

Book Review/*Ulasan Buku*

The Heat of the Hearth: The Process of Kinship in a Malay Fishing Community by Janet Carsten. 1997. Oxford: Clarendon Press, xvi, 314, index.

“Malay houses always have more than one door. There are many ways to enter the house.” Thus begins Chapter 1 of Janet Carsten’s book on a fishing community in Langkawi. The book basically addresses the dynamic function of the Malay house and how it is linked to the process of kinship. But it also has more surprises in store and opens a real door towards an understanding of how Malay kinship system works.

The book, which has nine chapters excluding the introduction and the conclusion, is divided into two parts, one dealing with the house as seen from inside, the other as seen from outside, especially in its relation with the rest of the village and the wider community external to the village.

The author, an anthropologist who did fieldwork in Langkawi in early 1980’s for her Ph.D. followed by more visits afterwards, demonstrates that kinship is necessarily an on-going process that is constantly being validated through various means. The most important of these, according to the author, is through living together, nurturing and sharing of cooked food. This is where the concept of the hearth or *dapur* is central to the study, because it is through the social organisation of the *dapur* that the sense of kinship relatedness becomes meaningful. The author insists that “relatedness is created through the sharing of substance, both as a result of acts of procreation and through living and eating together” (p. 289). Hence people who eat together from the same *dapur* actually constitutes the living family.

Carsten’s analysis of the *dapur* is very interesting indeed. It is not the ordinary cooking *dapur* that she refers to, but the ‘living’ *dapur*, the larger area where daily interactions between household members take place, and where its social meanings and anthropological significance are constantly being realised.

According to Carsten, the *dapur* is symbolically important to everything that concerns kinship and reproduction. It is the *dapur* which reproduces itself in terms of giving birth to new families. “The *dapur* produces blood and regulates its flow, thereby ensuring reproduction. The *dapur* is the transforming centre of the house; it produces life” (p. 128). This recurrent statement throughout the book encompasses the basis of kin relationship between household members, because commensality underscores and constitutes such relatedness; kin members eat from the same *dapur*. In fact, the norm is that one should not eat regular rice meals in other people’s house too often, because such behaviour challenges the integrity of the household.

Carsten’s study shows that while kinship involves blood ties through birth

and marriage, everyday perception of it tends to be quite different. In practice, kinship may not necessarily involve blood relatedness. Kinship is always a process of becoming, through eating, nurturing and living together in the same house, the same compound and in the same *kampung*. It is a constant process of adjustment between various factors, and not everything is necessarily tied to strict matrilineal or patrilineal rules. For instance, there is no standard rule regarding the choice of residence after marriage. Factors for setting up separate households after marriage vary, ranging from strained relations between spouses of married siblings, to availability of resources and lands in the compound of either parents.

Carsten also discusses the notion of siblingship and its continued importance. Hence, even in marriage, spouses tend to relate to one another as siblings, at least symbolically in the term of address used by the wife for her husband. Now we know why a wife calls her husband *abang*, although some people would have argued that the word *abang* is used as a mark of respect by the wife because in most cases the husband is likely to be older. One wonders what would a wife call her husband if he happens to be the younger one.

One also begins to realise that parts of the book read like a manual on how to become a good wife, a good husband and good parents-in-law. The last one, on what it takes to be a good mother-in-law, is very interesting. It involves "not being critical of one's daughter-in-law. The ideal parent-in-law scolds her own child and not the child's spouse," observes Carsten (p. 230). "When parents-in-law do not side their own child ..., their intervention is regarded as particularly good and likely to cement the marriage" (p. 232).

From the discussion the reader can sympathetically detect the fate of men as they grow old. While women dominate in managing household internal affairs, men assume the external role, but only up to a certain age. To prove this, Carsten shows that as men grow old, they tend to lose control over other household members, being reduced to doing errands, while women continue to dominate even in the twilight years of their life. Old men who survive beyond their socially useful age tend to become the butt of jokes of these women; in fact, they were seldom taken seriously.

In the second part of the book readers will find that a house is not necessarily an extremely private and exclusive domain. At certain times, the house has to open nearly all its doors and makes itself disposable to the entire village. The time for a *kenduri* is one of these, during which the symbolism of food sharing on a large scale becomes meaningful. But it is also the time when the house is literally free for everyone, strangers and relatives alike, to walk in and out, perhaps through all available doors.

By reading Carsten's work one realises that the working notions of kinship in Langkawi, and perhaps elsewhere too, is not that straight forward. Strangers may become closely related as if they are kins through sharing and nurturing. If

we ever wonder why some of our cousins are very close to us while others are not, the answer may be found in what Carsten insists: blood ties alone may not be good enough in fostering practical and socially meaningful kinship. Truly worthy kinsmen are people whom we meet everyday, with whom we eat together and those who offer us unsolicited help and advice in time of crisis. They may not even be our very own blood relatives. The prevailing belief in Langkawi is that "those who live close by become kin, those who live far off become strangers" (p. 197) drives home this point. Thus the process of fostering can eventually transform people into real affines and kin. After all, kinship is a matter of giving social recognition to someone whom we know in order to facilitate interactions in a socially meaningful way.

Carsten's book is a most timely contribution to Malaysian studies. At the rate Langkawi is now undergoing rapid economic changes, the Malay society, with its intricacies of kinship network described by the author is not going to survive for long. The real value of Carsten's work therefore lies in its detailed recording of everyday perception of kinship relatedness, and the process of incorporation and exclusion in the entire scheme of reckoning. All these are about to change and perhaps would be lost forever as the island gets itself more and more entangled in the development process.

Carsten's work definitely differs from those of others on Malay kinship system. By not engaging in a highly theoretical debate on kinship issues, the book makes an interesting and informative reading on how the system really operates. The author manages to bring out a good account of what kinship is all about, and what actually happens in the daily life of the community as she had herself partly experienced, in the true ethnographic tradition as a good anthropologist would. It is true that a Malay house has many doors. From the book it seems obvious that Carsten herself has entered the Malay house through all these doors.

Mohamed Yusoff Ismail
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM Bangi
Selangor D.E., Malaysia