

Ethnicity and Fertility in Malaysia

Noor Laily bt. Dato' Abu Bakar
Tan Boon Ann
Tey Nai Peng
Rohani Abd. Razak

Ethnicity and Fertility in Southeast Asia Series
General Editors: Aline K. Wong and Ng Shui Meng

**ETHNICITY AND FERTILITY
IN
MALAYSIA**

by

**Noor Laily bt. Dato' Abu Bakar
Tan Boon Ann
Tey Nai Peng
Rohani Abd. Razak**

**with the assistance of
Nazileh Ramli
Khalipah Mohd. Tora
Ng Tuck Seng**

**Research Notes and Discussions Paper No. 52
INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
1985**

Published by
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 0511

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ISSN 0129-8828

ISBN 9971-988-05-4

Printed in Singapore by Kin Keong Printing Co. Pte. Ltd.

PREFACE

The Ethnicity and Fertility in Southeast Asia Project that commenced in 1980, was an outgrowth of an earlier project, Culture and Fertility in Southeast Asia, which was completed in 1979. Building upon the results of the earlier study, which established that ethnicity was a significant factor underlying the fertility differentials among the various ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, the present project aimed to explore in greater detail the extent to which ethnicity and ethnic factors like ethnic attitudes, ethnic identification and cultural practices influenced reproductive behaviour. Instead of utilizing secondary sources, the project relied on primary data collected through the survey technique. In all, twenty ethnic groups from the five ASEAN countries were surveyed in this study which spanned a total of three years.

A study involving five different countries and so many ethnic groups of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds would invariably pose problems of comparability. To maximize comparability across countries, the study relied on the use of a common core questionnaire as well as a common analytical framework and data analysis procedures. While comparability was important, the incorporation of country-specific factors salient and relevant to the explanation of fertility behaviour was also encouraged. The final research design therefore attempted to be as comprehensive as possible in the exploration of the ethnic dimension in fertility differentials among the various ethnic groups studied.

Three workshops were held during the period of the project to enable the researchers to come together to discuss and resolve problems related to the project. The first workshop was held in May 1980. At this workshop the conceptual framework and the core questionnaire were finalized. In the second workshop held in June 1981, the methods of data analysis were decided. At the final workshop in September 1982, the country teams presented

their preliminary findings. The final reports were completed by December 1983.

A study of this scale obviously also involved many researchers. The researchers were all Southeast Asian social scientists drawn from various disciplines and backgrounds. Some were attached to universities of the region while others were from research institutes or government agencies.

Dr Rodolfo A. Bulatao from the East-West Population Institute provided the initial intellectual impetus to the project by formulating the conceptual framework and research design for the study as well as the drafting of the preliminary questionnaire. In addition Dr Bulatao together with Dr Aline K. Wong from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Dr Ng Shui Meng from ISEAS served as co-ordinators of the project. The country teams consisted of:

Indonesia: Dr Mely Tan (National Institute of Economic and Social Research of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, LEKNAS-LIPI)

Dr Budi Soeradji (Central Bureau of Statistics)

Mr Amri Marzali (Faculty of Letters, University of Indonesia)

Malaysia: Datin Dr Noor Laily Abu Bakar (Malaysia National Family Planning Board, NFPB)

Dr Tan Boon Ann (NFPB)

Mr Tey Nai Peng (NFPB)

Mr Hew Wai Sin (NFPB)

Ms Aminah Abdul Rahman (NFPB)

Ms Ramlah Haji Muda (NFPB)

Ms Nazileh Ramli (NFPB)

Mr Khalipah Mohd Tora (NFPB)

Mr Ng Tuck Seng (NFPB)

Ms Rohani Abd Razak (NFPB)

Philippines: Ms Pilar Ramos-Jimenez (Philippine Social Science Council, PSSC)

Ms Ma. Cecilia Gastardo-Conaco (University of the Philippines)

Ms Lorna Makil (PSSC)

Ms Ruth N. Barniego (PSSC)

Singapore: Dr Eddie C.Y. Kuo (National University of Singapore, NUS)

Dr Chiew Seen-Kong (NUS)

Thailand: Dr Suchart Prasithrathsint (National Institute of Development Administration, NIDA)

Dr Suwanlee Piampiti (NIDA)

Mr Thawatchai Arthorn-thurasook
(Mahidol University)

Dr Laddawan Rodmanee (Mahidol University)

Dr Luechai Chulasai (Chiangmai University)

Ms Suranya Bunnag (Prince of Songkla University)

Ms Amporn Chareonchai (Khon Kaen University)

Funding for the project was provided by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Rockefeller Foundation and the Human Reproduction Programme, Task Force on Psychosocial Research in Family Planning of the World Health Organization (WHO).

