

‘Balik Kampong’: Is Malaysia Facing the Trends of De-Urbanization?

Balik kampung: Adakah Malaysia Menghadapi Trend Kurang Pembandaran?

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a fast-grown developing country which took only 30 years to shift from predominantly agriculture-based to manufactured-dependent society. This kampong to urban migration has created a new generation of urban society who had disconnected themselves from the traditional subsistence farming but kept maintaining an occasional connection with their hometown. With new jobs, environment and lifestyle, these urban migrants' life and livelihood in cities improved and expanded. Growth in urban population and affluence raised the demand for housing, food and technological goods. With increased growth in demand, came an increased challenge in resource management to satisfy needs. A recent debate has highlighted issues on oil depletion and competition from neighboring countries that indicates a possible economic decline. This situation has triggered discussions about limits to urbanization and the possibility of urban and peri-urban food production in order to re-localize urban areas. Therefore, there is an emerging of decentralization of cities and population in Malaysia. This paper questions whether there is a further progression towards 'de-urbanization' or a return to a new form of rural life that takes advantage of new technologies to assist new way of life and improves the standard of living in kampong.

Keywords: Urbanization; de-urbanization; population mobility; 'balik kampong'; Malaysia

ABSTRAK

Malaysia adalah sebuah negara yang sangat pesat membangun, hanya mengambil masa 30 tahun untuk berubah daripada masyarakat berasaskan ekonomi pertanian kepada masyarakat berasaskan ekonomi pembuatan. Penghijrahan dari kampong ke bandar telah membentuk satu generasi baru iaitu masyarakat bandar yang tidak menghubungkan diri mereka dengan pertanian tradisi sara diri namun masih mempunyai hubungan dengan desa secara berkala. Dengan pekerjaan, persekitaran dan cara hidup yang baru, masyarakat yang berhijrah ke bandar ini telah mengalami peningkatan kehidupan yang lebih baik. Tuntutan terhadap pertumbuhan meningkatkan permintaan terhadap perumahan, makanan dan barangan teknologi. Dengan pertumbuhan peningkatan dalam permintaan, terdapat cabaran peningkatan dalam pengurusan sumber untuk memenuhi keperluan. Perdebatan terkini telah menekankan isu-isu kekurangan minyak dan persaingan dari negara-negara jiran yang menunjukkan kemungkinan penurunan ekonomi. Situasi ini telah mencetuskan perbincangan mengenai had perbandaran dan kemungkinan pengeluaran makanan di bandar dan pinggir bandar dalam usaha untuk menentukan semula lokasi kawasan perbandaran. Kertas kerja ini mempersoalkan sama ada terdapat perkembangan seterusnya ke arah 'de-urbanisasi' atau kembali kepada satu bentuk baru kehidupan luar bandar yang mengambil kesempatan daripada teknologi baru untuk membantu cara baru hidup dan meningkatkan taraf hidup di kampung.

Kata kunci: Pembandaran; de-perbandaran; mobiliti penduduk; 'balik kampung'; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The greater prosperity from industry was the catalyst that has shifted 70% of the agriculture-based-society from *kampong* into 70% manufactured-dependent society. This rural to urban migration trend does not stop within a city. Over the years, the population distribution trends keep on changing; creating more new spaces to cater for the new generation of urban society and fulfill their increased demand in food, goods and jobs.

While land in cities are highly occupied by the migrants, the land and houses in rural areas are left abandon and unattended. Many researchers focus on studies involving city development and a few others intend to identify the changes that rural experienced. This study highlights both; the changing urbanization in city and potential of the rural area that people can benefit from.

The concern begins when the abundance of oil and natural gas that fuelled industrial growth has reached its peak and their depletion is threatening

economic recovery (Byrd 2008). Previous cases of crisis in cities; such as Detroit (Sugrue 2005), Cuba (Rosset 1997) and African cities (Potts 1995; Tacoli 2001) showed that these cities have peaked and collapsed. Moreover, according to Meadows et al. (2004) in their '*Limits to Growth*' book, the cities' growth has reached their limits and was moving deeper into unsustainable territory.

