Introduction

Since this work is not a conventional ethnography, and it does not attempt to describe the totality of Singapore Malay life, it is as well to begin with a brief discussion of the theoretical framework which provided the focus for data gathering and which informs the analysis. The central question running through this book is this: how do the material conditions of life at the national level affect the day-to-day social practices of individuals and groups, and how do the culturally informed activities of daily life, through their cumulative and unintended impact, shape broad national economic and social conditions? No abstract answer is attempted here. Rather, the 'how' is answered by describing, exploring, and examining the nature of the interaction between macro-level economic and institutional conditions, inherited cultural forms and ideas, and the observable micro-level of day-to-day practices in the household and the community.

The study analyses the ways in which the Malay cultural heritage, and general economic conditions in contemporary Singapore, combine and interact in shaping the form of Malay household and community life. The study focuses on the creative ways in which cultural ideas are adapted to meet new conditions, and on the way that culturally informed practices, in turn, shape the conditions of daily life for individuals and contribute to social and economic processes at the national level.

The account of Singapore Malay life provided here acknowledges the role of both cultural ideas and macro-economic factors in shaping day-to-day practices, while not regarding either economic or cultural factors as static or pre-given. Cultural ideas are shown to be continuously created, recreated, and adapted in the course of daily life, in the light of new knowledge and new circumstances. Features of the economy, such as the availability of work for individuals of different age and sex, and rates of pay, form the practical conditions of daily life, and yet they do not have a mechanistic or determining effect upon social life because they are perceived, interpreted, and acted upon in the light of cultural knowledge.

The idea that social life is creative, and yet also constrained by the cultural and material order that pre-exists the individual, is expressed in Marx's well-known statement that 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circum-
All social life is inherently creative, in the sense that it is carried in and through the knowledgeable activities engaged in by agents in the course of their day to day lives. Social systems do not have form, or continuity across time and space, because they are programmed to do so by some mysterious set of causal forces propelling individuals along pre-prepared pathways. On the other hand, situated actors do not create most of what they do in the sense of inventing it ex nihilo. Quite to the contrary, they act in social contexts whose modes of organization precede their existence in time, and spread out laterally in space.

The term 'culture' is used in this work to refer to the spoken or tacit knowledge of human agents which is the source, medium, and outcome of daily activities. In accepting the premises that individuals 'act in social contexts whose modes of organization precede their existence in time, and spread out laterally in space', it becomes necessary to go beyond the (mythical) ethnographic present of Singapore Malay life in the 1980s to obtain a broader perspective on the Malay cultural heritage. Comparative ethnographic data from other times and places in the Malay world are used to provide the necessary historical and geographical perspective on contemporary cultural forms.

Cultural variation across time and space is a normal feature of social life in all contexts, rural and urban, when social life is viewed in terms of creative practices. The use of comparative data is not intended to imply that practices in one location, such as rural Malaysia or Java, are the pristine or original source from which urban Singapore Malay culture is derived. Rather, the benefit of comparative ethnographic data is in helping to clarify the depth of cultural continuity. Where social practices observed in contemporary Singapore are found to be similar to those elsewhere in the Malay world, despite different economic and institutional conditions, these practices can be said to be deeply embedded in the Malay cultural heritage (though never static). Where variations in practice occur across time and space, the analyst receives a signal that different structural, economic, or other conditions are playing a critical role. In this work, comparative ethnographic data are used extensively where they provide interpretive insight, but they are not intended to provide simple or deterministic explanations. Cultural knowledge suggests ways of acting, but it does not determine the path of social life which reflects unique sets of economic and institutional conditions.

A special opportunity for understanding Malay social life in Singapore is presented by the presence of other ethnic groups. These groups draw on their own distinct cultural heritages (with their own historical and geographical parameters) while acting within economic and institutional contexts that are often the same for all Singapore citizens. Comparison of the practices of Malays with those of other groups, such as the Chinese, provides a means with which to assess the relative importance of cultural factors versus structural conditions in the interpretation of a particular social form. Such a comparison does not rely on a simplistic dichotomization of one static culture (the Chinese) versus another (the Malays); rather, the comparison of different forms of life provides a source of insight contributing to the process of analysis and interpretation.

