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Conclusion: Female autonomy in Rembau?

Can we conclude that Rembau women have experienced an uncommon degree of 'autonomy', an autonomy intimately linked to the evolution of property relations? This question returns us to the feminist questions I posed in the Introduction. There I looked at some of the tensions within writings on Women-in-Development/Gender-and-Development, especially the furious debates about scholars' positionalities, and the ambiguities of the received models of the relationships between gender, modernity and underdevelopment. I also dwelled on the epistemological problems of the W-I-D/G-A-D debates and the ways that these tensions must necessarily pervade any attempt to deal with empirical materials. I saw real problems in authoritatively and positivistically identifying Malaysian modernity with the increasing gender inequality so often alleged to accompany such developments. As I suggested, analysing Rembau women's experiences of modernity is a no less ambiguous affair. I argued that the social transformations of Rembau society within modernity have been thoroughly gendered. We saw the rethinking of many of the central categories of analysis that the core absence of women from western social theory required: this case study of women's experiences of a divergent modernity questioned the reification of public and private at the heart of many of these feminist debates and argued for a close historicisation of the particular contingencies of local developments within modernity.

This work has stressed women's central part in these cultural transformations. But I have continuing problems with the ideas of both agency and resistance that have become increasingly

central to writings on post-colonial women (cf. Butler, 1990; Benhabib, 1992; Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, 1993). These are enormous issues for feminist and other social theory and not ones to be resolved here (see Butler and Scott, 1992). As Lata Mani notes, despite its being a central concern, women's agency remains poorly theorised within feminist thinking. 'This is equally true of post-structuralist theory, which while being critical of the bourgeois conception of agency as the free will of an autonomous self, has yet to produce an adequate formulation' (1990b: 36). As she argues, limiting discussion of women's agency to a victim/agent divide, 'makes it difficult to engage simultaneously women's systematic subordination *and* the ways in which they negotiate oppressive, even determining social conditions' (1990b: 37 citing Ong, 1987). Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, making a similar point, notes that many subaltern women have challenged the idea of women's sharing a universal experience of helplessness (1993: 119). Joan Scott suggests that a conceptualisation of agency that sees it 'not as an attribute or trait inhering in the will of autonomous individual subjects but as a discursive effect' will be more useful (quoted in Benbabib, 1992:2 21–2). But Benhabib, espousing a 'weak' version of post-modernism, sees particular dangers in feminism's embracing certain, 'strong' versions of postmodernism, which she among others sees as undermining the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women (1992: 228–29). She sees perhaps unresolvable problems for feminist writing in this clash of paradigms in which, on the one hand, power is seen as 'negotiated, subverted as well as resisted by the so-called 'victims' of history' and on the other hand, where the 'emphasis is on the "construction" of the agency of the victims through mechanisms of social and discursive control' (1992: 222).[1]

These problems are perhaps acute for feminist writing about Southeast Asia, where the dominance of ideas about women's 'relative autonomy' in some parts of the region has not confronted its own inheritance both of modernist ideas about the possibility of attaining a free and autonomous self and subtexts about an inevitable loss of autonomy with modernity. Ideas of both the relativisation and the loss of autonomy can be seen as legacies of androcentric western social theory, predicated on the male as the reference point: it seems to me that in many of the discussions about Southeast Asian women's autonomy, women are being judged as to how closely their state approximates that of the allegedly free and autonomous male subject/agent. More-

over, this is clearly the white, middle class, western male of the liberal, humanist imagination, the subject disowned by post-colonialists, post-structuralists and post-modernists.

One way of dealing with the issue of Rembau women's autonomy, given these problems, is to see women's subjectivities as being formed by multiple intersecting discourses—*adat perpatih*, Islam, modernity, work, property, mothering, marriage, sexualities, 'community' and so on: the shifting intersections of these discourses can be seen as having 'allowed' places for autonomous action. But to argue for women's relative social autonomy in a more totalising sense (what some might term collective agency) obviously implies a good deal more than arguing about individual autonomous selves: has the complex of *adat perpatih* in its modern manifestations, both colonial and post-colonial, formed within dominating global cultural production, nonetheless given women some means to put together the 'dispersed fragments of their selves' so eloquently described by Marnia Lazreg for the condition of Algerian women? (1988: 101) The answer can be a cautious 'yes', if one is willing with Lazreg and Benhabib to brave some current feminist retreats from the autonomous self and to retrieve a reconstructed feminist humanist politics and ethics (cf Benhabib, 1992). Writing from a somewhat different perspective, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan nonetheless invokes similar images of fragmentation when she argues that the fractured identity of the female subject entering into strategic alliances with groups can make a feminist politics possible (1993: 119).

