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# Introduction: A modern Malaysian matriliney

This book is about women's lives within the historical encounter between 'matriliney' and 'modernity' in Rembau, in the small Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan. This Minangkabau culture is one of a very small number of so-called 'matrilineal' societies which have assumed an importance in the western imagination out of all proportion to their actual size and incidence. Many western thinkers over the last century and a half have seized upon such societies in a search for the origins of equality and inequality. For some feminists among them, both past and present, matriliney has held out great promise as a Utopian model for a feminist world, an alternative way of organising relations between women and men that guaranteed women power, property, autonomy and even equality. But to write about such societies today rightly causes many would-be-feminists some anxiety, particularly about exporting the assured positivisms of some western feminist agendas to the rest of the world. There are sizeable theoretical difficulties standing in the way of anyone trying to write about gender relations in Malaysia (Stevens, 1992).

I shall present aspects of a complex, contradictory and fragmented history. Negeri Sembilan women have played a large part in that history, but their contribution has only rarely been allowed to break through the panoply of discourses representing this Malaysian state. My original research project therefore set out to explore the links between gender, *adat perpatih*—as the matrilineal 'customary law' is known—and underdevelopment. My findings from that and subsequent research strongly supported

the feeling I had before starting fieldwork, that the classical anthropological debates about 'matriliny' merited some re-examination in the light of a resurgent feminist theory. But such re-examination should only take place in a full awareness of the historical context and development of Negeri Sembilan 'matriliny'. This is no pristine anthropological relic. The state has been part of the sometimes spectacular unfolding of Malayan and Malaysian modernity—and possibly post-modernity—over the last century or more, of transformations in the agrarian and wider economies set in motion by the capitalist development process and the colonial polity.

Such eruptions of modernity are often seen as posing a terminal threat to matriliny. Malaysian matriliny in Negeri Sembilan, however, has been both more robust and more fragile than the simple scenarios of doom. Over the last two decades, the Negeri Sembilan capital, Seremban, has sprouted shopping centres, factories and middle class housing estates, many villages have given up most of their able-bodied labour to the urban sector and land settlement schemes, the rice valleys have all but been abandoned and the villages have become dormitory suburbs, full of elderly women and men, in many cases looking after grandchildren. Villagers have virtually given up being 'peasants', but many aspects of matrilineal ideology and practices continue to make their presence felt. Rice land is still under formal ancestral title, held by individual women who were given grants by the colonial state and even though it is now largely uncultivated, women still strongly stake their formal claims to its ownership. The representation of the formal structure of the matrilineal clans mirrors that formalised at the time of the colonial conquest, ceremonial clan positions are sought and fought over, sometimes bitterly, and the 'customary law' continues to excite considerable attention both from scholars and the local society.

In the face of immense social change in Malaya and Malaysia, we can see an active resurrection of 'tradition' in Negeri Sembilan, a continuing process of what I term cultural *reconstitution*.<sup>1</sup> I see the 'matrilineal' society of Rembau today as a product of complex historical processes transforming a past that is not easily subsumed under the rubric of 'tradition'. As Joel Kahn has argued for the parent Minangkabau society of Sumatra, interpretations of social change in these societies have been misconceived, setting up a false historical baseline of 'traditional' 'matrilineal' society against which 'modernity' is measured (1976, 1980a, 1980b).

The Negeri Sembilan of 'tradition' being busily resurrected in a contemporary wave of neo-traditionalism (Kahn, 1991) is only the latest manifestation of the process of cultural reconstitution that will be a major focus of this book. Rembau society is not something waiting for the anthropologist to identify, describe and interpret. It has been both a series of constructions produced by a range of historically located observers and the product of an interrelated, continuous process of local re-invention. I see Negeri Sembilan's matrilineal ideologies and practices in the colonial and early post-colonial periods as being in many ways thoroughly 'modern', in that they were reconstituted in relation to the modern order: today, Negeri Sembilan cultural practices face new challenges, finding themselves located in the tensions between the post-modern globalisation of consumer culture (cf Lash and Friedman, 1992) and a neo-traditionalist reconstitution of *adat perpatih*.

Most anthropologists have had little time for the nineteenth century imaginings about 'matriarchy'; such questions were not part of a respectable anthropologist's armory. The twentieth century enterprise of scientific fieldwork-based anthropology was rightly sceptical of any equation of matriliney with matriarchy. But in drawing back from these issues, the discipline buried the questions of sexual politics that had been to the forefront of some nineteenth century debates about matriarchy. The professional orthodoxy has been that the situation of women in societies with matrilineal ideologies does not in any way constitute a mirror image of that of men in so-called patrilineal societies. This is clearly the case. But the structurally central role of Negeri Sembilan women, especially as mothers, women's frequent involvement in kin decision-making, the importance of their position in households where a man moved to the woman's village on marriage, women's often extensive property rights and their ideological centrality, all suggested the need for another look. The question as to whether we can call this complex of female rights autonomy will constantly recur. It is not a concept that my informants used, although they had other words such as *kwin-kontrol* (queen control), which implied a form of female dominance. It has also not been a favoured concept in some of what is known as the Women-In Development literature, although it appears often in writings on Southeast Asian women (e.g. Van Esterik, 1982; Atkinson and Errington, 1990).

✓ I wanted to tie the issue of female autonomy to the context of Malay society's entry to modernity. For the last twenty years, feminist scholars have been looking at the fate of women caught

up in such agrarian transformations. But it is clear that simply inserting women into the classic debates about the subsumption of peripheral agrarian forms, showing the 'effects' on women, would not necessarily advance our understanding of the complex part that gender relations may play in such transformations. I aimed, therefore, to explore the place of gender difference in Rembau in the evolution of the district's social and economic forms, seeing this evolution as a thoroughly gendered process.

Modernity, a central issue in this book, is a highly problematic concept. Nothing has thrown up the category of modernity for renewed analysis so much as the current interest in post-modernity and the associated globalisation of culture (see Robertson, 1992). But few writings explicitly address the relationships between gender and modernity, even within the burgeoning body of mostly Eurocentric critical theory writings: those which do suggest that women's experiences of modernity have been ignored because the primary object of discussion has been the public (sic) sphere (Wolff, 1985; Felski, 1992). Once we look against the often profoundly masculinist grain of the many debates about modernity and post-modernity from a gendered standpoint, the very terms of the debates become destabilised. Rita Felski has argued recently that 'the periodisation and the criteria used to define the concepts modern and post-modern appear profoundly altered when women become the focal point of enquiry instead of men' (1992: 139). As I suggest elsewhere, an attempt to engender an account of modernity outside the Euro-American context leaves us with an acute sense of the problems with all the central categories used both in mainstream and feminist debates (1994b), particularly the division of society into reified public and private spheres. The concepts of 'tradition' and 'progress' have returned in refigured forms as parts of highly gendered subtexts in accounts of the relationship between gender and development. Women are placed in a shifting discursive relationship with tradition, often being seen as closely tied into a fixed immutable fossilised pre-modern sphere from which they will be liberated by the (western) civilising process. The resulting story lines vacillate between social theory's long-standing fear of the globalising power of modernity to erase all 'traditional' society, and romantic neo-traditionalisms in which women frequently become the bearers of an ethnic or national imaginary (see Stevens, 1994b).