The 'social contexts whose modes of organization precede [the individual's] existence in time, and spread out laterally in space' are economic and political as well as cultural. Published data, such as national censuses and statistics, educational and economic policies and statements, are used in this study to obtain an understanding of the macro-level contexts in which Singapore Malay life is pursued. The analysis shows how some important social, economic, and institutional features of the national order are themselves created and sustained as the cumulative outcome of day-to-day practices, albeit often unintended and unknown to individual actors. National statistical data are particularly useful in this regard, as they tend to reveal cumulative trends not always obvious to either participants or casual observers. While statistical data are very useful in complementing ethnographic observation, greatly increasing the power and scope of the analysis, the reverse is also true. If one accepts the premise that national-level economic and institutional trends are socially created, then it is clear that they cannot be explained or understood without reference to an interpretive, cultural dimension.

The three sections of this work each focus on a different aspect of the interaction between day-to-day social practices, the Malay cultural heritage, and features of the national social, economic, and institutional order. The influence of cultural ideas and economic conditions in shaping the form of Singapore Malay life and, in particular, the Malay household, is examined in Part I. Part II analyses the ways in which cultural practices at the level of daily life in the Malay household and the community have shaped Malay participation in the social and economic development of Singapore since 1959. It looks in particular at the social practices which have contributed to the development of ethnic and class divisions, and to the decline of the socio-economic position of the Malays relative to the Singapore Chinese. Part III examines the origins of the tendency, common in the Malay and national leadership, academic, and popular circles, to interpret Malay economic performance in terms of static cultural stereotypes, without considering economic and ethnic factors or the process of historical change. In contrast to this tendency, the account of Singapore Malay society presented here takes as its central focus the mutual interaction and continuous transformation and change of both cultural and economic forms.
Part I
Culture, Economy, and the Household
I Conceptual Framework: Householding and Malay Kinship

The household is chosen here as a focus for ethnographic description and analysis because of its central position in processes of cultural and economic reproduction and change. The household is the primary site of the creation and reproduction of an important subset of cultural knowledge and practices (kinship) and it defines a locale and set of relations within which changes in knowledge and practice and the influence of economic, institutional, and other factors can be observed. The household plays a role in ensuring both cultural and physical continuity from one generation to the next, through the processes of conjugal and intergenerational exchange, and it is thus intricately linked to questions of historical change. Finally, the household, through its routine practices and conscious strategies of its members, links individuals to national processes by preparing them to take up particular roles within a differentiated social, economic, and institutional order.

The household as an institution has received much attention in recent sociological debates. Interest has focused on the relationship between the form of the household and the economic structure of society. The sociological orthodoxy current until the 1970s saw the Western elementary family as the product of the development of industrial capitalism. According to this view, during the process of capitalist development, the family lost its productive functions, developed a strict division of labour between non-productive women and fully waged men, and became elementary in form (Thadani, 1978: 7; Household Research Working Group, 1982: 12). A challenge to this interpretation of the effect of capitalism on the family, arose from research on underdevelopment and the articulation of modes of production, from women’s studies, from family historians, and from new specialists in household studies. From this challenge, a new consensus has emerged which argues that there is no direct or simple relation between the economy and the form of the family, since the latter is affected by political and cultural factors specific to its own history. Diverse forms of family persist throughout the process of modernization, and traditional forms can be reinforced in industrial conditions as families adapt to new circumstances. There is not one type of household that is unique or necessary to industrial production,
capitalism, or urban life. There are different possible relationships between men, women, young, old, waged, and unwaged, within the household, that enable labour to be sustained and replenished across the generations. Finally, women's domestic work, though often unwaged, is not unproductive since it provides services essential to the formation and maintenance of the formal labour force.

While the new consensus has confirmed the inadequacy of mechanistic interpretations of the effect of the economy on social institutions such as the family, the nature of the relationship between economic and cultural forms still remains unclear. The analysis of the Malay household presented here contributes to this area of debate. The argument moves away from the issue of whether a particular form of family, or a particular form of economy, arose first, since such a debate is limited by a reified view of both culture and economy. A cultural form, such as an arrangement of household relationships, does not emerge and cannot be sustained or reproduced in abstraction from specific historical and economic conditions. As Willis (1977: 183) notes in his study of the cultural reproduction of class in Britain, 'cultural activities and attitudes are developed in precise conjunction with real exigencies, and are produced and reproduced in each generation for its own good reasons'.

Details on economic conditions in Singapore are reserved for Part II: here it is sufficient to note that the 'real exigencies' faced by the great majority of Singapore Malay men and women are those of the lower-income urban wage-worker. It is the impact of these conditions upon the Malay household that is explored here.

Householding

It is to the inner workings of the household, and the concepts that will be used to analyse it, that the discussion now proceeds. The approach adopted here is that of the Household Research Working Group (1982) which focuses on the process of combination of different labour practices, such as wage work, child care, and domestic work, that is necessary to sustain labour and replenish it across the generations. For this active process of combination of practices, the term 'householding' has been coined. Attention is directed towards the cultural terms in which householding is accomplished, and the variations in this according to changing economic conditions (such as wage rates, job availability by age and sex, and pension provisions). Participants in a householding relationship need not necessarily be co-resident, and for each party the nature and extent of their contribution has to be specified.

