

Women in Adat Perpatih
Society: Continuity and
Change

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WOMEN IN ADAT PERPATIH SOCIETY: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

by Prof. Madya Dr. Azizah Kassim

Introduction.

The Adat Perpatih society in Negeri Sembilan is one of the few matrilineal societies found in Southeast Asia, and the only one of its kind in Malaysia. It traces its descent to the early Minangkabau immigrants who are believed to have arrived in west Malaysia in the late sixteenth century. The society is a relatively small one, confined largely to the Malays indigenous to the five of the seven districts in the state i.e Kuala Pilah, Jelebu, Jempul, Tampin and Rembau. Estimates on the number of people in the Adat Perpatih society are not available as no attempt has been made to enumerate them. Such an exercise would be problematical because of the constant flow of population from and into these districts.

Adherents of the Adat Perpatih may be limited in numerical strength and spatial distribution, but their somewhat unique kinship system has attracted much interest among the early colonial administrators, scholars and others. Such interest, which has persisted until today has resulted in many published works on the society as evidenced by the publication list compiled by Tunku Noraidah (1984). However, a close look at these studies reveals that little attention has been given to the

position of women in the matrilineal society. It is only in the last two decades i.e since 1969 when objective studies on these women began. To date apart from the writer (Azizah Kassim 1970; 1974; 1986; 1988; 1989; & 1990) the only other researcher on the subject is Malla Stevens (1981; 1985; & 1987).

The availability of these works on the matrilineal women did not do much to clarify their status within the Adat Perpatih society. The general public in Malaysia, especially those outside the domain of the Adat, very often typecaste the matrilineal women as strident, domineering, and in control of their menfolk within the family and the household. In this paper the writer sets out to test the validity of this stereotype. By examining the basic principles of the Adat I attempt to look at women's rights and obligations within the family and the community. Central to my analysis here is gender relations, between women and their menfolk, including husbands and kin. The basic questions being addressed here are: what was the position of women in the traditional context? How do socio-economic changes that have taken place in the last few decades affect women's position in the matrilineal society?

The approach adopted here is anthropological. The writer focusses her attention on a group of Adat Perpatih communities in (1) the mukim of Seri Menanti, in the district of Kuala Pilah.

(1)

This paper is based on research carried out by the writer between 1986-88 under the auspices of JSPS-VCC (Japanese Society for the promotion of Science and Vice Chancellors Council of Malaysia). The research was funded by Hitachi Foundation.

Changes outlined here covers a period of about two decades i.e. from the time the writer began her earlier work on women in these communities in 1969. The earlier data is here used as a basis for comparison with those derived from the later research.

2.0. Basic Principles of Adat Perpatih

The social organization of Adat Perpatih is founded on the following principles:

- (1) Descent is traced through the female line i.e the kinship system is matrilineal.
- (2) Based on the matrilineal principle, the society is divided into clans (Suku) and lineages (Perut). There are twelve clans, each with a distinct name of its own and headed by an elder known locally as the Lembaga. Each clan, is further divided into lineages, each of which is headed by a Buapak.
- (3) Each clan has an allotted amount of ancestral land which is registered in the name of its female members. Male members of the clan have usufructory right over the land.
- (4) Each clan and lineage practise exogamy i.e. prohibition on intra-group marriage. However, what constitutes an exogamic unit varies, in some cases a clan, in others a lineage.

- (5) Transmission of properties, titles and statuses is through the female line.
- (6) Residence is exorilocal i.e the man leaves his natal place after marriage and resides at his wife's kampung.

3.0 Position of women in the traditional setting.

The Adat Society was based on an agricultural economy. Until the introduction of rubber in the early twentieth century the economy was largely subsistence in nature, depending largely on the cultivation of rice, fruits and vegetables; and the collection of forest products. The introduction of rubber brought in a new source of cash income, and the dependence on the dual economy of rice for subsistence, and rubber for cash, persisted till the sixties. It is this period before the sixties which is considered the traditional setting in this paper.

