of emotional significance (Seamon and Sowers 2008; Suntikul and Jachna 2016), but there is yet to be a specific study on the practice of returning to the natal hometown. Whether it is an off-season or in-season visit, the practice of returning home is clearly visible in many big cities such as Jakarta or Beijing which are the homes to millions of migrants from rural villages and other urban areas. There is surprisingly little attention given to this social practice even in works that cover the category of travel motivated by visiting friends and relatives or VFR (Backer and King 2015, p. 1). This paper explores balik kampung as a category of VFR travel with emphasis on its consequences on both the host and the guest.

Returning home can be examined at various scales from inter-parish to intercontinental levels, as in the case of the diaspora returnees who make their annual balik bayan trips to visit places of origin in the Philippines. In Indonesia, this annual return to the village of origin (mudik lebaran) is known to cause huge traffic jams in recent years lasting over a day or two before the traveler finally reaches home to be among childhood friends and relatives. The familiar phenomenon of traffic crawl is observable in the major cities of China and elsewhere during the festive season, usually associated with religious celebration such as the Chinese New Year, Eid for Muslims, and Vesak Day and Thaipusam for Buddhists and Hindus. In multicultural Malaysia, there are eleven annual religion-based public holidays and four national day celebrations. When such public holidays overlap with the weekends, the public holidays are often extended to make the weekend a longer holiday period. Employees
would take an extra day or two to make it worth taking a long distance trip back to the kampung. Thus, balik kampung or returning to the village is a regular feature in the family life of ordinary Malaysians. Barring financial and job constraints an employee would be able to plan for an extended leave when a public holiday coincides with the school vacation. For most Malaysians domestic leisure travel is an attractive proposition, given a well-developed system of infrastructure which facilitates mobility. In 2015, some 88 per cent of domestic travelers used private vehicles, while the remainder travelled by bus (7%), taxi (4%) and less than two per cent by air and rail (Malaysia 2016, p. 31). Given that nearly every family in the country owns a car, the main roads are always clogged up in traffic jams during festive seasons, resulting in slow journey and overcrowded rest and recreation stations.

What are the social impacts of balik kampung? Are there appropriate strategies that may be considered to make this leisure travel a more satisfying experience? To what extent can this practice of tourism be mobilized to promote cross-cultural understanding and national integration? Nearly three decades ago this author was less than optimistic on what seemed to be a ‘wishful’ desire to promote peace through tourism (Din 1988). On reflection at the local scene now, there seems to be room for optimism that travel within the Southeast Asian region may help in promoting regional consciousness and cross-cultural understanding. Balik kampung as an expression is about a journey toward an imagined peaceful family-cum-social reunion often valorized by participants. There is no explicit government policy on this yet there seems to be a positive mood by all to celebrate national festivals as a time to accept and appreciate differences between ethnic/social identities.

Balik kampung as a social event

The term balik kampung has evolved to become a feel-good expression, although its meaning is more polysemous than the literal connotation of going back to the village where one comes from. The fact that the term is now popular among all Malaysians even without deliberate official sanction, suggests that there is a space of common appeal based on shared values such as filial piety, place attachment and collective memories much of which are co-imagined. In terms of nuanced connotation balik kampung can be interpreted to mean rudely chasing someone undesirable out of the site and sight to where the condemned person belongs. Thus, in his popular song, P. Ramlee the late
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top national artiste’ ends a commiseration of a rural migrant by asking him to go back to his kampung of origin to grow beans (...balik kampung tanam kacang) for that is what he is only good for, being so hopelessly unskilled and illiterate. The other oft-cited derision relates to Kuala Lumpur ethnic residents ordering other ethnic residents to balik kampung (leave the city) which they had won during the May 1969 election. In contemporary usage, however, balik kampung has assumed a festive and positive connotation, as rendered by the late singer Sudirman Arshad. His melodious rendition of the lyric balik kampung has been reproduced both in Tamil and Mandarin by the ethnic songwriters, to capture the mood of festive seasons when Malaysians return to their hometown which, owing to residential mobility, may no longer be their meaningful birthplaces.

