

1 ~ People and places

I suspect that I was given permission by the Malaysian Ministry of National Unity to 'do' my original 'fieldwork' in Rembau precisely because they saw my project as a relatively harmless exercise in antiquarian anthropological recovery. I was to add my bit to all those 'observers' involved in the cultural production of Negeri Sembilan and its matrilineal customary law, *adat perpatih*; these have included travellers, colonial officers¹ and after World War II, a body of professional anthropologists,² beginning with de Josselin de Jong and Swift, as well as Lewis, Azizah Kassim, Kahar Bador, Norhalim bin Haji Ibrahim, Khadijah binte Muhamed, Peletz and McAllister.³

These colonial and scholarly cultural productions of Negeri Sembilan have had a complex relationship to the state's later place in the Malay imaginary, as I shall show.⁴ With the rise of Malay nationalism Negeri Sembilan assumed new significance as an archetypal Malay state within Malay mythologising about a Golden Past, a timeless era, when Malays were the sole keepers of the soil and a rich and varied Malay culture, a culture to be rudely torn from its keepers by British capitalism and Chinese rapacity. This Golden Age is still being reinvented politically and culturally. These imaginings have included an adulation of and attachment to the remnants of the aristocracy in some quarters and somewhat contradictory images of a Malay rural idyll of communitarian village life. The representations at the core of this imaginary can also be seen to be closely linked to colonial perceptions of Negeri Sembilan: some scholars see the state as the very model of the 'eastern yeomanry' that the colonial

authorities allegedly wished Malay peasantries to become (Lim Teck Ghee, 1977) and as having fewer of the 'feudalisms' like bonded slavery that the authorities wished to abolish.

Contests over the *kampung* (village) as the site of true Malayness have resonated down through Malaysian cultural productions and scholarly reflections upon them (cf Usman Awang's play *Uda dan Dara*). In the colonial and post-colonial periods, to be a villager, an *orang kampung*, has implied one who lives and works on the land, cultivating rice and rubber, looking after buffalo, collecting fruit from orchards and honey and *petai* in the jungle; all this is called *kerja kampung* or village work. But note that men have usually been seen as the ones involved in *kerja kampung*, although women have always done a great deal of village work. For some of my village informants the constant recreation of romantic notions about Malay culture and village life has formed part of a critique of commoditisation and modernity. Older men and women would tell me about going into the nearby jungle to just sit and contemplate: 'You can't do that in the city. Who wants all the rush and bustle and noise? Here you can eat your own rice and eat your own fruit and live in your own house.' Significantly, perhaps, those who produced such ideas have not been simply 'peasants'—not that any contemporary Negeri Sembilan people could be described as that in any case—but people with extensive previous experience of contemporary modernity beyond the village as migrants. This critique of modernity has found new life with the growing discontent among rural dwellers generally about the costs of encroaching modernisation and development, like the loss of *kampung* land to large housing developments on city fringes. But for some of the new middle classes the *kampung* has become a symbol of backwardness, as Watson argues is evident in that most middle class of cultural productions, the novel (1989). And for a radical minority, it has long been seen as the site of growing immiseration and inequality.

There are other dimensions to these cultural debates, however: I was soon told that other Malaysians, Malay and non-Malay, saw Negeri Sembilan people as 'primitive', 'matriarchal' and 'non-Islamic'—they spoke a dialect, had clans, and the men were ruled by their wives ('she is boss-lah!'). Anti-*adat* sentiment expressed in Islamic terms in particular has had a long history, an opposition fuelled by the recent Islamic resurgence in the peninsula. Such views have been linked to the sporadic attacks over the years by modernist elements within the government and civil service which have sought to blame Negeri Sembilan's

economic backwardness on its 'surprising' continuing attachment to its 'archaic' *adat*. The civil servants I met in the course of my research commonly expressed a strong sense of the cultural uniqueness of *adat perpatih*, often calling for my opinion on its future. At the same time, they also contradictorily tended to devalue these differences, seeing themselves as fully able to administer the state's 'custom', like this civil servant in the State Secretariat: '[We] learn all about it in school and at university. We educated, if I can use such an expression, we know a lot about our country. We educated, we've lived in K.L. [Kuala Lumpur], we've mixed with students from all over. You get to understand all the dialects. Not like kampung people. They might have trouble understanding things. And we do have a standard *Bahasa* [language].'