The failure of cities as engines of growth will also affect social structures and livelihoods. If a city fails, jobs, foods and safety of its population will become less secure. Society in general will face economic hardship, resulting in urban poverty. Historically, the challenges in cities have resulted into a new form of urbanization. Cities have started to sprawl out, reaching the peripheral areas. The society would no longer live in the cities and rather choose to commute regularly on a daily basis. This emergence of cities spillover has simultaneously decreased the urban population growth.

Looking into the changes in urban transition, this study questions whether these new forms of urbanization are still constitute a city with the required basic functions and structures? It analyzes the phases of urbanization, sub-urbanization and counter-urbanization through established references. This paper reviews the concept of differential urbanization by Geyer & Kontuly, (1993, 2003) and the idea of extended mega urban region by McGee T. (1971). The main focus is to foresee as to whether the further progression of the urban transition reaches rural areas as part of urbanization trends or are actually a sign of the de-urbanization trends; emerging of a reversed migration from city to *kampong*.

This paper adopts '*balik kampong*' concept as one of the possibilities if de-urbanization occurs. This study provides evidences from established references which have investigated the capacity of land that will be available and accessible for returned migrants. It also discusses on the prosperity that people could benefit from land and take advantage of new technologies to assist in developing a new way of life and improve the lives and livelihoods in *kampong*.

URBAN ON MOVE

CHANGES IN URBANIZATION

Urbanization is a complex process involving people, space and time. History has recorded many

successive and even devastating urbanization trends, which have led into various debates. Understanding urbanization leads to understanding one of the fundamental characteristics of human civilization (Antrop M. 2004). It covers the transformation of rural to urban spatial patterns, physical changes and social process associated with life (Antrop 2005; Antrop M. 2004; Champion 2001).

Urbanization was also a process of population concentration (Firman 1997; Osborne 2005; Tisdale 1941). All urbanization movements since the early 19th century have showed an almost exponential growth of rural to urban migration and transportation changes (Antrop M. 2004; Champion 2001; Pacione 1984). Subsequently, these factors make the migration movements easy and allow rapid expansion of urbanization.

The trends of urban expansion have been recognized since the end of 19th century (Champion 2001; Geyer & Kontuly 1993; Klaassen, Molle, & Paelinck 1981; Van den Berg 1982). This urban expansion and extension are defined according to the combined growth and decline of the urban center (Antrop 2004) and the potential in urban fringe area. Klaassen et al. (1981) first introduced the differential concept of urbanization into an exponential graph (Van den Berg 1982) which was then refined by Geyer & Kontuly (1993) and referred constantly by many researchers from various backgrounds such as Antrop M., Champion T., McGee T., Hadi A.S. and more.

The phases of differential urbanization are demonstrated in Figure 1. The phases begin with 'urbanization' which is the centre of urban concentration during rural to urban migration. Then, the overloaded population in the urban centre has resulted into urban agglomeration, or called 'sub-urbanization'. In this phase, the urban centre starts to lose its population while the new urban peripheries are growing rapidly. The third phase occurs when both; the population in the urban centre and fringe area are beginning to decline. Population are moving further than the centre and creating new places to live. Klaassen (1981) and Berg (1982) described the phases as 'counter-urbanization' or 'dis-urbanization'. As the model suggests a cyclic development of urbanization, the fourth phase occurs when the population returns to the recovering of population or a turning point which was described, which is commonly known as the 're-urbanization' period.

While Klaassen (1981) and Berg (1982) describe the differential urbanization based on the changes in population distribution and development of each urban

agglomeration, Geyer and Kontuly (1993) refined the cycle (refer to Figure 2) and adapted it into defining the population concentration and de-concentration by identifying the polarization reversal or a turning point. Their indications are based on trends that appear in Europe during the early 19th century.

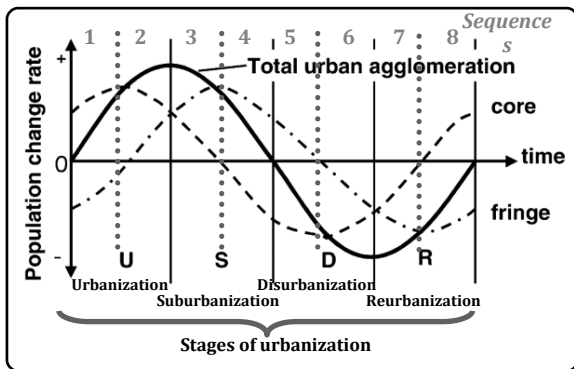


FIGURE 1. Cyclic model of stages of urbanization based on the population change in core & fringe zone of urban agglomerations (by Klaassen et al. 1981; Berg et al. 1982; Champion 2001)
Source: Champion 2001 & Antrop 2004