3.1 The Central Role of Women

In the traditional context, particularly in the years before independence in 1957, the matrilineal kinship system was the main basis for social, economic and political organization in the village and supra-village level. For the kinship system to survive, the kinship group must be perpetuated and this can only be achieved by the women. Hence, women occupy a central position in the Adat Perpatih society.

Without female children a lineage and kinship group will

perish (pupus). Thus it was necessary for a family to have at least one female child. The lack of female children was seen as a catastrophe, and a woman without daughters were often pitied. Invariably, families faced with such a predicament overcame it by adopting a female child, usually from a local Chinese family. The choice was both for pragmatic and cultural reasons. Female children were treasured in the Adat community and it was almost impossible to persuade their parents to part with them. Chinese female children on the other hand, were more easily available. The Chinese have a patrilineal kinship system which emphasises the importance of the males and with such a kinship ideology many Chinese families were inclined to give away female children, especially if they have many. Chinese children were also favoured for their fair complexion which is very much appreciated by the Malays.

The incorporation of the adopted children into the adoptive parent's family and kinship group would be formalised through a ritual ceremony called the "berkadem". After the ceremony, the adopted female children were accorded all the rights and obligations normally enjoyed by a child born in the society.

3.2 Women, Land and Political Office

Women are also seen as the custodian of the Adat, and in accordance with this important status the ancestral land (known also as customary land or tanah Adat dan Pesaka) are entrusted in their care. Such land are generally for subsistence agriculture and for homestead. In Negeri Sembilan today, ancestral land of

Adat Perpatih comprises kampung land and rice fields and to a small extent fish pond (tebat), orchards (dusun) and rubber plantations. The total size of ancestral land in the state is small, i.e only about 34,565 acres, accounting for less than one percent of all agricultural land in the state (see Table 1). It is believed that the total size of Adat Perpatih customary land has remained constant since their registration about a century ago. The acreage may have decreased in the post-independence era, due to land reclamation by the government for the purposes of physical development in the rural areas.

Table 1
Customary Land in Negeri Sembilan

	Jelebu	K.Pilah	Jempul	Rembau	Tampin	Total (acres)
No. of lots	64	9,950	809	8,261	1,103	20,097
No. of titles	53	9,973	751	8,587	992	20,366
Total size	96	18,000	1,669	12,698	2,072	34,565

Note: There is no customary land in other districts.

Source: Adapted from Mohd Shah bin Hj. Lassim and Norhalim bin Hj. Ibrahim [1984: 9]. The authors used figures from the Seremban Survey Department. No date was given. Because the size of customary land is fixed the absence of a date is irrelevant.

Ancestral land is transmitted through women i.e. from mother to daughters with each one having equal share. Where a family has

no female heir, the land goes to the wife's nearest female kin, i.e. her sister's daughters. In the absence of maternal nieces, it goes to maternal grand-nieces, etc. (see diagram 1). Men do not inherit ancestral land, but they have usufructory right over them. This right, however cannot be transmitted to their children.

In theory, ancestral land are held in trust by women for the clan. Ownership of such land is not absolute i.e. a woman cannot sell the land to anyone she pleases. If a woman is in dire need of money she can only sell her land to her female kin, offering the nearest first and then to other matrilineal kin. Only intra-clan sale is allowed. This limited market restricts the value of the land; but in the days when land was not commoditised, such limitation was not a problem.

Besides ancestral land, adherents of the Adat also own rubber smallholdings which varies in size i.e. between one and five acres. This category of land which is designated as Malay Reservation is not subject to Adat Perpatih rules of inheritance. It is transmitted according to Islamic rules, the Faraid, which favours the male i.e. two-thirds to men and one-third to women. However, in practice transmission of Malay reservation land was and still is very much influenced by the ideology of the Adat where men give up their share in favour of the women.