Positionalities: Researching a lost idyll

The contemporary ethnographer would find it hard to be as confident about understanding 'things' as this civil servant. Both the new reflexivities in anthropology and feminist critiques leave little space for holding on to the conventional fantasies of the supposedly objective and authoritative observer: these reifications have been replaced, present day anthropologists hope, by more nuanced representations of the pluralities of everyday life and culture. The ethnographer is now to try to place herself clearly within the material that she as a person of particular theoretical views collected and constructed through the writing-up process. Rembau 'culture' is not 'out there' waiting for the analyst, but the analyst is to be part of the process of social construction, a construction which has to be placed in historical, political and social context. But such historical interpretation may present even greater complexities than contemporary analysis, with the ever-present possibility of imposing outside schema and retrospective reconstruction. While anthropologists have not always been receptive to such history from below, I have only to remember what some of my older informants have told me about personal events in their lives—wedding days, children borne and lost, the pain of past divorce and death—to understand how vivid those memories can be. Such suppressed historical reconstructions have too easily been discounted by the powerful discourse of Malay 'fatalism' underlying so many past scholarly and other representations of the country.

The period of my research in Malaysia has seen the growth of acute sensitivities about the possibilities of discursive violence

within the cultural production of the ethnographic object (cf Roberts, 1981; Stacey, 1988). The fieldworker's guilt and anxiety about these possibilities is not easily set aside or rationalised, nor should it be. She cannot escape the authorial power to construct local culture that the writing up process necessarily involves. That power, of course, draws on colonial inheritances, although in turn it is also contested. Thus during my first fieldwork as a visitor from England, albeit of Australian nationality, I was an *orang Inggeris*, an English person, with all the historical, negative resonances of the colonial period clinging to me. It helped that I was not actually English, even if I came from a British university. At the same time my graduate status gave me an enhanced social status in the eyes of Rembau villagers, as did my assumed wealth as an o.p. (*orang putih*—white person). Where were my silks and jewels, some neighbouring villagers apparently asked. I did not always find these perceptions easy to escape, although my relative youth partly offset my educational status. Given these tensions, it is remarkable how extraordinarily receptive and gracious people have been about my constant intrusions into their lives when there was absolutely no reason why they should be, beyond their inherent sense of courtesy and helpfulness.

Most researchers' ambiguous relationships with local bureaucracies are part of these post-modern anxieties. The local District Officer and kampung head were both enormously helpful, as were the District and other Rembau offices during my first visit. But bureaucratic obstructionism has also been a feature on occasion, notably in the Rembau Land Office in 1987–1988, when I was charged M\$100 a day (the legal search fee). The ambiguities surrounding official perceptions of me and my gender can be illustrated by the invitation I received to play bingo at a 'nightclub' in a neighbouring town from an official in one of the civil service offices where I was working after Joel Kahn had gone back to England ahead of me. My Malay village friends were absolutely scandalised that he should behave in such a way. Again, at a day-long seminar put on by the Agricultural Department for the study villagers in an effort to raise rice production, I was completely ignored, when for once I should have appreciated the contacts with the dignitaries present, and I ended up down the back with the women serving tea. Meanwhile, Joel Kahn, who was not conducting research at that point, was taken up to the platform and the greatest public courtesies were accorded him.

Not surprisingly, I think that being female has had an

immeasurable effect on the research process. Even non-feminist anthropologists have long recognised that male and female fieldworkers get very different views of societies like Rembau where sexual segregation in 'public' life is marked. The male researcher's view of rural Malay life from the inside can more often be one of rather formal visits to the 'men's space' of front verandahs of houses where guests are welcomed or else sitting around outside in male company or in coffee shops drinking coffee, eating snacks, reading newspapers and discussing politics. Women researchers, on the other hand, often have the run of houses with the minimum of formality: I would find myself conducting census interviews all over village houses, outside on the steps or in the kitchen amidst the cooking, cleaning, washing and the babies being looked after, and no doubt hindering all these activities. Perhaps ironically, in view of the feminist stance of this present work, I took it as a great compliment when I too was termed an *orang dapur*, a kitchen person, just like the other village women. Sometimes informants in an excess of courtesy would insist on my being entertained on the front verandah. It was harder for me to talk to the men in their homes precisely because I was a female, although with careful chaperonage this was usually possible. But as a woman I could not go and sit in village or Rembau and Seremban coffee shops without extreme awkwardness. It was invaluable being married, although this was also balanced by the fact that I did not then have any children. Absolutely constant comments about my childlessness were a prelude to almost every social interaction and this harassment gave me great insights into the force of maternalist ideology in Rembau.

Being female, however, is not just a matter of visiting courtesies and conflicting statuses. The allocation of social space means that women researchers may interpret everyday life very differently. Women can enter the 'private', 'personal', inner spaces of the Malay house, where the quality of interaction is very different from the more formal external world. The very mundanity of this everyday life yields a very different quality of data. This is clear from the work of both the older and newer generations of female researchers. We find different interpretations of the place of men and women in the bilateral kin relations of the rest of the Malayan peninsula in Djamour (1965) for example compared to Swift (1965), Wilder (1991) and Banks (1976). The male researchers tend to represent kinship for example, as more male-centred, with Islam as a masculine ideology gaining ground. The female researchers take a more woman-

centred view, arguing that while the formal ideology might be male-centred, practices are often less so.⁵

Language was very much part of these complexities. As the Rembau anthropologist, Norhalim bin Haji Ibrahim, has pointed out, Rembau Malays are notoriously subtle in their language—a quality summed up in the phrase that I constantly heard: '*pusing anak Rembau*' (Norhalim, 1976). Roughly translated this means, 'Rembau people will always talk in a roundabout way' or 'they will not give you a straight answer!' Perhaps this 'round-aboutness' allowed them to reclaim some of the cultural capital appropriated from them by the visiting anthropologist. Such circumlocution inevitably made fieldwork more difficult on occasion. All research in the study villages was carried out in Malay with a smattering of the local Rembau dialect, which I came to understand quite well. (It was mainly used by older villagers.) Interestingly, some of my later urban middle class informants have insisted on being interviewed in English. Modern Malay is romanised; I have not, however, learned to read *Jawi*, so some of the older records from the nineteenth century have not been available to me.

Places

When I first arrived in Negeri Sembilan its past history of plantation and village agriculture was written all over its landscape. But increasing industrial and urban development has brought much change. The population of the state capital, Seremban, (201 035, at the last published census, Malaysia, 1984: 332), has nearly doubled in the last two decades. In the centre of the state on the main north-south freeway (see map 1), Seremban is often described in guidebooks as being as Chinese a town as one is likely to find in Malaysia. Much of its former quiet 'colonial' character has been lost today with new glass buildings in the centre of the town, a modern central market for stallholders, a luxury hotel and impressive administrative buildings with soaring Minangkabau roofs rising in the famous inverted arch, buffalo horns roof style of Negeri Sembilan, new emporiums and streets choked with Toyotas, Proton Sagas and motorcycles. The continuing dominance of small businesses is evident, though, in the multitude of small grocery, clothing, motor repair and eating shops, and stalls and peddlers' patches. In recent years Seremban has seen some reconstruction of 'traditional' Minangkabau houses operating as museums and cultural showpieces: the Minang roof style has also appeared in

a number of logos, arches and buildings, notably on the district offices, and also on such mundane forms as petrol stations on the Kuala Lumpur–Seremban freeway. In the 1980s such neo-traditionalism was challenged nationally by imported Middle Eastern architectural styles, which can be and are interpreted as a form of counter-cultural assertion by resurgent Islamic, modernist Arabism.

