

## Women, Development and Change in Negeri Sembilan : A Micro-Level Perspective

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### I Introduction

This paper is an attempt to study local level social changes among a group of matrilineal people in Negeri Sembilan. The focus of attention is on the changing roles of women at the household and community levels in the *mukim* (sub-district) of Seri Menanti.

Interest on women studies in Malaysia has shown a marked increase in the last few years as evidenced by the growing number of literature on the subject. However, most of the available works are still focussed on women and industrial development, especially on women in the manufacturing industries. Central to most of the discussions are women's migratory pattern and the impact of such migration, their problems in adapting to the new work pattern and living environment, their exploitation at the work place, and the consequences of wage labour on their social relations. As most of the industries are based in the urban areas, most of these works are urban based. Studies on women in the rural areas remain neglected. Of the few available works on the rural women are those by Husna Sulaiman [1989], Ng [1989b], Rokiah Talib [1986], Stivens [no date], Mazidah *et al.* [1983] and Strange [1980], apart from my own works [Azizah Kassim 1986a; 1988]. There is a need to increase the literature on rural women so as to provide a more balanced and comprehensive picture of women in Malaysia. This paper hopes to fulfill such an objective.

The fieldwork on which this paper is based, is a sequel to my earlier one carried out in 1969 in Seri Menanti, in the Kuala Pilah district [Azizah Kassim 1970]. In the previous study I conclude that women in the matrilineal society has a somewhat advantageous position vis-a-vis their menfolk due, among other things, to their control of the means of production, i.e. land for agriculture. Since 1969, a number of changes have taken place in Seri Menanti. The *mukim* has received various development projects of socio-economic significance. Most villagers now have access to public amenities and social services. Many, especially the young, have left the village for the urban areas or for FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) land settlement schemes, leaving behind a predominantly elderly population and creating labour shortages in the rural areas. Consequently agricultural activities have declined as evidenced by the vast stretches of unworked or under-utilised land (*tanah terbiar*) especially rice-fields and rubber smallholdings.

As shall be explained in section III, the economic base of the matrilineal society in Negeri

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Sembilan or the Adat Perpatih society as it is generally referred to, has changed in the last 20 years or so. Adherents of Adat Perpatih were predominantly dependent on agriculture but now, in the majority of cases, household income is derived largely from non-agricultural sources. In this paper the writer attempts to look at the social implications of such an economic change and the introduction of basic amenities and social services on women in the matrilineal society, particularly on their roles within the family/household and the community.

It is my assumption that the provision of basic amenities and social services as well as agricultural decline at the village level encourage the isolation of the nuclear family and erode the importance of the lineage group as the basis for extra household co-operations. These changes, in turn, negatively affect the relative importance of women vis-a-vis men in the Adat Perpatih society.

The fieldwork for this paper was carried out in stages over a span of over two years, between September 1986 and February 1987, in January and February 1988, and in October 1988. The focus of attention is on 200 female respondents, each from a separate household, from ten traditional villages in Seri Menanti. The respondents who were chosen at random, are either household heads or the wives of household heads. The number of households interviewed accounts for about one third of all households in the ten villages. Data gathered from the respondents were complemented by information solicited from key informants which include elderly people, politicians both at the village and supra-village levels, and officials of government departments involved in the implementation of socio-economic projects in the *mukim*.

My earlier work forms the main basis for comparison with the present findings. As the earlier work has a somewhat limited scope, there are instances where it lacks data for comparison. In such circumstances, I resort to oral history, soliciting information on the earlier period from village elders, particularly women.

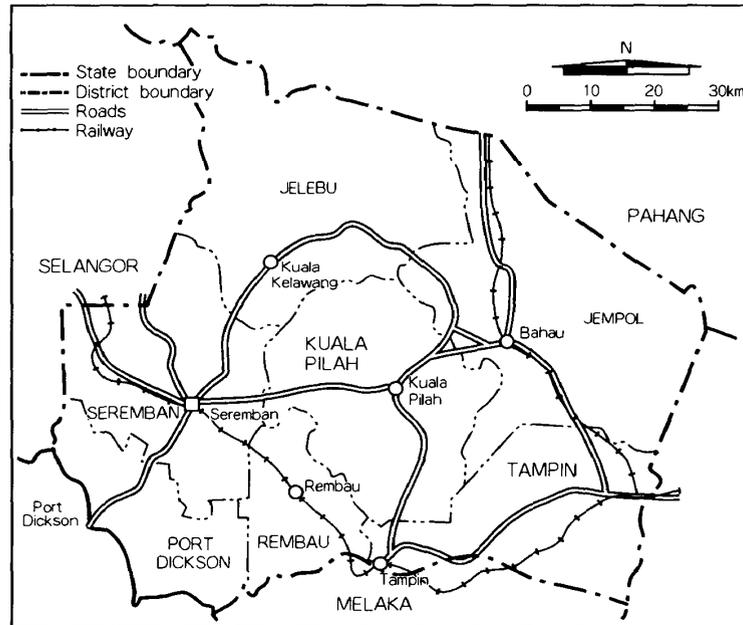
## II Seri Menanti : An Outline of Its People and Development

Seri Menanti is one of the ten *mukim* (sub-districts) in the district of Kuala Pilah (see maps 1 and 2). It lies in the valley of Sungai Muar (Muar River) in the central region of Negeri Sembilan. The *mukim* is a relatively old settlement, believed to have been opened in the seventeenth century by Minangkabau immigrants from Sumatra.<sup>1)</sup> The early settlers left a legacy, the matrilineal kinship system, known locally as the Adat Perpatih, which is still practised today in Seri Menanti and other *mukim* in Kuala Pilah as well as in five other districts in the state, viz.. Rembau, Jempol, Tampin, Kuala Pilah and Jelebu. It is the Adat Perpatih (or Adat for short) which sets the Malays in these districts apart from other Malays in Peninsular Malaysia.

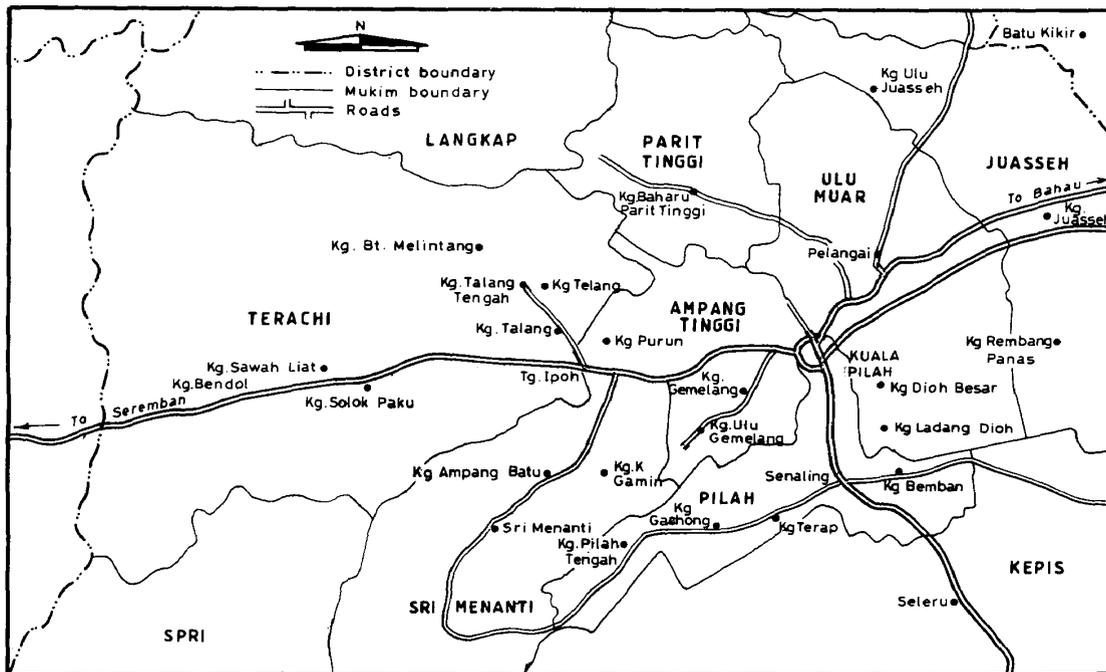
In 1986 the *mukim* had a population of 7,741 (which was distributed over 1,388 households) and in 1989 the population size is assumed to be the same. Almost all the population (99.7%) are

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1) Writing on the history of Negeri Sembilan between 1640 and 1760, Wilkinson [1971: 291] states that “. . . The later settlers had to go further afield, with the result that they created new states — Inas, Johol, Gemenchah, Terachi, Gunung Pasir, Jempol and Ulu Muar . . .” Gunung Pasir and Ulu Muar are in the Mukim of Seri Menanti.



Map 1 Districts in Negeri Sembilan



Map 2 Seri Menanti and the Neighbouring Mukims

Malays, while the rest (0.3%) comprise Chinese and Indians. The non-Malays who are confined to the two small trading centres, Pekan Tanjung Ipoh and Pekan Seri Menanti, are engaged in small businesses. The Malays, on the other hand, live in the countryside and are engaged in a number of economic activities including agriculture and wage labour (see section III).

All the Malays, except for a few from other states and from other districts in Negeri Sembilan,

besides the five mentioned above, are adherents of the *adat*. The *adat* used to regulate all aspects of village life, but its relevance has increasingly declined as the society becomes more receptive to outside influences. The *adat* has undergone several changes over the years, yet its basic principles remain constant. These include the tracing of descent through the female line which forms the basis for subdivision of the society into matrilineal clans and lineages; exogamic marriage patterns; matrilineal residence after marriage; and clan "ownership" of customary land, *tanah pesaka adat*, which are held by women and transmitted through them. *Tanah pesaka adat* comprises largely land for homesteads and rice fields, and some rubber holdings. This category of land, together with holdings under Malay Reservation, form the main bulk of land holdings among the matrilineal Malays in this *mukim* and elsewhere in Negeri Sembilan.

The *mukim* which has the *penghulu* as its administrative head, covers an area of approximately 7,769.971 hectares. It comprises about 60 traditional villages, some of which are small, with about 20 to 30 households. For administrative purposes, the district office groups together these small adjoining villages and considers them as one administrative unit or one administrative village, referring to them by the name of the largest village in the cluster. This administrative village is governed by the Jawatankuasa Keselamatan dan Kemajuan Kampung (JKKK, lit : Village Committee for Security and Development). There are ten JKKK in the *mukim*.

The chairman of the JKKK, the deputy chairman and the secretary, are usually officials of the local branch of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant partner in the ruling coalition known as Barisan Nasional (BN), while the rest of the committee members are strong UMNO supporters and representatives of some government departments in the district. The chairman of the JKKK is usually the head of the local party branch; at the same time he is also the village chief, Ketua Kampung.

The JKKK is the main link between the village and the various government departments in the district. It is through the JKKK that the government departments disseminate new ideas, relay information to the villagers and implement development projects. Similarly, the JKKK is the main medium through which the villagers present their grievances to the government and political leaders of the party in power such as Members of Parliament and Members of the State Legislative Assembly, and through which they apply for development projects, *projek pembangunan*, which can range from a small cash aid for repair of a mosque to a large financial allocation for rural road construction.

As the seat of the royal household, this *mukim* has been the focus of many development projects since independence in 1957. It is relatively well developed compared to other *mukim* in the district. Most of the villages are now accessible by motorised transport. The villages also have electricity and water supplies. The percentage distribution of piped water and electricity at the *mukim* level is not known; however, at the district level 98 percent of the population have electricity supplies and 80 percent have piped water [Taklimat Pembangunan Bagi Daerah Kuala Pilah 1985]. Public telephones are installed at selected locations along the Seri Menanti-Kuala Pilah main road especially at the four small trading centres in the *mukim*, viz. Pekan Seri Menanti, Pekan Tanjung Ipoh, Kampung Tengah and Gunung Pasir. At each of these trading centres there is a primary school, a health centre, a community hall, a mosque, and a kindergarten. In addition, Seri

Menanti and Tanjung Ipoh each have a post office, a secondary school and a police station.

At the village level, too, there is evidence of infrastructural development. In each administrative village there are community halls and Islamic religious centres in the form of a *surau* (small prayer house) or a mosque, although these structures are of poorer quality than those at the four centres mentioned above. The community halls and *surau*/mosques are centres of community life, and their presence epitomises the attempts made by the village administrators to separate religious matters from other spheres of village life. The *surau*/mosques are centers of religious activities, while the community halls are the venue for political, i.e. UMNO activities and all kinds of social activities related to the party in power or the government.<sup>2)</sup>

Besides the community halls and religious centres, in some villages, the government has also provided badminton courts and temporary structures for bus stops, built dirt tracks to allow access to public places such the graveyards, water falls, etc., and provided water pumps to selected households. All the public amenities and social services are provided by the government in the years after independence, especially after the implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1971. They form the major part of the government's rural development project in the *mukim*. The *mukim* also has access to several kinds of economic development projects some of which have been implemented. Under the Rancangan Tanah Pinggir (Fringe Alienation Scheme) for example, between 1970 and 1984, 541 acres in four different areas, viz. Panglang 1, Panglang 2, Gunung Pasir and Gamin have been developed into rubber plots and distributed to 156 people.<sup>3)</sup> RISDA (Rubber Smallholders Development Authority) has redeveloped some old rubber holdings; in Seri Menanti, the redevelopment was done under the group farming scheme, and in three other villages, viz. Kampung Panglang, Kampung Gamin, and Kampung Bukit Perah, the rubber land was redeveloped into mini-estates. The Department of Agriculture (Jabatan Pertanian) has, among other things, provided technical training to interested farmers, to some others technical assistance, financial subsidies and material aid for commercial group farming. These agricultural development projects are complemented by those implemented by the Veterinary Department (Jabatan Haiwan) which attempts to encourage animal husbandry among the villagers. Under a scheme called "*pawah*," the department lets out well-bred bulls and billy goats to stud to a few farmers. More agricultural development projects are in the offing which include redevelopment of idle rice fields and rubber land by RISDA and FELCRA (Federal Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation).

Although there are a number of government and semi-government agencies at the district level which are entrusted with agricultural development, agricultural activities have evidently declined. Based on official records over 95 percent of rice fields in the *mukim* have been left unworked since the early 80s [*Penyata Keluasan dan Keadaan Tanah Sawah Negeri Sembilan 1981*]. Similarly, a large number of rubber holdings have not been worked for years. Some land earmarked for

2) In Kuala Pilah, it is an accepted practice that the community hall (*balai raya*) can only be used for activities of the ruling party and not for those of the opposition. The same applies to the government built mosques and *surau*.

3) As to the size of land opened under the Rancangan Tanah Pinggir (RTP), there is a discrepancy between the figures given by the land office [*Taklimat Pembangunan bagi Pejabat Daerah 1985*].

homestead, i.e. *tanah kampung*, too, have been deserted. All this unworked land has turned into secondary jungle inhabited largely by wild boars which frequently menace the local population and destroy whatever little agricultural activities they now undertake.<sup>4)</sup>

Most agricultural land in Seri Menanti is either customary land, *tanah pesaka adat*, or Malay Reservation land. The former which comprises largely rice fields and land for homestead are held by women. The latter which is composed mainly of rubber holdings, are also held predominantly by women [see Azizah Kassim 1989]. Women, therefore, have control over agricultural land which in the years before the 70s were the main source for family income. But such land have little economic value now. The extent to which this change, along with others, affects the role of women will now be discussed.

### III Women and the Household: Changing Roles and Shifting Allegiance

The role a woman plays at the household level is influenced by a number of variables, which include her age, educational attainment, job and income; her marital status and her position in the family; the type of household in which she is a member and the economic status of the household. It is therefore relevant that the socio-economic background of the respondents be understood from the outset.