As a social event returning home is intended to allow sons and daughters to be reunited with their parents, relatives and childhood friends. Ideally, the family members would be happy to rough it out in the grandparent’s home, knowing full well that space in the old house is limited. Close relatives would share pillows, sleep, eat and clean plates together while exchanging stories and sharing news of success and misfortunes. This ideal scenario presumes some familiarization with shared values and attitudes to intellectual interest, ideas on basic needs and proprieties with respect to space, social distance, speech, dress, leisure activity; ideas on financial and time management and so on. The idyllic grandpa’s house is imagined to be surrounded by fruit trees and coconut palms, perhaps comparable to Tom Jones’ notion of the green, green grass in his dreamt home. The journey home might also be compared to John Denver’s ‘Country Road’ in its sentimental imagery.

In the real world, however, there are mosquitoes, broken fixtures in the bathroom, some relatives not on talking terms with one another, and especially the generation Y children who come from urban homes where they habitually hide themselves in private rooms with a tablet or iPhone in hand, quite oblivious to what happens outside their brick semi-D home. The ideal home may also be a ‘dungeon’ of a place for the urban uppyer spouse who may not enjoy the slumber rough-out situation. Even the content of the conversation may encroach on difficult ‘borderland’ subjects such as exchanges on different religious interpretations between the secular and fundamentalist religious practitioners. For the latter, for example, a female cousin has to be properly covered to go to the only toilet in the house, to avoid exposing herself to others, especially the male relatives.
Outside the home, there may be social calls and invitations which require proper observance of social protocol and etiquette. There is always a tendency to judge others in the extended family which is to be expected in the traditional society but the feeling may always be mutual, granted the encounter is between individuals who come from contrasting value orientations. This gives rise to difficulties in making oneself ‘at home’ in their own natal home. It leads to one spouse feeling quite alienated while the partner is enjoying every moment in the home. Beside the need to adjust to an overcrowded situation, there are also other possible situations where a *faux pas* may be committed. Stepping outside grandpa’s house momentarily to visit the neighbors and other relatives, for example, one has to think of what gifts to take along, how much *ang pow* (small money) to disburse. The ‘what to do’ question is connected to ‘when’ and ‘in what order’? Should the couple visit the cemetery first or see the neighbor who is expecting them? When is the *maghrib* (sunset prayer) time at granpa’s parish? Should the male spouse accompany grandpa to the local *suraq* (Muslim prayer room) for group prayer? Should he insist on going to the cemetery alone when the wife is having a period and is not allowed to enter the burial ground?

Many of the religious prohibitions and social sanctions are contestable, but the festive season is hardly a suitable time to raise questions. And when questions are raised; in my Thai speaking Malay *kampung* it matters in what language one raises it; English, Arabic, Malay or Thai? If urban-bred generation Y children, especially those born abroad are not fluent in Malay, they will become a subject of ridicule in the family. Similarly, spouses from outstation who do not understand the local dialect will find it difficult to fit in to the degree that they can enjoy the company of other relatives. When this happens, a feeling of being left out creeps in, consequently the *balik kampung* visitor becomes unhappy and pesters the spouse to think about making a U-turn to go home earlier than planned.