There was little urban development in the state outside Seremban when I first went there. But now there has been some building in places like Tampin in the south of the state and dramatic new developments at the formerly quiet seaside resort of Port Dickson which is being turned into a playground for the growing middle classes of Kuala Lumpur. Outside Seremban town proper, we find acres of hillside brick and concrete town houses in barrack-like rows. These are the new dream homes for the fast growing numbers of the new Malaysian middle classes: the clerks, teachers, nurses and civil servants. As we shall see, for some of my original village informants, such a house represented the height of attainment, a clear marker of the passage to modernity. I set up house in one of these Seremban estates in 1987–1988, in the initial stages of a project on the Malay middle classes. This three-bedroom bungalow, modest by Australian standards, was white-painted throughout, with hard white tiled floors and Spanish-style metal grilles, and set in a bare grassed lot. Stories about such areas told of consumer competition about cars, televisions, videos, fridges and furnishings, of ‘demanding wives’, servant problems, divorce and debt. These demanding wives have become dominant symbols for many, like the (male) Malay civil servant who told me: ‘I’d rather live in a Chinese block or neighbourhood than a Malay one, because [there] you don’t have to worry about keeping up with the Joneses. It’s driving them to divorce, the wives all nagging for more of this and more of that!’

The road south through Rembau district from Seremban to Tampin looks much like it did when I first went there, but the new north-south expressway has taken much of its traffic. In those days, the road first ran through a smoke-filled industrial estate, part of the industrial decentralisation promoted by the Malaysian state and then wound through miles of rubber plantations and on past one of the small towns of the district, Pedas, to the well cultivated rice plain of Rembau. Today, the rice valleys are all abandoned and overgrown. The half-glimpsed thatch and zinc roofs of village houses etched against coconut palms line the edges of the deserted paddies, giving way to

village rubber smallholdings reaching in some cases half way up the heavily forested slopes of the mountains.

Most of Rembau district is this fairly flat alluvial plain, with only mild undulations. The eastern part of the district rises to the central Malaysian range, with Gunung Rembau, at 884 metres above sea level, the highest point. A network of small rivers criss-cross the district, rivers that were once the main travel routes, and navigable by quite big boats, as the traveller Newbold reported in 1839 (1971). Now the district is bisected by the highway and freeway and the railway line and criss-crossed by many smaller roads; access by train, bus or car to most parts is very easy.

I had chosen Rembau district for my original fieldwork locale because it had constituted a separate state in pre-colonial times and because it had featured in a sizeable body of historical material. The modern district of Rembau (total population in 1976 of 39 708, District Office; 35 780 in 1980, Malaysia, 1984—the latest figure available) is one of the six administrative districts of Negeri Sembilan, more or less corresponding to the historical boundaries of the pre-colonial Rembau *adat* district. The district is further divided into seventeen *mukim*—administrative parishes or sub-districts. The district is overwhelmingly rural but there are a number of very small towns scattered down the old highway, including Rembau town itself, Pedas, Chengkau and Kota. These towns and villages are ethnically divided, with many townspeople being Chinese, with a few Indians, while the villages are overwhelmingly Malay.

Rembau town (population 1670 in the mid 1970s), the administrative centre of the district, houses a number of government offices, as well as small-scale commerce. I moved in to the civil service compound there for a month at the beginning of my original study. It is a rather sleepy place, only occasionally enlivened by national day festivities with bands and marching children and Koran reading contests ablaze with lights and cardboard minarets. The last fifteen years have seen quite a lot of new building, and there are plans for more (see Norhalim, 1976). The main town buildings include schools, *rumah murah* (low-cost housing)—single-storey, tin-roofed barracks-type construction—and treeless blocks of two-storey Chinese shophouses, some new and sparkling with fresh paint and ornamental grillework, some old and grey-timbered. Here there are shops selling furniture, clothing, hardware goods, dry goods provisions and estate supplies, as well as a number of coffee shops. Near here, too, are the houses of the District Officer and

the *Undang*, the highest office in the *adat* system. The latter now has a very grand house and ceremonial *adat* meeting hall—*balai*—built in the 1980s, with a Minangkabau roof. Many of the civil servants who work in the town live in other small towns or villages and travel in with a car-owning colleague or on one of the efficient buses plying the highway. My village neighbours with electricity and piped water had to travel to Rembau to pay their bills, and to purchase special foods for a *kenduri* (ritual feast). But the only cinemas in the 1970s and 1980s were in Seremban or Tampin; the 'youth' in search of entertainment bussed or biked it, and groups of women chartered a small bus to see the latest Indian or Malay romance, returning home late at night, having drenched many Kleenex. The growth of television, however, has lessened the attractions of such outings.

