

Supporting the Elderly: The “Kenang Budi” Concept Within the Malay Society in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The rising number of elderlies has brought several issues forward, particularly pertaining to care and support. Children are expected to be the primary source of support for the elderly and provide them with physical, social, and financial support to show that they are indebted to their parents. This concept is called “kenang budi.” The concept is prevalent in the Malay Muslim culture in Malaysia. This study examines the types of support given by the children in the practice of the “kenang budi” concept by analyzing the data gathered from 327 elderly in Pahang, Malaysia, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The results demonstrate that the concept is practiced by several acts of service, such as providing health support and care, aiding them financially, preparing daily necessities, maintaining good contact, and taking them to places such as mosques and festival shows. Since children’s support is pertinent for the well-being of the elderly, the concept of “kenang budi” is appropriate in ensuring the children’s continuous support and providing a chance for the children to care for and be responsible for the elderly. This article highlights the element of “kenang budi” (literally, in English, grateful) in the Malay community, especially in the context of doing a good or responsible attitude towards elderly parents, similar to the concept of filial piety practiced in Chinese society in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Elderly, “kenang budi,” Malay society, Malaysia, support

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of “kenang budi” within the Malay community in Malaysia refers to the idea that children are supposed to appreciate their parents and are responsible

for caring for and supporting them (Wan Ahmad & Ismail, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). The three main races in Malaysia— Malay, Chinese, and Indian—agree that children are responsible for taking care of their parents, which has been cultivated in the children’s minds when they are still young. However, Malay Muslims believe that children are not to burden others with the responsibilities of caring for their parents (Phillips, 1992) as the religion mandates that children should ensure their parents’ welfare and care (Wan Ahmad, 1999; Wan Ahmad & Ismail, 2014a, 2014b). The mandate is stated in the Holy Quran that the children are to do good and speak only kind words to their parents:

Your Lord has decreed that you should worship none but Him and do good too. If anyone of them or both reach old age, do not say to them: “uff” (a word or expression of anger or contempt), and do not scold them, and address them with respectful words. (*The Qur’an*, 1997, Al- Isra’, 17: 23)

In addition, children are also instructed to care for their parents because of the sacrifice of mothers who conceived, breastfed, and cared for the children when they were young (Hassan, 2015).

We commanded man (to do good) in respect of his parents. His mother carried him (in her womb) despite weakness, and his weaning is in two years. (We said to men), “Be grateful to Me and your parents.

To Me is the ultimate return. (*The Qur’an*, 1997, Luqman, 31: 14)

Apart from that, there is a warning from the Prophet PBUH about children who neglect caring for their elderly parents as a disgrace. In the Irsyad Al-Hadith article of the 356th series from the Office of the Mufti dated March 20, 2019, it was mentioned, “Furthermore, a person who was with or devoted to both his parents is a very lucky and fortunate person” (para 5). The Prophet PBUH once stated that a condemned person is a person who had time with his parents, but the opportunity did not allow him to enter heaven (Mufti of Federal Territory’s Office, 2019). Furthermore, a person who was with or devoted to both his parents is fortunate. The Prophet PBUH once stated that a condemned person is a person who had time with his parents, but the opportunity did not allow him to enter heaven. From Abu Hurairah R.A., the Prophet PBUH said:

“Shame, shame, shame.” He was asked: “Who (do you mean) O Messenger of Allah?” The Prophet PBUH replied: “Whoever has his parents when they are old, one or both of them but does not (make it the reason) will enter heaven.” (Narrated by Muslim [2551], as cited by Mufti of Federal Territory’s Office, 2019, para. 6).

Concept of “Kenang Budi” to their Parents in the Malay Society

Following the observation, this study discusses the gratitude the children show

by providing physical, financial, and social support and care to their parents. The “kenang budi” concept is appropriate in portraying children’s kind behavior and practices towards their parents, such as making various efforts and good deeds to them. In the authors’ opinion, “kenang budi” (grateful) is more suitable for explaining children’s good deeds to their parents. There are various ways children show good deeds to their parents. Among others are contacting, visiting, financing, helping them with daily chores, taking them to health care services, and many more. In the context of the children’s responsibility towards the elderly parents, the term benevolent is appropriate. Returns of favor are balanced or reciprocal, but gratitude is not necessarily balanced.