The conceptualization of householding as the active process of combination of practices which ensures the current maintenance and generational replenishment of labour, does not assume that these two functions are always congruent or 'naturally' welded together. The interest of the presently productive household members in expanding their current production, or withholding from current consumption, in order to reproduce future generations or maintain elderly dependants, is not guaranteed by their coalescence in a current householding relationship. The cultural and economic basis of transfers between generations must be explicitly analysed, and for this purpose three subcategories of householding practices are identified. 'Current reproduction' refers to those practices that maintain the current consumption standards of the householding group; 'extended reproduction' is the transfers across the generations that sustain the old and raise the young to maturity; 'expanded reproduction' refers to the practices which increase the productive base of the household beyond that needed for current or extended reproduction, and thereby improve the living standards of the current householders or future generations. The extent to which the householding relationship allows for, or encourages, expanded reproduction has significant implications for competitiveness in a differentiated economic order. It will be argued that Malay and Chinese households differ on this crucial point.

Various household members may have different interests in the current, extended, or expanded reproduction of the household. It is necessary to stress this point, because household studies have often been associated with the opposite assumption. The researchers involved with the Household Research Working Group, whose definition of householding is adopted here, make assumptions about the congruence of interests within the household which contradict their claim to explicitly analyse the terms on which householding takes place. They tend to prejudge the issue by asserting that householding is based on the 'pooling of resources' and the 'obligations to share... income' (Household Research Working Group, 1982: 22); 'strategies of coping with the allocation of labour' (Kamal Salih et al., 1983: 20), or 'the household as a decision making unit' (Young and Kamal Salih, 1984: 10). These terms carry a normative weight which assumes either an authority structure that enables the household head to plan, allocate, and form strategies, or a co-operative structure of sharing and pooling. Contrary to this assumption, it will be argued here that though by definition householding accomplishes the reproduction of labour, it may well do so on an ad hoc or conflict-ridden basis.

The strongest challenge to the assumption that the household is an income-pooling unit has come from women's studies. Feminist analysis has refuted the thesis that the household is a non-exploitative, intrinsically democratic and co-operative unit operating in the interests of all its members (Whitehead, 1981). Hartman (1981) argues that, far from a unity of interests, the household is a locus of struggle where members have conflicting interests deriving from their relations to production and distribution which are usually structured on an age and gender basis. In so far as it acts as an entity with unified interests, it does so only because of its members’ mutual dependence. It is the nature of this dependence and the terms of transfer of goods and services that will be analysed by means of the householding concept.

The assumption common to peasant studies that the peasant household is a unit of production and consumption has also been challenged.
This theory of the peasant household was developed by Chayanov (1966) in the concept of the ‘family labour farm’, and by Sahlin (1974) in the idea of the ‘domestic mode of production’. Diana Wong (1983: 32) criticizes this view and argues that the existence of the family labour farm cannot be assumed, since ‘all labour, including family labour, is not merely a value which is “naturally” at the disposal of a household, which is “naturally” formed in the course of an individual’s family life cycle, but ... it is a social product the formation and control of which has also to be analysed’. Harris (1981) notes that in some societies, men and women own property separately and control its produce; economic transactions between husband and wife can take the form of commodity exchange; and children and their labour cannot be assumed to be under the direct, exclusive control of the household head. Malay society, in both rural ‘peasant’ and urban industrial conditions, is of this type. Thus there are ethnographic as well as theoretical objections to the assumption that the household is either a corporate or a co-operative unit.

South-East Asian societies have attracted scholarly attention because they are rural based, yet have individualistic patterns of household operation more commonly associated with the modern industrial West or with some tribal societies (Macfarlane, 1978). Insistence on seeing South-East Asians, qua rural producers, as necessarily having a ‘peasant’ or family labour-based system of production has been a source of confusion to at least one writer. McGee (1973) argues that urban petty commodity production in Asia can best be understood as a ‘peasant’ form of production, its characteristics determined by the tendency of peasants to utilize family labour. This assumption produces what for him is the ‘ingenious paradox’ of ‘peasants in the cities’. He finds confirmation that Chinese ‘peasants in the city’ do organize their business enterprises on a family basis but he is ‘confused’ by the evidence that the Javanese do not. He notes the findings of Clifford Geertz that among Javanese bazaar traders, husbands, wives, sons, and siblings all operate independently. He claims that this ‘does not exclude per se the possibility of the appropriation of the individual earnings by the head of the household’. He fails to note the evidence of Clifford Geertz (1963) and Dewey (1962) that Javanese parents and children do not pool their earnings and that husbands and wives do so only in a limited way.