These problems are compounded by the Eurocentrism of the modernity debates. A series of concepts such as development, modernisation, westernisation, and tradition are deployed in ways

that frequently erase the history and the specificities of the non-western world (cf Said, 1993). Recent critical theory's stress on redefining the project of modernity in multidimensional rather than unidimensional terms is useful, (again see Robertson, 1992; Turner, 1990) but still often fails to escape its Euro-American bias. (But see Arnason, 1987; Kahn, 1993.) In the Southeast Asian context, we need especially to rethink the simple association of 'pre-colonial' with 'pre-modern', and the colonial and independent eras with the modern. I am assuming that we can push back the category of modern by some centuries (cf Vickers, 1994; Reid, 1993) and that today the world constitutes not one globalised modernity but many and divergent modernities.

An attempt to account for the complex relationships between gender and agrarian transformations in Rembau needs a theoretical framework tied to the history of Malaysian underdevelopment and the characterisation of Rembau rural society in relation to the wider national and world economies. In recent decades many critical anthropologists have argued strongly against the discipline constructing its objects as reified, bounded and separate 'other cultures' (cf Keesing, 1991). This focus parallels the interest in underdevelopment studies in accounting for the existence or persistence of non-capitalist forms in a world dominated by capitalism (Rey, 1973; Kahn, 1980; Kahn and Llobera, 1981). We need to see such part societies today as formed within the larger society and the global order, in continuous, complex and multi-layered relationships with them. These part societies cannot be read off simply from an understanding of the processes of the world system, European hegemony and imperialism. This means that my material collected over a number of years in the three study villages and on a Seremban housing estate cannot be seen as representing a microcosm of Malay, or even Negeri Sembilan society; other methods are needed to relate the local society to the whole, especially an account of historical processes. (And, of course, feminist debates about methods have underlined earlier critical debates about the positivism and claims to authority of anthropology's habitual practices. See Stacey, 1988; Nencel and Pels, 1991.)

It is important to emphasise the historical specificities of this case study. Negeri Sembilan's present-day social arrangements, especially its 'matriliney', can best be understood as the products of highly specific historical processes occurring within the context of capitalist development and colonial and post-colonial politics. This book will explore how the historical reconstitution of Rembau and Negeri Sembilan matriliney produced patterns of

gender relations somewhat different from those elsewhere in Malaysia. But these differences can be exaggerated. It seems probable, for example, that colonial social processes, contested and uneven as they were, actually accentuated the ideological differentiation of the various states' social practices. The British administration identified Negeri Sembilan as a separate culture area, conserving aspects of the matrilineal clan structure and property relations; these were to serve both as an administrative basis for indirect rule in Negeri Sembilan and as a model of the 'yeoman peasant' subsistence farming community which the authorities allegedly saw as the desirable form of Malay social structure to be imposed throughout the peninsula.

These colonial social processes will be seen as intervening in 'matrilineal' practices in ways that were highly significant for women's situation: they reconstituted certain key aspects of *adat perpatih*, including matrilineal ideology and property relations, prevented the full commoditisation of land and secured an ideological association of women with ancestral land and the community. But there were certain ironies for women in these outcomes of the colonial hegemonic process: the commonly predicted replacement of matrilineal property relations with individual male ownership (Boserup, 1970; Rogers, 1980) did not happen in my study area. Not only do women still hold the titles to much ancestral land, but there has also been a constant tendency for newly acquired land in the system to move into the female-owned sector (Stivens, 1985b). Sizeable amounts of non-customary land have accumulated in this female sector, not only through the workings of the inheritance system, but also through husbands, fathers and brothers registering land in women's names. This process—which I term a *feminisation* of property relations—and the relationships between this process and other aspects of women's situation in Rembau will be major concerns of this study. Taking account of the historical construction of underdevelopment, I argue that the very backwardness of village production has recreated and reproduced the feminising tendencies already present in matrilineal 'tradition'. These patterns of land ownership have the appearance of perpetuating *adat perpatih*: in other words, there is an ideological fit between the observed and changing contemporary practices and the pre-existing patterns of 'traditional' matriliny. Rembau social practices will not be seen purely as colonial and capitalist impositions, however, but also as constantly shaped and reshaped by the local responses to those impositions: these include, most importantly,

women's political response on a number of occasions to direct attacks on their rights in the system.

This book will argue, then, that gender relations have been key elements in the development of Rembau agrarian society and that there is a need to redress the neglect of these issues in the existing discussions of the 'development' both of Negeri Sembilan and Malaya/Malaysia generally. The reasons for this neglect are many: first, gender as an analytic object has been almost totally absent from social theory's central discussions of 'development', and in particular from discussions about the *characterisation* of agrarian societies in many parts of the world and Malaysia is no exception. Many previous studies of Malay peasantries have given ill-defined and inexact accounts of the relative situation of the sexes in terms of land holding, labour inputs and control over agricultural production. Moreover, gender has been almost totally hidden in the very construction of the categories used to analyse such societies.<sup>2</sup> A central problem has been assumptions about the 'black box' of the household as a residential and household productive unit (see Sanjek, 1982; Young et al, 1984). Equally serious has been the use of male subjects in almost all of the more theoretical discussions of the past, present and future of peasantries<sup>3</sup> worldwide. Thus, the 'Malay farmer' has mostly been assumed to be male in spite of the fact that Malay women's participation in agriculture and ownership of agricultural land have both been extensive throughout the periods for which we have historical data. Reconstructing the categories of analysis, however, in the context of an ethnographically based study will inevitably pose problems which are part of a wider set of issues facing feminist anthropology.

### **Anthropological ambivalences: The awkward relationship between anthropology and feminism**

The period during which I have been carrying out research in Negeri Sembilan has been a somewhat turbulent one for anthropology. Decades of critical scholarship have decentred ideas about anthropology's providing both knowledge about and speaking for its Others of the European imagination (cf Nencel and Pels, 1991). Whether this perception of 'crisis' is merely a symptom of the post-modern age is debatable, but the discipline has emerged into the 1990s as a set of highly unstable and contested practices. The recognition of the gendering of anthropological knowledge has been part of a wholesale disruption of anthropological authority, with feminists arguing robustly that



gender as well as race and class had been absent from the prevailing paradigms of social science. But, as Moore has argued (1988), the 'problem of women' in anthropological work lay not so much in their absence as in their representation. The sizeable degrees of 'sexual segregation' found in the societies forming the anthropological object meant that the female perspective obtained by a female ethnographer had a place, if a muted and suppressed one, as a complement to the mainstream, male stream, canonical accounts.