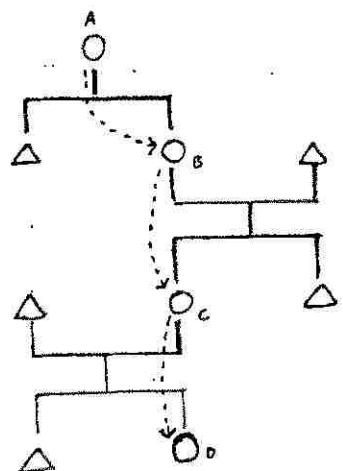
In addition to land, women also inherit the family house. In cases where a family has more than one daughter, either the eldest or the last female child inherits the house. The right to

Diagram I

PATTERNS OF INHERITANCE

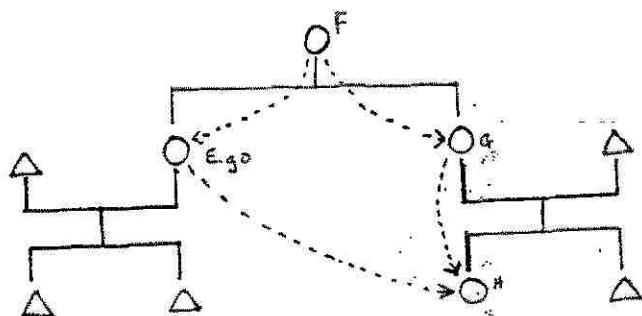
Legend:

- △ Male
- Female
- Transmission



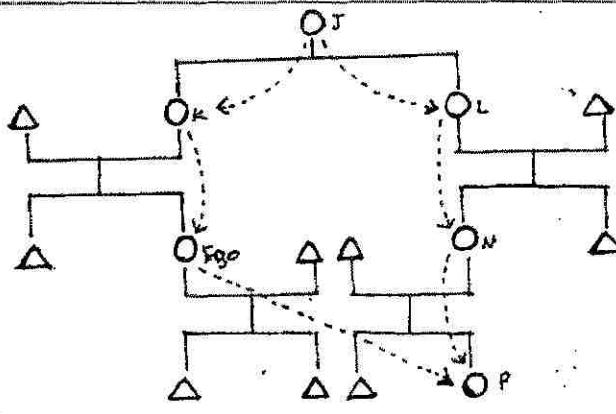
Mode I

From Mother to daughter



Mode 2

From Ego to sister's children



Mode 3

From Ego to Mother's sister's grand daughter

inherit and use the ancestral land and family house comes with obligations to members of the family and lineage. Women, not men, are held responsible for taking care of their parents in their old age, a practice contrary to Islamic teaching. Men are not expected to care for their elderly parents as they leave their natal residence to live with the wife's after getting married.

In addition women are also expected to provide accommodation and assistance to close matrilineal kin in their times of need, especially to their male siblings and to their mother's brothers, referred to as the "buapak kadim". Situations in which such relatives require assistance are many. For instance, a man may have a temporary tiff with his wife and feeling peeved decided to leave his marital home for a while. He may divorce his wife; or his wife may have died. Under such circumstances he has to leave his wife's place and return to his natal village, to the house of his close matrilineal kins i.e his mother's, if she is still alive; his sisters' or his sisters' daughters'; his maternal female cousins'; etc..

Titles and statuses are also passed through the female line. Among these are offices in the traditional political system which are retained until today. Examples are the post of Undang, Penghulu Luak, Lembaga and Buapak. These posts are held by men, and in the old days they were important statuses which commanded power and respect and from which the incumbants derived an income. Today, these posts are given official recognition by the state government and the incumbants are given allowances of varying amounts. At the lowest level of the hierarchy, a minor chief may

get a stipend of a few hundred dollars a year, and at the top rung, the Undang receives a four figure monthly salary in addition to other privileges. These posts which are transmitted matrilineally are held in rotation by a select number of lineage groups. Thus an Undang, for example, will not transmit the post he holds to his son but to his matrilineal heir i.e a son of one of his classificatory sister's from anyone of the select group of "ruling families". (See diagram 2).