Eleven kilometres south of Rembau town, after passing through an area of plantation rubber, one comes to the small town of Kota (population 531). Here in the 1970s and 1980s Chinese and a few Malay shopkeepers in grey timber shophouses competed in selling identical, limited ranges of old stock dry goods; tailors made trousers and dresses for the young *moden* (moderns); rubber merchants traded in sheets of yellowed rubber piled in the bare and scruffy interior of their shops and clumps of *segrap* (scrap) from rubber tapping lay on the dirt in front of these shops. Older men sat reading newspapers both in *Jawi* and in romanised Malay in the several dingy coffee shops, sipping hot drinks and eating the sweetmeats prepared by the owner or bought from the bakery vans which plied up and down the highway. Just after Kota the road leads to the *mukim* (parish) of Gadung (population 5172, 1976), where the three villages of my earlier study are located.

Three villages in Rembau

The three study villages are historically separate entities and today are separate administratively, although they are located in a more or less continuous area of habitation bounded by jungle tracts and low mountains. The village (*kampung*) is the smallest unit in the administrative hierarchy of *mukim* (parish) and district. Parishes are overseen by a salaried headman (the *penghulu*), and villages by a head (*ketua kampung*), usually an active member of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), who receives a small monthly allowance. Two of the study villages, which I have called Kampung Pokok and Kampung Teluk, are both very old, figuring in the history of

Rembau right back to the days of mythology; the third, Kampung Bunga is much newer, its land having been taken up in the nineteenth century.

When I first moved to the villages, they seemed the very picture of the Malay rural idyll. The road into the village was flanked by well-tended rice paddies in whose water was reflected the coconut palms, and imposing reddish-timbered Minangkabau-roofed houses, their gardens a mass of bright flowers and potted plants. These were the houses of the better-off families, the schoolteacher, the larger landholder, the wife of a retired government clerk who had come back home to spend her last years in the village. But the houses further back from the road, each in its own compound of a quarter to one acre, were less grand, some little more than bamboo pole shacks. There were a few run down village shops within the parish, a mosque serving several villages, as well as some small prayer houses, several schools, a health clinic on the main road leading to the foot of the mountain behind the village, an orphanage and a small row of Chinese shophouses down on the highway.

On an average day, these villages were very quiet and village-like, even though the highway passed less than a kilometre away. There was no centre to the villages: in the past there were some *kedai* (small shops) selling soft drinks and other sundries, but apparently when the owners of one of these wanted to set up a few tables and chairs outside in the early 1970s, the village committee stopped it. Conscious of the colonial mythologies about 'lazy Malays', they had worried that (the very few) motorists driving past would think the villagers 'lazy'.

The local parish head had some trouble finding people willing to rent us a house, for it seemed that many of the villagers were 'afraid' (*takut*) of having 'white people' (*orang putih* or *o.p.* for short) living in their midst. This tells us something of the force of the legacy of colonial power. My adoptive 'mother' and 'father', who joked about these anxieties later, were most gracious and even a little brave to allow us to live in a house in their pleasant grassed compound. In time I came to be spoken of as an adopted daughter and an adopted sister of this compound by many villagers and jokes were made about Joel Kahn, who accompanied me, having to bow to Rembau's uxori-local (residence in the wife's village) ways and become a mere in-marriage male (*orang semenda*).

The sheer hard work of village life, of course, belied the Golden Age imaginings. The day would begin at 5 am, whatever the stage of the agricultural and religious cycles, before the dawn

chorus of birds, chickens and insects had risen to its full intensity, with the call to prayer. After a chilly morning *mandi* bath (in which water from a large container is thrown over the body with a plastic pot), some of the older men would walk down the main village road to a coffee shop for breakfast, ignoring their wives' grumblings about the expense, and women and girls would be busy washing the last night's dishes, preparing the fire, collecting water, if there was no piped supply, preparing flour and banana cakes and getting children ready for the bus for the first school shift. Hot drinks were favoured at this time when the air was 'cool' (23°C) and people were chilled from their bath.

