

Malaysian ‘matriliny’: past, present and future

Edition 10, 2022

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DOI: [10.37839/MAR2652-550X10.12](https://doi.org/10.37839/MAR2652-550X10.12)

The ‘matrilineal’ social arrangements of the Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan—the so-called ‘daughter’ society of the Minangkabau in Sumatra—and of Minangkabau itself have long intrigued observers, including colonial officials, scholars and missionaries, as well as members of surrounding societies. My own original anthropological research among Malays in rural Negeri Sembilan several decades ago was driven by a feminist interest in how ‘matriliny’ might affect the situation of women: did it make for versions of gender egalitarianism and what some term ‘relative female autonomy’?

The demise of matriliny globally has often been predicted: what has happened to Negeri Sembilan’s matrilineal order with the dramatic changes in Malaysia over the last decades, and what does the future hold?

Negeri Sembilan histories

Negeri Sembilan history tells a tale of settlement by Minangkabau from the 14th century onwards. Following Minangkabau precepts, people have historically traced their descent and inheritance of clan-based ‘customary’ or ancestral property through their mother’s kinship line, and men have moved into their wife’s village on marriage (uxorilocal residence). I wanted to explore this history, especially women’s property rights under the ‘customary law’ (*adat perpatih*) and the ways in which these rights were reconfigured with colonial rule and after.



Rembau 2004. Copyright: Maila Stivens

Many contemporary anthropologists are wary of the idea of ‘matriliny’, seeing it as an unhelpful, reified and crude classification hailing from the days when kinship studies were the core of anthropology. (Anthropology has long had to rethink both its earlier concentration on [kinship studies](#), which saw ‘kinship systems’ as [bounded wholes](#), and the discipline’s constitution within colonial relationships and categories.) I have argued elsewhere with other scholars that an unexamined idea of *adat perpatih* as a unilineal kinship ‘system’ can exaggerate the differences between its practices and *adat temenggung*, the cognatic practices in other areas of Malaysia.^[i] Negeri Sembilan (and parts of the state of Melaka) share many kinship features with other Malay areas which mainly follow bilateral kinship reckoning:

these include the workings of wider bilateral kinship groupings (kindreds) and ideas of co-parents-in law (*bisan*) as part of the (affinal) relations set up by marriage. I was especially sceptical about some anthropologists' views of matriliney as an anomaly or a 'puzzle', as inherently unstable because it departed from more 'expected' male-centred patrilineal kinship relations and [authority patterns](#). It was argued that tensions arose between the interests of men as brothers and uncles and their interests as husbands and fathers, with assumptions that authority rested solely in the hands of men. In this it seems likely, [structural issues apart](#), that anthropologists were following local ideologies. For example, within Negeri Sembilan and Malaysia more widely, some popular commentary about matrilineal practices did indeed highlight the tensions that men felt: there was talk, probably mostly by men, about how Negeri Sembilan was governed by *Kwin-Kontrol* ('Queen' or 'woman control') and how men joined the police and the armed forces to 'escape' the matrilineal organisation. (This overlooked the fact that men held and hold political and ceremonial positions as clan leaders and as the Ruler of the state.) A prominent [local saying](#) points to the problems in-marrying males felt they faced:

*A bridegroom among his wife's relations
Is like a soft cucumber among spiny durian;
If he rolls against them, he is hurt,
And he's hurt, if they roll against him.*

I was equally sceptical about matriliney as a form of 'matriarchy'. Versions of 'matriarchy' and arguments about its implications for the situation of women have had an important place in a series of historical imaginaries, starting with the work of Swiss scholar Johann Jakob Bachofen in the mid-1800s. This was taken up by Friedrich Engels (Marx's collaborator) and recycled and refined in versions of Marxist social theory. Later, a body of second-wave cultural and New Age feminisms centred around reclamations of the Goddess and matriarchy. (Cynthia Eller's 2000 book [Gentlemen and Amazons: The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory](#), explores this history). The concept also made regular appearances in popular commentary, colonial writings and scholarly work on Malaya, such as the 1931 book [Matriarchy](#)

[*in the Malay Peninsula and Neighbouring Countries*](#) by former colonial officer George De Moubray. With other colonial works the latter served as a 'text' for discussing *adat perpatih* ('customary law') in both English and local writings and policy-making. (Note that the Dutch colonisers used the term *matriarchaat* to denote Minang *adat* practices.) More recently, anthropologist Peggy Sanday's 2002 book [*Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy*](#) sought to reclaim 'matriarchy', arguing for a reconfigured understanding of the term in Minangkabau: she sees matriarchy as emphasising the role of maternal symbols in webs of cultural significance, with the mother and nurture as the dominant symbols, as opposed to power and dominance.

In spite of these issues, however, I was interested to revisit the classical anthropological debates about 'matriliny' in the light of feminist complaints about the male bias of much anthropology, to see what kinds of difference 'matrilineal' kinship practice and local *adat perpatih* in the Negeri Sembilan district of Rembau might make for gender relations. (See my book [*Matriliny and Modernity*](#)). I was concerned to do this within a full awareness of the historical context and development of Negeri Sembilan 'matriliny' (and I hope in full awareness of my own positionality as a 'foreign' scholar): the state's matrilineal practices were reconfigured within global forces that first colonised Malaya, then transformed it in the postcolonial period. Colonial legal codifications produced a complex multilayered legal structure of [*common, Islamic and 'customary' law*](#), imposed on local practice. A series of colonial reports and later scholarly accounts also worked to 'freeze' social relations in transcribed accounts. I recall that when I showed villagers my copy of M. B. Hooker's book [*Adat Laws in Modern Malaya*](#) it excited great interest, and they spent hours poring over charts of Negeri Sembilan clans, regarding them as truly authoritative. This illustrates well the continuing epistemological power of colonial and western scholarship.

Adat in Negeri Sembilan had recognised two categories of landed property, 'ancestral' (*harta pusaka*) and 'acquired' (*harta sepencarian*). British colonial codifications of customary law and wider economic transformations produced some

[complexities](#) that furthered individual female control of land: colonial legal codification of *adat* laws saw women granted individual titles to the ancestral land previously held as clan property. Although this land could not be sold on the free market, individual women now had extensive control over its use. Moreover, from the early decades of the twentieth century, with the rubber boom, while the British encouraged newly opened up (acquired) smallholder rubber land to be registered [in male names](#), most was not initially. Although male registrations increased over the years, a significant number of Rembau fathers and brothers who had purchased land made it over to daughters, sisters and wives in family agreements; this moved land into the female sector of ownership. My informants told me that people made these arrangements to make sure their female kin had property as an ‘insurance’, a concern arising primarily from the historically very high rates of divorce. Arguably, this was evidence of a strong local feeling that women deserved land, a significant sentiment for women’s wider rights within the society. In spite of this, ongoing pressure to increase the application of Islamic law to inheritance of acquired property has intensified with the dramatic Islamic revival in the country from the 1970s.

It could be argued, however, that much of the relative advantage for women under *adat perpatih* has declined with Malaysia’s spectacular modernisation since the 1970s. There had been a circular pattern of migration between Negeri Sembilan and urban centres dating well back into the colonial period, as my informants’ life histories from the 1920s onwards attested. But this intensified in the 1970s and after, with older residents tending to a declining agrarian economy. They did this while often caring for their grandchildren whose parents had left to join the urban working classes and the fast-growing new middle classes of Seremban, Kuala Lumpur and elsewhere. (In later projects I have explored the new lives of these [middle classes](#).) I have argued [elsewhere](#) that this formed an extended domestic sphere reproducing what for many was often a precarious urban life, bridging a supposed [rural-urban divide](#). New occupations and residence also saw many people from Negeri Sembilan increasingly marrying people from *non-adat perpatih* areas,

and some were also defying adat rules forbidding marriage within clans: both trends have undermined the clan system.

By the 1980s most rice fields lay fallow: [government figures](#) reported that there was almost no rice being grown in Negeri Sembilan. By the 2000s, however, some of the ancestral rice fields in my research village were now planted with a palm oil cash crop. This was in contravention of the ongoing cultivation conditions prescribed under colonial regulations for such ancestral land in the local Rembau Land Office (Land Registry). On my last two visits to one of my research villages, my adopted 'mother's' beautiful and historical Negeri Sembilan house within the compound where I had lived during fieldwork had fallen into ruin, and was totally gone by 2010: a poignant symbol of the decline of *adat perpatih*?



Couple threshing rice, Rembau, 1975. Copyright: Maila Stevens

The cultural politics of adat

Who is invoking *adat perpatih* today, who is challenging it? The declining agrarian economy along with the Islamic revival within Malaysia since the 1970s are important contexts for the developed cultural politics surrounding ‘tradition’, ‘heritage’ and Islam: this politics is enmeshed in the long-standing issues of who constitutes a true ‘Malay’. Within Malay identity politics, the Malay ‘villager’ (*orang kampung*) has been the central figure at the heart of the Malay nationalist imagination both before and after Independence in 1957: the essential Malay was either pictured as a (usually male) villager living in an egalitarian rural idyll or as a subaltern united in suffering and deprivation by the twin forces of colonialism and capitalism. Both images, and the image of the ‘village’ itself, are of course highly reductionist and essentialist, and ignore the multiple shifting forces constructing Malayness historically. Significantly, Rembau villages have represented the epitome of the long-established rural idyll in the Malay national imaginary, an archetypal Malay homeland with a documented long history. But Rembau may be one of only a few locations in the Malay peninsula with such claims to ‘true’, long-standing Malay identity, an outlier in terms of Malayan/Malaysian histories and demographics: Anthropologist Joel Kahn demonstrated in his book [Other Malays](#) the extensive immigration of Malays from outside the peninsula to participate in trade or commercial agriculture, the substantial Malay population in towns and cities, and the reformist Muslims who argued for a common bond in Islam and played down Malayness.

Today the ‘village’—both in Negeri Sembilan and other areas of Malaysia—has often become a commodified and increasingly fragmented cultural artifact, a backdrop for models displaying new ‘*moden*’ (modern) reinvented Malay fashion, and an object for romanticising, orientalisising and exoticising tourist consumption and celebrations of ‘heritage’ and ‘tradition’, at least before the COVID-19 pandemic. Such productions

in Negeri Sembilan form a key site of matrilineal practice in public spaces, underlining the ways in which *adat perpatih* operates as a site of both local and national romanticised imaginings. Social media are of course important today, constituting new publics. Unsurprisingly, there are a number of Facebook pages devoted to Negeri Sembilan and Rembau, including [Anak-Anak Negeri Sembilan](#) (literally ‘children’, people) of Negeri Sembilan, [Anak Rembau](#) and [Adat Perpatih](#); they all feature many posts in the local dialect, covering history, events, food, rituals, especially weddings with all the trappings of ‘tradition’—reinvented and contested within Islamisation—and *adat* performance. Trolling humour features in the first two websites.

Recent projects to ‘revive’ *adat perpatih* have shifted to urban bureaucratic and scholarly centres, with some local scholars working with entities such as state government and tourist bodies to market ‘tradition’ and heritage. Such an active resurrection of *adat* can be seen as part of a continuing process of cultural reconstitution, but one also subject to elite and other political manipulations and occurring against a background of tense ethno-nationalist politics. Arguments against ‘non-Islamic’ customs and practices have been a feature of the relationship between *adat* and contemporary Islamic religious revivalism: Islamic forces have mounted multiple challenges to aspects of ‘Malay culture’, including dancing (especially by women) singing, magic and healing.

I recently had a conversation in Australia about this with a young woman, whom I shall call Azlina, originally from Rembau. She told me about the problems in organising her wedding in Malaysia 15 years ago. Her father had been keen to strip the ceremony of its non-Muslim components, such as the supposedly Hindu origin sitting-in-state (*bersanding*) of the bride and groom, and associated rituals, such as painting with henna. The family, after extensive negotiations, decided to have a simple *nikah* (Muslim ceremony). Azlina in fact did not want a *bersanding*, or a ‘decorated’ wedding. But her mother did want a *makan beradab* (reception).

Azlina’s story represents a pattern of contestation around wedding rituals that has

been ongoing for several decades. For new middle-class migrants to the cities in the 1980s and 1990s this was often resolved/accommodated by a complex and presumably quite expensive set of wedding ceremonies, sometimes over several days: a *nikah* on the first day followed by a 'traditional' sitting in state, topped off by a dinner at a city hotel in the evening where the bride sometimes wore a more 'western' style wedding dress. Today, Negeri Sembilan [wedding venues](#) feature photos of elaborately-decorated halls, with the bridal couple ceremoniously seated on a couch. The brides sport modest wedding dresses mostly featuring the Malay kebaya shape in luxurious fabrics, topped by a Muslim headscarf: this is sometimes further adorned with a reinvented Negeri Sembilan headdress recalling the gold filagree old-time headdresses. Red henna-ed fingernails have replaced hand painting for many. The grooms mostly wear Malay dress, although a few affect western-style suits.

Such accommodations are at one end of the spectrum of conflicts between Islam and *adat perpatih* historically. On the other, the most developed Islamic-based direct opposition to *adat perpatih* came in a famous episode in February, 1951 described at length by Dutch anthropologist [de Josselin de Jong](#). The Religious Affairs Section of the Rembau branch of the UMNO (United Malays' National Organisation, the political party which was to become the dominant party after Independence) proposed changing the customary law applying to the distribution of *harta pesaka* (ancestral property, today termed *harta pusaka*) to conform with Islamic law as they saw it. There were complex, months-long manoeuvrings, with large meetings in Rembau and Singapore, and perhaps unexpected support for the plan from a few clan chiefs and the UMNO Women's Organization (*Kaum Ibu*). But in July, Rembau women threatened to institute divorce proceedings by eliciting their repudiation by their husbands if their husbands continued to support the plan, and it was [eventually shelved](#). (See [Peletz 2002](#): 59 for discussion of this complex episode against a background of shifting Malay political leadership.)

When I asked Azlina what she thought about the future of *adat*, she told me that, like many of her peers, she 'feared' it was on its way out, observing that women's

position had been strongly based on economics, especially women's ownership of the now mainly fallow rice land. Referencing the number of 'mixed' marriages among people from different states in Malaysia these days, she told me about how men will say that 'you should not marry a Negeri Sembilan woman because she will take all your money!' She herself is the eldest daughter of an eldest daughter, so will be the senior woman within her sub-lineage. In spite of this, she told me she did 'not know much about the *adat* until my grandmother told me all about *suku* (clans) etc.'. Her grandmother had organised everything for the wedding. Azlina also felt that her mother had changed her views about *adat* over the years, becoming more concerned about 'proper' Muslim practice as against *adat*, sometimes to an extent that had shocked Azlina.

It should be noted that a proportion of people in Negeri Sembilan do not perceive a clear conflict between *adat* and Islam and indeed Islamic practices had been integrated with *adat perpatih* over the centuries, as the contemporary wedding rituals show. Some posts on the [Adat Perpatih Facebook site](#), for example, make long arguments about how Islamic law and *adat* are fully reconcilable, echoing earlier sentiment. [Joel Kahn](#), however, notes the views of the middle-class respondents from Seremban (the capital of Negeri Sembilan) in our study who suggested that Islam would eventually replace Malay 'culture'.

What is the future for Negeri Sembilan *adat perpatih*?

[Anthropologists](#) have been divided about what the future holds for matrilineal organisation. A growing literature has explored the ways in which invocations and reconstitutions of 'tradition' within modernity play important parts in struggles for autonomy, identity, and power worldwide. In Malaysia, feminists have made some important arguments about the political potential of *adat*. For example, [Gaik Khoo](#) and [Wazir Karim](#) have suggested that *adat* (presumably both the cognatic *adat temenggung* and *adat perpatih*) in the country generally can act both as a site of

support for women, and of resistance to an unequal gender order. Khoo analyses what she terms the reclamation of *adat* within Malaysian film cultures, suggesting that modernity facilitates the conscious and unconscious recuperation of *adat*, usually through a focus on sexuality or a return to forms of the archaic like magic or traditional healing. [Karim](#) suggests that ‘bilateral modes of social relations discourage social hierarchies derived from Western capitalism or religious orthodoxy’. [Sisters in Islam](#) (SIS), a [Muslim reform group](#) based in Kuala Lumpur, has also [argued strongly](#) for using *adat* more generally to secure women’s property rights against the inroads they see Islamist interpretations of *Shari’a* law making into women’s ‘traditional’ inheritance rights. They also propose using Malay ‘culture’ to promote local grounded understandings of rights. For example, with [others](#), they have argued that the provision in the Islamic Family Law of Malaysia (and Singapore and Indonesia) that recognises a woman’s right to a share of matrimonial assets was actually based on *adat perpatih*, giving women greater rights in divorce settlements than in many other Muslim jurisdictions. This right has been energetically [defended](#). (See [Stivens 2017](#) on Malaysian women’s activism.) As columnist [Tunku Zain Al-Abidin](#) opined recently, ‘Do not forget that we have our own local traditions of democracy and female empowerment, as the Adat Perpatih of Negri Sembilan and its Minangkabau antecedents as proof [sic] from centuries before’.

Claims based on *adat perpatih* should not be understood as a reactive return to ‘tradition’, however. *Adat* does not function in any clear-cut way as a homogeneous oppositional cultural sphere, a reified pre-modern or non-modern sphere or relic, an egalitarian ‘traditional’ ‘communal’ (and ‘female’) sphere, as against ‘modern’ rationalistic, capitalist sectors of society. Rather it is best viewed as a series of what scholars call discursive formations, shaped by power relations within which shifting, unstable—and intrinsically gendered—discourses have been continuously shaped. As such it can be, and has been, deployed in highly selective and strategic ways within specific contests. It has operated to sustain relatively communitarian and sometimes anti-development ideologies at specific points in time: my elderly ‘adopted mother’, for example, in an act of actualising resistance, had resolutely refused in the late

1980s to let her children persuade her to plant her now fallow ancestral rice land with a cash crop: 'It's ancestral land'! This communitarianism has had implications for women's situation, as the 1951 episode suggested.

In spite of its threatened decline, *adat perpatih* could have the potential to move into a series of arenas, including globalised rights claims around women's rights. In general terms, wider matrilineal kinship models in and of themselves, as noted, offer visions of a more equal communitarian order: they can also offer alternatives to heteronormative models of the 'nuclear family'. Calling upon dimensions of *adat* emphasising egalitarian ideology and female-centred practices could work to produce new democratic spaces in Malaysia, as has clearly occurred both in the past and present. The decline of the Negeri Sembilan rural economy and mass out-migration, however, suggest that locally-based, more communitarian political action based on *adat perpatih* itself is not likely. Moreover, moves to strengthen ideas of *adat* 'tradition' could be co-opted as a vehicle for those pursuing local political cachet within *adat* revivalism: male clan leaders for example could seek to parlay *adat* positions into wider political influence, playing into the tense identity politics of multi-ethnic Malaysia's ethnonationalisms. (There is a [well-developed scholarly literature](#) on Indonesia, which explores the deployment of *adat* within struggles over land, decentralisation, ethno-politics and conservation, including its potential for precipitating conflict.) In the Malaysian context it seems more likely that *adat perpatih* could act to provide ideological inspiration on the national stage for versions of political action seeking greater equality, especially gender equality.

Globally, some First Nations movements are reclaiming their matrilineal and 'matriarchal' histories: indeed, 'matriarchy' seems to be having a moment. There are multiple cases of renewed invocations of matriarchy searching for prehistoric utopian origins, some [scholarly work](#), New Age summonings of the Goddess in feminist spirituality movements, as well as indigenist moves like the '[Blak Matriarchs](#)' of Aboriginal Australia. Sanday's work has provided one template for a considered political reclamation of a version of 'matriliny' for a more egalitarian order of peace, plenty, harmony with nature and gender [egalitarianism](#) (cf. [Eller](#),

[*Gentlemen and Amazons*](#)). Will the thoroughly modern matriliney of Negeri Sembilan, reconstituted within the politics of colonial imposition, postcolonial developments and local cultural response, produce further new imaginings and new politics?

[i] M. