

A MATRILINEAL SOCIETY IN THE CONTEXT OF DEVELOPMENT
— THE ADAT PERPATIH CASE

by

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Development implies change, both in the physical and non-physical sense. In Malaysia, in the post independence era, there has been a conscious and concerted effort by the Government to bring about changes in the country through planned socio-economic developments. Two of these development plans, known as the Five-Year Plans, have already been carried out and the third one is currently under way. Largely as a result of these plans it is practically impossible not to notice the physical changes which have taken place in the country. The non-material aspects of these changes, however, are often ignored for they are less obvious and not so easily discernible.

In this paper an attempt will be made to look at some of these aspects and to see in particular how these physical changes have affected the social relationships of the people in a matrilineal society. For the purpose of this paper, attention is focussed on the *Adat Perpatih* society in Seri Menanti, a mukim in the district of Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan.

Adherents of the *Adat Perpatih* or Customary Law of the *Perpatih* are concentrated mainly in four districts in Negeri Sembilan, viz. Tampin, Jelebu, Rembau and Kuala Pilah. Tracing their descent to the Minangkabau migrants from Sumatra three centuries ago, this group could be regarded as unique in comparison with other Malay groups in Peninsular Malaysia. It is the only group which abides by the customary law of *Perpatih* in addition to existing law of the country and Islamic law. This customary law is based on a matrilineal kinship organisation. *Adat Perpatih* is an ideology or a philosophy of — life¹ whose law is embodied in *Adat* sayings known variously as *pepatah*, *petitih*, *pantun* and *perbilang* *adat*, transmitted orally from one generation to the next. The *Adat Perpatih* relates to the whole way of life of the people and the *Adat* sayings become guidelines for social relationships

¹ Prof. Mr. M. Nasroen *Dasar Falsafah Adat Minangkabau*, pp. 36 C.V. Penerbit PASAMAN—Djakarta.

and social actions. However, the *Adat* could be reduced to six basic inter-related principles which touch on the mode of reckoning descent, kinship grouping, pattern of residence, inheritance, marriage regulation and man's responsibilities over his close kins:

1. Descent in an *Adat Perpatih* society is traced through the female line, i.e., matrilineally. One considers as one's close kins relatives of one's mother.
2. Each member of the *Adat Perpatih* society belongs to one kinship group called the *suku*. *Suku*, which is a clan, consists of lineages called *perut*. A *suku* which is normally identified by a name is headed by a *lembaga*, while a *perut* is headed by a *buapak*. *Lembaga* and *buapak* are the kingroup elders whose function is to supervise and ensure the proper implementation of the *Adat Perpatih* law.
3. Each *suku* corporately owns lands known as *tanah pesaka* which may be in the form of *sawah padi* (padi fields), *tanah kampung* (dwelling areas) and *dusun* (orchards). These ancestral lands are inherited by the women only with the mode of transmission being matrilineal, i.e. transmitted from mother to daughter, with each daughter getting an equal share. This pattern of inheritance is also applied to other objects categorised as *pesaka* which may have a high economic and/or ritualistic value such as jewellery or *keris*, the Malay dagger. Succession to posts of heads of lineage or clans or other titled positions in the society is also done matrilineally, except that the mode of transmission is from a man to his male relatives, the closest of whom is his sister's son. Such posts are held by men only.
4. Intra-group marriage is forbidden. Normally a member of a clan is required to look for a spouse from another group. However, what constitutes an exogamic entity seems to vary from place to place. If a lineage group is large enough, it is sometimes regarded as the exogamic entity. If on the other hand it is small then the *suku* will be exogamous.
5. As a consequence of girls inheriting ancestral lands and of exogamous marriage, pattern of residence is uxori-local whereby a man at marriage leaves his natal home for his wife's.
6. A man is required to be responsible for the welfare of his kins

especially his closest kins, viz. his sisters' children. He is the *buapak kadim*, while his sisters' children are his *anak buah kadim*.

The principles outlined above are guidelines for social relationships in the *Adat Perpatih* community. However, it is becoming apparent that socio-economic changes which have taken place both inside and outside the society are having an impact on the social relationship of the people causing in some instances their actual behaviour to deviate from the expected norms as outlined above. With socio-economic developments within the boundaries of the *Adat Perpatih* society come widespread education, health facilities, water, telephone, electricity and various gadgets and appliances which come with electricity. Economic developments outside the society's boundaries, especially industrialisation, offer new job opportunities to the peasants. With more and more members of the *Adat Perpatih* society resorting to wage labour or salaried jobs offered by the public and increasingly by the private sectors there is a shift from agricultural dependence to industrial dependence. Such a shift leaves a negative impact on the *Adat Perpatih* society for it decreases the dependence on ancestral lands. Studies in kinship among peasant societies have shown that when means of production is controlled by the kinship group, kin ties are strong as long as there is an economic dependence on the means of production. In the *Adat Perpatih's* society's case, the means of production is the ancestral lands which are controlled by the kingroup. In the present-day context, dependence on the lands is undermined by industrialisations and other economic developments; consequently, kin ties are rendered less close and less strong. Generally speaking, the people, especially the younger generations, born after the Second World War, and who have had the benefit of a better education, no longer view the *Adat* as seriously as their parents or grandparents. Attachment to the *Adat Perpatih*, except for a few cases, is merely sentimental and to define one's roots for one who is obsessed with genealogical importance.

In attempting to analyse further the impact of development on social relationship of the *Adat* community, the basic principles above will now be dealt with one by one.

1. **Descent, Clan & Lineage.** It is noted that the young, especially those still unmarried, are somewhat vague about the *Adat*. A large number of them, when asked, cannot identify the name of their *suku* and consequently are hazy about their close matrilineal relatives other than their first cousins. *Adat Perpatih* laws are not taught formally in schools or elsewhere; they are

orally transmitted from one generation to the next; they are revealed only to those who have a genuine cause to be interested in them such as those who wish to hold an *Adat* post. In view of this it is hardly surprising that nowadays young men and women are introduced to some aspects of the *Adat Perpatih* law only when the need has actually arisen. For example, when a young man is looking for a spouse he will be reminded of the exogamic nature of the law; or, when a girl is being courted she will be informed how important it is for her mother's brother's views to be taken into consideration in the choice of her future husband and how important it is that he be not slighted for his presence at her wedding is essential from the *Adat's* point of view. Or, when a woman dies; for then her children will need to seek the opinion of the clan elders on the proper mode of property division. Unless such needs arise, the *Adat Perpatih* laws are seldom discussed except by lineage and clan heads.

Thus the present day attitude particularly of the younger generations towards the *Adat Perpatih* is one of indifference. This has its roots in the individualistic attitudes which seem to be growing and becoming more and more apparent in the society as wage labour and salaried income become more and more common. In a total peasant society it was indeed very important that relationship with close kins, viz. one's matrilineal kins, be cultivated and maintained. They would be one's neighbours and friends with whom one would have strong customary as well as family obligations. These obligations, as Bloch says, are "binding, unconditional and without terms"². It was most important then, in a total peasant society, to know who one's kinsmen were, who members of one's *perut* and *suku* were, for they were, inter alia, a potential source of help and cooperation badly needed in agricultural activities which were fraught with uncertainties. One's kins and their spouses within the lineage group often engaged in mutual help variously known as *menyeraya*, *bertolong-tolongan* and *gotong-royong*. In these mutual help activities services were rendered free; all that the host had to provide was the day's meal.

Nowadays such mutual help is very much a thing of the past; it is no longer possible to obtain free services from one's kins. Labour is now expected to be paid for in cash. In this respect the kinship appears to have lost one of its economic functions. This naturally contributes to the loosening

² The Longterm and the Short-term: The Economic and Political Significance of the Morality of Kinship - p. 78 in "*The Character of Kinship*", ed. Jack Goody, Cambridge University Press, 1973.

and weakening of kin ties. Eventually, if kin ties are maintained at all it will be mostly for sentimental reasons.

The introduction of public amenities such as tapped water and electricity also appears to have had a negative impact on relationship between members of the society under consideration. In the days gone by when the source of water was a well or a spring, these "water-holes" were community meeting places. A well used to serve more than one families; wells were therefore communal in nature and used to serve as a place for social interactions especially for the womenfolk. While washing and bathing their children gossips and information were exchanged and later relayed to other members of the society. In Seri Menanti piped water is supplied to individual homes and this had had the effect of confining people to their own houses, cutting them off from communally shared activities and encouraging desire for privacy. The introduction of electricity and electrical appliances has had similar effects on communal relationship. All these facilities have to be paid for in cash out of individual earnings and since incomes are usually hard to "come by" members of a household are often reluctant to share the facilities with other members of the clan or lineage group. In other words all these modern amenities seem to have had the effect of encouraging selfishness among clan members which is of course contrary to the very ideals of the *Adat Perpatih* which encourage its adherents to share and share alike as expressed in one of the *Adat* sayings:

Kalau bukit sama didaki
Kalau lurah sama dituruni
Hati gajah sama dilapah
Hati kuman sama dicecah.