Rubber tappers would be on their way earlier than other workers, for the latex can only be tapped early in the morning before it dries up by 10 or 11 am. These tappers were mostly men. At harvest time and during the fruit season the villagers, men and women, would also get up early to try to complete heavy work before it became too unbearably hot. In the fiercely hot harvesting month most people stopped work at 11 am and only started again at 4 pm after a recuperating nap in the humid midday heat. Teenagers often did not get up until 7 or 8 am during school holidays, occasioning much scorn from their elders who grumbled about the sloth of the young. Until then, comparative peace reigned, but some young people were the proud owners of tape recorders, gifts from migrant kin, which blasted the kampung with the latest in worldwide hits played with failing batteries.

The morning busyness of clothes being washed and curries being cooked and school buses returning gave way to the stillness of the afternoon siesta; the only sounds were the constant hum of insects, the wind in the coconut palms, the thump of a palm branch on a tin roof and the crowings and cluckings of chickens. As the heat abated, the villagers re-emerged, women cleaning and preparing rice for cooking, throwing a winnowing basket back and forth rhythmically and pounding glutinous rice for sweetmeats.

As the sun sank, cattle were herded home, goats were penned, chickens roosted noisily in trees and in their cages, and children were dragged protesting to join their elders in the pre-dinner bath. The hum of chatter rose as small groups of mainly girls and women, often including the resident anthropologist, gathered to gossip and greet returning villagers, like the smartly dressed young woman working in a nearby town who was walking home uncomfortably through the dirt and stones in her high heels from the bus stop.

The lights would come on and people did not linger outside for as dusk fell and the call to evening prayer sounded the mosquitoes became voracious. There was still rice for women to cook and perhaps some extra dish to be made and the kitchens were busy with the sounds of sizzling fat and other preparations. Most people had dinner after the second Muslim evening prayer Isyak, and those not cooking passed the time until then reading, talking or listening to the radio. Afterwards, they might sit and talk, cook cakes for the next day, iron clothes or visit a house with a television. It was not only the mosquitoes that drove people into their houses at dusk. Village life pretty much shut down at night, with many people withdrawing into their houses and little social mixing apart from TV viewing groups. There was not even the gathering of youths that used to mark Minangkabau evenings in Sumatra when I lived there for a year. For some this private way of life was an explicit choice: 'I do not like to mix' (*tak suka campur*), they said, when I would ask them about joining political and other organisations.

In 1994, the villages present a sorry contrast to the earlier neatness and industry. The picture drawn below of a village economy sharply declining over the last two decades is mirrored in the village landscape. Overgrown and unkempt paddy fields, their bunds broken down, and neglected rubber holdings point to the other sources of income on which villagers now often have to depend. The declining village economy through the 1970s and 1980s could not support them and many have needed the help of the kin who have left to seek their fortune elsewhere.

People: Demographics and definitions

The villages from the mid 1970s on have had something of a missing generation. Few people between the ages of 25 and 40 have lived there, apart from some women with husbands away working in the city. Some villagers live on pensions from outside occupations, and a few, following the patterns set in the colonial period, earn salaries as teachers, clerks and labourers in nearby small towns.

Rembau people have long had a reputation for providing both service personnel—policemen and soldiers—and educated workers—schoolteachers, clerks and civil servants—for the Malayanised bureaucracy. But over the last twenty years or so, with industrial and urban growth, internal migration has risen sharply; young Malay women have migrated to the city to work in 'light industry', as domestics and as other pink collar workers;

and single and married men, many with their wives and children, have left in ever-increasing numbers to seek work in both middle class and working class occupations.