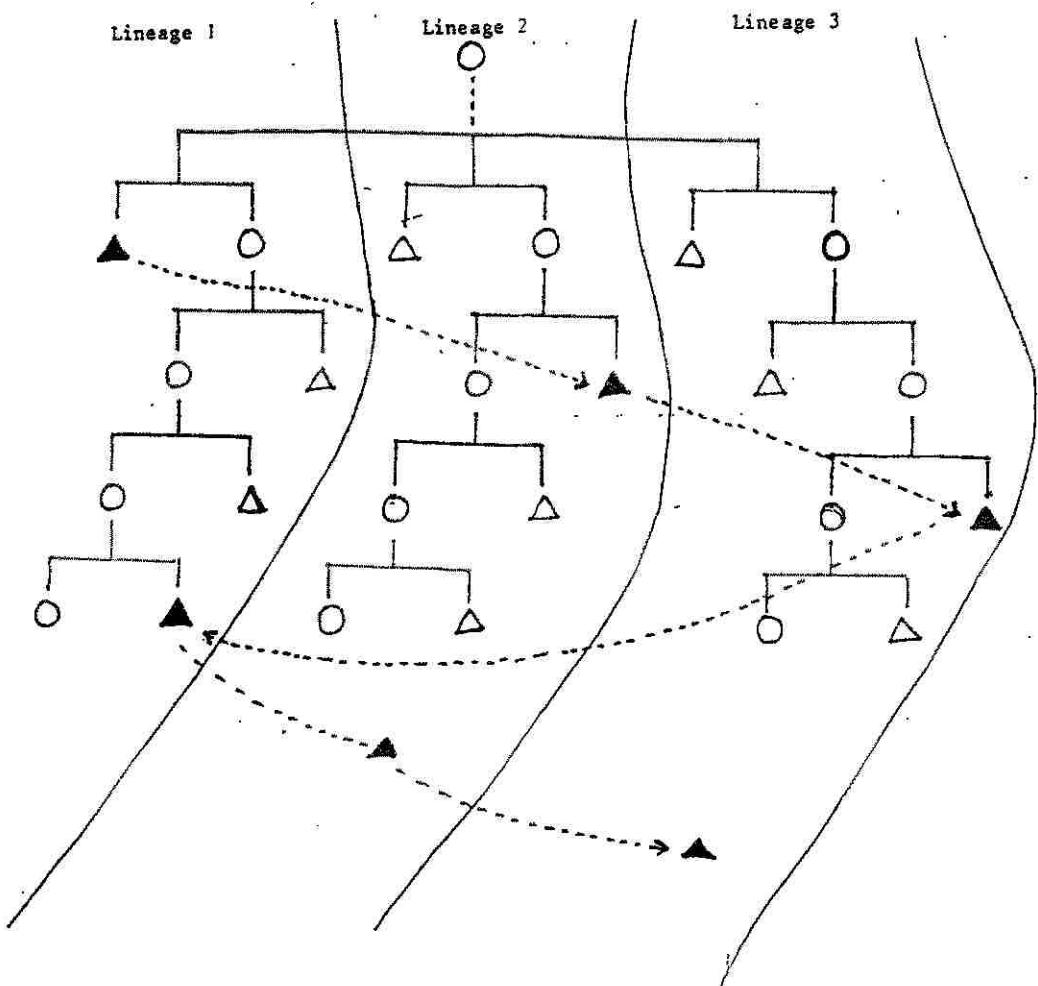
3.3 Gender Relations: Women, Their Husband and Male Kin

The pattern of land inheritance and residence as well as the mode of economic organization in the traditional Adat Perpatih society enabled the woman to have an edge in her relationship with the men - her husband and her male kin. The dynamics of such a relationship can only be understood in relation to the peasant economy.

As alluded to earlier, traditional economy of the Adat Perpatih society was dependent mainly on rice cultivation for subsistence and rubber tapping for cash. Women controlled the means of production i.e land for agriculture (for rice cultivation and to some extent rubber), land for homestead, and housing. Matrilocality removes men from their natal residence, thus making it difficult for them to work the land of their family of orientation. Thus, men were compelled to work on land belonging to their wife or wife's kin. The further men were from their natal residence, the more dependent they were on the wife and her family for their livelihood.