If a hill we'll climb it together
 If valley we'll go down it together
 If elephant's liver we'll divide in large chunks
 If microbe's heart we'll touch with little finger

2. Inheritance of Ancestral Lands. The allotment of ancestral properties, especially lands, to the womenfolk was aimed essentially at ensuring the economic welfare and security of the women. However, frequent fragmentation of the lands over a period of almost three centuries has rendered individual ownership of such lands uneconomical. In various parts of Seri Menanti it is not uncommon to find women with only a quarter of an acre of padi land or *kampung* land to their credit, while the largest unit

owned by women is about seven acres. In 1970 out of 177 respondents asked only one woman was found to own such a large acreage³. The situation may have deteriorated since then.

Adat lands owned by women have never enjoyed very high economic values. This is because the market for such lands is very limited. Ancestral lands cannot be sold to people outside the clan or lineage group; even within the clan or lineage group sales of such lands must be done with the consent of the elders and other members of the clan. All these constraints help keep the price of ancestral lands low. At present the price of such lands may be as low as Malaysian \$500.00 per acre. And of course such lands are not acceptable as collaterals or securities for loans by ordinary commercial banks.

As more and more people are educated in an education system that is not geared towards agriculture and as the pull from urban areas becomes greater, emigration becomes a salient feature of the society. At this juncture, it must be stressed that voluntary emigration or *merantau* is not anything new in the *Adat Perpatih* society.⁴ In fact the society itself can be regarded as a direct result of *merantau* process carried out by the society's Minangkabau ancestors. *Merantau* was a social institution which offered the young the opportunity to go out of the *Adat Perpatih* territory to seek knowledge and fortune. Knowledge and fortune were prestige indices which improved a man's eligibility as marriage partners. They also helped determine one's social status in later life. Since prestige is a desirable acquisition in the egalitarian society of the *Adat Perpatih*, *merantau* was positively encouraged among the young men of the society.

Nowadays, however, emigration affects not only the male members of the society. The bright lights of the city and greater job opportunities in the industrialised urban areas attract both males and females alike. This leaves a heavy toll on the society; demographically it depopulates the traditional villages. Practically everywhere now only elderly people are left behind looking after ancestral lands. In addition to emigration to the cities

³ Azizah Kassim *Kedudukan Wanita Dalam Masyarakat Melayu Beradat Perpatih di Negeri Sembilan*. — M.A. thesis, pp 191 – 192, Department of Malay Studies, University of Malaya.

⁴ Nordin Selat *The Concept of Merantau in Adat Perpatih in Negeri Sembilan*. Federation Museums Journal Volume XV, 1970. pp 121 – 128. Museums Department, States of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

and industrialised areas there has also been quite a sizable emigration by the able-bodied to join land development schemes such as those developed by the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA).

The pattern of land ownership in the *Adat Perpatih* society and the mode of inheritance practised by clan members render any attempt at land consolidation difficult if not impossible. Any capitalistic endeavour such as to buy up lands so as to form large holdings where modern farming can be carried out economically is made very difficult by the constraints on sale transactions of ancestral lands. All this plus the unavailability of the able-bodied to provide the labour force to till the lands has resulted in a glaring neglect of ancestral lands. Vast stretches of neglected and uncultivated padi-fields are now becoming a common sight as one travels through the length and breadth of the *Adat Perpatih* territory.

3. **Exogamic Rule.** On the whole the exogamic rule concerning marriage seems to be still largely observed. Cases, however, of violations of this particular rule seem to be on the increase and public attitudes towards such violations are becoming more and more tolerant, it seems. The *Adat Perpatih* is of course very strict in this matter; it condemns in very strong terms any such intra-group marriage as witness the *Perbilangan Adat*:

*Celaka, derhaka,
Dahaga, dahagi,
Meruntuhkan langit,
Merebahkan tombak,
Menguncupkan payung.*

May you be cursed for your treason,
May you die of thirst,
For bringing the sky down
And causing the spear to be laid down
And the umbrella be folded up.

It is easy to understand why *Adat Perpatih* condemns intra-group marriages in such strong terms, for, if they are allowed to occur freely it will destroy the *suku* system which, after all, is one of the cornerstones of the *Adat Perpatih* and if the *suku* system is destroyed the whole *Adat* will also be destroyed. The *Adat* is therefore very clear on the penalties to be imposed on those who contravene this particular rule.