The results of the study are being published in six monographs in this series:

Ethnicity and Fertility in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Analysis

Ethnicity and Fertility in Indonesia

Ethnicity and Fertility in Malaysia

Ethnicity and Fertility in the Philippines

Ethnicity and Fertility in Singapore

Ethnicity and Fertility in Thailand

ALINE WONG and NG SHUI MENG
Project Co-ordinators
and
General Editors of the Series

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The Ethnicity and Fertility Survey in Malaysia is part of a cross-national research project on differences in attitudes and fertility among the major ethnic groups in the five ASEAN countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

The Project defines ethnicity in broad terms to cover identification of individuals by race, religion, language, nationality, tribe and similar "primordial" characteristics. From an ethnic point of view, the ASEAN region is an interesting one in which to study ethnic differentials in fertility. These five countries are all ethnically diverse. The people of these countries are fragmented in important ways not only by national boundaries but also by religion, language, national origins, and distinctive subcultures.

The three major ethnic groups in the Malaysian study are Malays, Chinese, and Indians -- distinguished by national origins, as well as by other factors. The Chinese may be further subdivided into various dialect groups. The country also contains other indigenous population not included in the present study, such as the Sea Dayaks (Iban), Land Dayaks, Dusuns, Kadazans, and other minority groups. Though living within a single majority political system, the communities are strongly associated with their own socio-cultural ways of life. Religion, language, dress, and food habits of the various communities are apparently different. The type of community is further broadly characterised by occupational structure, by urban-rural residence, and also economic status and level and type of education (Noor Laily et al. 1982). Despite great diversity, the relationship between ethnicity and other social and behavioural dimensions has yet to be fully investigated, partly because of

the sensitivity of the issue and partly because of the dearth of data on differentials on ethnic behaviour. This survey is an attempt to collect primary data on ethnic attitudes and fertility in Malaysia and to perform an in-depth analysis of ethnic fertility differentials, to be used as guidance in population policy formulation and programme implementation.

The project is an extension of a previous project on the same topic that was, however, limited to a literature review and to secondary analysis of existing data (Noor Laily et al. 1980). Though the literature review on ethnic fertility differentials was rather limited, given the small number of studies available for the country, the prior project did, however, demonstrate through the pilot studies that field research on ethnic attitudes and cultural practices affecting fertility is feasible and could be productive.

Purpose of the Study

There are several reasons why ethnicity is important and meaningful for investigating differentials in fertility and family planning behaviour -- in Malaysia, in particular.

First, ethnicity though not based on socio-economic differences, does nevertheless have different socio-economic and even political consequences for the populations involved in many countries. In Malaysia, ethnicity has traditionally affected access to political and economic power in such a way as to perpetuate division, according to many observers, rather than facilitate unity and, therefore, has in recent years invited serious efforts on the part of the government to redress the imbalance created.

Secondly, ethnicity is often highly correlated with religious differences. In Malaysia, for example, nearly all Malays are Muslims, while the Chinese are predominantly Buddhists or ancestor worshippers, and the Indians, for the most part, Hindus. Not all Muslims are Malay, however; some are Chinese or Indian. Likewise, with Buddhists: they are not all Chinese; some are Indians. But because of the large overlap between religion and ethnicity in Malaysia, ethnicity incorporates whatever religious influence there may be on, say, fertility.

Thirdly, ethnic or racial groups exhibit substantially different fertility behaviour in many countries. For example, ethnic differences in fertility have been found among the Whites (Anglos), the Blacks, the Chicanos, the Japanese-Americans, the