The relations between anthropology and western feminist theory have been problematic. The critical stances of various feminisms have faced considerable institutional resistance, but redressing anthropology's sins of omission and commission in relation to gender has proved more complex and politically difficult than the 1970s feminist critics had hoped. Importing western feminist discourse into so-called post-colonial contexts highlighted areas of awkwardness in the relationship between anthropology and feminism (Moore, 1988; Strathern, 1985, 1987; di Leonardo, 1991). A particular problem has been the all-too-common unreflected feminist location within an essentialised 'West'. Anthropology has had no monopoly in recognising difference and in trying to look at the ways that gender, race and class intersect (Moore, 1988: 10). But its challenge to feminist universalism, foundationalism and essentialism is one point of extreme awkwardness in its relationship to feminism (see Fraser and Nicholson, 1988). It was soon realised that feminist attempts to reconstruct much of the analytical framework inherited from anthropology would involve a far more difficult task than merely slotting *women* in, even a re-invention of social theory itself. The attempt to deconstruct paradigms in the context of a meeting of Euro-American and peripheral scholarly practices, however, turned out to be only the beginning of a series of possibly unresolvable tensions. The deconstruction of received theories has left feminist scholars facing the awkward and difficult task of reclaiming gender from the vast edifice of concepts that include it, but exclude any real consideration of its workings.

Particular tensions have centred on the feminist assumption that there is an underlying actual or potential identity among all women. As Moore (1988), with others, argues, the concept 'woman' cannot stand as an analytical category in anthropological enquiry. But deconstructing the subject woman, questioning whether woman is a coherent political identity, has left us with serious difficulties, both epistemological and political (Delmar, 1987; Riley, 1988). One anthropological solution has been to take

gender rather than woman/women as the object, but that is considered controversial within some feminist circles, as depoliticising feminism. In turn, however, some writers have seen gender itself as so fragmented by racial, class and historical particularity as to self-destruct as an analytical category (Bordo, 1990).

The history of the uses made of the discipline by second wave feminist writing could be summarised as one of progressive withdrawal, after some interest in anthropology's cross-cultural project in the 1970s (Stivens, 1992). After this short engagement with pan-cultural questions, however, some feminist celebrations of difference seem to have relegated many kinds of difference among women out of the picture, especially difference outside the western centres of knowledge production. It is perhaps ironic that this should coincide with another perceived crisis in cultural theory, with widespread scepticism about western (including anthropological) claims to knowledge and understanding (Mascia-Lees et al, 1989: 8; Mohanty et al, 1991; Ahmed, 1992). Post-colonial writings in particular have a very ambivalent relationship to anthropology, seeing it as firmly part of an oppressive colonial project. These latter concerns relate to the anxieties expressed by a number of writers about positivistically identifying women as victims-of-development (Mohanty, 1988; Lazreg, 1988; Ram, 1991a; Mani, 1990b; Ahmed, 1992). The demise of anthropology in its critical mode within feminism is probably not simply a rejection of its awkward and embarrassing insistence on exploring difference within the category woman. It is also one result of a general cultural abandonment of the exotic Other as a vehicle for messages about 'our' society within the centres of transatlantic theory making (cf Marcus and Fischer, 1986: 135).

There are also personal awkwardnesses for western feminist anthropologists, as I can attest from my own research relationship with Malaysia. Feminist anthropologists' current disquiet at the pre-occupations of some feminist theory-making no doubt has close links to the now discredited critical practices of speaking for one's colonised subjects. This denial of anthropological authority echoes the concerns of some recent feminist methodology about the epistemological violence of research. Malaysian intellectuals may feel resentful about First World women appropriating Third World women's experiences for feminist anthropologising and historicising. But claims by 'locals' to 'authentic' knowledge can probably only be sustained by holding on to a notion of 'innocent' and uncontaminated knowledges.

Local challenges to 'expatriate' (as they are known in Malaysia) scholars' knowledge claims rightly look to the power of colonial hegemonic discourses, but local scholars have problems of their own as members of elites in claiming subaltern positionalities.

Third World intellectual women have good reasons for refusing to embrace western feminist versions of themselves as the Oriental and sometimes victimised Other. But they face real difficulties in their inheriting often very gloomy but ultimately ambiguous, contradictory and confused narratives about the relationships between gender relations and modernity. For such women, perhaps, fragmentation in the face of imported paradigms is not new. Lazreg among others has put it very well: 'How can an Algerian woman write about women in Algeria, when her space has been defined, her subjects objectified and her language chosen for her' (1988: 95). Nor do contemporary western intellectual developments offer a solution: some western feminists have been, rightly in my view, suspicious that the centres of transatlantic knowledge production decry the projects of modernity just when 'the white, male cultural elite was beginning to have to share its status with the women and peoples of other races and classes' (Fox-Genovese, 1986: 134; Hartsock, 1990; hooks, 1989).

Post-colonial responses to the western intellectual enterprise, even its feminist versions, have forced a painful re-appraisal of western women scholars' positionalities. But the response to some of the disarray of (western) thought, post-modern intellectual fragmentation and the retreat from totalising theories has been too often a form of 'new ethnographic' hyper-reflexivity (cf Mascia-Lees, 1989). Inevitably, working through these issues in the context of an ethnographic study like the present one will produce awkwardnesses and ambiguities.

### Matriliny reconsidered

One of the most notable aspects of the encounter between Malay 'matriliny' and modernity is the way the relationship has been represented within western and Malaysian scholarship. We can speculate about why interest in matriliny/matriarchy as a set of alternative social arrangements has arisen at given points of time in the West. The nineteenth century saw a flowering of western imaginings about matriarchy with the publication of Bachofen's *Das Mutter-Recht* (Mother Right, [1861] 1969) and the subsequent anthropological musings of McLennan, Morgan and

Engels. These writings continued to be echoed in some utopian socialist writings. Second wave western feminism also has taken up the theme. Clearly, matriliney has formed one focus of cultural critiques of the West by the West. But these searches for clues about the world historical defeat of women and the origins of inequality over the last 140 years could also be seen as simultaneously re-asserting the 'normal' in their very exploration of the exotic and bizarre.

The Social Darwinist and functionalist ascendancies in anthropology consolidated the dominance of male-centred paradigms, after a short romance with the nineteenth century theories (Sacks, 1982). When the issue of matriliney resurfaced in the 1950s, it was cast squarely as an anthropological 'problem' in the matrilineal puzzle debates (Schneider and Gough, 1961), debates which failed to break out of their own epistemological constraints. Anthropology had problems with matriliney precisely because it concerned social arrangements which called into question the male-female relations expected by western discourse. The issue of gender ceased to be submerged in the received categories of thought.

A crucial point about representations of Negeri Sembilan by observers and participants alike is that gender has escaped its epistemological confines on occasion to be seen as a critical part of the way the society worked. This intermittent gendering of Negeri Sembilan studies has been a legacy of the exoticising discourses representing the state's social practices in the past. Thus contemporary Malays make jokes about 'matriarchy'—they use the English word—and *kwin kontrol*. Articles about Negeri Sembilan's 'unusual' social relations have also regularly appeared in Malaysian newspapers and magazines and local scholars contribute in ever-increasing numbers to the representation of Negeri Sembilan to itself and others. For example, in 1990, Wintrac, (the Malaysian affiliate of Women's World Banking) held a seminar at a Hilton hotel near Kuala Lumpur, titled 'A Discovery of *Adat Perpatih*', to which a number of local anthropologists contributed. And recent disputes over clan positions have even appeared as 'exotica' in the news pages of the *London Times*.