The individualism of South-East Asian households makes the question of what holds them together and how they accomplish householding on a current and extended basis, all the more fascinating. Given the assumption that culture is continuously produced and reproduced in daily life, it will be necessary to look both at the cultural heritage and at the present conditions in Singapore in order to understand the contemporary basis of householding.

**Kinship, Commodification, and the Gift**

To guide the reader through the detailed analysis to follow, it is useful to present here some Malay kinship ideas, and to introduce in general terms the writer’s interpretation of the cultural basis underlying contemporary householding practices in Singapore.

The historical background of the Singapore Malay community will be described in detail in Chapter 6. The key fact to note at this point is that the population which now calls itself ‘Malay’, is composed of people of varied South-East Asian origins, the biggest groups being from the Malay Peninsula and from Java. For this reason, reference is made to both Malay and Javanese ethnographies to provide general insight into Malay cultural ideas, and these sources indicate that on the question of the basic structure of the household, there are no fundamental differences between Malay and Javanese traditions. There are variations in practices between Malaysia and Java, between rural and urban Malay societies, and across time, and where appropriate, these variations are investigated as they provide a good source of information on the process of cultural change.

Malays are Muslims, and Islam is ingrained in Malay culture. Though some writers have seen Islam as a veneer on pre-Islamic Malay beliefs and practices, this view has to be rejected since it assumes the existence of a primordial, ahistorical, reified Malay culture. The position adopted here concurs with that of Banks (1983: 53) in taking the view ‘that regards all of the Malay historical tradition as real, changing, and therefore significant. In this view, Islam has had an important formative and reformatory role in molding modern Malay ideas.’ Nevertheless, there will be occasions to point out that some individuals are more learned in Islamic canons than others, and make more concerted and explicit attempts to model their behaviour on Islamic principles.

The excellent work by Banks (1983) identifies three sets of kinship ideas which are deeply embedded in Malay culture. One is darah, blood, which involves obligations channelled along consanguinal lines, in particular the duties of parents as defined by Islam. The second is muafakat, which means agreement or settlement by discussion, and this concerns the calculated, interest-serving aspect of all social relationships, including those within the household and especially between husband and wife. The third idea is kesayangan, kinship sentiment or love, which generally (though not necessarily) runs concurrently with darah or develops through co-residence, but can be present ‘in all close social relationships containing a voluntary moral component’ (Banks, 1983: 128). Banks (1983: 48) writes:

This spiritual kinship links the essences of individuality in persons as whole beings. The overt expression of this pure kinship of the spirit is much like The Gift, as explicated by Mauss (1966).… The Malay conception of spiritual kinship expresses the hope that people can live together despite the many problems that beset the attempts. It is the goal that Malay social life seeks to attain so that all Malays will live in a world of affection and esteem.

The value of Banks’ analysis is that he has shown how these two different ideas can coexist in one kinship system and even in one relationship. For example, he considers it to be parental duty, defined by darah
and codified in Islam, to establish the new generation with the economic and social means to lead independent adult lives. Yet, he also finds (1983: 157) that the provisioning of the young with the means of livelihood is seen as a gift, the ‘supreme act of kinship’, and that ‘in dividing up his land before he dies, a man is divesting himself of his worldly property voluntarily in accordance with the unselfish wishes of his heart, and this is viewed as praiseworthy in religious law and public morality... Malay inheritance is based upon gift or hadiah’ (Banks, 1983: 138).

It will be argued here that these kinship ideas are intimately linked to an individualistic system of property ownership. Although others have mentioned the individualism of Malays (Djamour, 1959: 46), there has been no systematic analysis of this question in Malay ethnographies, especially as it pertains to relations within the household. In Malay and Javanese society, partners in marriage retain ownership of their own goods and earnings. Parents have complete ownership of their property and during their lifetime may give it to whom they please, not necessarily to their own children. Children, in return, do not have a clearly defined obligation to support their parents. They have no obligation to contribute to the support or material provisioning of their siblings with whom there is no joint estate. In a system based on the idea of individual rights to property, transfers are ultimately based on ‘voluntary acts’, not legal joint ownership (Macfarlane, 1986).