We have similar difficulties with the idea of *resistance* in all of its late-marxist, subalternist and post-structuralist versions. Latter years have seen a plethora of writings analysing the workings of power either within structures of domination or within discursive practices. Both versions locate a necessarily occurring resistance, overt or covert, which is seen as a given of the operation of power. In feminist versions women as resisters are then often slotted into the received paradigms. But the central concern of contemporary feminist thinking with the political, historical and geographical situatedness of knowledges underlines the difficulties with deploying the ideas of female agency and resistance formed within western discourse to other contexts; to avoid such essentialisms, it is vital to clearly specify the conditions under which such agency and resistance arise and operate.

In many ways, the Rembau case provides some grist for productionist mills. I saw strong links between colonial political

economy and women's situation, indeed agency, in Rembau, arguing that there has been an intimate connection between property and gender relations throughout the last 100 years: colonial land legislation played an important part in the reconstitution of a set of non-capitalist relations that can be seen as recreating a degree of female social advantage. The subsequent development of social practices feminising landed property relations has arguably accentuated women's economic independence, even within a national context of peasantries subject to authoritarian colonial and post-colonial state control. This outcome for Rembau women runs counter to many arguments made about the relation between gender, modernity and underdevelopment. Thus the various inheritors of Engels' argument about the world historical defeat of women might have problems with the Rembau case. In my view, many such arguments have failed to consider the local specificities of the capitalist subsumption process, the 'complex and diverse articulations of the local and global' (Mani, 1990b: 25; Lash and Friedman, 1992).

I suggested that we could best understand the complex of ideas about *adat perpatih* produced both locally and by scholars and the Malay(si)an state over the last 100 years as a series of discursive formations. The constructions of *adat* as an imagined community (cf Anderson, 1983) or commonality were not simply functions of the economic and political forces of the last century. I argued for a more dialectical understanding of the interrelations and tensions between economy and polity and these discursive formations: we cannot see successive constructions of *adat perpatih* as constituting a reified pre-modern or non-modern sphere or relic, an egalitarian 'communal' (and 'female') sphere as against 'modern' rationalistic, capitalist sectors of society; we need to see *adat* as being formed within and in relationship to capitalist culture and modernity. Joel Kahn argues for the Minangkabau that central to the very definition of peasantries is their embeddedness in modern society (1993: 287). In this sense I was rejecting what some might see as a dangerous essentialism in some subalternist arguments: these set out to reclaim the authentic primordial consciousness of subaltern classes, the subjectivities subjugated by the universalising modes of neo-colonialist, neo-nationalist and economistic marxist historiographies (O'Hanlon, 1988).[2] This subalternist reclamation project shares some of the assumptions of 'people's history', 'history from below' and feminist history in its claim to recover the experience of oppressed and marginalised groups and in its emphasis upon a communal mode of consciousness among peas-

ants. Such a 'moral economy' with all its implications of homogeneity and consensus among the subalterns (eg Scott, 1976) is seen to become an active agent of either overt or hidden resistance.[3]

Adat perpatih, however, cannot usefully be seen as the homogeneous oppositional cultural sphere implied by many of these theoretical positions, even if we could avoid all the problems with the idea of a 'culture' that anthropologists have underlined (Fox, 1991; Keesing, 1991). Negeri Sembilan culture, like Minangkabau culture, is better understood as a project of constitution by officials, the local 'middle class' and anthropologists (cf Kahn, 1993). As noted, writings on Negeri Sembilan have been attached to a series of dualisms, women/men, *adat*/Islam, rice/rubber, and so on. *Adat*, I suggested, should be seen rather as a series of constantly shifting and unstable, gendered discourses deployed strategically. It is unhelpful to pose a central opposition between *adat*/Islam, female/male, seeing religion as being inherently patriarchal and oppressive to women and *adat* as communitarian and egalitarian, inherently supportive of women. Women in their everyday practices have constantly recreated Islamic faith: to ascribe these religious acts to women's governance by (oppressive) religious ideologies, as many western-based feminists describing similar situations have done (cf Lazreg, 1988), seems ultimately to position them as victims (cf Mohanty, 1988). Not least of the complications with such polarities is the way that *adat perpatih* has emerged as a sphere for the exercise of contemporary (mainly) male identity politics in contemporary Malaysia, with *adat* positions being used on occasion to project the holder within national political spheres. On the other hand, I have suggested that *adat perpatih* has operated to sustain relatively communitarian anti-development ideologies at specific points in time, and that this communitarianism has had implications for women's situation. But we can also recall the anti-communitarianism of increasingly atomised village production, and some residents' preference for an isolationist rural idyll (*'tak suka campur*, I don't like to mix') in the contemporary period. Today, we may see the wave of neo-traditionalism reconstructing Malay culture nationally (Kahn, 1992) as a form of post- or anti-modern identity cultural politics, within which *adat perpatih* has a distinct place. This ties Negeri Sembilan 'culture' both into a romanticised neo-traditionalism and a subalternist notion of Malay deprivation (Joel Kahn, personal communication) produced by intellectuals and activated in the New Economic Policy.