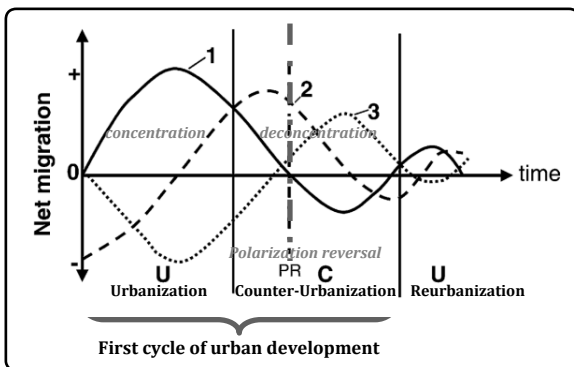


FIGURE 2. Model of differential urbanization phase by Geyer & Kontuly (1993:165). (1) Cycle of primate city (2) cycle of intermediate city (3) cycle of small cities
Source: Champion 2001 & Antrop 2004

Both analyses were highly important in understanding the change of the population distribution in the countryside due to urbanization processes. Antrop (2004) highlighted that the phases of concentration and de-concentration of population in urban places as a major concern which consecutively spreads the cities into smaller towns and settlements. Therefore, the concept of differential urbanization suggests that urbanization gradually affects the whole countryside development, which forms an indicator for future development.

While some research emphasized on how to maintain urbanization process, another work has sought to show how cities reach their limits in growth and cease to decline. This study challenges the contemporary understanding in urban transition and seeks to investigate the potential of de-urbanization. Although the term de-urbanization itself does not appeal to convince and gain people preferences, the emerging forces from various disciplines provide evidences that de-urbanization are possible.

THE EMERGING TRENDS OF DE-URBANIZATION

The situation of urban decline has been discussed since 1970s (Boyle & Halfacree 1998). It begins when oil and gas that fuelled the industrial growth in most developed and developing countries has peaked and depleted. The decreasing supply of resources is threatening economic recovery (Byrd 2008) and affecting production in the industrial sectors which resulted de-industrialization.

De-industrialization happens when manufacturing's share of employment and services begin to decrease. According to Whittaker (2007), most industrialized (or developed) countries reached this phase of de-industrialization around the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, while some high-income developing countries (such as the rapidly industrializing economies of East Asia) began this phase in the 1980s (Palma 2005).

When de-industrialization happened, food supply, jobs and security will be insecure. De-industrialization also causes a widening income inequality and the displacement of workers, which consequently raises urban poverty (Hussain & Byrd 2013; Bluestone 1984; Brady & Wallace 2001; Whittaker et al. 2007; Whittaker et al. 2010). This urban poverty issue is a substantial problem that forces people to move and leads to de-urbanization (Drakakis-Smith 1996).

Studies show that more than half of the urban population is below the poverty line in several Asian and Latin American countries (HABITAT (1996) in Yaakob 2011). As economy has always been the motive that forces people to move (Boyle & Halfacree 1998), failure in cities will once again makes the prosperity from land becomes greater than the prosperity from the industry. This moving-out phenomenon demonstrates how urban are being de-populated and creating the emerging trends towards de-urbanization (Bilsborrow 1998; T. Champion 2001).

Apart from the economic reasons, Whittaker et al. (2007) has also highlighted issues faced by the urban middle classes in the rapid developing economies which subsequently contribute to the city failures. The issues include ‘*double burden of disease*’¹ (Monteiro, Conde, & Popkin 2002; Organization 2010; Popkin 2002) and a ‘*double challenge of education*’² (Dore 1976) that has restricted human development. This study raises concerns on the changing in lifestyle of urban migrants, those who have disconnected themselves from the traditional way of life. It argues as to whether the urban migrants would be able to re-adapt with the land if they return to the subsistence living when de-urbanization occurs.