Anthropology's responses to the 'problem' of matriliney in Malaysia have been varied. One solution was to accentuate the orientalist vision: Negeri Sembilan and the parent Minangkabau society of Sumatra frequently found their way into textbooks in various forms as 'extreme' cases of matriliney. The Minangkabau husband was represented as traditionally only a visitor to his

wife's home. The romantic image of the hillsides flickering with the torches of non-resident, amorous husbands (we are not told how amorous the wives felt) wending their way to the wife's (extended) family home at dusk seems to have had particular resilience, in spite of the contemporary Minangkabau denials of such a past. Later versions of this exotic solution collapsed gender into structural oppositions naturalising gender difference (for example, the Dutch structuralist anthropologist de Josselin de Jong in the early 1950s, 1951, 1956, 1960, 1975). The male: rubber, Islam etc, is opposed to the female: rice, pre- and non-Islamic belief and matriliney. This model, although in accord with local twentieth century ideological constructions of male and female, singularly failed to account for the dissonance between ideology and practice.

Michael Swift proposed another solution in his oft-cited work on Jelebu in Negeri Sembilan (1965, based on fieldwork in the 1950s). He eliminated the problem of apparently anomalous gender relations by pretending that they were in fact mostly 'normal', that is that they fitted the model of western discourse. The forms of gender absence in the work are interesting. He fails to provide the most basic quantitative data about male and female property owning and labour contributions. He even suggests that he will treat land as if it is owned by men, although he admits that women in fact held formal title to a great deal of land (1965: 35-36). He goes on to assert that 'most middle-aged men own some rubber. Nearly all old men have also owned some rubber, but may have sold it or passed it on to their children' (1965: 53). It is not that Swift did not discuss gender—he could hardly avoid it, although he tried - and anthropology's central construct of kinship enforced some consideration of the so-called domestic domain. But the whole conceptual apparatus developed to analyse such peasant societies could not 'see' gender relations and collapsed women into households headed by men. Women were merely biological reproducers and objects of male authority (or problems for male authority), but not usually social agents in their own right.<sup>4</sup> These absences become less evident in the work of Lewis (1962), Norhalim (1976) and Peletz (1981, 1983, 1988) and are addressed to some degree in McAllister (1987). Peletz in particular is well cognisant of some of the dangers of past representations of Negeri Sembilan matriliney, which his rich analysis of kinship is concerned to locate in the specifics of the district's social history.

### The concept of matriliney

There are clearly a number of problems surrounding the use of 'matriliney'. These include, on the one hand, epistemological problems with the concept itself and problems of androcentrism; on the other hand there is a range of difficulties surrounding the issue of the fate of matriliney in the modern world, both in terms of its inherent instability and its dissolution in concrete historical situations with the incorporation of that segment of society into the world economic system.

We could, following Leach's famous dismissal, reject the concept completely: 'It may be that to create a class labelled matrilineal societies is as irrelevant for the understanding of social structure as the creation of a class blue butterflies is irrelevant for the understanding of the anatomical structure of lepidoptera' (1961b: 4). As Needham added: 'it is far from clear that there is any convincing defence of the class of matrilineal societies' (1971: 9). The difficulties in theoretically constructing a jural complex that he details are not confined to functionalism. In my view, problems in defining matrilineal kinship are part of a larger problem of reifying kin relations (cf Schneider, 1984). An essentialist assumption of kinship as a thing in itself, whether this is identified as an idiom, an affective or cultural core or as a jural mode, is highly problematic. This reification leads to attempts to see 'matriliney' and 'patriliney' as unitary phenomena, comparable outside of particular social contexts. As Kuper notes, the end result of all the lineage theory debates was very little (1982). We could, of course, go even further and, like Schneider (1984), reject kinship as a concept altogether, as merely an essentialist transposition to the anthropological periphery of western discourse's own family models.

Whatever stance we take on 'kinship', there is little point in trying to establish some essentialist core of meaning that is 'matriliney'. Many contemporary social patterns in Rembau have the external appearance of a continuing matrilineal organisation. But we cannot take Rembau matriliney at face value. There are problems in identifying *adat perpatih* in any simple way with matriliney. In my view, contemporary kinship in the state has often been fetishised in the literature as a unitary reified kinship system, when it would be more productive to deconstruct it into a number of discourses and practices relating particularly to property relations and ideologies of descent. A central argument here will be that in the contemporary conjuncture, Negeri Sembilan kin relations, that is relations based on an ideology of

genealogy, encompass a number of contradictory dimensions generated by a complex historical process: on the one hand there are matrilineal elements reconstituted through the colonial and post-colonial social process; and on the other there are cognatic (non-unilineal) elements, always present, but more important recently in relation to the emerging role of kin ideology and practices in the migration process.

*Androcentrism, matriliney and the 'family'*

A second cause for dissatisfaction with previous analyses of the concept of matriliney is their male-centred view of kinship: they often implicitly and explicitly operated with a model which assumed universal male power and authority. This literature has depicted the central conflict in the 'matrilineal puzzle' as between descent traced through women and authority being invested in individual men (Schneider and Gough, [1961] 1974).

Schneider's 1961 account, detailing the 'sex-roles' underlying the system, defined women as mothers with responsibility for childcare and men as having authority over women and children (1974: 6). Matrilineal descent groups, he suggested, depend for their continuity and operation on retaining control over both male and female members, especially present and potential authority holders. Even the loss of those men unlikely to succeed to authority positions is seen as a source of strain and a threat to the integrity of the group. The sister is also a tabooed sexual object for her brother, while at the same time her sexual and reproductive activities are a matter of interest to him. Schneider suggested as well that the institution of strong, lasting or intense solidarity between husband and wife is not compatible with matrilineal descent principles, that there is a limitation of the authority of husbands over wives and that the emotional interest of the father in his own children constitutes a source of strain. The system itself is seen as inherently unstable, because descent through women leads to the inheritance of authority positions not through the elementary family from F(ather) to S(on) but indirectly through M(other's) B(rother) to Z(sister's) S(on). It also leads to purported conflict of interest between, on the one hand, men's jural importance as brothers and guardians of their sisters' children, the children of the matrilineage, and on the other hand, the supposed claims on the man by his own children, the children of another matrilineage.

These propositions rested on a number of unreconstructed assumptions: first, that male authority was a given of both the

household and larger kin units; second, that men managed property inherited by or through women; and, further, that patriliney was more 'normal' than matriliney: not only normal in a statistical sense, but normal in the sense of conforming to accepted notions of what is basic to human kinship. Anthropology's cultural relativism, problematic as it has been, failed to free it from the ideologies of the 'family' current in scholarly and popular discourse in advanced capitalist societies.<sup>5</sup>

Some feminist anthropologists have returned to look at kinship systems where women occupy a focal position.<sup>6</sup> The central characteristics of societies with a marked female stress in kinship practices include women playing a central, if not dominant, role in kinship arrangements, frequent interaction among female kin, strong geographical and economic concentrations of female relatives, and large amounts of material and other aid flowing through female networks (Yanagisako, 1979). The catchall of 'matrifocality'<sup>7</sup> has had widespread currency in some of these discussions. It tends, however, to homogenise the enormous variation in the types of social system in which matrifocal tendencies have been postulated, suggesting a narrow concern with women as *mothers* and conflating domestic groups with kin structures. It is much more helpful in my view to speak of female-centred kinship (cf Yanagisako, 1979).