Diagram II

TRANSMISSION OF POLITICAL OFFICE
(in rotation between three hypothetical lineages)



Legend :

○ Female

△ Male

.....→ Transmission

In the peasant economy, there was also gender differentiation in economic activities. Rubber tapping was considered a man's job while rice growing and processing that of the woman's. A man might help his wife in the fields if he was not otherwise engaged, and vice versa. Nonetheless, it was considered the duty of the wife to provide rice, the staple food of the family, and the duty of the husband to acquire cash to purchase all other family necessities. Thus the wife and husband contributed equally to household economy. Given such a context the status of the husband and wife was deemed to be equal, as reflected by the term used to refer to a spouse which is *kawan* (lit. friend).

The rule of matrilocality, in conjunction with women's control over the means of production made it difficult for a man to exercise control over his wife. He is a "lodger" in the house of his wife or wife's mother, surrounded by the kith and kin of his wife. In such a setting it would be almost impossible for the husband to maltreat or abuse his wife. If he dared to do so, he risks incurring the wrath of his wife's kin and in the event of a marital breakdown it was he who has to leave the marital home. A marital break-up is most inconvenient for a man as he tend to lose all the social and economic investments he has made at the wife's place. He also faces an uncertain future as far as accommodation is concerned. Depending on the nature of his relationship with his close matrilineal kin after his marriage, his kin group may or may not want to accommodate him. If he was rejected by his kin he had no choice but to spend the rest of

his life in the village mosque or surau. Indeed, in many villages in the Adat territory, such cases are not unknown.

In view of the above, I contend that in the traditional context, a woman had an edge in her relationship with her husband. She was in a relatively powerful position and such power increased with age. For the longer the marriage last, the more removed a man was from his matrilineal kin and the harder it was for him to return to his natal home and be welcome and accepted by his matrilineal kin.

It is my impression that a woman also occupied a dominant position in her relationship with her male kin i.e her brothers, mother's brother, etc.. By virtue of her right of inheritance to land and housing, she could determine who can or cannot reside in the ancestral home, who could be allowed to share the use of the rice fields, or who could collect produce (such as fruits, palm leaves for attap roofing, fish, sago, etc.) from the ancestral farm land. She had what some anthropologists call relative autonomy. Such was the privilege of the matrilineal women which those in non-matrilineal societies did not enjoy.

It must be stressed that women's dominant position in the matrilineal society is not conspicuous. Their religion, Islam, which emphasises patriliney and patriarchy tends either to neutralise female power or to conceal it from the public. But female power was there to be utilised by the women as and when it suited them.

4.0 Socio-Economic Changes in the Adat Perpatih Society

I maintain that the "special" position of the matrilineal women is attributable mainly to two basic principles of the Adat i.e the inheritance pattern and matrilocality, which allowed women in the peasant economy to control the means of production and living space. Adat principles remain the same today, but they are no longer observed strictly. This change in attitude towards the Adat is attributable to several socio-economic developments which have taken place in the mukim in the years after independence.

In the last three decades the mukim under study has been the recipient of many development projects. Most of the villages in the mukim are now accessible by motorised transport; almost 90 percent of the households have electricity supply and piped water; and the number of schools, health centres, community halls and prayer houses have increased many fold. In the economic spheres several schemes have been formulated and implemented to help improve agriculture in the traditional villages. These changes, along with developments extraneous to the mukim, particularly the opening up of new agricultural schemes for resettlement and the expansion of industrialization in the seventies, have left a profound impact on the social organization of Adat Perpatih.

In the post independence period, especially after the implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1971, the mukim suffered huge population losses due to out-migration. The spread

of education has given way to a new attitude towards jobs; few of those who benefitted from formal education, even up to the secondary three level (Form Three), are keen on agricultural jobs in the peasant economy. Such jobs are now considered dirty, demeaning and physically demanding. To escape working in the paddy fields and in the rubber small holdings, most of the young (in their late teens or early twenties) migrated to the urban areas soon after leaving school, in search of paid employment especially in the manufacturing sector and the public service. Others, too old to qualify for jobs in the urban areas, moved to land resettlement schemes which offer better economic opportunities. Such a population drift left many traditional villages in the mukim without sufficient labour for agriculture.