FROM SMALL *KAMPONG* TO BIG CITIES

THE MALAYS URBANIZATION

A review on previous studies of urbanization reveals various ways of defining urban and cities in Malaysia. Hadi et al. (2010) define urban as a centre of administration or place that connecting people. Their study stated that urbanization in Malaysia has existed as early as the 18th century-during the British administration where tin were heavily mined and rubber were a main commodity. They described this period as the nascent urbanization which involves two major urban groups; the British colonial officers of public personnel and the migrant workers from South China and India (Sendut 1962,1965) from 1820 to 1947.

The rural to urban migration trends in Malaysia started after the Second World War II in 1947. This phase was described as the pseudo-urbanization which involves a small percentage of the Malays (single-young-male) (Salih 1977) who entered the administration urban labor market, doing the ‘kitchen jobs’, such as general housekeepers, helpers, gardeners and menial labor works (A. S. Hadi, Idrus, Shah, & Mohamed 2010).

After Independence in 1957, the opportunities offered by the urban have resulted in a massive rural to urban migration. The Malay society has started to get involved more in urban services market such as police, Malay regimen, or mid-range officers (Hadi et al. 2007), (Hadi et al. 2010). The Malays were then started to become more aware of the economic divisions and actively involved with politics. However, after election in 1969, a political misunderstanding between races has grown in tension

and broke out into racial riots, between the two largest communities of Malays (63%) and Chinese (17%).

As a response to the race riots, the Malaysian Government has introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP 1971-90)³ in order to overcome the economic disparities by ethnicity. The NEP allowed Malaysia to aggressively pursue Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and open an important opportunity to foreign investors, technology transfer, skill development and better access to foreign markets (Ariff & Hill (1987). This policy has resulted in rapid industrialization and economic growth to the country.

The emerging industrialization (in particular electronic industries) was the main pull factor that attracted many obedient and diligent young-unmarried-women (Ariffin 1994a; Ariffin et al. 1994b; Byrd H. 2012). This massive rural to urban migration has shifted 70% of the rural society into 70% urban in less than two decades and created a new urban society. Despite the increased in population growth that which is contributed by rural to urban migration, Pryor, (1973) and Hirschman, (1976) argued that natural increase was the main demographic process behind the urban growth rates (Rimmer & Cho 1981).

Between 1970 and 2000, the urban statistics showed that two-thirds of Malaysia’s population live in urban areas (Yaakob 2011). The overloaded population has forced the urban to sprawl and created a new form of urbanization in the peripheries. Aiken & Leigh, (1975) described this as the ‘*superlinear city*’, Drakakis-Smith & Johnstone, (1977) referred to as the ‘*urban conurbation*’, while McGee (1971) and Hadi (2010) called it as the ‘*extended mega urban region*’. Siti Zakiah Muhamad Isa (2007) in Yaacob (2011), added that the emergence of peripheral urban has simultaneously resulted in a decrease of population in the urban centre.

Over the years, the new forms of urbanization keep on expanding. The urbanization transitions in Malaysia follow the differential urbanization model proposed by Antrop M., (2004); Geyer & Kontuly, (1993); Paddison, (2000). This paper analyses the physical profile of urban expansion in Malaysia. Surprisingly, it has been found that the urban conurbations are simultaneously moving far from the city centre but becoming near to the rural areas. Therefore, this study argues as to whether the urbanization movement is part of the urbanization process or are actually returning to a new form of rural life.

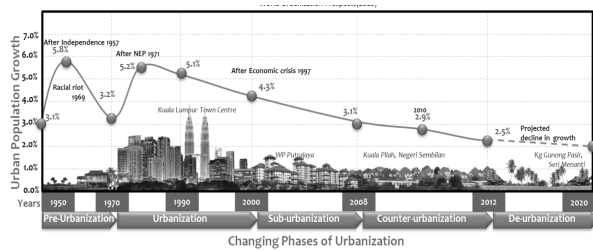


FIGURE 3. Physical profile of the urban expansion from city centre to rural areas in Malaysia

Source: Profile based World bank data estimates based on United Nations, World Urbanization Prospects (2013)

Figure 3 shows a profile of urban expansion in Malaysia and decline in the urbanization growth rate. From the demographic statistics, it shows a decline in the overall urban population since late 19th century (Boyle & Halfacree 1998). This trend was supported by Thompson, (2002) and predicted a continuous decline reaching the year 2020 (Klaassen 1981).