In the context of responsibility, children’s responsibility to elderly parents is emphasized in the term “kenang budi” (remember their good deed). Adult children are expected to remember their parents’ “budi” (good deed), which includes their sacrifice and kindness in bringing them up from a newborn to an adult. The Kenang Budi concept includes a feeling of gratitude and respect to the parents who raise them with love, care, and sacrifice. In this paper, the term “kenang budi” is more appropriate than “balas budi” (which means give something back, reciprocity). In this context, the “balas budi” concept is difficult to achieve because it is almost impossible for the children to give their parents back as much as the parents’ scarification in bringing them up.

In the authors’ view, the term “kenang budi” is more appropriate to describe children’s attitudes toward remembering and appreciating the good deeds of their parents. They remember their parents’ kindness by helping them with daily chores, visiting, contacting, giving money for expenses, sending and accompanying the parents to get health care, and many more. In the context of a child’s responsibility to an elderly parent, the term graciousness is more appropriate than reciprocity. Reciprocity has the elements of balanced appreciation or exchange between the two parties (parents and children), but in reality, it is not necessarily balanced. A handful of parents are happier and richer than their children, and it is acknowledged that the services or sacrifices of parents are not always “paid back” at the same amount or level. In Malay society, the sacrifices and services of parents are often mentioned in verses, poems, and parables. For example, Pantun Kasih Sayang Ibu Bapa (<http://pantunmelayu.com/pantun-kasih-sayang-ibu-bapa>)

*Tanam tebu tidaklah payah,
Bila tumbuh pastinya suka;
Ku kasihkan ibu, ku sayang ayah,
Tiada terbalas jasa mereka.*

Translation:

Planting sugarcane is not difficult,
When it grows, we definitely like it;
I love my mother, I love my father,
There is no limit to their services.

*Nasi lemak dalam pinggan,
Terliur sudah tidak tertahan;
Sayang emak tiada tandingan,*

Pengorbanan ayah tiada ukuran.

Translation:

Nasi lemak on the plate,
Drooling is unbearable;
Mother's love is incomparable,
Father's sacrifice is immeasurable.

The above pantuns clearly show and remind us that the children should repay the parents' kindness and be grateful for their sacrifices to their children since the children were young.

Literature Review

Elderly Muslims in Brunei tend to live with their children as it is believed that the children are responsible for their parents when the latter is old (Cleary & Maricar, 2000). This notion is echoed by the Chinese community, which believes that family members, especially children, are responsible for caring for the elderly. This concept is an effective support system for the elderly (Jernigan & Jernigan, 1992; Makhtar & Samsudin, 2020).

Filial piety refers to people in China, Japan, and Korea showing responsibility and devotion to their parents, in addition to feelings of respect and the willingness to sacrifice for their parents (Zhang et al., 2019). This concept is a traditional value in Chinese society (Bedford & Kuang, 2019; Wenyi, 2019)—the belief that children are obligated to support (Du & Guo, 2000) and respect the elders are taught to the children from an early age (Jernigan & Jernigan, 1992). Three basic components of filial piety: caring when sick, honoring their

wishes, and respecting them (Mehta & Ko, 2004). Among Chinese Singaporeans, filial piety is fundamental to fostering love and mutual respect for the elderly (Mehta & Ko, 2004).