Agricultural activities, especially rice growing began to decline inspite of the availability of agricultural development strategies to combat it. The rate of decline became accentuated by the lack of water supply and silting of the rice fields caused by indiscriminate felling of trees by loggers. Most of the rice fields in the mukim, and elsewhere in the district of Kuala Pilah have remained idle in the last fifteen years.

In many areas in the mukim today the presence of idle rice land is very conspicuous; in some cases rice fields have dried up and turn into secondary jungles. In some areas too, land for homestead are left neglected as the owners have left for the towns or resettlement schemes. Rubber small holdings too suffer from labour shortages, but non-utilization or under-utilization of rubber small holdings are not easily seen as rubber holdings are

largely situated away from village settlements.

The presence of under-utilised or non-utilised agricultural land are not the only evidence of agricultural decline in the Adat Perpatih territory. In my survey on ten communities in the sultanate between 1987 and 1991, I note that only a third still regard themselves as 'agricultural' under study i.e. 33 per cent were dependent on agriculture. The other 66 per cent of the households' sources of cash income were either trapping, animal husbandry, i.e. the rearing of cows, and the sale of fruits. The others had non-agricultural sources of income; from pensions, remittances from children who are in paid employment in the urban areas, and in the case of these still economically active, from wages or salaries of heads of households (see Azizah Kassim, 1988:132-149). The Adat Perpatih economy has undergone considerable transformations; it is no longer dependent on agriculture and on Adat land but on income from paid employment.

4.1 Impact of change on Adat Perpatih

The process of depeasantization taking place in the Adat Perpatih society, among other factors reduces the relevance of the Adat. As I explained in an earlier paper (Azizah Kassim, 1991, forthcoming) kinship groupings now play minimal role in village socio-economic organizations; their role being replaced by new forms of social alignments based on a number of factors, such as religion, common economic interests and political party affiliations.

Few of the young now know the name of their respective clan or who their clan elders are. To many, the Adat Perpatih is relevant only for symbolic reasons and for limited economic purposes such as to determine their clan and lineage for purposes of transmission of property and statuses. Interactions with clan elders are minimal. Very often the clan elders are sought only when necessary, for example when their approval and signatures are needed in cases of transmission of ancestral land. The few who may show keen interest in the Adat are those who hope to benefit directly from it, such as to hold offices in the traditional but relatively defunct Adat political structure.

4.2 A Move Towards Gender Egalitarianism

With the declining importance of clan and lineage and of the Adat as a whole in the life of the villagers, there seems to be a move towards gender egalitarianism. Little emphasis is now placed on having female children. Daughters were required to take care of ancestral land and the family house, to take care of elderly parents and other close matrilineal kin in their times of need. Now few of the daughters can be relied on to perform these functions.

Many women leave the village, they marry out and live elsewhere, thus making it difficult for them to carry out the traditional obligations imposed on them. Similarly, those who remain behind, as shall be explained later, very often could not do so because they lack the economic resources. Thus it is

irrelevant now whether or not a family has daughters. Many families without daughters no longer bother to adopt female children. Adoption of children is done only by those without children and boys too are now adopted.

4.3 Women and Men: An Insight into Husband-wife Relationship.

The changing basis of the village economy affects gender relations in the society. Although women are still owners of ancestral land, this land is now of little economic value. Ancestral land which is now kept mainly for symbolic reasons and as a form of security, is largely utilised for housing. However, the size of individual share of ancestral land is negligible, in the majority of cases between a quarter and one acre. Most of the holdings are jointly owned, thus making its development problematical (see Azizah Kassim 1989: 317-338).