The importance of gender relations for the study of kinship 'systems'—however these are defined—was mostly neglected until recent feminist interventions (Collier and Yanagisako, 1987; Strathern 1988); this absence was mainly due to the conceptual relegation of women to the so-called domestic domain or private sphere; this domain often operated as a residual category (cf Stivens, 1991b), where the superficially comparable tasks of biological and daily reproduction were essentialistically elevated to a universal 'private' or 'domestic' domain.

### *The dissolution of matriliney*

A further area of difficulty in the debates about matriliney has centred on its fate in the modern world. Arguments have taken two main directions: one emphasising the inherent instability of matrilineal arrangements, the other emphasising the role of external forces in undermining them. The first set of arguments has concentrated on determining the kinds of situations in which matriliney develops and persists. Rather than being associated with some primordial social state, as proposed by the nineteenth century evolutionists, matriliney is seen as developing among



horticulturalists of low agricultural productivity occupying a particular narrow ecological niche (Aberle, 1974). The internal economic and demographic instability of matrilineal arrangements is emphasised; because matrilineal descent groups rely on the fertility of their own women for the continuance of the group rather than on marrying-in women, they always face possible declines in population. This theme of instability was revived in Meillassoux's arguments about the turbulence produced by systems which immobilise women and the inevitable tendency for matriliney to either disappear permanently or become patrilineal (1981: 31).

A second level of discussion about the fate of matriliney has been more concerned with the encroachment of the world economy on peripheral societies. Many anthropologists have seen matriliney as a cumbersome dinosaur among kinship systems, which will inevitably dissolve with increasing economic differentiation (Goody, 1956: 110, quoted in Douglas, 1971). For example, Gough suggested that traditional (sic) matrilineal systems break down as a result of 'economic changes brought about by contact with western industrial nations', with the elementary family emerging as a key kinship group (1974: 631). Such incorporation into the world economy is seen to inevitably lead to the breakdown of larger property-holding units, with, importantly for my present discussion, formerly communal property becoming concentrated in individual male hands.

Mary Douglas, refuting all this, stressed the flexibility of matrilineal kinship, not only in encouraging open recruitment of manpower (sic), strong intergroup alliance and scope for achievement, but also in creating effective cross-cutting ties (Douglas, 1969). But this assumes that the only socially important ties are based on links between men; of course the dispersion of men by uxorilocal residence clearly can promote such links. Arguments about risk spreading and mobilisation of resources have concentrated unduly on narrowly economic dimensions of kin relations; they have not explored the theoretical issues raised by the relationship between family forms, state, and class in the capitalist development process within which most recorded matrilineal systems have been located.

Some later marxist writers have been concerned to theorise 'preserved' kin relations as products of economic and political developments within the world economy (cf Meillassoux, 1981). But these accounts (especially of the lineage mode of production), have not only suggested that certain kin forms are *determined* by capitalism, but that capitalism *needs* such (non-

capitalist) forms to reproduce itself (see discussion in Stivens, 1987; 1991b). This reduction of kin ideologies and practices to the outcome of monolithic economic forces of capitalist development denies the complex economic, political and cultural forces forming them in concrete circumstances.

Political forces have figured strongly in some accounts of the demise of matriliney. Historically speaking, it is clear that the collapse of formally jural matrilineal systems has often been due partly at least to colonial and post-colonial state action (Rogers, 1980). Some feminist writers have alleged that misogynist colonial ideology worldwide has been a major force in dismantling matriliney (Boserup, 1970; Rogers, 1980). Rogers, quoting Rattray on West Africa, suggests that colonial authorities were uniformly hostile to matriliney, which they saw as unnatural and grotesque (Rogers, 1980: 126). But the Negeri Sembilan material will show that while Malayan colonial policy was distinctly ambivalent about matriliney, some colonial officials there conducted something of a romance with the idea of matrilineal customary law. Moreover, the colonial processes aimed at subsuming and recreating an eastern yeoman peasantry will be shown to have been a major force in reconstituting a matrilineal yeomanry.

Both marxist and non-marxist discussions have tended to assume that kin forms are shaped passively by state action and the wider economy. But the arguments here will suggest that the effectiveness of the colonial and post-colonial state in structuring social forms is easy to exaggerate; the use of functionalist, overly mechanistic models of the capitalist state are to blame here. Although the colonial state-directed capitalist development process restructured many relationships within the sub-society of Negeri Sembilan, those relationships were also constantly reshaped by the local-level political responses to the dominant order. Not least of these were women's own actions to defend their land rights against Islamic and bureaucratic modernism, including a famous episode in 1951 (see de Josselin de Jong, 1960; and chapter 3). These have played an important part in recreating matrilineal discourses and practices.

The modern feminist tack has often been something of a mirror image of the masculinist writings. Feminist utopian elements in the West have had a continuing attachment to the idea of matriarchy/matriliney as an alternative vision of society. The works of Evelyn Reed and a range of feminist mystics and matriarchy study groups have found a ready market, with cults of the matriarchal Goddess apparently growing apace in California and elsewhere in the 1990s. One problem with these writings

is their appropriation of the reified concepts of kinship and matriliney presented to them by both positivist and structuralist anthropology, without dealing with the debates within the discipline itself about the status of such concepts. Similar problems in reifying kinship and matriliney are apparent in a range of feminist theoretical writing from Gayle Rubin's (1974) and Juliet Mitchell's (1975) engagements with the origins of patriarchal culture to Coward's *Patriarchal Precedents* (1983).

The following chapters chart the reconstitution of matrilineal ideology and practices in Rembau with the transition to modernity. This process of reconstitution continues to the present day within the cultural resurgence of 'traditional' Malay cultural forms, presumably produced as much for the new Malay middle classes as for tourists (see Kahn, 1991, 1993). One of my major arguments is that contemporary practices are no mere persistence of 'tradition', nor merely a matter of non-capitalist resistance to the juggernaut of modernity: we have rather a thoroughly modern 'matriliny', formed within modern capitalist society and cultures, the outcome of highly complex, fragmented and uneven processes.

### **Capitalist development and gender**

Most writers on underdevelopment would probably see this as a process of actively underdeveloping peripheral areas of the world, through the process of capitalist exploitation. In its legendary pure form, capitalism is reproduced by the process of exploitation: the appropriation of surplus value from the working class by the capitalist class (Marx, 1967). In the complex social formations of the periphery, this reproduction is seen as occurring through other forms of exploitation, including extra-economic coercion in the cases of 'feudalism' and the Asiatic mode of production (Banaji, 1977). Kahn (1981a), in common with a number of writers, suggests we use the term *subsumption* to describe the general process of peripheralisation—an encroachment on existing labour processes with capitalist development—and I shall adopt his usage.