**Realities of *balik kampung* at the local level**

To some extent the festive season is a specter of happiness and glee, with all the media channels communicating a happy mood. The reality however presents a mixture of happy and sad episodes. A few might have died on the road from a traffic accident and many may not even be able to *balik kampung*, either because they are engaged in jobs that require them to work during the festive
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season such as in the army, police, security, hospital, fire brigade and other essential public services, or because they cannot afford the journey. When there are ‘no shows’ the parents and close relatives can be quite upset and this will affect their mood to entertain others, especially if the absent member is their closest offspring or sibling. A no-show clearly is a clash of expectation, but even among those who return, they are expected to stay for an extended period. For some, the return to hometown is an obligation too important to take lightly in case one hurts the feeling of close ones. But this is also a time to explore the country in side tours to holiday resorts or short drop-by visits to see friends, relatives and burial grounds along the way. Studies on domestic tourism indicates that the motivation for domestic travel is multipurpose (Malaysia 2016; Mohamed 2005; Sloan-White 2007; Embong 2002, p. 94-95, p. 147-148) and multi-destination, making the family home less attractive, especially for those who may have a ‘fear of gathering’ hence would try to avoid or shorten the stay. In China, such a syndrome is associated with family interrogation on one’s position with respect to job, income, marital status and material achievements. In China, over six million travelers went abroad during the recent festive season, many chose such trips partly to avoid the above-mentioned fear of gathering. Sloan-White (2007) observed, however, many middle-class Malays have shown signs of a waning sentiment for balik kampung as they become increasingly engaged with business and touristic travel even during the festive season.

For Malays who are Muslims, Islam enjoins an ideal period of a three-day visitation after which one can no longer claim the privilege of a guest but must chip in as a member of the household. In practice, such claims vary with the individual. At one extreme, some children would plan ahead to make sure that the host parents are not burdened in any way, by bringing home all the expected hospitality needs and take over the household chores while they are in the kampung. There are also those who treat the old home as a cozy corner which allows them to rest and recuperate without bothering to imagine the catering problems with which the old folks must grapple. Between these two extremes, there are those who would rent a homestay nearby for some privacy as an adjustment to the overcrowded space in the ‘home’ to which they were so happy to return. For the more mood-conscious they would think of all avenues to make sure that their spouse and children enjoy the festive season while making it less taxing on the family hosts. This means checking into a hotel in the vicinity with a swimming pool, and eating at fast-food outlets.
nearby such as Pizza Hut, KFC, McDonald and Kopitiam, all of which are now halal certified. On the way to hometown they will buy lemang which is glutinous rice baked in bamboo in a quantity sufficient to cater to the needs of the extended family when they reach the parent’s home.

My reflection is clearly ethnocentric in that there is hardly any reference to balik kampung practices among Malaysians of other ethnic backgrounds. As Amy Chua once said, the dog and pork factor prevents interaction and intermarriage between Malays and Chinese. Because of this dog-pork divide Malays and Chinese rarely have meals together in a Chinese restaurant. Such social separation means when Malaysians balik kampung they will always return to their respective social niches. Nonetheless, because they have to share space en route to their hometown (same restrooms, R and R restaurants and halal food), it narrows the ethnic distance somewhat, and according to the contact hypothesis, would sooner or later, encourage interaction among some. Embong’s (2002) findings based on a study nearly two decades ago suggests that members of the Malay middle class do invite their work mates to ‘open house’ specially prepared for them. This tradition of inviting ethnic others to their homes during the festive season is now common practice among both political leaders and departmental colleagues. A well-known Malaysian social scientist, Shamsul Amri, is moderately optimistic about inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia which he describes to be in a state of ‘stable tension’. Malaysians, he claims are good at ‘tongue-wagging’ rather than pursuing violence (Shamsul 1998). In so doing, they create what he terms as ‘ethnicized knowledge’, meaning writings are always couched from a specific ethnic lens. This leads to polarization into what he termed as a ‘cleft society’ which echoes Amy Chua’s metaphor of the dog-pork factor in a situation of ethnic divide. In such a divisive context, any new source of inter-ethnic rapport should be welcome by those in the corridors of power, remembering that national integration has been repeatedly declared as the overriding goal by all the five Prime Ministers of Malaysia, including the present Prime Minister.