#### III-1 *Social Indices of the Village Women*

One very conspicuous feature of the women under study is their advanced age. Eighty-six percent of them are above 40 years of age, and 50 percent are above 50 (see Table 1). The majority of those in their 40 have little formal education, having attended primary school between one and six years. Those above 50 are largely without formal education; the few who have, went to primary school between one and four years. Almost all married young, in their mid-teens, and by now this group of women are grandmothers in their own family of procreation and are classificatory grandmothers in their lineage group.

The respondents' advanced age has a bearing on their household/family type.<sup>5)</sup> As shown in Table 2, 46 percent of the household are of the denuded type, where the children have grown up and set up their own households or have left home and the village, leaving their elderly parents behind. More than half of the denuded families are headed by women. They are either divorcees or widows, either too old to get married or, if they are relatively young, for some reasons prefer not to

4) In many villages, wild boars roam freely during the evening, making their entry at dusk and leaving at dawn. A number of people have been attacked by the beast, the latest incident was in January 1989 when a man was savagely attacked on the Seri Menanti-Kuala Pilah main road in Kampung Umur, while on his way home from work. He had to be rushed to the Seremban general hospital for treatment. Besides wild boars, wild cats (*harimau*), too, occasionally menace the villagers. In 1988, two wild cats were killed in Seri Menanti after killing a cow. The proliferation of wild animals is not only due to the increasing number of neglected land, but also to the prohibition imposed by the authorities on killing wild animals without hunting licences.

5) Each family lives in a separate household. In this case the household and family can be taken as synonymous.

**Table 1** Age of Respondents Household Heads or Wives of Household Heads

Age (years)	Number	%	Cumulative %	Approx. Position in the Family
20-25	2	1.0	1.0	
26-30	9	4.5	5.5	Mother
31-35	8	4.0	9.5	( <i>Emak</i> )
36-40	9	4.5	14.0	
41-45	32	16.0	30.0	
46-50	40	20.0	50.0	
51-55	32	16.0	66.0	Grandmother
56-60	26	13.0	79.0	( <i>Uwan</i> )
61-65	12	6.0	85.0	
66-70	22	11.0	96.0	
71-75	4	2.0	98.0	
76-80	3	1.5	99.5	
80+	1	0.5	100.00	

Source : Survey Samples

remarry. Many live alone, while others are accompanied by their children, grandchildren, siblings and other maternal relatives. Where the denuded family is headed by a male, its main composition are the elderly couple, and they are frequently joined by their grandchildren, the wife's parents and siblings.

The nuclear family accounts for 40 percent of the households and in the majority of cases this type of family comprises elderly couple with their grown up children who are in the secondary schools, or have just completed their schooling and are looking for jobs. In 14 percent of the households, the nuclear family is joined by relatives, thus forming the extended family. The relatives concerned include grandchildren, and the relatives of the wife such as her mother, grandmother, sister and sister's son. The absence of the husband's relatives in this type of household and in others bears testimony to the persistence of matrilineal residence in the the *mukim*.

The ageing population is attributable to large scale out-migration of the young from the *mukim*. All households are affected by migration. On average two children from each family have left the village. Some left to further their education, others in search of employment and a better living elsewhere, yet others, i.e. the women, to follow their husbands after marriage. The rate of migration is slightly higher than that of the district as a whole, where, according to Nyanen Thiran, approximately 42 percent of the farmers' children have emigrated [1983: 72]. For many of the families, migration is not a new phenomenon. More than 50 percent of the respondents have been living away from their village for some length of time, either with their parents or with their respective husband. Many families therefore, have experienced out-migration for two generations.

The drift from the *mukim* took place earlier than the beginning of industrialization in 1957 and its rapid expansion after 1970. Emigration of families for purposes of opening up new agricultural

**Table 2** Household Types and Composition

Household Type	Household Composition	Percentage		
		1988		1970
		Sub-Total	Total	Total
Nuclear :	Husband + wife + children		40.0	52.1
Extended :			14.0	32.9
	N + wife's mother	5.5		
	N + grandchildren	4.5		
	N + wife's grandmother	2.0		
	N + wife's sister's son	1.0		
	N + wife's siblings	1.0		
Compound :	N + wife's children by previous marriage		0.0	0.7
Denuded/incomplete :			46.0	14.3
(a) Male headed :		21.0		
	Husband + wife	15.0		9.3
	Husband + wife + grandchildren	1.0		
	Husband + wife + wife's parent	2.0		
	Husband + wife + wife's siblings	2.5		
	Husband + wife + daughter-in-law + grandchildren	0.5		
(b) Female headed :		25.0		
	Single women	12.5		5.0
	Single women + mother + children	6.0		
	Single women + grandchildren	1.0		
	Single women + children + grandchildren	4.5		
	Single women + grandchildren + nieces	0.5		
	Single women - brother	0.5		
			100.0	100.0

Note : Total number for 1988 = 200 ; for 1970 = 140.

Source : Survey samples and [Azizah Kassim 1970 : 63]

land, locally referred to as *menebus*, has been going on for generations, which led to the segmentation and dispersal of clans and lineage groups in the *mukim*. This type of migration eased off in the 40s when new forms of employment were opened for the villagers in the public sector, i.e. in the civil service, the armed forces (especially the police and army (*askar Melayu*)); and in the field of education. This gave rise to a new pattern of population out-flow, i.e. of single males looking for opportunities for salaried jobs. At this juncture, out-migration of women was limited; they moved out with their parents or to be with their husbands. It was rare then, for single women to leave the village. The few who did were impoverished divorcees or widows with little land to work on and no relatives to depend on for economic support. The only avenue for paid employment then open to them was to work as domestic help (*orang gaji*) in the houses of the Negeri Sembilan royal family or high ranking civil servants in the state capital, Seremban.<sup>6)</sup>

6) I met four women who worked as domestic help in the 50s. Two worked with Europeans in Seremban. ↗

In the years after independence more opportunities for migration were opened to women. The capital, Kuala Lumpur, only about 75 kilometers away from the mukim, was and still is the site of many development projects. Initially, the increasing population of Kuala Lumpur and its growing middle classes, and the expanding service sector, created a demand for female labour, i.e. those without or with little formal education. And the expanding urban bureaucracy and the manufacturing sector provided job opportunities for those with better educational attainment. It was then that women from this *mukim* began to move out to the capital in large numbers, and the drift outwards increased considerably since the 70s when a demand for female labour was further created with the establishment and growth of the electronics industries in the Kelang valley and the institution of industrial sites in Seremban.<sup>7)</sup> These two areas have since then become the main recipients of migrants from this *mukim* and from Kuala Pilah as a whole [see Abdul Samad Hadi 1981: 180].

Apart from the drift to the urban areas, some families also moved out to resettlement schemes such as those under FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority). Many from this *mukim* are now found in FELDA schemes in Negeri Sembilan such as Pasoh, Palong, Labu Jaya, Bukit Jalor and Sungai Lui. Such emigration also accounts for the increase in the number of denuded families in the *mukim*. As shown in Table 2, the percentage of denuded families in 1970 was about 14 percent; in 1988 it has increased to 46 percent. The percentage of female headed households too has risen, from 5 percent to 25 percent; so has the number of husband and wife households, which rose from over 9 percent to 15 percent. These changes took place primarily because of female emigration. According to the local *adat*, it is the daughters who should be staying in the plot for homestead, the *tanah pesaka adat*, and who should be taking care of the elderly parents. Most of them have left, leaving their elderly parents behind and, many "take care" of their parents from a long distance by sending them money and visiting them from time to time. Some parents reciprocate such generosity by minding the children of their daughters. Hence the relatively high number of households with grandchildren, most of whom are of school going age.

