

'Oh, it's nothing, I've just cooked too much'

Patterns of Kin and Community Support

Research >
Indonesia

Despite the lack of formal welfare provisions, it is often assumed that the elderly in rural Indonesia are nonetheless protected by social networks. These networks extend beyond the nuclear family and household by encompassing wider kin and community members. Whether kin and community support are genuine and reliable supplements – even alternatives – to support from children is best examined where dependence on kin and community is greatest, that is, in the absence of support from children. Rural East Java provides an apt setting for such an investigation, as levels of elderly childlessness are high (25 per cent).

By Elisabeth Schröder-Butterfill

My ethnographic and quantitative field research on elderly support networks was conducted in a village near Malang in 1999 and 2000. Contrary to expectation, kin support was not automatically forthcoming but had to be carefully negotiated. Moreover, kin support should not be seen as a distinct type of support, operating somewhere in the space between the family and the community. Rather, kin stand in one of three social relationships to an elderly person – relations of filiation, patronage, charity – which are also found among non-relatives. The quality and acceptability of assistance from kin depends on the relationship in which the arrangement is cast; this in turn is affected by the social and economic status of those involved, and their willingness and ability to invest materially and practically in relationships.

Anak angkat

Most societies have more or less institutionalized mechanisms through which adults without offspring gain parenting roles. Across Southeast Asia, adopting or acquiring an *anak angkat* (raised child) is common, though seldom recorded officially. Two-thirds of childless respondents had at one time taken on a child. Most people adopt close relatives because kin are least able to refuse the request for a child. Moreover, by entrusting a relative with their child, biological parents can maintain contact with their offspring. Herein lies the adoptive parents' greatest vulnerability, as the continued contact with the family of origin often leads to conflicting loyalties and the breakdown of the created filial link. Some elderly go to great lengths to protect their ties to *anak angkat* – by moving villages or providing generous inheritances. Nonetheless, almost half of all adoptions fail, with the child ultimately feeling no particular obligation towards its adoptive parents. Even where a child's loyalty is not in question, support in the desired manner may not be forthcoming (see also Keasberry 2002:238ff). Children, be they adopted or one's own, are considered at best unreliable sources of old-age assistance: they may move away, be unsuccessful, or have other priorities. This means that most elderly, with or without children, are potentially dependent on kin and community support.

A better outcome is achieved by wealthy individuals of high social standing who 'adopt' younger relatives – typically a grandchild – late in life, when the former are in need of support. Such cases are essentially contractual care arrangements



An elderly childless woman with her adopted son (a great-nephew) and the son's child.



An elderly woman in her small shop, which she opened in her seventies.

A sign advertising a doctor who treats childless couples: 'Medical treatment by Mr Arnaz for husbands and wives who don't have offspring. Opening hours Friday to Monday, 9 am to 8 pm.'

involving a relative who would not otherwise be expected to help. Mutual obligations are made explicit – material wealth in exchange for old-age care – but the elderly person avoids losing face by couching the relationship in the idiom of filiation (*anak angkat*).

Patron-client relations

Most elderly in rural Java, irrespective of whether they have children, are concerned with maintaining independence in old age (Schröder-Butterfill 2002). For the majority (80 per cent) of elderly without pensions, land, or savings, the ability to preserve economic autonomy is premised on continued access to work. This is not trivial, as competition for work is



high and most unskilled occupations require physical strength or capital (cf. Breman and Wiradi 2002). Hence poor elderly people's access to income often rests on long-established labour relations with wealthy individuals (or patrons) prepared to continue employing them when they are no longer optimally productive.¹ As an avenue to old-age security, patronage – from a member of kin or the local community – can provide not only employment but also support after 'retirement'. Thus it is not uncommon for an elderly domestic servant to stay on in the household of her boss and receive material and practical assistance until she dies. By emphasising mutually beneficial exchanges, kin and neighbours of differing social and economic status can interact without upsetting Javanese sensitivities regarding hierarchy (*sungkan*) and without invoking overt connotations of charity. For example, one poor childless elderly respondent was employed by a rich nephew to work a plot of land; in addition to receiving

a wage he was encouraged to keep most of the produce. The support did not take the form of a 'pure gift', but of payment in exchange for services, even if these were largely symbolic. The elderly man could thereby retain moral and material autonomy which would vanish were he simply handed money or food.

Charity

Community charity is often invoked as a safety net of last resort for the elderly who are no longer independent and who lack support from a child, adopted or their own. The institution of *zakat* is one instance of charity: rich villagers donate rice and money which is then redistributed by the mosque. Other forms of charity include occasional gifts of food, money, or inexpensive medicine by neighbours or distant kin. For example, women will often take a plate of food to a poorer neighbour, playing it down with a comment like, 'oh, it's nothing – I've just cooked too much'. Food is also distributed as part of ritual celebrations (*slametan*), and although such gifts are not understood as charity, they can be important sources of indirect support. For example, 91 per cent of poor households stated that they only consumed meat as part of a *slametan* meal.

Zakat, occasional gifts, and ritual exchanges alleviate material need but are insufficient to guarantee a living for those without independent income. For the elderly poor who have failed to create and maintain close links with children, grandchildren, or patrons, the provision of food and shelter by a diffuse network of neighbours and kin may become the main source of livelihood. This form of unidirectional charity is motivated by pity and condescension and entails dramatic loss of status, autonomy, and social participation of the recipient. Moreover, charitable support is premised on the recipient not falling seriously ill, as physical care and expensive medicine are generally not forthcoming (see also Marianti, in press). Once incapacitated, elderly who rely on charity quickly die.

As we have seen, Javanese villagers are typically part of social networks involving family, kin, and community. Yet the extent to which these networks entail reliable forms of old-age support depends on individual success in creating special, personalized bonds with specific network members. By adopting a relative, people come closest to fashioning the unique parent-child bond from which assistance in old age may most readily be expected. Provision by a rich patron is an acceptable alternative to filial support. Patron-client relations, despite being hierarchical, are often viewed positively, because they are rooted in reciprocal exchanges and thus avoid outright dependence. Least reliable and most socially damaging is support from a diffuse network of kin and neighbours, where notions of personalized obligation and mutual respect are lacking. <

References

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- 1 Patronage is construed broadly here to include any hierarchical, dyadic relationship involving reciprocal obligations that are not merely economic but entail mutual social and 'political' responsibilities, like loyalty.