In the 1970s and 1980s, until rice cultivation stopped, many villagers gave fruit and rice to their absent kin in return for monetary help. More significantly, migrant parents in the city sent a number of their children home to the maternal grandmothers. There were good schools nearby, adequate health services, even piped water and electricity introduced in line with UMNO election promises. The children, as they grew older, were not always so happy to be there; they yearned for the bright lights and the better schools of the urban areas. Education was and is highly valued by the young 'moderns' and examination results were avidly discussed throughout the villages. There was no future in the rural areas: 'There's no work here, why stay?'

Definitional problems

It is usual at this point to present a body of statistics about age structure and household composition for one's informants. But the problematic concept of the household produces considerable epistemological and theoretical difficulties, which cloud what might at first sight seem a comparatively straightforward demographic exercise. In my view, we cannot just proceed to produce a table of household composition according to the accepted headings like elementary family and denuded family so clearly derived from Eurocentric social science models of family history and household. Although anthropologists have long recognised that developmental cycles make for untidy domestic groups in the 'real' world, the need to institute a more rigorous analysis of the household, to deconstruct it in terms of its internal power relations, has perhaps only been fully recognised with recent feminist interventions (see White, 1980; Sanjek, 1982; Harris, 1984; Whitehead, 1984).

The standard ways of producing tables of household composition are also not without problems, especially an excessive formalism. For example, how useful is the common category of denuded household to describe the situation where a widow is looking after some or all of the children of her absent migrant children? Similarly, the category ignores the difference between male and female-headed households. Such categorisation often obscures more than it describes.⁶ Again, there is the old problem of actually demarcating a concrete co-residential cooperative domestic group. In the past it has been common to select say a

cooking group as a household (see White, 1980; Firth, 1966: 12–21). Older widows in Rembau, however, often retained their own house, but spent a great deal of time in their daughter's house in the same compound, doing some or most of their cooking with the daughter, helping with domestic chores and looking after the grandchildren. These women maintained fiercely that they formed a separate household and wanted to be independent in their own small house. They frequently contributed their rice to their daughter's household but received the rest of their food from the daughter's budget. Moreover, contiguous households shared many help patterns that further erode the usefulness of formalistic divisions.

How are such domestic groupings to be classified unambiguously? Indeed, as will become clear, the very idea of the 'domestic' imposed by western scholarship on such contexts as Rembau is singularly problematic. At this point it is perhaps less important to expend effort on more and more refined definitions than to concentrate on some workable procedure. The only way I see to deal with these problems in this context of reporting empirical data is to give a highly detailed listing of the members of households in the original village study, which I do here.

Village households

While households formed analytically separable entities, it should be remembered that most households belonged to a compound of two or more houses related through close female ties. Today, with large-scale out-migration, some of the houses may be empty, in varying stages of disrepair. The customary practice in the 1970s and 1980s, however, continued the 'traditional' uxorilocal residence practice of daughters resident in the village building houses in their mother's compounds, the husbands marrying in (uxorilocal residence).

There were over 440 residents in the three study villages at the time of my original study, in 26 households in Kampung Bunga, 33 in Kampung Pokok and 40 in Kampung Teluk—a total of 99. In addition there were a number of unoccupied houses.⁷ Table 1.1 details the household composition for the three villages, treating each occupied house as a household, according to the residents' own view of these as separate units. The most obvious feature is the number of female-headed households. As the table shows, over 40 per cent of households were headed by widows, divorcees and other sole women (such as women whose husbands were working elsewhere). These proportions are, of course, in