When the obligations of consanguinity have to be voiced and backed by Islamic law, it is clear that they are not taken for granted or embedded in the property system as such, as would be the case in societies with a corporate family economy, binding elementary family members and possibly extended kin into an indivisible economic unit during at least some stages of the family life cycle. In Malay society, negotiations of self-interest are always a necessary element in joining two or more individuals in a household relation, since it is not a relation that stems inevitably from any corporate rights. Ultimately, transfers are based on voluntary acts, and this is conceptualized as kinship sentiment, which is a positive exertion of will in the desire to give up the full enjoyment of one’s own property and labour, which is an individual right, in order to make gifts and enter into exchanges with others. Kinship sentiment is complementary to ideas of duty and self-interest. It is the voluntary element of will that gives the individual a sense of pride and worthiness as he or she fulfils personal obligations. It is only the willingness of individuals to give and be generous that makes mutual agreement by negotiation possible. This makes the idiom of the gift very prominent in daily life, as it describes both the actual process of negotiation between individuals, and the ideal state of relations. It is, in the Malay view, more worthy to give with love and generosity than to be forced by obligation, and it is more worthy to give than to specify the exact return expected. The best relationships are built on kinship sentiment.

Ethnographic observation established that the idiom of the gift, used to describe and express householding relations, has attained a marked prominence in contemporary Singapore. It is useful to consider here, in more detail, some of the features of the gift as a mode of transferring valued goods and services. Giving, whether of affection and concern or of a material gift, is predicated on the basis of the giver’s ownership. A gift is a gift only if it unambiguously belongs to the giver, and the decision to transfer it is a voluntary act of will. So, too, with affection. A sentiment counts as affection only if it is voluntarily given, an idea based on the wholeness and integrity of the donor. That the idiom of the gift should attain prominence within the Malay household, rather than between groups or between households as is more common in ethnographic literature of other areas of the world, is related to the integrity of the individual in Malay culture.

The idea of the gift does not imply non-calculation. To be a gift, the object must have a value to both giver and recipient. The ‘pure gift’, as Mauss (1966) and Bourdieu (1977) explain, is unrealizable because the trace of individuality in the gift sets up a relationship of debt and obligation with the recipient. It is only by uniqueness in measure and timing that the gift is ‘carried off’ and made into an irreversible transaction. The defining feature of a gift is that exact measure cannot be repaid. The debt thus created poses a threat to the autonomy of the recipient, whose counter-gift becomes not quite the voluntary gift of an individual will, but in a sense a forced response. This tension between the voluntary, willed nature of the gift and its potential to set up relations of obligation and dependence is a permanent feature of the gift. It makes it a powerful vehicle for the creation and maintenance of social relations.

Bourdieu has called the relationship set up by the gift ‘symbolic violence’. In the rural economy of Kabylia, he finds (1977: 191) there are... only two ways (and they prove in the end to be just one way) of getting and keeping a lasting hold over someone: gifts or debts, the overtly economic obligations of debt, or the ‘moral’, ‘affective’ obligations created and maintained by exchange.... The reason for the pre-capitalist economy’s great need for symbolic violence is that the only way in which relations of domination can be set up, maintained, or restored, is through strategies which, being expressly oriented towards the establishment of relations of personal dependence, must be disguised and transfigured lest they destroy themselves by revealing their true nature; in a word, they must be euphemized.

Seen in this light, it is no surprise that the gift idiom finds currency in the heart of the household. Face-to-face relations in the household could not be more intense, yet it is also the site of the most significant material transactions between people in positions of power and dependence, who must strive to sustain a relationship over a lifetime. This point is recognized by Sahlin (1974: 194) in his discussion of generalized reciprocity: 

... for its logical value, one might think of the suckling of children in this context—the expectation of a direct material return is unseemly. At best it is implicit. The material side of the transaction is repressed by the social: reckoning of debts out...
When personalized goods and services such as the provision of a home and the care of a child are the elements exchanged, the obligations created are indefinite, and the relationship developed through these gifts is consequently more durable.

The use of the gift idiom is not necessarily a manipulative strategy, nor a form of conspiratorially induced false consciousness as Bourdieu's (1977) account sometimes seems to suggest. The idea of the gift is deeply embedded in the organization of Malay kinship, but it is not an idea imposed or accepted uncritically, nor one that reproduces itself through a dynamic of its own. Individual Malays are able to give an account of the reasons why they seek to organize their household relations on the basis of the gift. It will be shown that they engage in some conscious strategies to try to preserve this element in their kinship relations, and which is highly valued in itself, and is also a source of self- and social-esteem. At the same time, it is recognized that gifts build up obligations, so that the element of self-interest is known to be integral to the idea of the gift, even though self-interest may be explicitly denied. To the extent that transactions within the household are seen as gifts, this has a real material effect on the way people proceed in daily life. The choice of idiom is not merely a superficial gloss.