These debates about forms of exploitation have been closely linked to disputes about how far the social forms found on the periphery can be accounted for by the process of capitalist expansion itself—constructed or preserved by capitalism for its own ends—or how far they are the product of more contingent historical processes. There are diverse and numerous positions about these processes in a huge literature,<sup>8</sup> within which the debates

about the relationship of peripheral social formations to the global order are of greatest relevance here. Laclau (1971) and Meillassoux (1981), for example, suggested in different ways that distinct peripheral forms have emerged in response to capitalism's needs for cheap labour. Meillassoux's proposal that capitalism conserves pre-capitalist enclaves as reserves of relative surplus population lowering the cost of wages for the capitalist sector was initially admired by some feminists (eg Ong, 1983). But critics of this approach not only pointed out that it is functionalist, but also that it reduces and denies highly specific and complex processes (Kahn, 1981a; Rey, 1973; Edholm et al, 1977). Rey, for example, suggests that capitalism does not seek to maintain non-capitalist forms on the periphery: 'the previous social structures and economic structures which [capitalism] must destroy . . . have proved themselves infinitely more resistant than were precapitalist structures in Europe' (quoted in Kahn, 1981a: 205). Some more recent post-colonial writings have been somewhat amnesiac about these debates, reverting to unproblematic uses of the idea of pre-capitalist for what is better termed non-capitalist.

I have found Rey's and Kahn's formulations the most useful in dealing with Rembau social structure. Although Malaya was probably incorporated into the world system from the sixteenth century (Wallerstein, 1974), the penetration of first merchant capital and then the capitalist mode of production proper has been uneven and incomplete. I shall stress the role of capitalist class interests and the colonial and post-colonial state in structuring Rembau peasant society; I see such interventions as playing a crucial part in reconstituting a matrilineal peasantry characterised by non-capitalist relations of production within petty-commodity and subsistence-producing sectors in Malaya. The continuing commoditisation of both the local and national level economies has led to the total collapse of Negeri Sembilan rice production in the past decade. I shall, however, reject any implication that this local economy has functioned for the ends of the capitalist system or that industrial capitalist development *accounts* for the state's social or economic forms. The historical development of 'peasant' enclaves like Rembau can only be seen as a dialectical process in which they constantly re-make their own history in a complex reaction to those larger forces.

### *Gender in the development process*

Most characterisations of the links between agrarian and dominant capitalist sectors in many parts of the world have been blind

to the significance of gender differentiation within so-called peasant sectors. This neglect is symptomatic of the general absence of gender in the classic writings on imperialism and more recent theoretical debates about underdevelopment. The persistence of unreflected androcentric assumptions about gender relations in production processes and productive units and clear resistance to feminist interventions have had especially serious consequences for male-stream debates about agrarian questions. It is significant, for example, that the extensive debates surrounding Chayanov's writings on the peasantry proceeded without reference to the gender relations at the heart of demographic relations.

On the other hand, feminist writings about Women-In-Development have also been far from unproblematic. The present theoretical turmoil in western feminist theory has complicated the task of those involved with analysing women's relations with modernity in the periphery. In particular, there has been little coming together of W-I-D (or now G-A-D, gender and development) and post-colonial writings. The inevitable awkwardnesses in applying reconstituted modernist feminist theories, both mainstream/male stream and dissenting feminist, to objects outside the West have produced ambiguous results. Much of the writing in the W-I-D field in the last two decades has been firmly in a positivist, materialist mode, drawing on the gloomy political economy agendas about the world historical defeat of women set last century. Not surprisingly, it has also been trenchantly criticised for homogenising 'Third World' women as victims of development within an economistic metanarrative and for importing agendas based on the experience of middle class women in the rich countries to the poor periphery (Mohanty, 1988; Lata Mani, 1991b).

One product of these ambiguities and tensions has been some W-I-D writers' dualist division of the world into productive and reproductive spheres, albeit in different configurations (cf Moore, 1988). Again drawing on the nineteenth century agendas, most of the more economistic, productionist arguments have assumed that women's situation automatically declined with imperialism, colonialism and capitalist development (e.g. Mies, 1981). As the debates about the unhappy marriage of marxism and feminism showed, such economistic theories have often failed because they could not specify why it is *women* who become excluded from production except by resorting to biologicistic theories that locate women's ultimate social vulnerabilities in their biological functions as mothers. Such arguments overlook the vital place of

family labour and generalise from the western experience of the growth of the housewife form.

'Reproductionist' schemes, on the other hand, have seen women's subordination as ultimately deriving from the social relations of kinship, marriage and mothering (Chodorow, 1978). Feminist discourse was for a time enthusiastic about the concept of reproduction as the key to understanding gender difference, especially women's subordination in the development process. Thus it was argued that women's reproductive activities are the primary determinants of women's situation. In the final analysis, men's control over reproduction—in the household—was seen as crucial. Many accounts saw reproduction as operating outside direct economic determinations, (although some saw the demands of the capitalist system as structuring the empirical forms these reproductive relations take, for example, Meillassoux, 1981). The link between women's subordination and the dominant system of production was then made by suggesting that these domestic relations reproduce the conditions of existence of the productive relations. In the Third World context, a further link was often proposed suggesting that women's labour is increasingly withdrawn from social production with intensifying capitalist production and transferred to private household use (reproduction) or to subsistence production; both forms of production were seen as reproducing the dominant relations in the system.<sup>9</sup>

The role of the state has also been seen as important here; the 'capitalist' state has often been represented as being inherently patriarchal and as securing the conditions both of reproduction and of women's subordination. But such arguments assume a high level of effectiveness of instrumentalist state action, and a degree of functional fit between state forms and the economy. I am unhappy about both aspects: even the more subtle accounts of the (western) capitalist state as creating an arena of political struggle (Alavi, 1982), a space in which specific forms of male dominance are acted out, can exaggerate both the unity and the effectiveness of the state.<sup>10</sup>

In addressing women's unique capacities as child bearers, reproductionist theories linked up with interest in theorising mothering (cf Chodorow, 1978; Ruddick, 1982; Kristeva, 1981). Elaborate ideologies of motherhood are often associated with situations where the social conditions of mothering are an important dimension of female subordination. But there is no necessary connection between maternalist ideology and subordinating practice, unless we take an essentialist view of mothering as an unvarying institution. (And unless, of course, we accept a

universal psychoanalytic model, but even the entente between psychoanalysis and feminism would hardly suggest this.) As Bordo has recently argued, the growth of the (western) feminist intellectual seems contradictorily to have produced raw hostility to discussions of the 'female' virtues of mothering and empathy (1990: 148–49), and, I would argue, an essentialist identification of mothering with subordination.

Not surprisingly, western feminist thought has retreated from 'reproduction'. Reproductionist schemes ultimately bring us back to identifying women's situation with a universalised and naturalised sphere of biological and household relationships—the *domestic* or *private domain*. Such dual systems theories betray their inheritance of a tainted western division of the world into a 'male' productive sphere and a 'female' reproductive sphere.<sup>11</sup> We are presented with models in which men and capitalism in varying mixes dominate women. The division into universal and reified private and public spheres, for example, has been a pervasive model in feminist anthropologies of varying political positionings (cf Rosaldo, 1974, 1980). A minority of feminist anthropologists, however, has seen this private domain not as a source of subordination, but as a parallel power structure which can mirror male power in the public sphere (Wolf, 1972; Bell, 1983). In this they echo the tenets of cultural feminism.