Table 1.1 Household composition in three Rembau villages

	<i>Kampung Bunga</i>	<i>Kampung Pokok</i>	<i>Kampung Teluk</i>
Wife, husband, dependent child(ren)	2	3	4
Wife, husband, some children gone, dependent child(ren)	6	6	8
Denuded elementary, wife and husband only	1	4	1
Wife, husband, dependent grandchild(ren)	2		2
Wife, husband, some children gone, adult unmarried child(ren)			2
Wife, husband, some children gone, unmarried adult child(ren), dependent child(ren)		1	
Wife, husband, adult unmarried child(ren), dependent grandchild(ren)		1	
Wife, husband, married daughter, daughter's husband, daughter's child(ren)	1		
Wife, husband, widowed or divorced daughter, daughter's child(ren)			1
Wife, husband, widowed or divorced daughter, daughter's daughter, daughter's daughter's child(ren)		1	
Wife, husband, divorced daughter, (daughter's children gone)		1	
Woman with husband away working, dependent child(ren)	2	1	2
Woman with husband away working, all children gone		1	
Widow alone	1	4	1
Widow, adult daughter, daughter's husband, daughter's married child(ren), daughter's daughter's child(ren)			1
Widow, widowed/divorced daughter, daughter's child(ren)			2
Widow, dependent child(ren)	1		
Widow, dependent grandchild(ren)		2	2
Widow, some children gone, adult unmarried child(ren)	1		1
Widow, unmarried adult children, dependent children		1	
Widow, divorced daughter	1		
Widow, one or more unmarried children, dependent grandchildren		1	
Widow, married daughter, daughter's husband, dependent child(ren)		1	2
Widow, divorced/widowed daughter, separated daughter's daughter, daughter's daughter's child(ren)		1	
Widower, some children gone, dependent child(ren)	1		
Divorced woman alone	2	1	4
Divorcee, adult child(ren), dependent child(ren)	1		
Divorcee, some children gone, dependent child(ren)		1	1
Divorcee, dependent child(ren)		1	
Divorcee and adult child(ren)	1		

	Kampung Bunga	Kampung Pokok	Kampung Teluk
Divorcee, married daughter, daughter's husband, dependent child(ren)	1*	1	1
Divorcee, dependent grandchildren	1		
Widow/divorcee, ZD, ZD's husband, ZD's dependent child(ren)			2
Other	1**		3+
Totals	26	33	40

* This woman's daughter spent about half her time in the village, her husband spent less.

** W, H, Cs, WMMZS

+ a. Divorcee, her B, D, ZDS.

b. Divorcee, WMF, Z, D.

c. W, H, D, DH, WMB.

part artifacts of the methods I employed here. Thus where an elderly woman was sharing her house with a daughter and the daughter's husband, I counted this as a female-headed household, even though many researchers might have treated this household as a husband-wife couple with the wife's mother as an extra member. The decision about how to treat such units can be highly ideological: do we inherit the scholarly tradition of assuming males to be heads of households, here backed up by the general Malay cultural picture of the man as the *tuan rumah*, the 'lord' of the house, as the basis for constructing a household typology? Or should the fact that the older woman was the holder of the title to the compound land and the possessor of the house according to Rembau matrilineal ideology determine the issue? I decided that it should.

The household composition table also indicates some of the social patterns to be explored in the following chapters. We can see clearly, first, the persistence of uxorilocal residence in the patterns of daughter's husbands sharing the household with their wife and wife's mother, (although the category of elementary family hides the fact that all the married men in the villages were living uxorilocally); we can also see the significant numbers of divorcees, the husbands absent on migration, and numbers of grandchildren being cared for. The table also illustrates the contrast between the sizeable proportions of single person households—14 out of 99—and the numbers of large, complex extended family forms. These single person households all involved widowed or divorced women in middle or old age. But most importantly, we can see the central, and continuing, importance of the female ties forming the core of residential patterns.

Table 1.2 also underlines the high proportions of middle-aged

and elderly village residents in the mid 1970s. This trend has continued on up to the present: there were also relatively large numbers of teenagers, compared to younger children, which again shows some of the shifts that have taken place over the last decades with out-migration. While teenagers in the 1970s were completing their schooling in the village, far fewer of their younger kin have been brought up there in subsequent years, although as noted, grandchildren have continued to be sent home to grandmother.

Table 1.2 Residents of the three study villages by sex and age cohort

Age Cohort	Kampung Bunga		Kampung Pokok		Kampung Teluk	
	Male	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
70+	3	5	7	9	4	9
60-69	6	2	4	7	6	5
50-59	2	8	6	7	10	12
40-49	5	6	4	12	5	15
30-39	1	6	2	3	5	9
20-29	3	2	5	7	3	8
10-19	28	24	22	21	37	33
0-9	2	9	10	8	22	14
Totals	50	62	60	74	92	105
						443