This concept is also applied in other places—studies in Sri Lanka demonstrate that adult children are the primary carers for the elderly, especially those with poor health (Ostbye et al., 2010). In Brazil, it is observed that the elderly are more likely to live with adult daughters than adult sons, but the elderly in the Philippines are more likely to live with their unmarried sons than daughters (Domingo & Casterline, 1992). In Vietnam, the elderly prefer to live with their married eldest sons, but those in Thailand prefer their married adult daughters (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2015). In Malaysia, the elderly live with their adult children (DaVanzo & Angelique, 1994), but the primary carers are the elderly's adult daughters (Alavi & Sail, 2010). Furthermore, older people in Taiwan prefer to live with their adult children as the latter are deemed more responsible and capable of taking care of them. In Japan, the daughter-in-law is responsible for caring for her parents-in-law (Ogawa et al., 2003). However, due to the increase in women's socioeconomic level, the care pattern for the elderly has changed. Higher socioeconomic levels achieved by women led to many of them seeking paid work outside the home; thus, their absence from the home caused the male children to take the responsibility of caring for their elderly parents ("Men caring for aging," 2014). The observations present

a pattern—the responsibility of taking care of the elderly falls on the family members, especially the children, and the practice is prevalent in Asia (Loichinger & Pothisiri, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Selection of Study Area and Sampling

This study was conducted in Jerantut District, the largest district in the state of Pahang (Figure 1), with an area of

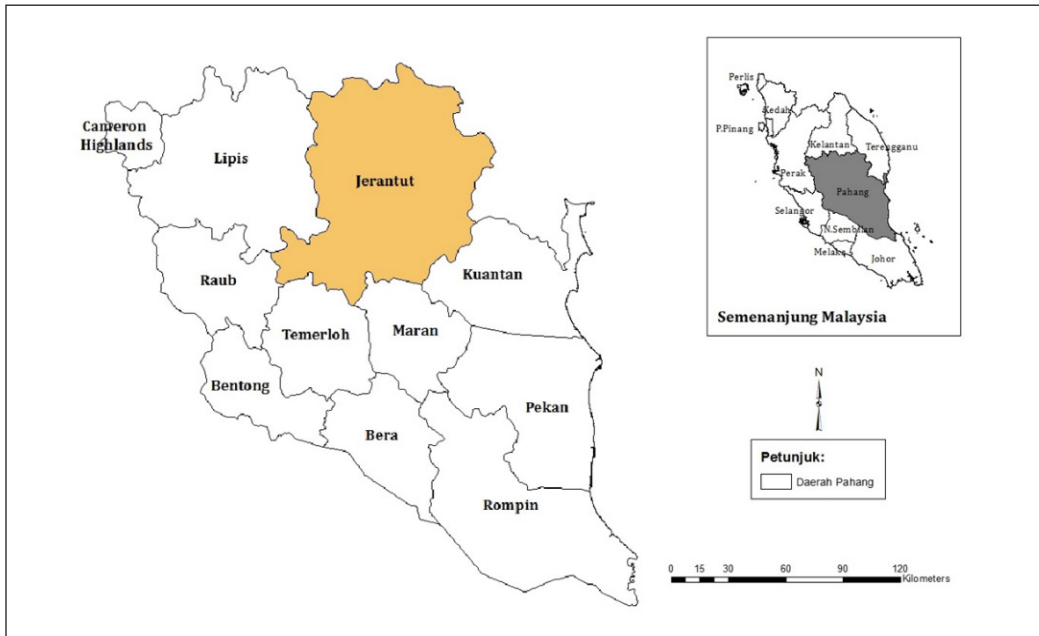


Figure 1. Map of the study area; Jerantut District, Pahang

Table 1
Information on the area and population in Jerantut District, Pahang

Mukims	Area (hectares)	Number of populations	The number of the elderly	Number of villages
Ulu Cheka	32,579.36	8,565	895	69
Pedah	24,006	10,886	2428	33
Teh	8,846.49	7,228	915	21
Burau	9,672.04	*	237	*
Kelola	2,802.10	1,351	29	7
Tebing Tinggi	11,781.27	2,051	353	10
Pulau Tawar	78,513.68	20,513	2375	22
Kuala Tembeling	19,047.39	2,566	388	16
Tembeling Tengah	123,670.58	9,958	597	26
Hulu Tembeling	409,840.45	2,217	255	27
Total	720,760.36	65,335	8472	231

*Not obtained

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (2011)