There are three modes of sanction. First, the couple who are found guilty of this "crime" may be expelled from the clan. Second, only one of

the couple may be expelled; and in most cases it is the male who is expelled. The expulsion thus makes him an outsider and consequently marriage can be carried out. Thirdly, fines are imposed on the families of the guilty parties. The fine usually takes the form of a buffalo, 100 coconuts and fifty measures of rice plus some money. All these will be utilised in holding a *kenduri* or feast at which the guilty parties will admit their guilt and seek the forgiveness of their lineage, clans elders as well as other members of the clan for in committing such *faux-pas* they are supposed to have brought disgrace upon their clan. Such a *kenduri* is called *bertimbang-salah*, the purpose of which is to normalize relationship among members of the kin-group.

To adherents of the *Adat Perpatih* and in the context of the pre-industrial era these penalties are indeed very heavy. Expulsion from one's kingroup means having one's kinship ties severed which in turn means having one's right to corporately owned properties denied. Anyone finding himself or herself in such a situation will be economically paralysed at least temporarily. It means starting all over again; the expelled parties may have to acquire new lands by opening up virgin jungles through the process known as *meneroka*. Obviously, it will take years before their economic position can become reasonably stabilised again. Similarly, the loss of a buffalo and such large quantities of rice cannot be replaced easily; it may take years or at least months.

By today's improved economics standards, these penalties are relatively mild; they are no longer an effective deterrent. Perhaps it is because of this that cases of violation have increased. And of course it is usually those who enjoy strong economic positions who think nothing of violating conventional restraints as well as those who have no intention of settling down in the *Adat* areas anyway. For those whose circumstances compel them to reside in *Adat* areas they have of course no choice but to abide by this regulation.

4. Pattern of Residence — Uxorilocal. This pattern of residence applies only to those who marry within the society and who intend to settle down permanently in *Adat* areas. With increased opportunities to acquire and accumulate wealth outside the *Adat Perpatih* territories, there is an increasing tendency among the more fortunate members of the society to be neolocal in their pattern of residence. Properties acquired and houses built outside the *Adat Perpatih* territory are not subject to the jurisdiction of the *Adat*.

If there was a need on the part of the menfolk to build their homes outside the *Adat Perpatih* lands, it was because of the precarious nature of

the husband's position *viz-a-viz* the wife's in the context of the society. Many anthropologists working on the *Adat* society agree on this point. Ideally when a man marries, he leaves his natal home to reside with his wife, at her mother's place among her kinsfolk. While his wife's kinsmen will be his *tempat semenda*, he will be the *orang semenda* whose activities and actions will always be under the scrutiny of the *tempat semenda* especially his wife's brothers. As long as the marriage lasts he will go on staying at his wife's place. In the event of her death or should the marriage break down and divorce follow he would then be required to return to his natal home. Thus the man's position is very insecure. It is this very fact that induces men of the society to emigrate and find ways of improving his economic position and acquire properties which he can call his own for in so doing he will not only be able to improve his social status but also exert his right and authority as head of his family and perhaps gain some measure of respect from his wife and her kingroup; he will become more desirable and valuable, he will become an "asset".

In the days when rubber-tapping was the only or the most dominant means of deriving cash income, one of the most salient consequences of uxorilocal pattern of residence was the inter-renting of rubber plots between male in-laws, i.e. between the *orang semenda* and *tempat semenda*. Apart from ancestral lands, as already mentioned, some of the more well-to-do members of the *Adat Perpatih* society also own *Adat* lands; the pattern of inheritance of such lands are not, therefore, subject to the *Adat* law. In this case the Islamic law of inheritance or *hukum faraid* applies which gives 2/3 share of the land to the male children and 1/3 to the females. Consequently we find a situation in which the wife owns the rice-fields and the kampung lands and the husband owns the rubber plots. However, because of the shift of the husband's residence after marriage and if his new residence is some distance away from his natal home he may find that he is unable to work on his own rubber lands. The usual solution to this problem is for him to work on his wife's or his wife's kinsman's plots; at the same time he will get his own brother-in-law, who now resides at his natal home, to work on his plots. Thus is created a situation of inter-renting of rubber plots — an economic arrangement which binds the male in-laws, i.e. *tempat semenda* and *orang semenda*, to each other. This interdependence leads to healthy cooperation between the two parties involved, a very desirable thing indeed in the agricultural activities of the peasants.

Now with lesser number of people involved in rubber-tapping, this interdependence and cooperation is diminishing. Nowadays members of the

society are less dependent on each other; they are more dependent on government and government agencies and on business organisations. This means that their group corporateness and unity is increasingly threatened by wage labour and salaried income.

