4 The *Kampung* and the Global Village

It might seem paradoxical that in devaluing the Malay *economic* past, increasingly – in the corridors of corporate power, in evocative images portrayed by government and the media, and in the ideology of modern Malay men and women now living far from the villages and small towns of their childhoods – the framing of a highly valued Malay *social* past is taking form. While the *kampung* encompassed no past economic behaviours that could be utilized in the present, and Malay feudal society had no social behaviours applicable to modern life, the *kampung*, now exalted as a kind of idyllic community, has, to my informants and their political leaders, instructive power in conducting modern relationships. Its norms and values are believed to be superior to those of Western societies to which modern Malays increasingly compare themselves; moreover, in its imparadise we can find indigenous theories of ‘Malayness’ itself.

The men and women I knew, who construed themselves as ‘new Malays’, are moving ever farther from the small-town pasts of their childhoods. At the same time, as we shall see, the past is memorialized as being perhaps more humble and Utopian than their childhood experiences often actually were, pushing the ‘past’ back to the more dreamily evoked *kampung* of their parents’ and grandparents’, and perhaps not their own, childhoods. As my informants became increasingly distant from the real *kampung* of today – populated more often than not with marginalized rural Malays who have been left out of NEP development or squatters come to Kuala Lumpur with hopes of retrieving some share of it – their image of an idealized *kampung* grew ever sharper. The real *kampung*, as we learned in the previous chapter, is occupied by backward and passive Malays.

**BEING ‘KAMPUNG’ – A MODERN MALAY IDENTITY**

As seen at the end of the last chapter, Dato Hassan revealed his core identity – and the one to which he intended to return – as ‘just a *kampung* boy’. At first, I was much surprised by his description. His parents had long been urbanized, among the middle-class civil-service strata,
essentially the ‘new Malays’ of their time. Dato Hassan, like many of my informants, despite an urban childhood, despite being programmed for success by ambitious, modernized parents who knew well the value of an English-style education and rigid academic discipline, despite all the socially differentiating experiences he had had as a result of NEP educational and economic opportunity, evoked an identity that returned him squarely to a rural village past.

But as the phrase ‘kampung boy’ settled in my mind, I realized I had heard it often. Nearly every successful Malay entrepreneur that I spoke to, like Dato Hassan and the highly regarded Tan Sri Azman Hashim, of whom we will learn more below, described himself as ‘just a kampung boy’. This identity was not merely claimed by the entrepreneurial virtuosi of Malay society, but by the much more average entrepreneurial aspirants I knew. I began to realize that this claim had less to do with my informants’ past experiences than it did with a crucial definition of their modern identity. Indeed, my informants frequently endeavoured to show me how their modern behaviours evidenced a solid continuity with the simplicity and humility of Malays in the past. Rokiah, for example, frequently and earnestly sought to explain to me how ‘kampung’ she still was. She said that while the ‘outside appearance’ may change drastically, such as wearing Western clothes, and aspiring, by means of entrepreneurship, to high economic status and a modern korporat identity, her inside self – in terms of beliefs and values – had stayed essentially traditional. Westernized material existence is merely a veneer to my informants, rather like the ‘costume’ they claimed dakwah followers wore. But not only was the core self still firmly in place, but its traditional norms and behaviours were, Rokiah felt, alive in modern activities, contributing much to her pursuits and directing the social and moral content of modern relationships. This constellation of ideas had much to do with her perception of how to behave ‘Malay’ in modern life, and in turn, of how to behave as an entrepreneur, as we will see later on.

The Malay men and women I knew believed there were kampung values in Malay culture – sharing, fairness, equality, and balance – bred in the bone, that could not be tossed off, no matter how much any individual stood out in the context of modernity. They pointed out how these values could be demonstrated in modern entrepreneurial activities, when Malays pitched in to help one another by sharing business ideas and engaging in allied ventures. Indeed, what they called business ‘networking’ recalled to them the spirit of gotong-royong (shared labour) which they said characterizes life in the kampung. As such, being a kampung Malay has taken on a newly valued eidetic form in urban Malaysia. There has been a revival of