720,760.36 hectares, ten sub-districts, and 231 villages. It has a population of 65,335, with 8,472 aged 60 and above, as of 2010 (Table 1). For this study, a total of 327 respondents aged 60 years and above, living in the district, and of the Malay race were selected using a purposive sampling method to be included in this quantitative approach study. A questionnaire was used as the instrument of research.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The respondents comprised 327 elderly, 147 males and 180 females, living in Jerantut District, Pahang (Table 2). The respondents were between 60 and 125 years old, with the mean age being 70.6 years. Adapting Mohd Zain and Shaffie’s (2005) study, the respondents were divided into four age groups: early-stage elderly (60–69 years), intermediate-stage elderly (70–79 years), later-stage seniors (80–89 years), and very late-stage seniors (above 90 years). Most respondents (158 elderly, 43.8 percent)

belonged to the early-stage group, followed by the intermediate stage (130 elderly, 39.8 percent). More than half of the respondents (64.8 percent) were married, with 83.7 percent of the total male respondents still married. One male respondent was not married, while 15 percent of the male respondents were widowers. Meanwhile, 49.4 percent of the female respondents were married, and another 50.6 percent were widowed.

Children as the Primary Source of Support for the Elderly

The issues of care and support for the elderly are actively discussed. Many researchers argue that family members are responsible for caring for the elderly, and planning their life around providing support should be the family member’s responsibility. According to the United Nations (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019), the increasing rate of urbanization, industrialization, and migration decreases the awareness of the need to care for the elderly. Life planning

Table 2
Demographic characteristics of respondents by gender and sub-districts

Demographic characteristics	Item	Gender		Total
		Men	Women	
1. Age group	60–69 years	61 (41.5%)	97 (53.9%)	158 (43.8%)
	70–79 years	67 (45.6%)	63 (35.0%)	130 (39.8%)
	80–89 years	16 (10.9%)	15 (8.3%)	31 (9.5%)
	90 years and above	3 (2.0%)	5 (2.8%)	8 (2.4%)
	Total	147 (100%)	180 (100%)	327 (100%)
2. Marital status	Not married	1 (0.7%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.3%)
	Married	123 (83.7%)	89 (49.4%)	212 (64.8%)
	Widowed	23 (15.6%)	91 (50.6%)	89 (27.2%)
	Total	147 (100%)	180 (100%)	327 (100%)

that involves taking care of the elderly is important. However, it is highly dependent on the children and the elderly economic status and their level of health and physical ability.

Living with elderly family members demonstrates familial support, especially from the children (Fan et al., 2018; Wan Ahmad & Ismail, 2014a). If the parents are living with their children, the arrangement should benefit both parties to make it easier for the children to provide social, financial, and physical support. In addition, it can help the elderly to weather the changes in family structure, such as the death of a spouse, divorce, or remarriage.

Three living settings were identified by observing the living arrangements of the Malay elderly in Jerantut, Pahang: living alone, living with a partner, and living with family members. Manning and Brown (2011) provided another classification: living with non-family members or in welfare institutions. This study did not include this type of elderly’s living arrangement in this study.

Most respondents (61.7 percent, 202 respondents) were living with family members, followed by living with a spouse (24.8 percent, 81 respondents), and living alone (13.5 percent, 44 respondents) (Table

3). It can be seen that 61.7 percent lived in a “broad family” setting, while the rest—living alone or with a spouse—were living in a “nuclear family” setting. The results demonstrate that the elderly are getting strong familial support, especially from their children.