### III-2 *The Village Economy*

In a speech to the *adat* chiefs at the palace (Istana Besar Seri Menanti), in July 1989, the ruler of the state expressed his concern over the growing size of unworked land in the Adat Perpatih territory especially in Seri Menanti, and the increasing number of cows left to roam the street in the *mukim*.<sup>8)</sup>

↘ One subsequently married her employer and later migrated to England where she now lives with her family. The other later joined the royal household of the Yang Dipertuan Agong in Kuala Lumpur where she worked till the 70s. The other two later married and settled down. These women have done well, but they still remember the shame that they had to put up with in the 50s for taking up jobs as domestic help.

7) Industrial site in Seremban was established under the government industrial dispersal policy as stipulated in the *Second Malaysia Plan* [1971: 154-156]. The electronic industries are still the main employers of female labour [see *Labour and Manpower Report 1985/86*: 77].

8) According to the Jabatan Haiwan (Veterinary Department), the number of cows has increased considerably since the 60s, while that of the water buffaloes has declined. In the district as a whole, cows are let out free during the day. The lack of grazing grounds forced many of them to linger about on road reserves along the main road, dirtying and damaging the road with their urine and dung. Some farmers collect and ↗

Indeed, cows and idle land are ubiquitous in the district and these are among the major economic changes that have taken place in Seri Menanti since my last fieldwork in 1969. At the time the majority of the households in the *mukim* were engaged in rice cultivation for subsistence and rubber tapping for cash. Such activities were supplemented by other economic activities such as small scale vegetable gardening, rearing of fowls, goats and water buffaloes; and collection of jungle produce for consumption or for sale. The village was bustling with all kinds of economic activities and women played a major role especially in rice cultivation and processing, and the production of many household goods. The situation is very different now.

Agricultural activities have declined drastically, and almost all rice land in the *mukim* is either unworked or is not fully utilised for the last 10 to 15 years. The same is the case with rubber small holdings. Attempts to revitalise agriculture, as I have explained in an earlier paper, have not been very successful due to several factors, which include labour shortages, multiple and absentee land ownership, and encumbrances imposed by the *adat* [see Azizah Kassim 1989]. The village population no longer depends on agriculture for their livelihood. None of the respondents has planted rice in the last five to ten years, and their rice fields have dried up and turned into secondary jungles. Rubber tapping is done only in 14 percent of the households. The majority of the population depend on non-agricultural sources of income. Major sources of cash income are varied. Some have paid employment, mainly in the public sector, others have pensions and remittances from children working outside the *mukim*. Others are self-employed, engaged in rubber tapping, petty-trading, carpentry, etc. As shown in Table 3, 48 percent of the households studied have more than one source of cash income. Pensioners, for example, may take up work again after retirement, and thus have another source of income besides their pensions. At the same time such people may also get some remittances from their children (see Table 3 & Azizah Kassim [1988 : 132-149] for more information on the economy). Monthly household income varies from RM50.00 to RM2,200.00, with 45 percent earning less than RM200.00, 41.5 percent between RM201.00 and RM500.00; and the rest between RM501.00 and RM2,200.00 (see Table 4). Evidently there is a wide gap between the lowest and the highest income among the villagers.

Apart from the cash income, many villagers are also involved in some small scale agricultural activities and animal husbandry both for sale and for household consumption. It is common to see small vegetable plots and fruit trees around the house within a homestead plot. Over 86 percent of households studied rear chickens, the number of which varies from 5 to 50. Thirty five percent keep goats, 27 percent ducks, 19 percent water buffaloes, and 11 percent cows. Contributions made by such economic activities to the household economy is substantial, especially in the case of animal husbandry. Many people in the *mukim* have financed their pilgrimage to Mecca by money derived from the sale of water buffaloes and cows.<sup>9)</sup>

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\ pen their cows in the evening, others do not. These neglected animals usually sleep on the road at night thus obstructing traffic and sometimes causing accidents.

9) Cows are a good cash earner. One fully grown cow can be sold for M\$700. At the end of the year when feasts are often held, or during the two religious festivals, Hari Raya Puasa and Hari Raya Haji, a cow can fetch a better price, sometimes as high as RM1,000.00.

**Table 3** Sources of Household Income

Sources	%	
<i>Single income :</i>	52.0	
Income from household's head's work		23.5
Remittance		18.5
Pensions		9.5
State welfare aid		0.5
<i>Double/multiple income :</i>	48.0	
Household's head's work + remittance		19.0
Households head's work + pensions		6.0
Household head's work + remittance + pensions		4.0
Pensions + remittance		17.0
Remittance + state welfare aid		1.5
Remittance + state welfare aid + household head's work		0.5
Total	100.0	100.0

Source : Adapted from Azizah Kassim [1988 : 144].

**Table 4** Monthly Household Income

Monthly Income (RM)	No. of Households	Sources of Income	%
50	14	Self-employed, e.g. rubber tappers, sundry shop operators, carpenters, etc.	45.0
51-100	34		
101-200	42		
201-300	30	Paid employment such as clerks, hospital attendants, drivers, etc. and pensioners.	41.5
301-400	26		
401-500	27	Paid employment + remittance + pensions ; or dual income earners.	13.5
501-600	8		
601-700	5		
701-800	4		
801-900	1		
901-1,000	1		
1,001-1,100	1		
1,101-1,200	1		
1,201-1,300	1		
1,301-1,400	1		
1,401-1,500	1		
1,501-1,600	1		
1,801-1,900	1		
2,101-2,200	1		
Total	200		100

Source : Adapted from Azizah Kassim [1988 : 145]

Although agriculture has declined, the people are evidently much better off now than they were in 1969. Their improved economic status is manifested in many ways, one of which is the number and type of consumer durables they now have (see Table 5). In the house, for example, electrical appliances are widely used. More than half the households in my study have televisions; in some households there are two sets, one colour and one black and white. Electrical appliances for kitchen use are also widely in evidence. Rice cookers are found in 54 percent of the household, blenders in 61 percent, coconut scrapers in 55 percent, refrigerators in 60 percent. Seventeen percent of the households have cars and 20 percent motorcycles. Except for bicycles, lounge sets, dining tables, radios and sewing machines, the rest of the goods were not in evidence in 1969. Even those which were then available, some were of lower quality.

It is significant to note that most of these consumer durables are found in households with income above RM500 a month and where the household head is in paid employment or has multiple

**Table 5** Ownership of Consumer Durables: Indicators of Economic Status

Types of Goods	No. of Households	%
<i>Electrical appliances :</i>		
Videos	8	4.0
Television :		
Colour	112	56.0
Black & white	98	49.0
Radios	152	76.0
Tape recorders	120	60.0
Fans	112	56.0
Irons	142	71.0
Rice cookers	108	54.0
Blenders	122	61.0
Refrigerators	120	60.0
Washing machines	4	2.0
Coconut scrapers	110	55.0
<i>Non-Electrical goods :</i>		
Sewing machines	150	75.0
Paraffin cookers	124	62.0
Gas cookers	104	52.0
Dining tables & chairs	140	70.0
Lounge sets	152	76.0
Cars	34	17.0
Motorcycles	40	20.0
Bicycles	130	65.0
Lawn mowers	24	12.0
Telephones	1	0.5

Source : Survey samples.

sources of income. The goods are frequently bought on hire purchase, or in some cases by cash derived from various sources such as gift from children, from rotating credit association, gratuity pay on retirement, accumulated sale of farm produce, etc.

Increased economic standard is also manifested in the type of houses found, the repairs and extensions done and the number of new houses built since the 60s. Sixty percent of the households have been repaired once and 21 percent twice. In most cases house repairs involve changing the roofs from *attap* to corrugated iron, having a new kitchen and a washroom built on the lower floor to accommodate newly installed water supply, and building a room on the ground floor for the elderly who now find it difficult to climb the stairs in the traditional Malay house on stilts. Twenty-four percent of the houses are new, built in the last 20 years. All house repairs and new houses are built with money from non-agricultural sources such as from the husband's gratuity on retirement, and from money given by children working in the towns. It is relevant to note that it is mainly the female children who provided money for most of the house repairs.