Formulations about women's reproductive capacities did address the specificities of gender relations but did not in the end explain them; seeing capitalist relations as relying on already constituted gender relations for their reproduction (Meillassoux, 1981; Ong 1983), they conflated women's part in biological and social reproduction with wider systemic processes of social reproduction; this stress on the reproduction of the system rather than its transformation (cf Molyneux, 1979) appropriated an Althusserian conception of reproduction to convey a multiplicity of often confused and confusing meanings (cf Edholm et al, 1977; Harris and Young, 1981). The legacy of these dualisms can be seen in the pictures of rural women relegated to reproductive and subsistence production, the so-called 'informal sector' and other marginal activities (eg Boserup, 1970; Rogers, 1980).

The ideology of private women can be seen as specific to certain historical contexts, for example, *purdah* in parts of the Islamic world and the housewife at certain periods of western history. It is unclear, though, how far the concept of domestic can be applied in non-capitalist contexts or contexts of part-societies subsumed by capitalism (cf Stivens, 1991b). It is also

unclear how oppressive tasks that would be classified as domestic in advanced capitalist society are in circumstances where they are carried out more sociably, even though they still represent considerable labour expenditure and are mostly confined to women. The use of 'domestic' implies an assumption that 'household' or 'domesticity' have the same meaning in all contexts as natural and given (see Harris, 1984; Whitehead, 1984). And to assume a universal dichotomy suggests a kind of inevitability. Calls to deconstruct the illusory unity of the household and treat its internal power relations analytically are by now familiar but far from being generally heeded as yet. Many accounts of Malay peasantries for example have assumed implicitly that households are male-headed, elementary family households, although in varying degrees they acknowledge the effects of developmental cycles and other factors such as kinship relations (eg Kuchiba et al 1979; Fujimoto, 1983). Yet the analysis of the household clearly has repercussions far beyond the so-called *domestic domain*.

If we consider the large body of material on 'women and development',<sup>12</sup> we need to emphasise the variations in the patterns of relationships between gender relations and capitalist development worldwide, rather than one general tendency. The tensions between more economic, productionist accounts and reproductionist accounts and between specificity and universality underline the dangers of dualism inherent in many of the discussions. I stressed the problems with suggesting that women somehow occupy a separate reified private sphere or a separate women's economy outside a homogenised and universalised 'capitalist' sphere. These sidestep all the problems in the determination of this separate sphere and ignore the interpenetration of gender relations and other social relations.

### *Gender and capitalist development in Southeast Asia: Relative autonomy?*

The resurgence of feminism within world scholarly circles has brought a new focus on women in studies of rural society in Southeast Asia (Stivens, 1992). In Malaysia this interest has built on a pre-existing body of work on women and gender which has been important in setting agendas, especially in arguing for a degree of female autonomy. It is often claimed that 'peasant' women in Malaysia, Indonesia and neighbouring parts of Southeast Asia have more autonomy vis à vis men than women in some other Asian countries like India (cf Stoler, 1977; Strange,



1981; Van Esterik, 1982; Atkinson and Errington, 1990). This has been attributed to women's importance in wet-rice cultivation (Boserup, 1970), and in the household economy (Strange, 1981). Suggestions of some degree of female autonomy by scholars working in the Southeast Asian region, however, have not always chimed with the dominant paradigms of the international socialist feminism of the conference circuit, with their common attachment to women cast as victims. Within Malaysia itself, as well, some local feminists recently have argued for greater degrees of female subordination than such representations of autonomy might suggest.

As I shall argue, there are considerable problems with the idea of female 'autonomy'. But, although their situation shares many features of larger Southeast Asian cultural traditions, we could argue that Negeri Sembilan women have had some advantages over other Malay women, including a greater degree of economic independence and a lack of marked cultural devaluations. My discussion of Rembau stresses these kinds of differences: women's considerable property rights and central cultural importance deriving from the historical reconstructions of matrilineal culture will be seen as securing a degree of relative independence in some spheres. Undoubtedly the reconstitution of matriliney in the colonial period has produced a set of distinct social patterns, a distinctiveness emphasised throughout this book. Equally, however, Rembau women's 'autonomy' can be seen as squarely part of what is represented as a larger Southeast Asian cultural patterning of gender relations.

The following chapters will explore the implications of the colonial reconstitution of 'matriliney' for Rembau women's situation. A central argument will be that the political and ideological identification of women with 'matrilineal' subsistence had a number of very significant, if uneven, effects: these included a strengthening of women's social base, counter to some of the more common claims about the negative effects of the capitalist development process and the colonial polity on women's situation. But successive phases of capitalist accumulation and the tensions between the reconstituted 'pre-capitalist' social forms and new economic pressures can be seen as seriously undermining what is left of Rembau women's 'relative autonomy' in the contemporary era.

Rembau women undoubtedly have suffered from a range of social disadvantages; but it will be argued that they have had considerable control over their destinies in several key areas of social relations, particularly within the household and village

economy. While we cannot reduce women's situation to economy alone, property relations have been a crucial factor in endowing them with a degree of what some would see as autonomy in their everyday lives. This relative lack of disadvantage will be linked to relationships centred on the village: it has to be seen in the context of rural underdevelopment. That is, while it can be argued that the consequences of colonial rule actually formally strengthened women's control over some areas of property relations, it was control over property in backward and poor sectors. Moreover, as more and more of the villagers have become migrants in the wider society in the 1970s and 1980s, new economic and political conjunctures have steadily undermined much of the women's social base; these pressures have included new crises in a declining, marginal economy as out-migration intensifies and new, contradictory struggles for female independence and freedom within the larger society.

The following chapters begin by outlining the setting and the context of the study, with discussions of Negeri Sembilan state, Rembau district, the study villages, field procedure and the demographic characteristics of the sample population. Chapters 2 and 3 outline the historical background to the arguments to be presented, stressing the economic and political forces engaged in the continuing re-creation of 'tradition' in Negeri Sembilan. Chapter 2 explores the development of *adat* discourse and practice in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, arguing for a deconstruction of *adat*. It looks at the ways that the colonial transformation subsumed and reconstituted *adat perpatih* and the relation between the reconstitution of a non-capitalist enclave and emerging gender relations. The colonial codification of *adat* is seen not to preserve and fossilise a 'traditional' 'matriliney', but to reconstitute it and partly reproduce it through state juridical processes, especially land administration. The codified, legalistic texts on *adat* and enactments governing its administration are shown to have become central to the development of matrilineal discourses, both as models of the system and as sources of ultimate authority for government, village and scholar alike. It is argued that in many ways Negeri Sembilan people have come to understand their society through internalised colonial models of the clan system. The developed model of matriliney reported by anthropologists in the last years of the colonial period is seen as the product of this historical process, not as a 'traditional' relic of former times. The chapter also explores some of the tenor of colonial understandings and representations of

Negeri Sembilan 'matriarchy' and women's place in it. The colonial reconstitution of land tenure is also outlined, with particular attention to the feminisation of land inherent in the pre-colonial system and its reworkings in the colonial and post-colonial periods, especially the debates about whether the colonial process robbed women of their land. A major point of the analysis will be that these feminising patterns have not simply been a perpetuation of matrilineal 'tradition'—indeed they represent patterns quite outside its formal workings—but have been closely linked to the ultimate fate of smallholder production and the village economy.