Social consequences in the larger context

Ethnic separation is commonplace in multicultural Malaysia. Malaysians go to different schools, speak different languages, eat in different restaurants and go to different places of worship, and they rarely cross the ethnic divide in choosing marital candidates. The social setting is less than promising if one
Balik kampung as an emergent social practice has the features of an integrative social institution. As a process, it brings ethnic individuals to relate with the ‘others’ even if it may initially be asymmetrical. Communication scholars would say ‘...one cannot not communicate’ (Watzlawick et al. 1967). Let me imagine the process of returning home involving a hypothetical engineer family who hails from Kampung Tebing (Ban Meanam), Napoh, Kedah, resides in Bangi on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, heading north to celebrate Eid with the husband’s family. Two or three days before the public holidays, all at the workplace are already in the festive holiday mood. Conversation revolves around when they are leaving. Since a Chinese colleague has earlier given him a box of mandarin oranges and kueh bakul (nien kao or Chinese caramel cake), his wife makes sure that he gives him three plastic tumblers of sweet cookies with ang pow packets for the children. On the way home, he drops two similar tumblers to the Indian and Nepali guards at the main gate leading to their gated residence.

The couple then decides to leave immediately after work to avoid heavy traffic northward along the North-South Highway. They stop half-way in Tapah for sunset prayer. He goes for a shower and ablution in the restroom area and on the way-out bumps into a former Chinese classmate who has also left home
early to avoid the heavy traffic jam. They have to queue up to get some *teh tarik*, and while waiting, are able to share news mostly about other classmates. After exchanging business cards, they move on. Since they both live in the same hometown, he extends an invitation to his parent’s open-house after the Eid prayer. In the car, his wife turns on the radio; there is the *balik kampung* song by Sudirman on the air.

There is not much to elaborate on other than pointing to the fact that symbolic gestures in the box of mandarin, cookies and sharing *teh tarik* together, have led to an invitation to an open-house. There is no *haram-halal* divide since in Malaysia, there are public spaces meant for all, hence no pork or alcohol are served. The children who accompany them go to different schools but have just been exposed to a touch of inter-ethnic socialization (see Cheng 2012 for a more poignant coverage on inter-ethnic co-mingling). Upon reaching home the engineer reads an English newspaper that he has brought along and turns on the English language TV channels. At that point, the media is well spruced-up to convey the celebrative mood with the Prime Minister appearing to wish everybody a happy holiday. There is also an announcement on an open day in one or two homes of the Ministers. Everyone is welcome with the understanding that *halal* food is served. Malaysians can now feel comfortable and literate on other cultures because they can always google for information. Indeed, when googling for Malaysian practices, I also came across several works that use the name *balik kampung*, although the coverage is in English. One volume which I could not access is an anthology of short stories in English edited by Varena Tay titled simply *Balik Kampung*.

In contrast to the earlier government initiative to create a national culture through assimilation of ethnic cultures, *balik kampung* is a natural organic practice that has evolved through prior origins in the past - that is made more emergent with the media and other technological supports, including the pro-interaction R&R facility on the highway. This is not to suggest that well-meaning Malaysians have found an antidote to ethnicization of our living space. It merely draws attention to points of connectivity that may be harnessed in support of the national agenda.

*Balik kampung* is not confined to only domestic segments; there are regional and international diaspora communities to speak of. Sudirman’s *Balik Kampung* song is played all over the world. The media, especially *Utusan Malaysia*
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is replete with images of Malay students who established their ‘kampungs’ where they study, complete with Malay dress, traditional compacted rice and satay during the hariraya eve. And it has also become a trend to invite non-Muslim Malaysians to their hariraya gathering celebration after one month of fasting, making such inclusive occasion as merry as practised in the country. It would be refreshing to know if the Tamil rendition of Sudirman’s song is also played in India where there are many students of Indian parentage who pursue studies there.