Not only are the present houses better than those in the 60s, they also have basic amenities. Ninety-five percent of the houses have electricity supply, 83 percent have piped water, and 13 percent, i.e. those without piped water have hand operated water pumps. Sanitation, too, seemed to have improved, with 81 percent of the households having pour-out toilets and 8 percent flush toilets. These amenities were rarely found in the 60s, when the villagers eased themselves either in rivers and pit latrines and depended on kerosene and gas lamps for lighting. These basic amenities have to be paid for and their widespread use is proof of the villager's new found affluence.

### III-3 *Women as Wives and Mothers*

The village population is now economically differentiated, with some families having a better living standard than others. Nonetheless, the differences in economic level have little impact on women's role in the household. Almost everyone of them has to perform the household chores themselves. Domestic help is hard to come by. Working as domestic help, i.e. as *orang gaji* is considered demeaning; it was resorted to in the old days only out of desperation. Now that there are other sources of cash income, few want to work as domestic help. Even those who may want to, would not do so in the village but in the urban areas away from the scrutiny of the villagers and where the pay is higher.

With declining agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, women's economic contribution to the household economy is minimised, and her workload has decreased accordingly. Prior to the 70s, when agricultural activities were actively pursued there was a marked division of labour between the sexes. Men were more involved in securing cash income for the family and women were engaged mainly in subsistence agriculture, especially in rice production. Women did most of the work in the fields particularly rice transplanting (*menyabut benih and mengubah*) and weeding (*merumput*), and men expended their labour in the rice fields only when they were not otherwise occupied.

Rice cultivation took about four to five months of women's time in a year. After the harvest women were engaged in rice processing, which was also seen as women's job. They threshed small bunches of rice stalks with their bare feet to free the grains, winnowed the rice grains, and

stored them in the granary (*kepok*), all of which took about one to two months. For the rest of the year they were engaged in other forms of economic activities — drying rice in the sun and pounding them (some may have their dried rice sent to the rice mills); collecting, processing, and weaving *mengkuang* (*pandanus*) leaves into baskets and mats; gathering foodstuffs and firewood from the forests and fishing in the river or rice fields. In addition they may also help their respective spouses tend to the family fowls, goats, and water buffaloes; and to farm vegetables.

For those without a husband, the workload was definitely heavier. They had to look for cash income as well through such work as rubber tapping, tailoring, doing domestic work and laundry for others, and working in the rice fields for wages (*upah*) [Azizah Kassim 1970: 200–216]. All this is in addition to the household chores, which were and still are considered women's main responsibilities.

Things have changed considerably for the women. This is reflected in their description of themselves when asked about their job (*kerja*). The majority of them either referred to themselves as *tak kerja* (not working) or as *suri-rumah* (housewife) implying that they are no longer economically active. Two decades ago the women were more positive about their economic roles and most referred to themselves as *kerja kampung* (lit: doing village work, i.e. involved in all kinds of work ordinarily found in the *kampung*); *bersawah* (engaged in planting rice) or rubber tapping. Presently only 14 percent of the women say they are involved in some kinds of economic activities. Two work as teachers at a primary school, 1 is a tailor, 6 help their husbands to run the family sundry shops and 15 help their husbands with rubber tapping. Although the rest claim they do not work, many are involved in some kind of economic activities, albeit on a small scale, such as rearing chickens, goats or cows, doing vegetable gardening, etc. which, in the case of the single women, they did individually, or, for those married, in co-operation with their husbands. These economic activities, as noted earlier, contribute significantly to the household economy.

Women's lack of active participation in economic activities means they have limited access to cash. Very often it is the single women in female headed households, which form 25 percent of the respondents, and the few with fixed jobs and pensions, who have cash income at their disposal. The rest are dependent on their husbands or in some cases on their daughters' husbands for cash. This financial dependency on the "*orang semenda*" (i.e. men marrying into a lineage group) as explained in my earlier paper [Azizah Kassim 1988: 132–149] negatively affects the wife's position vis-a-vis the husband.

Women's work load within the household has decreased tremendously since rice cultivation came to a halt. Except for those who are economically active as mentioned earlier, women's work is confined largely to maintenance of the household and the family — cooking, washing, taking care of the young (many of whom are grandchildren), and cleaning the house and the compound. Even then, much of the housework is now made lighter by the availability of piped water supply to each household, electricity, and mass produced consumer goods. Women no longer need to draw water from the wells for household consumption or to take their washing to communal wells or springs (*jeram*) to have them washed. Their laundry is now done at home as most houses have wash-rooms. Foodstuffs for daily consumption such as rice, vegetables and fish which are their staples,

are now bought either from itinerant traders or from the shops in the village and in Pekan Seri Menanti, thus dispensing with the long hours of food cultivation and processing. Women do not fish anymore as the rivers and small fish-ponds, *lubuk*, have all dried up. Nor do they forage for food-stuffs in the forests as they used to two decades ago. The forests are now covered with thick undergrowth.

In the kitchen, electrical gadgets make women's work much lighter. For example, women used to pound chillies manually in a mortar and scraped coconuts using a tool called *kukur*, which was tiring and time consuming. Now these chores can be done in minutes; the chillies using an electric blender and the coconut using an electrical scraper. If these gadgets are not available at home, then pound chilies and freshly desiccated coconut can be bought at the local shops. And the very process of cooking itself is now greatly speeded up by the use of electric cooker, or gas and paraffin stoves. Very few households use wood fire for cooking unless it is for some special kinds of dishes which cannot be cooked otherwise, or for large scale cooking such as for a feast (*kenduri*).

Women are also spending less time making handicrafts or sewing clothes for the family than they used to in the 60s. The art of weaving *mengkuang* (*pandanus*) leaves into mats, baskets, etc. which was popular in the 60s, is no longer practised. *Mengkuang* weaving was essential for rice cultivation when mats, baskets, and *sumpit* (a type of sack used to keep uncooked rice, etc.) were required in rice processing, storing, and packing. Except for mats, there is little need now for such artifacts. Mats are also used to cover the wooden floors in Malay houses. But house mats are slowly being replaced by linoleum sheets and carpets, and those who may still want to use mats at home can buy them easily from itinerant vendors who come from as far as Melaka and Terengganu. Not only has the art of *mengkuang* weaving been lost, the *mengkuang* groves, too, are hard to come by. The plant flourishes well on the edges of swamps and rice fields; now that neither swamps nor rice fields are there anymore, the *mengkuang* groves too have disappeared. The art of sewing too is less practised, as fewer women are sewing clothes for the family. Ready made clothes are easily available and most can afford to purchase them. Some also employ tailors in Kuala Pilah, Seri Menanti or in the local village, depending on their affordability.

All women, irrespective of their economic status, now admit life is much easier, *senang*, and of course, for some life is easier than others. They are fully aware that it is the availability of cash income which enables them to acquire some small comforts in their life. This conviction finds expression in the socialization of their children. Most women (and men) now stress to the children the need for education and doing well at it because they believe education is the main avenue to better paid employment. Mothers and grandmothers in charge of young children, often relieve school-going kids of household chores to give them time to study. Indeed, almost all these children do nothing else except go to school five days a week, starting at about six in the morning. In the afternoon they either stay back at school for extra-curricular activities or go home for religious education (*kelas mengaji*) and to do homework. Women have become indulgent parents and guardians, raising girls who, as one respondent put it, "know nothing about housework" and boys "who are ignorant of village work." These are kids who are socialised in a manner that alienates them from the local environment because their parents and guardians want them to succeed academically and

get paid employment.

Mothers' indulgence of their children has paid off. Many children from the *mukim* have done well academically. While the majority of children leave school after secondary education, after Form III or Form V, others proceed to do higher education. Some are pursuing their secondary education in selected residential schools or in MARA<sup>10)</sup> junior colleges, established by the government primarily for *bumiputra* (indigeneous) students from rural schools; yet others are in colleges and universities all over the country. Many families in Seri Menanti now have graduates in their midst, a very rare achievement in the 60s. In one village, for example, at least one in six families has a university graduate; having two or three in a family is not uncommon. The level of educational achievement in the *mukim* is relatively high and this factor partially accounts for the high rate of emigration.