Chapter 3 explores gender and the remaking of the village economy from the pre-colonial period to the present, arguing that this colonial legacy is vital for understanding the place of gender in the transformations in the village economy. The latter part of the chapter draws out the implications of these findings in a short interpretative account of gender relations in the same periods. The aim again is to set the scene for subsequent arguments, especially those trying to link the patterns of women's landholding to the historical development of underdevelopment in Malaysia. Some accounts of Malayan economic history have depicted a profound transformation of Malay peasantries with colonial state-supported capitalism, which they see as bringing varying degrees of impoverishment through usury and the spread of tenancy (Jomo, 1977; Amin and Caldwell, 1977). Although the decline of the colonial and post-colonial village economy can be linked to colonial controls on rubber production in particular, I take issue with some of these views about ever-increasing degrees of class differentiation, at least in relation to the Negeri Sembilan village economy. Undoubtedly, the subsumption of smallholder production into the capitalist social order as this 'cash economy' expanded was to transform villagers' lives profoundly. But the colonial reconstitution of *adat perpatih* limited capitalist penetration, with important implications for land tenure, especially women's ownership of land, and for the whole future course of gender relations. Moreover, women's advantages in property relations point to a need to reconsider the relationships between gender and class in subsumed agrarian sectors like Rembau.

My reading of Rembau women's situation reveals a central paradox: the colonial process, in reconstituting aspects of pre-colonial social relations, in fact provided women with sizeable sources of 'independence' within the colonial and post-colonial social orders. Most significantly, one can argue that land legis-

lation significantly strengthened women's individual rights to ancestral land by giving them individual titles—titles to semi-commoditised land nonetheless. The social forms and accompanying ideologies of the village community are seen as shaped partly by its responses to colonial rule and the events it set in motion. This is clearly the case with women's land rights. These were not simply created by colonial fiat but through everyday practice. Ultimately, however, the village economy is seen to have declined to the point where, by 1982, very little rice was being grown in Negeri Sembilan and the drift to the cities had intensified. By 1986, government figures claimed that no padi (paddy) land at all was being cultivated anywhere in Negeri Sembilan (Courtenay, 1987a). This picture of relative, and in some cases, absolute, failure in 'modernising' the village sector mirrors similar failure nationally. In many ways, however, this concern has been almost totally sidelined by the emphasis on the spectacular growth in the Malaysian economy in the 1980s and 1990s and massive urban development.

Chapter 4 moves on to consider the relationships between gender and contemporary property relations in the study villages, including rice, rubber, orchard and compound land ownership patterns. I strongly emphasise diachronic aspects of property relations, an emphasis that has been mostly absent from published material on Rembau.<sup>13</sup> Exploring the process I have termed the feminisation of property relations, I look not only at how land has been acquired in recent years, but also at what can be pieced together from Land Office records and my census material about land acquisition in the colonial period. A central focus is the gaps between formal legal and social practices and the contrasts between the ownership patterns of rice, rubber and orchard land. Whereas rice and orchard lands have been largely female owned, rubber ownership has been both more individualised and more commoditised. The implications of the feminisation process are explored: can we see this as a continuation of *adat*, without formal procedures—that is reproducing, or perhaps better, re-inventing, matrilineal practices outside the formal juridical sphere?

Chapter 5 concentrates on the last two decades, giving detailed material on women's and men's economic activities and discussing the increasing problems of the rural economy. The small scale of Rembau rice and rubber production is stressed. The chapter explores the sexual division of labour, finding considerable differences between formal ideologies and actual practices. It looks especially at the extent to which women's

labour in rubber growing has been consistently underestimated. It also examines the extent to which women exercised effective control over the production process and the links between family labour and wider economic processes. The changing rationality of the productive enterprise is examined in a context of declining group cooperation and an increasingly marginal economy. Women's labour is seen as crucial to an understanding of the decline of the village economy and its present precariousness.

The discussion in Chapter 6 of patterns of out-migration and off-farm work, the development of the remittance economy and relations between gender, work and social inequality points to the long-term importance of these sources of income. The contemporary period has seen a dramatic entry of young women to the urban workforce, which has entailed a restructuring of young femininity. The nature of authority in Rembau households is a central issue for the discussion of young women migrants' place in the emerging modern/post-modern social order. The account again emphasises the problems in importing concepts from European-based discourses, particularly the class-based differentiation debates. The chapter also explores the ways that gender and other forms of inequality have mutually constituted one another through the colonial and post-colonial periods, arguing moreover that the misogyny of the state has been integral to the peasant-state relationship.

Chapter 7 moves on to examine the making of femininities in Rembau, looking at developmental and life cycles. The organisation of marriage and divorce is outlined, with special emphasis on the emergence of romantic free-choice marriage in the industrial era. My female informants were often vocal about the problems marriage and divorce laws presented them; the precepts and practices of family law as women experienced them will be seen to be contradictory, with competing definitions about the conduct of family life being deployed by state, religion and media. The pronatalism of Negeri Sembilan culture is shown to be a critical aspect of women's mothering. The chapter also looks at women's experiences of childbirth and child rearing, with especial reference to arguments about medicalisation. Finally, it examines issues surrounding sexuality and sexual segregation, arguing that while sexual avoidance patterns have been transformed with other social transformations, many of the 'old' patterns have been recreated within modern cultural practices, sustained by new pressures arising from Islamic revivalism. The chapter underlines what is seen as a double burden of women's reproductive labours. In contrast to Rembau women's advantages

in some aspects of production, it is argued, domestic life has brought them severe constraints, even though it is questionable whether the Rembau household has constituted the oppressive, privatised sphere envisaged in some western feminist debates. There has been a clear contradiction between women's productive independence and the circumscription of their lives by all the elements forming femininity.

Chapter 8 discusses kinship relations and practices, returning to the issue of the reconstitution of *adat perpatih* and its contemporary fate. It links debates about 'modern' family forms to the previous discussion of contemporary economic processes, seeing a particular contradiction between, on the one hand, the state's historical reconstitution of matriliney and its ideological support for the 'Asian Family' and, on the other hand, its encouragement of economic forms that encourage individualism and 'modern' family forms. The central role of women in kinship relations is seen as crucial to an understanding of current developments in this sphere.

The final chapter explores the issues surrounding writing about female 'autonomy' in Rembau. Can we conclude that Rembau's entry into colonial and post-colonial modernity has left women with some measure of social independence and power, in spite of considerable degrees of oppression in some spheres of life? A central aim will be to explore some of the relative communitarianism and egalitarianism of Rembau's reconstituted matrilineal practices and ideologies and the implications of these for the complex relationships between gender, economy and polity. As will be seen, women's own political actions in defending their rights have played an important part in the evolution of Rembau's social forms. It is argued that the exploration of the political significance of women's land ownership and of gender relations historically casts light on past and present developments in Rembau and other Malay rural societies.