5. **Mother's Brother and Sister's Children relationship.** When a man is held responsible for his sister's children in the Adat Perpatih society, it is not without reason. His nieces and nephews are important to him. His nieces, for instance, will carry on the lineage group; without them the lineage will come to an end, i.e. *pupus*. In the days gone by a man without *anak buah* was an object of pity. It may not be so bad now but he still lacks security. A man depends on his sisters and her children for a number of things. As was mentioned earlier, in the event of his wife's death or a divorce, a man has to return to his natal home; this means, if his parents are already dead, returning to his sister's home. It is not only in the case of death and divorce that he repairs to his sister's; he may need to do so even for a brief stay, for example, when his marriage suffers a temporary breakdown. This being the case it is clearly very important for a man to cultivate and maintain a good relationship with his sisters and sisters' children and he does this simply by carrying out his responsibilities as required by the *Adat*. A man's sister is of course required by the *Adat* to "receive back" her unfortunate brother, but unless he has done his duties by her he may find that he is not very warmly received. In fact there have been cases of men, because of their failure to carry out their responsibilities as the *buapak kadim*, condemned to isolation in their old age; they have to seek shelter and live out the rest of their natural lives in *suraus*, i.e. prayer houses and mosques; for food they depend almost entirely on the charity of the local people. Some wise ones among them manage to make a virtue out of necessity by turning themselves into *tok gurus*, i.e. religious teachers, and die as *walis*, i.e. saints.

Because of this special relationship between a man and his sister and sister's children, a desirable marriage is one between relatives and those who are staying in close proximity to each other. The most desired pattern of marriage is of course between a girl and her mother's brother's son for this will allow the young man to marry into his father's kingroup and stay after his marriage in his father's natal home.

As has been mentioned, improved education coupled with better job opportunities elsewhere has induced the younger members of the society to leave their traditional homes. This means that the younger generations are exposed to new ideas and a wider range of influences.

Although most of them still return to their ancestral homes from time to time especially at festival times such as the *Hari Raya*, there is no denying that their attitudes and way of thinking are vastly different from those of their elders. They acquire new ideals and new values. Their attitude towards marriage, for instance, has changed quite noticeably. The great majority of them now prefer to choose their own spouses; kinship and economic considerations come second to the ideal of love marriage, consequently more and more of them now marry people from outside their traditional Adat areas even outside their districts and state. There are even a few cases of marriage with foreigners. It is therefore becoming more and more difficult for the male members of the society to carry out their duties and responsibilities to their *anak buah* as required by the *Adat*.

Thus the change in income patterns does contribute quite significantly to the breakdown in mother's brother—sister's children relationships. With improved and more secure economic positions, mostly away from their traditional homes, many men no longer feel the need to cultivate and maintain good relationship with their nephews and nieces and quite often neglect to carry out the duties and responsibilities expected of them by the *Adat*. There has been a clear shift from *Adat* obligations to simple family obligations. Modern living conditions demand that a man must give attention to the welfare of his own family of procreation first. This means that in a man's consideration the order of priority of importance has changed. Traditionally, relationship with one's sisters and their children was given top priority; now, one's own family of procreation comes first, one's parents and brothers and sisters, particularly the young and unmarried ones, come second and one's nephews and nieces come a poor third.

It must be emphasised, however, that in spite of all these changes of attitudes and so on there are *Adat Perpatih* men, admittedly few in number, who, having made good somewhere, still try to carry out their expected role. Except that they now carry out their obligations by means other than giving physical help. They now send money to their relatives in the *kampung* either regularly or periodically depending on their means to help meet the costs of education for younger relatives or the expenses of festivals such as the *Hari Raya* or of *kenduris* or feasts which accompany *rite-de-passage* such as circumcision, betrothal and marriage. They also give money in hard times such as in sickness or death. In addition to giving money they pay their relatives visits usually at *Hari Raya* times and in the fruit seasons. Such men are highly respected and very well thought of; they are models of *Adat Perpatih* men in the present-day context.

Conclusion. Thus one finds that the socio-economic developments taking place in this country, both within and outside the *Adat Perpatih* society, do help change the nature of social relationships among the adherents of the customary law. To some extent they undermine the position of the *Adat*; but as long as there are *Adat* lands which form the mainstay of the *Adat Perpatih*, the *Adat* will continue perhaps to exist. Attitudes, however, towards the *Adat* have changed quite considerably. The younger generations do not feel quite as strongly about the *Adat* as their parents; some are quite indifferent to it. Spread of education, exposure to the wider society and the national culture, better job opportunities elsewhere and the introduction of public amenities – all this and other factors will no doubt continue to affect and have an impact on the *Adat Perpatih*. Will the *Adat Perpatih* be able to survive the challenges of developments and modernisation? Will it be able to live by one of its own sayings:

*Biar mati anak,
Jangan mati Adat.*

*Let our children die,
But not our Adat.*

This question will no doubt be asked more and more often in the future.