Children of both sexes are encouraged to look for paid employment once they are no longer in school. This could be after the Form III secondary school examination, Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP); the Form V secondary school examination, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or the Form VI secondary school examination Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran (STP), especially if they fail these examinations. Otherwise, they are persuaded to pursue their studies further at least to a degree level before they find employment. Very often, paid employments, be they in the public or private sector are found away from home, i.e in the urban areas and moving out of the village is inevitable. But this emigration is sometimes seen as a temporary phase. Those involved, particularly the women, are expected to return once they retire. In the meantime, close link is maintained between the working children and the parents; the former sending remittances to the parents as alluded to earlier, and visiting them when they have leave, during feasts and family rituals, on *hari raya* days or during the fruit seasons. Some parents, especially mothers help working daughters to take care of the latter's young children. Working women in the urban areas, especially those in the low income group (such as factory workers, salesgirls, office cleaners, etc.) quite often cannot afford to employ child minders to take care of their young children while they are at work and are forced to send them back to the village. As seen earlier, cases of old ladies taking care of their grandchildren are widespread enough. With most of their time spent in the household, the village women are now relatively isolated and "domesticated." Increased household income has made many families less dependent on their neighbours. In the days gone by, agricultural activities forced people to get out of their houses and co-operate with neighbours who were and still are their friends and relatives (see section IV). Now the urgency to get out is minimised. The social distance thus created is further enhanced by a specially created spatial barrier, i.e. the fences. Now many housing compound have fences built of steel or wooden stakes, barbed wire and steel netting, to keep out wild animals as well as domesticated ones such as goats and cows which have increased in number. Few such barriers existed earlier; even when a farmer did fence his housing lot, he made them largely of wooden poles and bamboo and provided small gates on four sides of the rectangular fencing to allow

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10) MARA is the acronym for Majlis Amanah Rakyat (Council of Trust for the Indigeneous People). It is the new name given, in 1965, to RISDA (Rural Industrial Development Authority) which was set up in the 50s to help improve the socio-economic status of the rural based indigeneous groups.

free pedestrian flow. Now, in most cases only two gates are made which restrict neighbours from visiting each other.

Women's life now revolves around their family of procreation, i.e. around her husband, children and grandchildren. The husband is now the central figure in the family; he is the main breadwinner. Wives, in general, contribute little to the household economy. The family home, too, no longer belongs entirely to the wife as although it may be sited on the land belonging to the wife's lineage, the house itself, in about 25 percent, is built by the husband. In 60 percent of family houses which have been renovated and/or extended, the costs have been borne by the husbands. In some cases, about 21 percent, house extensions have been done twice and the costs also borne largely by the husbands. The fact that the husband bears the costs of building or renovating the family makes a lot difference in that the husband is regarded by the wife as the *de facto* head of the family, not just as a titular head as before.

One sees now the growing importance of the conjugal family and women's increased dependence on their husband. For those who have once migrated from the village with their spouse, their dependency was forged early in their married life when they lived away from their families in the village. In other cases, it is induced by the absence of lineage members in the village. It is rare that a woman has sisters and other close matrilineal relatives living with her in the same family compound as was the case in the earlier study. In such circumstances it is on the husband she must rely, and in the absence of the husband, on her children.

Men too, can no longer expect their maternal kin such as their sisters or sisters' children to come to their help in times of trouble. Most men migrate to the urban areas at an early age and after marriage they live at their wife's place, all of which distance them from their close maternal kin. This geographical separation limits interactions and induces social distance between men and their maternal kin, thus enabling them to concentrate their time, energy and financial resources on their family of procreation. Husband-wife relationship is closer now than what it was before the decline of agriculture and the expansion of paid employment in this *mukim*.

#### IV Women and Community Relations

In the years before the 70s when the village economy was largely dependent on agriculture, life for the majority of villagers was a relentless struggle. Life hardships and economic uncertainties created an urgent need for inter-household co-operation in all spheres of village life. Gender roles and work were clearly defined, just as the case was among other matrilineal groups in the state [Lewis 1962: 257-258; Swift 1965: 37]. It was essential for both sexes to have their own separate work groups involving their own circle of friends, relatives and neighbours. The need to co-operate with others at the extra-household level was more felt by women whose household had few female members.

In my earlier study, women's supra-household relations were based mainly on economic necessities. They had informal groups for mutual help, i.e. the *kumpulan menyeraya* or *kumpulan tolong-tolongan* in rice cultivation and rice processing. It was common to find women taking turns to help

each other in rice transplanting, weeding, harvesting and rice threshing. Women, too, had informal groups for other economic activities such as fishing, either in the river (*mengecar*) or in a fish-pond (*menimba*); for the gathering of edible jungle produce such as *cendawan kukur* (fungus), *pucuk paku* (shoots of wild ferns), *buah gelugor* (*garcinia atrovividis*),<sup>11)</sup> *bunga kantan* (*etlingera elatior*)<sup>12)</sup> and *buah jering* (*pithecellobium jaringa*),<sup>13)</sup> and for collecting firewood for fuel, twigs for brooms and *mengkuang* leaves for weaving.

Apart from these work groups, women were always in close contact with each other. Every day they gathered at any one of the village common water centres, such as the open wells (*perigi*), the springs (*anak air*) or the waterfalls (*jeram*), to wash themselves and their kids, and to do the family laundry. Here they exchanged gossips and disseminated information, in the same manner men did at the village sundry or coffee shops.

Occasionally, women met for rituals and feasts. Such an occasion called for close co-operation between women especially those who were neighbours and members of the local descent groups. A feast, especially one held to celebrate a wedding, required tremendous amount of labour, and much of the preliminary preparation was done by women. Groups of women worked together drying padi and processing them into rice, pounding glutinous rice into flour, making artificial flowers for *bunga telor*,<sup>14)</sup> sewing clothes for the bride, weaving mats and preparing a host of other essentials for the feasts. All this took months of joint efforts. Thus, it was then extremely important for the women to have a mutual-help group of their own.

Women's economic activities and household chores took a large portion of their time and this limited their participation in other activities at the community level. In the 60s, in the villages studied, there were two centres for adult education classes (*kelas dewasa*) where women could go once a week to learn to read and write. But these classes were not very well attended. At the same time, women's involvement in the local political parties, i.e. United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) was minimal.

One area in which women were relatively active was in the rotating credit associations. There were two main types of rotating credit associations: the short term association which ran for about a year and the long term one which could run for more than a decade. The former was the *kumpulan undi*, which is now popularly known as *kumpulan kutu*. This involved the monthly pooling of cash by a group of women (usually 10 to 12 in number) with each woman taking the cash pool in turn until all had their share. A variation of this was the pooling of cash for the purchase of crockery. It was through such credit facilities that women were able to acquire cash in a lump sum to buy personal items or household goods which were otherwise beyond their means.

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11) This sour fruit, which is about the size of an average apple, belongs to the mangosteen family. The fruit is thinly sliced, dried in the sun and preserved. The preserve slices are widely used in Malaysian and, in particular, Malay dishes.

12) *Bunga kantan*, which is pink in colour, has pungent smell and is used in many Malay spicy dishes.

13) *Jering*, which belongs to the legumes family, is the fruit of a wild tree. The fruit is usually eaten raw with rice and curries as appetiser.

14) *Bunga telor* are hard boiled eggs beautifully decorated with paper flowers, ribbons, etc. which are distributed as gifts to the guests at a major feast such as a wedding.