In the analysis to follow, it will be argued that the prominence of the gift idiom in householding relationships in contemporary Singapore is paradoxically related to its conceptual opposite: commodification reaching into the heart of the household. The term ‘commodification’ refers to the process central to capitalism in which material products and labour power become commodities, seen and measured in terms of money, which acts as a common standard of value (Giddens, 1981: 8). In Singapore the labour power—and hence the very time—of every individual has a value, as there is full employment and waged work is available for everyone. The commercial value of domestic services, such as cooking and child care, is well known. These economic conditions give the housewife a heightened sense of the value of her domestic services and her labour time, and she feels strongly that she is making a gift when she forgoes work opportunities for herself and performs services without pay in the household. The individual’s ability to dispose of his or her own time, and its commodified equivalent, money, reinforces the idea that money, goods, and services transferred within the household are given by the will of individual owners out of concern and affection for other household members. There is also the recognition, sometimes made explicit, that the personalized nature of household services actually makes them resistant to ultimate commodification. There is no price for the provision of a home or the loving care of a child. The incommensurable ability of the elements exchanged in the household is retained and this, as noted above, is essential to the idea of the gift.

The assertions most frequently heard when Singapore Malays are discussing transfers of money, goods, and services within the household are that it is not good, or it is troublesome, to calculate things too much. The individual claims to refuse to calculate, and refuses to demand or expect a full recompense, and in this way claims to be making a gift. This gift claim depends on the recognition of imbalances in the exchange of commodities, that is, on the covert and unspoken calculation of values and equivalences. The paradox is that while it is asserted that pure kinship, or the gift, both is and should be the basis of exchange in the household, the calculation of values is integral to the idea of the gift in a commodity economy.

Parry’s work on the gift (1986) supports the argument made here on three points: first, in Parry’s (1986: 456) concurrence with Mauss that in many, or most, instances there is a combination of interest and disinterest of freedom and constraint in the gift; secondly, in the recognition that it is market economic relations (commodification) that engender an emphasis on the pure gift as their conceptual counterpart; and finally, in the observation that the notion of reciprocity in exchange has been over-used by analysts imbued with market thinking, since even when all possible types of goods (prestige, emotional well-being, land, and honour, among others) are taken into account, it is not obvious—either to an observer or a participant—that they must somehow balance each other.

The capacity of the gift to assert and proclaim the power of the donor is discussed by Bourdieu (1977), and it finds expression in the Malay concept of kasihan. This concept is frequently used to describe the transfer of goods and services within the Singapore Malay household. The term is translated as ‘kindness, favour; pity; an unfortunate thing’ (Cope, 1976). Kasih, the root of kasihan, means love and affection, and kasihan is also related to the word kasi, ‘to give’. In the way that the term kasi is used to describe transfers of resources within the Malay household, the three senses, pity, love, and the gift, are closely linked. Other students of South-East Asia with whom these research findings were discussed were surprised at the use of this word within the household in Singapore, since it is elsewhere reserved for the treatment of unfortunate outsiders such as beggars. Of all the different terms for gifts in Malay, kasihan is the least egalitarian, having strongly condescending implications. Tracing out the pattern of use of this concept will provide some insight into the shifting power relations within the household. It indicates which individuals feel they are giving more than they are receiving, or receiving less than is their real individual entitlement, and hence be-stowing the greater gift.

The layering of the concepts of duty, self-interest, and kinship sentiment and the shifts in emphasis and meaning that develop in the context of commodification and in conjunction with the changing economic circumstances of individual household members, male, female, young, and old, will be traced out in detail in the chapters to follow.
CULTURE, ECONOMY, AND THE HOUSEHOLD

1. See Harevin (1977); Sussman and Burchinal (1962); Harris and Young (1981); Stivens (1981); Household Research Working Group (1982); Hartman (1981); Kamal Salih et al. (1983); Wallerstein et al. (1982); Thadani (1978); and Whitehead (1981).

2. Note that Willis has been criticized for a relapse into material 'determinism in the last instance'. See Jenkins (1983). Nevertheless, his work represents an important attempt to understand the interplay of cultural and material factors by means of a combination of detailed ethnography and examination of broader cultural, economic, and ideological processes. His work was something of a model for the analysis attempted here.

3. Diana Wong (1983) was the source of inspiration for making these distinctions, though the usage developed here is not identical to hers.