It is clear that Malaysian versions of modernity verging on post-modernity have produced some of the conditions that elsewhere have produced some degree of female rebellion (see West and Blumberg, 1990). I have seen Rembau women's relative independence as being overtly recreated through women's own political actions to defend it. But on the other hand, I also suggested that the events of 1951, when women fought off attempts to dismantle *adat perpatih*, should not be seen simply as a form of proto-feminism. Taking place during a period of intense national political activity, they show the need to consider the intimate relation between gender relations and other political processes in Rembau. The female opposition to moves to dismantle their property rights that emerged was not a given of the system; we have to account for the actual form that such sexual contradictions and sexual politics have taken in specific contexts. Rembau women clearly had a substantial social base for the development of a collective consciousness as *women* which could be mobilised politically and strategically at a given moment in response to the attacks on *adat*. But this sexual politics was also circumscribed, particularly by women's position within the household. Such political struggle can be difficult to sustain. Nonetheless, this victory of the pro-*adat* forces, temporary as it might have been, helped recreate the conditions of women's relative social advantage and secured the ideological association of women with 'tradition' and the 'community'.

Women's relative 'autonomy' may have been manifested collectively on a number of occasions, but it has also been represented in highly contradictory ways. Thus one set of propositions represented women as weak pawns of men, the victims of male irresponsibility, needing the protection of *adat*, other benevolent males and gifts of land from men. But at the same time, they were also represented as all-powerful, indeed domineering, matriarchs and controllers of the household who were also sometimes dangerously adept with love potions.[4] These ideological ambiguities can be seen as linked to structural contradictions in women's situation. Thus while property relations and economy have conferred sizeable advantages, there have been other forces at work which can be seen as seriously disadvantaging women within village society, including the construction of domesticity, many ritual and religious practices, and everyday social practices such as controls on women's mobility and deferences towards men. Of course, women as much as men have produced and recreated these practices. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the cultural valuation of

women and the central part it played in the continuing feminisation of property relations. I saw this valuation of women as closely linked to the political and ideological identification of women with the 'matrilineal' community.

In chapter 7 I suggested that many of my village informants saw domesticity as oppressive to women. A prevailing ideological definition of women presented them as housewives, although this idea did not have the same connotations as in the West; rather in the recent past at least it implied the keeper of the house, with a clear expectation of other work, especially agricultural work. I pointed out that it is not easy to separate out domestic work analytically; much of it was part of the structure of subsistence production, not a privatised, highly oppressive ideological domain. We saw that mothers of young children faced a continuous round of feeding, washing, cooking, supervising homework and emotional work and that modernisation may well have increased women's work rather than relieving it. Domestic work emerged as having high priority over other forms of labour in the village economy: for example, women with young children would not cultivate their share of paddy land, and women tappers would stop for pressing domestic tasks. Such labour was clearly considered vital in reproducing all the village production processes. Although such unvalorised labour was not totally female, women were very articulate about their double burden of domestic and other labour, many accusing men of laziness.

Women's former advantages in production, as we saw, have been seriously undermined in the industrialising era. The relative collapse of the village economy, leaving the rural area as little more than a dormitory for the spreading urbanism of the cities, can be seen as profoundly affecting women's central place within the complex and shifting discursive formation of *adat perpatih*. Women's economic vulnerabilities appear to have increased with the decline of the village economy and with the rise of migrant women's economic dependence on husbands. Of course, women as 'victims' of unfair divorce laws were always to some degree vulnerable. But contemporary problems in the rural economy have placed women's situation firmly in perspective. Formally, they have retained their rights in ancestral land, but much of it is unused and its future is uncertain. As well, the high level of female-headed households has given women an often absolute control over their everyday household and productive lives, although they may have had adult children or other kin anxious to be involved in their care. The realities of massive out-migration and crisis in rural production, however, have steadily

undermined what independence land owning has given women in the village economy. The rising level of commoditisation of inputs had important implications for an ageing female labour force. As I stressed, women in the 1970s and 1980s were disadvantaged in obtaining cash for inputs and the need for these was compounded by labour shortages. The net effect seems to have been a greater dependence of married women on their husbands, and of widows and divorcees on their adult (and often absent) children. Village production has been viewed more and more as a means to eke out a pension or remittances.