The study found that 13.5 percent (44 respondents) of the 327 respondents live alone and are called a single-person households. Respondents had to live alone after the death of their respective spouses. Although the respondents studied live alone, most of them get support from their families, such as children, who always take care of their welfare, whether near or far away. It is in line with other studies in rural areas in Kelantan, which showed that elderly parents usually receive support from their families despite living alone or with their families (Wan Ahmad et al., 2012). However, this pattern contrasts the elderly living in European countries, who are forced to live alone without family support, even though they are incapacitated and suffer from illness till the end of their lives (European Union, 2019; Rolls et al., 2010). This study found that even though the children do not live with their elderly parents, they usually live close to or next to their parent’s house, either on the same land or in the same village

Table 3
Living arrangement patterns based on Manning and Brown (2011)

Living arrangements patterns	Numbers	Percentage
1. Living alone	44	13.5
2. Living with a spouse	81	24.8
3. Living with family members	202	61.7
Total	327	100%

area. This situation allows the children to visit their parents daily. Children living separately but close to their parents' homes are a common phenomenon for those living in rural areas. This situation is due to the cheaper cost of land and the cost of building houses in rural areas compared to living in urban areas.

Children Provide Financial Support

Old age comes with a decline in health, causing less employment participation among the elderly (Schmillen et al., 2020) as they are no longer fit to work, especially in jobs that require strength and physical ability (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). The elderly who cannot work due to health problems will need support from their children or the government (Zimmer & Kwong, 2003). As the elderly age, their income becomes little to none (Ling, 2009). They need financial support from their children for daily necessities and utility bills.

The results demonstrate that 50.5 percent of the respondents received financial support from their children (Table 4). It was also observed that the respondents

were not employed due to health problems or because their children insisted they do so. According to Andrews and Hennink (1992), children are the primary source of financial support for the elderly. The results show that the children support the parents' expenses, regardless of whether the parents and the children live together or separately. Furthermore, some of the female respondents were no longer working to care for their sick husbands or disabled children and relied on their other children's financial support to survive.

According to Wan Ahmad and Ismail (2014a), the support received by the elderly from their children demonstrated a sense of appreciation and gratitude for their parents, which is prevalent in the Malay Muslim community. It is also similar to the concept of filial piety in the Chinese community; it reflects a sense of responsibility and devotion to their parents (Ananta & Arifin, 2009; Martin, 1990).

Children's Bringing and Accompanying the Elderly to the Health Centre

Another important discussion in the care of the elderly is the arrangement of taking

Table 4
Financial resources of the respondents

Financial resource support for daily spending	Gender		Total
	Men	Women	
1. Self-support (still working)	52 (35.4%)	33 (18.3%)	85 (26.0%)
2. Support from children	53 (36.1%)	112 (62.2%)	165 (50.5%)
3. Pension	26 (17.7%)	12 (6.7%)	38 (11.6%)
4. Financial assistance Department of social welfare	9 (6.1%)	17 (9.4%)	26 (7.9%)
5. Others	7 (4.8%)	6 (3.3%)	13 (4.0%)
Total	147 (100%)	180 (100%)	327 (100%)

Note. Some respondents received multiple financial support, but only the primary source was taken into account.

them to health centers. In this study, 142 respondents were medically ill, but only 124 were under treatment with frequent appointments with health professionals. As shown in Table 5, 50.1 percent (62 respondents) were sent or accompanied by their children to the health centers. Respondents who could drive went to the hospital or clinic alone, while those who were sick or unable to drive relied on their spouses, children, grandchildren, or close neighbors to take them to the health centers. In addition, the children also purchase the necessary health equipment for the elderly, such as breathing aids, wheelchairs, blood sugar measuring devices, and high blood pressure measuring devices.

The results demonstrate that culture and family support influence the elderly’s living arrangements. The elderly know the benefits and importance of living with their children. It is observed that 86.5 percent of the respondents aged 60 and above are living with their family members, which is typical of rural communities. In addition, the respondents also receive financial,

physical, and social support from their family members, especially their children (Figure 2).

Social support includes frequent visits, phone communications, aiding sick elderly, and accompanying the elderly to gatherings to prevent them from feeling lonely and avoid the empty nest syndrome. Meanwhile, financial support refers to the financial assistance and necessities provided to the parents, while physical support pertains to providing comfortable living arrangements for the elderly.