The latter was called *syarikat* (short for *syarikat kerjasama*, i.e. co-operatives). There were the *syarikat kenduri* (co-operatives for feasts) and *syarikat pinggan mangkok* (co-operatives for crockery). The *syarikat kenduri* comprised about 15 to 20 members, each from a separate household in a traditional village. They pledged to help each other in kind, cash and labour when anyone of them held a feast. The amount of contribution made by each member was determined in advance. In most cases, each member paid RM5.00, two *cupak* (about two kilos) of rice, five coconuts, ten eggs, etc., in addition to manpower to run the feasts. Each member enlisted the help of his/her group only once and when all the members had had their turn, the group was disbanded. The *syarikat kenduri* formed in the 50s lasted until the late 70s; in the 80s new ones were formed.

The *syarikat pinggan mangkok* was, like the *syarikat kenduri*, locally based and had a small membership, but its objectives and mode of operation were different. The main aim, in this case, was to buy essential items for use during feasts, such as large cooking utensils, crockery, water drums, tents, etc. These equipments were bought in stages, beginning usually with the crockery, hence the name of the *syarikat*. Money for the purchase was collected from each member who contributed in equal proportion. The members in turn had the privilege of using the *syarikat's* property freely whenever a feast was held at their house; but they had to make good any damage. Non-members in the village too were allowed to use any of the goods owned by the *syarikat* for a small fee.

It is significant to note that the two types of *syarikat* were not gender based. They were often initiated, headed and managed by men, but women often represented their households in such a group especially if they were divorced, widowed or their husbands were working and living away from the village.<sup>15)</sup> Women were the force which kept the *syarikat* going. It was particularly so for the *syarikat kenduri* where it was the women who saw to it that the household's contribution to the group was timely paid. And when it was their family's turn to receive the contributions, they saw to it that all members paid their dues.

Women's informal work-groups have now disappeared with the decline of agriculture, especially rice cultivation, and with the expansion of the market economy in the countryside. The rotating credit associations still exist today; the *syarikat pinggan mangkok*, on the other hand, has become less popular. In the 60s, each traditional village had its own *syarikat pinggan mangkok*, now only one village has it. The *syarikat* in the other villages have been dissolved. With the improved economic standard, many people in the village are now in a position to acquire their own equipments for use during feasts. In addition, there are now other agencies such as the farmers' association in Tanjung Ipoh, and some mosque committees which rent out such equipments.

The *syarikat kenduri* is still popular; 62 percent of the households studied are members of such an association.<sup>16)</sup> My informants believe the number of households who are members of *syarikat*

15) It was not uncommon for men to live away from their wives and children. Men working in the armed forces such as the army and the police, were frequently transferred, and to avoid disruptions to their children's education, they left their wives and children in the village. In other cases the wife and children were left behind because income from paid employment was too small to maintain the family; the wife stayed back and worked the rice field to supplement family income.

16) In my preliminary paper on women in Seri Menanti [Azizah Kassim 1988: 148] I stated that *syarikat* are ↗

*kenduri* has decreased. For some, it is because they can no longer afford to subscribe as the amount of contributions has increased; while others, such as the village economic elites, no longer have need for the *syarikat*. The increased contribution each member makes can be seen in one of the *syarikat* studied. Each member contributes RM10.00 per feast, in addition to one *gantang* (approximately four kilos) of grade A rice (*beras keras*), half a dozen tins of condensed milk of a specific brand, one kilo of sugar, one dozen eggs and two *cupak* (approximately two kilos) of glutinous rice. Total contributions per member come to about RM30.00 (at 1989 price), a sum which a few villagers, especially those in the *kerja kampung* category, find it difficult to raise. Most *kenduri* are held during the school holidays, either in April or at the end of the year, in November and December. Sometimes two or three feasts take place in one month. When that happens, members of a *syarikat kenduri* will have to pay out much more, and this makes it even more difficult for the rural poor to participate in the *syarikat*.

There are many *syarikat kenduri* in a traditional village, probably two or three operating at any one time. In some of these, members' contribution is even higher. One such group, with the highest contribution, consists of ten close lineage members whose respective husbands are all pensioners. In this case the cash contribution is RM150.00.

It is interesting to note that most of the *syarikat kenduri* are now initiated and managed by women. Women are in majority at the village level and most of them have participated in such a *syarikat* before. They are familiar with its organization and management and want to have a go at it themselves. This they do now with commendable efficiency.

Besides the *syarikat*, the *kumpulan kutu*, both for cash (*kutu duit*) and for the purchase of household goods (*kutu barang*) still prevail today. Twenty percent of the respondents, are members of *kutu duit* groups, paying between RM10.00 and RM100.00 a month. Sixteen percent are members of *kutu barang* groups where each member makes a smaller contribution between RM5.00 and RM20.00 a month. It is rare that women join both groups simultaneously.

The organization of the *kutu barang* groups has undergone some changes. In my earlier study the organiser of the group gave her services freely; presently, she works for a commission. When a *kutu barang* group is started, the members decide in advance the type and amount of goods to be bought and how much monthly payment each member makes. The organiser then approaches a trader in Kuala Pilah or elsewhere and promises to buy from him a fixed amount of a particular type of goods every month for a specified period. Every month she collects money from the members, buys the goods on behalf of the group and delivers them personally to one of the members at her house. She repeats this until every one in the group receives her share at the end of the round. She gets her commission from the vendor. Very often the commission is paid in kind, i.e. the set of goods she purchased every month. It is the prospect of getting such a commission which induces many enterprising women to form the *kutu barang* group. This form of group purchase is similar to those I found among the urban poor of Kuala Lumpur [see Azizah Kassim 1986b : 56–57]; it had its origin in the urban areas and had been introduced to the *mukim* by women who had once lived in towns.

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↘ no longer formed. My previous assumption is proven wrong.

All the women's rotating credit associations are now more widely based. The members of an association are no longer confined to one traditional village and close lineage members, but are spread all over the *mukim*. The *syarikat* and *kumpulan kutu* are now based on networks of relatives and friends who went to school together, or who were once neighbours when they lived in the urban areas; and friends of friends. This change is attributable to a number of factors. The village population has declined and not everyone can afford or want to join the *syarikat* or *kumpulan kutu*. Intra-village dissensions and polarizations are common due to conflicting interests and differing political alignments, competition for material wealth, and the emergence of the *nuveaux riches* which upsets the traditional social order. Given such circumstances, any rotating credit association must recruit members from a wider geographical area and this is made much easier by improved road communication.

Women today have more free time than they were accustomed to in the 60s. One would expect them to be able to participate fully in community activities organised by formal agencies such as Kemas (Kelas Kemajuan Masyarakat, i.e. Community Development Classes), the local UMNO branch, the *surau* or mosque committee, etc. But their involvement in such activities leaves much to be desired. For example, Kemas organises two domestic science classes in the *mukim*, one in Pekan Seri Menanti and the other in Kampung Merual. But these classes, which are held once a week, receive poor response from the women. Attendance has been so poor that the organisers are seriously thinking of closing down the classes. The lack of response is clearly reflected in the survey results; only 7 percent of the respondents have attended them. In the classes I attended there were only five or six women present, all of whom were the local party activists or the wives or daughters of other party activists. Kemas is closely associated with UMNO; in fact the two Kemas classes were instituted on the recommendation of the local UMNO officials who also sit in the village JKKK, hence the support given by women who are party activists or wives and daughters of party activists.

If Kemas classes are unpopular, it is largely because their curriculum is not attractive to most of the village women. The subjects taught are cookery, the art of making artificial flowers for decorations and *bunga telor*, and embroidery. Most village women who refer to themselves as *orang tua* (old women) feel such lessons are of little benefit to them. They see the classes merely as a place to socialise which they can do without. Many are more keen to join the religious classes organised by the local *surau* or mosque committee.

In the realm of politics, women's political consciousness has improved somewhat since the 60s, due mainly to their access to newspaper, radio and television. For example, women are now more aware of which political parties are in power, and the consequences of supporting or not supporting those in power. Like the men, they view their participation in a political organization as a means to an end, i.e. to get some kind of benefits for themselves, their families and the community. To obtain benefits from the government, be it *projek pembangunan* (development projects) or other forms of largesse, it is considered proper that one should support the party in power. Thus many gave their support to UMNO, before the party in-fighting began in early 1988. The only opposition party, the PMIP, has minimal support, as evidenced by the results of the last general election in

1986 in the Seri Menanti state constituency.