The move to the city has seen women increasingly relegated to a privatised ideological domain. As we saw, this relegation has been strongly supported by some elements within the Malaysian state and other elaborated 'modern' discourses about womanhood and marriage. The role of the urban housewife can be seen to represent a definite decline in economic autonomy and access to important economic and social resources available to village women, including childcare and moral support. Many of the urban scenarios have been redolent of domesticity in the West, with young wives ensconced in the suburbs, engaged in the work of coordinating consumption. But for others, such domesticity has involved living in a squatter's shack, looking after children with only a communal standpipe and no proper sanitation. Of course, the structural isolation of the housewife can be overdrawn, given the involvement of many migrants in the remittance economy. Women themselves have been caught up in competing definitions about how 'family life' should be conducted. But whether elementary or extended, the ideological reconstruction of 'family' has taken for granted the unvalorised labour women and their mainly female relatives do for each other and their male kin.

We saw, too, the processes involved in women's becoming workers, with all the contradictions these posed. The new forms of wage labour could provide some short-lived independence for women. But the modernist search for autonomy in new work and family patterns has also created new forms of gender subordination at home and work, undermining what are left of women's relative social advantages. Younger women's situation has been caught up in tensions between the structural constraints generating kin dependence, and drives towards modernist individualism; their independence from their parents anyhow has been somewhat illusory, when we consider the patterns of kin dependence generated within new moral economies of kinship; young people's earnings have increasingly contributed to the reproduction of the

village household. The effects on young women's standing in their families is a complex issue as we saw. The processes freeing young women to urban labour markets and the wickedness of the city and the world have been beset with ideological conflicts, too. As I noted, neither *adat* nor Islam in their historical blend in Rembau has countenanced the free young woman of modernist ideology; my Rembau informants mostly couched their aspirations firmly in terms of 'family'.

It is apparent, therefore, that the recent developments have produced many pressures threatening women's relative advantages in this segment of Malay society. These have included pressures against matrilineal practices, new patterns of economic dependence and new kinship and household patterns. I stressed the role of sexual politics in creating female advantages. Women have not only defended their rights in overtly political ways, but also through what can be seen as everyday acts of 'resistance', if we can use this problematic term, such as refusing to get married. The case of the independent-minded young widow will be recalled: she greatly relished the independence her husband's pension afforded her, refusing to remarry and happy to avoid the constant demands of marriage even though this meant enduring *janda* status. Judged from a modernist western perspective, she could be seen as having the best of both worlds, a regular cash income, a high level of independence (she and her mother had quarrelled, so she was not even beholden to her) and her base in the village society. We can see, too, that the increasing value placed on freedom, privacy, and individualism by young people has represented a kind of struggle for autonomy in new areas. But paradoxically, such struggles have been enmeshed in changes that have seriously undermined the bases of village women's advantages. It would also be surprising if 'male' attacks on *adat* were not renewed.

My discussion of attempts to theorise gender in the development process drew attention to the dangers in dualist theories that suggest that women somehow occupy separate private or subsistence spheres. These sidestep problems in the determination of such spheres and ignore the interpenetration of gender and other social relations. Feminist critiques of the standard social science concept of the household suggested that this model completely ignores female subsumption in the household in both advanced capitalist societies and in many peasant societies where women's labour is hidden in an assumed unified household enterprise. But is the critical feminist model of hidden exploitation appropriate to Rembau rural society, at least for the

household as a productive unit in subsistence and petty commodity production over the last 100 years or so? In some ways it is not. There is clearly a case for arguing that Rembau's reconstituted matrilineal practices inverted some of the conditions of women's subordination within the household elsewhere: these include especially property relations, relations of appropriation of labour and women's central role in kinship practices. Women's ideological centrality as mothers has been far from inherently oppressive either. (But we should beware of confusing this focal role with the sheer hard labour of mothering.) One of my main conclusions, then, is that it is hard to sustain a picture of female subordination within the Rembau household while it functioned as a productive unit. Women have had a range of material rights in land and considerable control of the product; their ownership moreover has by no means been token, although crisis in the village economy and pressures towards commoditisation contributed to greater dependence on others in recent years.