The statistic data was supported by the Worldbank data on World urban population growth, in which has shown a reduction of 0.92% rather than the expected projection of 1.07% that has been made in 1995-2000 (Millinger et al. 2012). Millinger et al. (2012) added that the percentage of urban growth in developed and developing countries are expected to further decline starting from 1995 to 2015.

LIMITS OF GROWTH IN CITY: SHALL WE 'BALIK KAMPONG'?

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF 'BALIK KAMPONG'

Kampung is a Malay term which means village or rural settlement in Malaysia. It carries a pervasive concept in Malay culture. In the early years, many researchers distinguished *kampung* from urban form and described it as a terrain that resembles the norms and forms of the Malays (Bunnell T. 2002; Hirschman 1976; Lim 1987; Thompson 2002). However, after the urbanization stoke out, *kampung* is seen to diversify. Brookfield et al., (1991), Maliki, (2008); Thompson, (2002) described *kampung* as a place that have connection with urban.

When a massive rural to urban migration took place in 1970's, *kampung* has received a big impact where about 50% of its population is moving out and hollowing the land. These rural migrants are

disconnecting themselves from the traditional subsistence farmers into becoming the industrial workers. While some studies have shown that these rural migrants have totally forgotten their rural background, there are some others who have provided evidences that they are still carrying a strong attachment with their place of belonging.

Awang Goneng, a Malay journalist who left his *kampung* and lived in London for over three decades expressed his longing for *kampung* and wrote his childhood memories in a book - 'Growing Up in Terengganu', in which he described; "In a sense the *kampung* is the womb of the Malay body and soul that will always bring the Malays back home; to their *kampung*" (Goneng 2007).

Meanwhile Maliki (2008) conducted a study on the rural-migrants' interpretations on the definition of *kampung* has discovered that Malay migrants do bring over and keep some belongings from *kampung* and remain attached to their hometown. The findings have been extended by Nor Atiah Ismail, (2010) through her study on urban-home-landscape. She concluded that there is an emerging concept of 'ruralizing' the urban where these rural migrants tend to decorate their home landscape using *kampung* components.

These findings brought to conclude that strong attachments still exist between the rural migrant with their *kampung* (Maliki 2008; Nor Atiah Ismail 2010; Smith J. S. 2002). The attachment to *kampung* is one of the reasons that brings people back to *kampung*. It also explains why some of the traditional activities such as 'gotong-royong', 'kenduri' and 'balik *kampung*' are still being practiced.

The 'balik *kampung*' - "the exodus to one's roots" (Nordin (2000) in Bungo & Hussin 2011), is one of the common activity done by the urban dwellers. However, current practice mostly involved for the periodical return of urban Malays to their hometown or birthplace during festivals and public holidays for kin reunions (Gannon 2004; Gannon & Pillai 2012). Therefore, this study challenges 'balik *kampung*' concept to be one of the alternatives for the urban migrants to return permanently to *kampung* if de-urbanization occurs.

Returning to village/land or 'balik *kampung*' is not returning to poverty. With the prosperity that land offers can benefit the society, this 'balik *kampung*' concept does not only allow society to live in resilient but also capable to remain far from being poor.

THE POTENTIAL AND OPPORTUNITY

THE LAND CAPACITY

Prior to the massive rural to urban migration influenced by industrialization in the 1970s, there had been a decline in agricultural development in Malaysia (Thompson 2002). Over 800,000 hectares of agricultural land was abandoned or underutilized. However, Malaysia is fortunate to have laws and legislation that cover the land ownership. This Malay reserve land can only be owned and held by the Malays and they cannot be sold (Millinger et al. 2012).

This legislation has been discussed by, among others, Zaki et al. (2010) who found that although the land tenure system in Peninsular Malaysia has undergone several changes since 1957, the Malay reserve land and the customary land tenure system are still much implemented especially among the rural Malay society. Therefore, although most of these reserve and customary lands have been abandoned due to rural-urban migration during the industrialization period of the 1970s the ownership still belongs to the Malays (Hussain N. 2012, 2013). This has left the door opens for the urban migrants to return to the land.

This abandon land was said to not only remain accessible for future but also still rich in ecological functions and resources (Nor Atiah Ismail 2010).