As mentioned earlier, in most households now the main sources of cash income are the husband's pension or income from paid employment, or remittances from children which are often channelled through the father. Few women are actively involved in economic activities. Less than ten percent of the women interviewed in the survey said they work (kerja) and of those who do many are working in supplementary capacity to their husband. They help in the retail store run by the husband, assist him to tap rubber or make sugar from the sap of the palm trees, etc. In such jobs they have no access to income of their own. A very small number are in paid employment, working mainly in the public sector as teachers or clerks. The majority of women describe

themselves as housewives (suri-rumah) whose main occupation revolved around household maintenance - cooking, cleaning the house and compound, doing the laundry, taking care of the children or grandchildren.

Compared to the women in my earlier survey in the sixties, few women are engaged in agricultural activities except for small scale vegetable farming for subsistence, which are often taken on like a hobby. They no longer plant or process rice; go fishing in the river; forage for vegetables, fungus or other edibles in the forest as women used to do two or three decades ago. Most of the daily necessities are now bought. Few women need to collect firewood as many are now using alternative power such as kerosene, gas or electricity. Similarly, few now need to sew clothes for the family or weave mengkuang for mats. And in discharging their daily chores in the kitchen, many women have electric gadgets such as the blender, mixer and coconut scrapper which make their job much simpler. Indeed, as women today admit, their life is now more comfortable and this new found ease is made possible by men's (in most cases the husband's) earning from sources outside the Adat territory.

As men increased their economic standing and become the main breadwinner in the family, women find their's declining. Most women are now dependents of their husband and they make minimal contribution to household income. The house a family lives in may be built on land belonging to the wife, but very frequently the house was constructed, repaired or rebuilt with income of the

husband. Without the husband many women may find themselves in financial difficulty. This dependency seems to erode the power women used to have in the peasant economy.

When a wife is dependent on the husband for her livelihood, it is easy for the husband to exercise control over her. Her position vis-a-vis her husband is worsened by the disintegration of the lineage group at the village level as a result of out-migration. A woman used to have adequate emotional support system (and in some cases extra-economic support as well) from close matrilineal kins who lived close by. Now that support is, in many cases, missing as people move out of their native village. Today if a wife is to have a quarrel with her husband, or is deserted by him, she may not have many people in the village to whom she can turn to for help. She must therefore exercise caution in her relationship with her spouse. It is my impression that husband-wife relationship is now tilted in favour of the man. There is now a growing emphasis on male dominance which seems to be gaining acceptance among the villagers in the light of renewed interest in Islam which is taking place.

In the few cases where women are able to secure stable jobs and steady income, their position vis-a-vis the husband remain similar to those of women in the traditional context. In some cases, their position is further strengthened.

4.3 Women and Men: Matrilineal Women and their Kin

As the kin groups, the perut (lineage) and suku (clan) cease

to be the main basis for social organization in the village-- and as out-migration continues, the relationship between a woman and her kin outside the family/household is given decreasing emphasis. The stress now is on the nuclear family and most women without economic resources of their own find it difficult or impossible to carry out their duty towards their matrilineal kin as required by the Adat. In the early days for example, it was incumbent on women to accommodate a widowed or a divorced brother or mother's brother, such obligations cannot easily be discharged now that the household is financially supported by the husband.

With the expansion of the money economy in the village life, there is also a growing sense of individualism among the villagers and the spirit of communalism as espoused by the Adat is often ignored. This sense of individualism and the lack of understanding of Adat Perpatih have caused a number of misunderstandings among lineage members. One of the most common causes of conflict is the ancestral land. Many women now regard such land as private property and deny their male kin their right to use the land or share its products.

It is clear that under the present socio-economic structure, it is difficult to sustain lineage unity and co-operation and women, in particular, cannot perform their obligations towards their kin effectively.

5.0 Conclusion

What has changed and what has persisted? The Adat Perpatih kinship system prevails until today and women retain their rights within the system i.e. they continue to perpetuate the lineage and clan, they inherit the ancestral land and family housing, and political offices are transmitted through them. These rights which in the traditional context put women in a special position have little significance now. Women have lost their special position and relative autonomy. This is attributable to socio-economic changes taking place in the Adat Perpatih territory in the last few decades which undermined the economic basis of the Adat.

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