Women may be politically conscious, but their participation in political party activities is limited. A few become office bearers in the women section of the ten UMNO branches in the *mukim*. Almost all these female local party officials are close relatives (wife, sister-in-law, nieces, etc.) of male party officials. Quite often their involvement is in anticipation of some material benefits, such as to get a job with Kemas as a domestic science or a kindergarten teacher. They remain active until such expectation is fulfilled after which they become more committed to the party. If they or any member of their family fail to gain something out of the party, frequently they quit as party officials.

Women party officials are party activists, some of whom sit in the village JKKK. They are those who help organise party activities, especially the local level campaigns during general elections. For the rest of the women, however, political party participation merely means attending the annual general meeting of the local UMNO branch, and voting in the general elections once in every four or five years. Even at the annual general meeting, their role is often peripheral. They very rarely take part in political discussions and their function is confined mainly to serving refreshments to those present.

It appears that the political party and Kemas have failed to provide the women with a platform for social interaction at the community level. Women's interactions are confined to their informal self-help groups, the *syarikat* and *kumpulan kutu*; and in the field of religion and rituals. This last seems to be the main area of community interactions now among the villagers, both men and women. The 80s saw the popularisation of religious recital groups, i.e. the *kumpulan yasin*, and *kumpulan kulhuallah* and the growing importance of the death and burial association at the village level. In every administrative village under a JKKK there is now a religious recital group. Members of the groups are men, but women play an important part in their weekly meet. The recitals are accompanied by a small *kenduri*, and as is the case with all feasts, it is the women who bear major responsibilities for the preparation of food for the religious *kenduri*. It is in rituals and religion that women now find a base for close interaction and co-operation. The *kenduri* and the religious classes provide the women a respite from their housework and give them an opportunity to go out of their house at least once a week to socialise with friends and relatives.

## V Conclusion

Development is planned change and its implementation is bound to affect distribution of roles between the sexes. This is evident in most studies on the impact of development such as those by Strange [1980] in Rusila, Trengganu; Husna Sulaiman [1989], in the MUDA project in Kedah, and Ng [1989b] in Tanjung Karang, Selangor. Ng, in particular, observes the changing women's role from producer to housewife among the group she studied. It is the same kind of role transformation which is taking place in Seri Menanti. However, the causes of change in both cases are the opposite. In Tanjung Karang, female role transformation is due to agricultural development, particularly the adoption of new farming techniques in rice cultivation which includes mechanization.

In the case of Seri Menanti, it is attributable, in part, to the lack of agricultural development, especially in rice cultivation.

The changing role of women, therefore, is not confined to the area under study alone. It is a widespread phenomenon and in the case of the matrilineal society, the implications of this change go far beyond the boundary of the household and the family. Its implications on the Adat Perpatih institutions are serious; they signal the accelerated decline of the *adat* as an organising principle at the village level.

Development at the national and local levels has given rise among other things, to bureaucratisation of village life as reflected in the incorporation of the village headman into the district administrative system and the organisation of social and religious activities by government agencies, political organisation or state religious authority; the spread of education and increased educational attainment among men and women; the expansion of wage employment; emigration; the decline of agriculture and the full penetration of the market economy into village life. These very changes pose a threat to the very existence of the Adat Perpatih. The *tanah pesaka adat* comprising mainly land for rice and homestead are now of little economic value. To many, the land is an economic liability as the annual taxes must be paid whereas no income is derived from it and it is being held largely for its symbolic value. Emigration disperses the lineage members and increased contact and interaction with non-*adat* Malays and non-Malays as well as exposure to the mass media bring in new ideas and practices which conflict with Adat Perpatih practices. Emigration also keeps people away from the village for a long period of time and this eventually alienates some of them from the Adat Perpatih and makes many ignorant of *adat* rules and regulations. These social processes reduce the importance of the lineage group as the main basis for co-operation at the village level; the lineage group is slowly being replaced by specially created informal groupings. As the lineage group becomes irrelevant in many spheres of village life, the conjugal family becomes increasingly important to adherents of Adat Perpatih.

To assess the impact of these changes on women in the matrilineal society one has to look back at their position in the late 60s. At a time when they were actively involved in agricultural work especially rice farming, and when the land under their control was productive, these women had some kind of autonomy over their own actions (such as in the distribution and disposal of their economic resources). They also had social power in the sense that they were able to influence decision making at the household and to a small extent at the supra-household level, and to affect and control the action of others. The extent of female autonomy and social power in the household then, was relative to the husband's economic position. Where the husband was dependent on agricultural work (*kerja kampung*) and was working on his wife's *tanah pesaka adat*, and the family lived on the wife's ancestral house (or one built for her by her father), the greater was the degree of autonomy and social power enjoyed by the wife. It must be emphasised that in the 60s, most of the men in the village were in the "*kerja kampung*" category and the women, in general, did enjoy a high degree of autonomy and social power within the Adat Perpatih society.

Changes taking place in the villages, in particular the transformation in the economic base of the population, negatively affect the role of women in the matrilineal society. Where a woman is able to

find new sources of income, for example by going into paid employment or small business ventures, she is able to retain her autonomy and social power. Otherwise, such autonomy and social power are eroded in direct proportion to her economic dependency on her spouse. As described earlier, most women are now economically dependent on their husbands, and this dependency quite often obstructs or limits their ability to perform their traditional roles especially those affecting their siblings and close lineage members as prescribed by Adat Perpatih. Some examples are needed to illustrate this point.

**Example 1.**

In the Adat Perpatih society it is a woman's duty to give board and lodging to her adult male siblings or maternal uncles in the event that these relatives are divorced, widowed, or in need of temporary accommodation as a result of having had a quarrel with their respective spouses. In the 60s and earlier, when the family house was built by the wife's father and the family's economy was dependent on her ancestral property, women who found themselves confronted with such an obligation found it easier to persuade their husbands to jointly perform this traditional duty. Now, a man can and very often prohibits his wife from doing so, especially if his relationship with the wife's lineage members has not been good. If the wife refuses to observe such a prohibition, her own marriage may be jeopardised. In such circumstances, in order to keep her own marriage intact, the wife usually chooses to abandon her traditional *adat* role.

**Example 2.**

Care for the elderly parents in this matrilineal society is also considered the duty of the female children who inherit the ancestral property. In the 60s and earlier, such a duty was taken on willingly, especially because elderly parents can be an asset in the informal setting of a farming community. Now there are cases where husbands show reluctance to accommodate the wife's elderly parent(s); and in a few known cases the husband made it impossible for his wife to fulfill her filial obligation. This emerging trend partly accounts for the high rate of elderly people living alone in the villages under study.

These two cases help to illustrate how changes taking place in the matrilineal society today curb female autonomy and social power. While women lose her autonomy and social power, men's position within the household changed for the better. Previously men's position was described as precarious, now he has more control over his own family of procreation with minimal interference from his wife's close lineage members. This is made possible not only by men's access to non-agricultural employment which liberates them from dependency on their wife's ancestral property, but also by the emergence of religious consciousness and the growing commitment to Islam among the villagers. The Islamic ideology, as opposed to Adat Perpatih's, has a strong patriarchal bias.

Development, together with renewed interest in Islam at the national and village level, has the combined effect of changing the roles of women in the matrilineal society. Women may feel that

their burden of household chores and family responsibility is not as heavy as they used to be, but in terms of power in their relationship with the men, they seem to be losing out. In other words their autonomy and social power have been progressively eroded and weakened. Such a decline can only be arrested if the trends observed in this study are reversed; but as these trends cannot be stopped, let alone reversed, the position of women in the Adat Perpatih society in Negeri Sembilan will not be the same again ever. As women have always been the main prop of the Adat Perpatih, the weakening of their position may signal the eventual demise of the Adat Perpatih in Negeri Sembilan.

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