4. In a later paper (1982), McGee mentions the individual consumption goals which motivate young Malay women to join the urban work-force, and states that the extent to which there is a family economic strategy and pooling of incomes must be examined rather than assumed.

2 Household Membership and Consumption Rights

Household Membership

In the Singapore census, a shared hearth is the criterion of a household unit. The census uses the concept of family nucleus to indicate a grouping based on a marital and/or a filial bond, and records households (defined by a shared hearth) which consist of more than one family nucleus. Since the housing unit is not used as a point of reference, the census does not indicate the frequency with which two or more households co-reside in one housing unit, but the practical conditions of living in high-rise flats make this arrangement rare. According to the Singapore census data, Malay households are predominantly elementary in form. They are composed of a single family nucleus living separately from other kin. This pattern changed little during the period 1957-80.

The Malay concept of a household combines the idea of a marital bond with that of the hearth or housing unit. The phrase berumahtangga means to marry and to set up home. Upon marriage, the most common residence pattern in Singapore and elsewhere in the Malay world is a short period of residence with either, or periodically both, sets of parents, then separate residence as an elementary family within one to four years. The goal of young Malay couples is to live on their own as soon as possible, and the delay is due to the necessity to first establish an

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<th>Table 2.1: Malay Household Membership, 1957 and 1980 (per cent)</th>
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<td><strong>1957</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>One family nucleus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married couple with a parent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents and children couples</td>
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<td>Other two family nuclei</td>
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<td>More than two family nuclei</td>
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<td>No family nucleus or one person</td>
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Source: Chang et al., 1980; L&B Census 1980, VI A-6
independent livelihood and acquire separate housing. In rural areas of Malaysia and Java, the couple would be given land and agricultural capital by either, or both, sets of parents upon marriage, or helped to clear land or establish a tenancy or share-cropping arrangement. In the urban economy of Singapore, the young are often financially independent before marriage, and the delay in moving out from the parental home is caused by the one- to four-year waiting period for rental or purchase of a government flat. During this period the young couple form a separate family nucleus, and independently earn their food, but are not strictly speaking a separate hearth as they usually give a cash contribution to the parents and share food with the parental unit.

Djamour's research on a fishing village in Singapore in 1949 shows the preponderance of the elementary family as the basis of the household unit. She (1959: 55) found 77 per cent of households to be elementary, while 19 per cent included three generations or other kin, and 4 per cent were composed of single individuals. In a rural Malaysian village, Wilder (1982a: 40) found 68 per cent of households to be elementary in structure (including those comprising married couples without co-resident children), 14 per cent of households were composed of a single adult, and 18 per cent were formed by extensions of the elementary unit to include a third generation or other adult relative. Jay's (1969: 53) findings for Javanese rural households are similar: 74 per cent elementary, 21 per cent extended, and 5 per cent single adults.

While there has been continuity in the predominance of the elementary family in both rural areas of the Malay world and urban Singapore, there have been significant social and demographic changes within the elementary Malay family in Singapore. These changes concern the extent to which the children present in the households are the biological offspring of both the parents. Variations in this are not well reflected in national census data where birth records of children are not checked. The change is due to four factors. First, there has been a rise in life expectancy, making it more common for parents to survive to raise their own children to adulthood. The life expectancy at birth for Malays was 57 years for men and 59 years for women in 1957, and 65 years for men and 66 years for women in 1970 (Chang et al., 1980: 58). Second, there has been a drop in the Malay total fertility rate from 6.3 in 1957 to 1.9 in 1976 (Chang et al., 1980: 59). This again increases the frequency with which parents survive to raise their own children, since they complete their childbearing at a younger age. The tendency to have fewer children has also reduced the frequency with which parents are willing to give children away in adoption, a common practice in Malay societies (Djamour, 1959; McKinley, 1975). The third factor is a reduction in the divorce rate, which in Singapore is calculated as the number of divorces per 100 marriages per year. This rate dropped from 52 per 100 in 1957 to 14 per 100 in 1979 (Wahidah Jalil, 1981: 36). The decreased divorce rate has reduced the frequency of the presence of stepchildren in the home, and it has also reduced the practice of child transfers. Divorce was a

Ethnographic accounts give an indication of the magnitude of the change in household composition that has resulted from the trends noted above. Djamour found that in the Singapore Malay fishing village of Tanjong in 1950, 15 out of 48 households contained children who were not the offspring of either parent. Life histories collected in Singapore in 1982 revealed that 41 out of 80 individuals aged 30 or above had not been raised by both their own parents up to the age of 15, due to divorce, death, migration, or permanent transfer. This figure excludes temporary transfers of a year or so. The frequency of transfers is much lower among those under 30 years of age.