Domestic labour and its appropriation in the household is a different matter. I have pointed out how many women in Rembau carried a double burden of productive and reproductive labours and that they were very articulate about this burden. I also discussed the importance of domestic labour in the rural economy and its links to the remittance economy. The burden of this labour has clearly been oppressive to women. Such domesticity has been accentuated by all the elaborated ritual and religious ideologies positing female inferiority and demanding female deference to males. Nonetheless, it is questionable whether the Rembau household in the contemporary conjuncture has constituted a privatised, oppressive sphere in the sense envisaged by much feminist work in the West. Male writers have represented Negeri Sembilan and other Malay women as constrained, acquiescent, polite, even formal in public and in the company of men in public. But Swift notes that he suspects that behind this deference women have considerable power in the household (Swift, 1965). Many Malay women also represent themselves as the power in the household. As one Negeri Sembilan woman academic asked me, only half in jest, 'Did you discover that Malay women really rule the roost? They shouldn't be seen to be doing so but they do!' Of course, such interpretations have long been the rationale provided for women's subordination in European society. Yet the women I sometimes saw in women's gatherings in Rembau would hardly impress the observer as the gendered slaves of some feminist rhetoric, with their rude comments and laughter about men's laziness and lack of support.

In my introduction I also raised the question about how far we should identify the complex picture of Rembau women's situation as an effect of the capitalist development process. I have been stressing throughout the need for attention to the historical specificities of Malaysian modernity within this process. I argued that rather than seeing gender relations as an 'effect' of larger social forces, we should see them as integral to the transformations producing Rembau social structure and practices historically. Gender relationships in the district have been continuously generated through complex and uneven historical processes, not least by women's own political actions. Gender has been central to the specific and varying responses to the development process which have been apparent in many aspects of Rembau villagers' reactions to the capitalist and colonial orders. I am thinking here of among other responses, resistance to commoditisation, resistance to land legislation, evasion of rubber regulation and state economic management and the defence of *adat*. As I have been arguing throughout, women and men were active in all these processes and practices as gendered agents. I saw gender as a constantly reconstituted category of relations subject to highly specific historical determinations, not just the formal, logical determinations of the capitalist system in an abstract sense. In particular, it is apparent that the political and ideological identification of women with this reconstituted non-capitalist enclave had material effects which have been more complex and uneven than some of the more common claims about the negative effects of this development process on women's situation might suggest. This makes it clear that the defence of 'tradition' in all its shifting meanings within Rembau has been much more complex than a mere conservative reflex: it has been also on occasion an act of overt sexual politics. We may conclude, therefore that it was the very unevenness of capitalist penetration into village society that has left women with some social advantages. But successive phases of capitalist accumulation and the tensions between the reconstituted social forms and new economic forces have placed these advantages under increasing pressure.

And what of the future? How long can women's relative social advantages resist the growing pressures against them? After all, they are based in backward, unproductive and poor sectors. Women's resistance to capitalist development and its advocates has derived its strength from the matrilineal imagined community; egalitarian *adat* ideology, the moral economy of kinship and the high cultural valuation of women have all been

linked to this enclave and its conservation. As we saw, women have occupied a central place in both the urban and rural imaginaries as the keepers of a rural idyll which has explicitly distanced itself from the anomie, materialism and status-seeking of the city. I am not particularly optimistic, however, about the future of *adat perpatih* and women's situation within it. Pressures to dismantle it are likely to come both from the modernist young and from the Malaysian state's intensifying 'development' drives; the misogyny of much of the state apparatus could also be seen as significant in affecting the future course of Rembau society's relations with the wider society and economy. The most overtly anti-female action would be a dismantling of the *adat* system and with it the bases for Rembau women's historically reconstituted relative autonomy.

It is possible of course that other women's struggles nationally could become explicitly involved in an *adat perpatih* reclamation project, in either romanticised neo-traditional or more overtly subalternist versions. But while the 1951 and other defences of *adat* have been clearly embedded within modernity, further defences of *adat* would probably draw on already constituted national feminisms, producing new political conjunctures and complexities, especially in a context marked by Islamic revivalism and its alternative critique of versions of modernity. This is not to imply that such 'feminist' engagements as feminist networks, women's crisis centres and Islamic and legal reformisms are new: there has been a long history of women's involvement in social reform in the country. But such a defence of *adat* could well take place in an explicitly middle class political arena, like many 'subalternist' struggles. At present, however, Rembau women's aspirations seem to be centred more on modernist hopes for prosperity and personal happinesses. New forms of family and work may seem to offer renewed autonomy to young women in Rembau, but these new forms can be seen as part of larger forces promising if anything greater dependence and declining rights—a woman's place.