It is more beneficial for older people to live with their family rather than alone. For example, the mortality rate among the elderly in Japan who live with their children is lower than those who live alone (Takagi & Saito, 2020). Furthermore, it was observed that the respondents receive adequate support and attention from family members in all aspects of life, ensuring a fair and preserved quality of life. The elderly can also provide valuable contributions such as childcare (grandchildren), cleaning, and cooking. Overall, it is observed that

Table 5
Respondents’ companion in seeking treatment at a nearby hospital or clinic

Respondents’ companion	Total	Percentage
1. Alone	18	14.5
2. Spouse	20	16.1
3. Child(ren)	62	50.1
4. Son-in-law	6	4.8
5. Grandchild(ren)	5	4.0
6. Relatives	1	0.8
7. Neighbour	12	9.7
Total	124*	100%

*The total did not include 18 respondents who did not seek any treatment at a hospital or clinic.

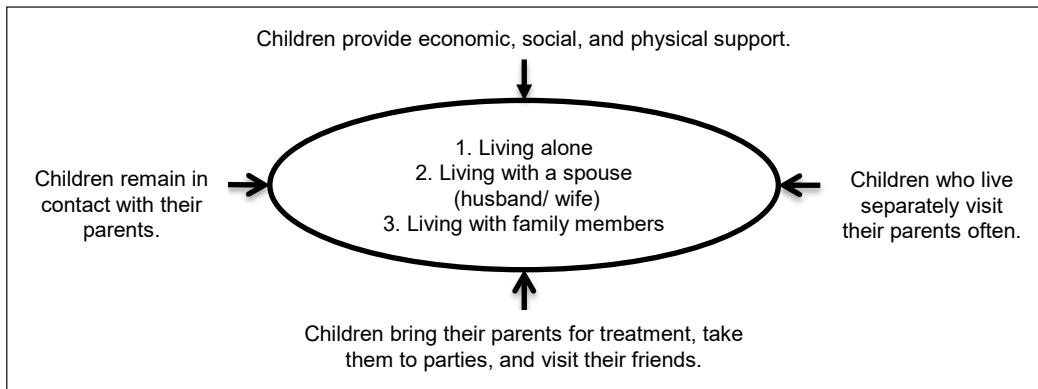


Figure 2. The support received by the respondents according to the pattern of living arrangement

the elderly who live with family members and relatives are well-supported and are experiencing a good quality of life.

Pertaining to this study, the support shown by the children towards their parents follows the Islamic teaching for children to be devoted and responsible to their parents. Furthermore, the Malay Muslim community emphasizes the concept of “absolute recall,” which refers to the obligations of children to provide support and care for their parents. Those who do not fulfill these obligations are considered “ungrateful” or “rebellious” (Wan Ahmad & Ismail, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). In addition, Muslims believe that their sacrifices in caring for their elderly parents will be compensated by the Almighty God, which can explain the support received by the respondents in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the children provide social, physical, and financial support for their parents, as the Holy Quran dictates. The notion of the obligation of children to take care of their parents has

been cultivated since childhood, and it is considered to repay the parents for taking care of the children while the latter is growing up. It shows the concept of “kenang budi,” in which the children care, respect, and devote themselves to their parents. It is deemed that a strong Islamic belief has influenced the support given by the children to their parents. Therefore, the support given by family members, especially among children, shows that they adhere firmly to Islamic teachings that emphasize the responsibility of caring for elderly parents, such as in aspects of welfare and well-being until the end of their lives. In the Qur’an, there is an order for children always to obey, do good and only speak good words to their parents.

This order has been instilled in children since they were small. Even the support shown by the children also shows their “kenang budi” attitude towards their elderly parents. When they were children, their parents took care of them, and now it is the children’s turn to remember and take care of their elderly parents. In addition, the support

given by the children to the respondents shows the existence of the concept of remembrance among their children. This concept of remembrance shows that children have a responsible attitude and respect and are willing to sacrifice for their parents. Therefore, the strong belief in Islam instilled in the children since childhood makes the respondents in the study area receive good support, attention, and care from family members, especially their children. This study also found the existence of an element of love and an element of remembrance practiced by children towards their respective parents. These elements make children provide support and care to their parents. Family members, especially the children, are the ultimate carers and supporters of the elderly parents.

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