The impact of these changes on the parent-child relationship and the transfer of resources between the generations will be discussed in a later chapter. Here it has been established that the unit of co-residence in the 1980s is most likely to consist of parents and their own children, though some variations occur. In the following discussion, the term 'household' will be used to refer to the unit of co-residence, and the complexities of provisioning the hearth will be analysed using the concept of householding defined earlier.

Consumption Rights

Co-residence defines a set of consumption rights. These are the rights to share in cooked food, and the use of household items, such as furniture and television set. These are not absolute rights, as consumer goods are considered to be the property of the individual purchaser, placed in the house for the use of others on the basis of a voluntary contribution or gift. There are occasions when a comment might be made linking the consumption of cooked food to contributions towards buying it, but this is rare and it is considered to be very calculating (berkira). The conceptual stress is on the sharing of cooked food among everyone present in the house at the time the food is prepared, including informally adopted children and kin or friends who might be there by chance. This is enjoined by Malay hospitality and by Islam.

The boundaries of the regular consumption unit are not clear-cut. Members who do not co-reside, notably married children, often share cooked food. This may happen on a fairly routine basis, for example when a married working daughter, whose child is being cared for by its grandmother, goes daily, alone or with her husband, to collect or visit
own housing unit is used only for sleeping, and she may cook there only at week-ends. It is often jokingly referred to as a hotel. Having her own housing unit gives the daughter the status of living away from parents, despite the use of the labour resources of her mother. For these services, she would contribute cash (see pp. 44-8). This shows that householding relationships can span across two or more housing units.

Another variation in the consumption unit occurs when a co-residing member makes minimal use of household facilities. This is typically the unmarried son, whose peer activities and voluntary attachments to the households of friends or kin take him out of the house, and whose wage enables him to buy cooked food regularly outside. Alternatively, he may make use of household resources, coming home to eat, sleep and bathe, but rarely be present in the house at other times. Other marginal co-residing members are divorced men without custody of children, who are deprived of the right to separate housing under government housing rules. Though they may eat and sleep in the house of a relative (most often a parent or sibling), their physical presence in the house is likely to be awkward, whatever their financial contribution.

Hildred Geertz (1961: 123) notes that in urban Java, ‘single men can attach themselves loosely to a household, take their meals in restaurants, wash some of their clothes themselves: but sooner or later they get married’. This she attributes to their practical dependence on women for the performance of household tasks. In Singapore, too, where men desire the physical and emotional comforts of a ‘home’, they are forced to enter householding relationships. Commercial substitutes for domestic services are readily available in the city, but are generally thought by Malays to be expensive and inferior in quality. Culturally, the only household relationships that can provide regular current consumption services such as cooked food and laundry are those of spouse, parent, or unmarried child. Other relationships are temporary or uncomfortable, though slightly more tenable for women than for men, as younger divorced or widowed women can sometimes reintegrate with the parental unit.

The social and emotional aspects of home and family are probably even more important than domestic services of a material nature. Few Malays relish the prospect of being alone, even temporarily, and still less as a permanent living arrangement. One divorced man in his early forties who was living alone, experienced a personal, social unease which he described thus: ‘Where can I go? I can’t stay in the mosque, that will be locked in the evening; I can’t associate with the other bachelors who are younger than me and like to go to hotels and bars; I can’t visit my friends or sister all the time because they have their own families and want their privacy too.’

Considerable pleasure is taken in family gatherings of the co-resident unit or wider circles of kin (on special occasions). Life histories collected, reveal differences in the tone of such gatherings, depending on the personal characteristics of family members, especially senior males. Some individuals recount extremely strained and largely silent relations with very stern, formal fathers (garang), while others claim to have been able to laugh and chat freely with their parents (gurau). First-generation migrants from Java are more likely to have been stern, and distant from their children, though the pattern is not entirely consistent. Differences between families still remain, but the trend observed is for parents to foster close and affectionate communication within the family, in part for the sheer pleasure that such close relations bring to all concerned. Strains still seem to arise, especially for boys during the teenage years, but both parents and teenagers state that, ideally, relations should be close and communication open: this ideal is important to the discussions of particular relationships that follow.

The analysis now turns to the question of contributions to the household, to the source of cash and domestic labour that makes food and services available to the consumers. In brief, women do domestic work and all wage-earners contribute some cash, but there is no concept of the household as a unit in which these resources are automatically pooled. It is through an analysis of the dyadic relations between household members that insight is provided into how these various contributions and the relations between them are perceived and organized. The key relationships are those between husband and wife, and parent and child.