THE SOCIETY CAPABILITY

Many studies have examined the returning migrants' capability to re-adapt with land when they return. Thompson, (2002) and Bunnell T., (2002) found that the returning migrants have a strong attachment with their kampong. This thus enables them to successfully adapt with the kampong work.

The concept of 're-adapt' allows people to continue living a subsistence lifestyle (Zaki et al. 2010). According to Smith J. S. (2002), a livelihood is considered sufficient when the society can cope and recover from economic failure or is able to maintain its capabilities and assets. This idea was supported by Omar et al. (2013) in their article entitled '*Sufficient and Sustainable Livelihood via Community Economy: A Case of Natural Farming Program in East Malaysia*' which discovered that a natural farming program is an affordable community economic model that can improve sustainable livelihoods in rural areas (Omar et al. 2013).

Moreover, the evidence of returnees capability to work with land also has been discussed by Byrd (2012). They presented sample of current successful urban returnees, when combined with recent initiatives such as the natural farming program (Omar et al. 2013), the returning migrants are able to adapt well to a new kind of life and are capable of living above the poverty line while working on the land.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES TO ASSISTS THE SUBSISTENCE WAY OF LIFE

In addition, this paper addresses '*subsistence of life*' as a way in which people can use new technologies to assist traditional life. Rural areas have vast natural resources such as land and plants which allow alternative technologies to be developed and used locally. For example, solar power, which creates energy by utilizing rooftops and awnings in the big cities, has the potential to produce greater quantities of energy in the large fields and compounds of the sub-urban (Bilsborrow 1998). Bilsborrow (1998) has given a good rule of thumb on the ability that rural areas have in generating solar energy; it is predicted that one megawatt of solar-generated power can be produced by about eight acres of land. This is not possible within a dense, compact megacity.

Other researchers, such as Millinger et al. (2012) have discussed the potential of solar power in the rural areas of India; rural areas can generate twice solar power for household electrical supply when compared to that of the urban areas (Millinger et al. 2012). This situation not only capable to cater for the local demand, but has shown further benefits by reducing household expenses and generating income for the rural community.

CONCLUSION

This paper discusses on the past, present and future urban expansion in Malaysia. The concern of this study is to investigate the changing urbanization trends and the emerging de-urbanization which has become a recurring topic in most of recent debates. Although many researchers classified de-urbanization as part of the urban transition, this paper challenges it to be a new form of rural life as the result from the urban devolution.

The discussion begins with analyzing the urbanization movement and its transition based on

previous literature. It narrates an investigation of urban and urbanization phases in both the global and local context. This thus creates an in depth understanding on the challenges that cities is expected to face if economy declines and industry fails.

With the aid of statistical data, the discussion expands into presenting the evidences in regards to Malaysia context. Based on the analyses, this study found a declining trend of urban population growth which subsequently creates a reverse footprint back to rural area or traditional *kampong*.

Therefore, with evidence showing a strong attachment between rural migrant with their *kampong*, this paper challenges the new form of urban transition in Malaysia to be the 'de-urbanization' trends. This paper adopts the '*balik kampong*' concept as an alternative if de-urbanization occurs. It provides evidences that returning to *kampong* are not returning to poverty. In conclusion, this paper claimed that future prosperity will be from land; exploiting the recent technology to assist the traditional-subsistence way of life.

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NOTES

- ¹ The '*double burden of disease*' relates not only the traditional diseases that continue in urban areas, but also the new diseases such as obesity due to increased consumption of fat and a sedentary lifestyle.
- ² The '*double challenge of education*' as been argue by Dore (1976) relates to the problem of divided societies where there remains not only inadequate education amongst low economic groups but also the mass education of middle-income causing 'credential inflation' without significantly increasing the quality of job prospects.
- ³ New Economic Policy or NEP (1971-1990) initiated by the government to overcome the imbalance economic by ethnicity. This policy emphasizes on a global economic strategy which allowed the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and resulted an excessive industrialization.

- ⁴ '*gotong-royong*' means a sharing activity that people do it together and help each other.
- ⁵ '*kenduri*' means feast or gathering that have special meaning involving people, purpose and food.
- ⁶ '*balik kampong*' means returning back to hometown/village.

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