Conclusions

Studies in mobility refer to cultural mooring as a factor that ties an individual to a specific place or cultural activity. In the case of balik kampung, it is the shared experience acquired through earlier socialization that makes the individual desirous of returning to their sentimental abode. For many who had relocated and married to spouses who come from outside the district, they can no longer presume that their village of origin belongs to everyone in their family of procreation. The spouse may have little appreciation of the kampung due to a lack of bonding and shared experience being a distant outsider. Some spouses in my village of origin continue to become alienated owing to the infrequency of visits and the lack of interest in the local Thai language which they find hard to learn. Consequently, they grow to feel as outsiders and so do the children. This is where the nostalgic picture of the natal place as a favored refuge fails to sustain visitor loyalty resulting in abandonment within one to two generations. The question then is how to conserve the attractiveness of the kampung among its former sons and daughters? I believe it is possible to study success and failure factors in a systematic way so that ‘knowledge science’ can be deployed to produce a reliable guide for community planning or code of practice which can be applied to promote the cause of balik kampung as a social institution of strategic value in a multicultural context. At present, there have been some initiatives to invigorate the spirit of love for the place of origin through the classroom. This is a challenging task given that many such places no longer exist. For many members of the younger generation this cultivation of bonding through awareness and experience may be extended through landscape appreciation via a program of field visits that can be built into school history, geography or local studies curricula.
This paper suggests that the practice of returning home has the potential as an instrument for social and national integration. Properly encultured and mobilized, it may serve as a natural home grown part of the national culture subscribed by all citizens. Just as the natural environment is subscribed by all ethnic groups balik kampung as a metaphor and an element of filial piety seems to appeal to a majority of Malaysians hence it can be turned into a social rallying point or ‘cultural mooring’. The subject of interest here is a complex one but surely the value of research is more than merely what the market wants, and even so in the long run balik kampung activities would theoretically be capable of generating the expected multiplier effects for economic development. This advocacy position is in line with the government’s initiative which encourages returning home through the balik kampung allowance given to teachers who serve in distant regions of Malaysia.

Some two decades earlier, this writer proposed a strategy of returning beans to the pod (kacang pulang ke kulit), in local government. I was aware that some academicians from University Malaya had served effectively as representatives of the Petaling Jaya Municipal Council. I suggested in the paper that academicians who do have skill in doing research ought to be encouraged to maintain ‘field’ connection with their place of origin to which we can expect a certain loyalty and dedication. They can be appointed as a non-executive ‘fellow researcher’ of the local government at the district level. Such appointments will not only allow them to gain access to information on local problems and issues but also to do research while enjoying occasional balik kampung trips to see their relatives and friends. This would have been a useful solution to the phenomenon of brain drain in the rural areas. The idea certainly resonates with the Malay ethos as reflected in many Malay proverbs (Abdullah and Ainon 2011, p. 102) such as:

\[
\text{Seperti ikan pulang ke lubuk (like the fish returning to its water sanctuary)}
\]

\[
\text{Seperti belud pulang ke lumpur (like the eel returning to its mud refuge)}
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The underlying assumption here is that individuals may have greater care for their place of emotional significance and hence would dedicate their time to help out even when living in diaspora abroad. This is feasible if in doing so,
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Academicians can gather data to publish papers as is required for their KPI. In this way, the consequences of rural-urban migration may be addressed to some extent.

In terms of policy, there is scope for formulating specific programs for developing the urban fringe through incentives to facilitate balik kampung travel. To this end, some funding ought to be made available for a nation-wide study of the scale of the United States ORRRC 1962 study on leisure activities which subsequently generated interest in leisure and recreational planning. Such a study need not be costly since it can be orchestrated by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Rural Development. In terms of social policy there is scope for developing shared experiences which should be embraced by both host and guests. At the inter-ethnic level there is a window of opportunity to strengthen the balik kampung accepting mood for further reinforcement of values favoring social integration. Since returning home is a universal practice it may be reasonable to suggest that a cross-country research project be initiated at the regional (ASEAN) level, to be extended later for comparative purposes. My email query to contact persons in Australia, the UK, USA and France yielded eleven returns which suggests that most people value the place where they spent their formative stage and would have liked to go back more often, even if their close relatives no longer live there. The Thai concept of lop ban rau or ‘returning to our village’ which is especially visible during the Songran holidays, is shared by other communities in the Southeast Asian region. Returning to hometown is clearly an important event and a cultural capital that is changing as the nature of the journey and the destination itself evolve.

Notes

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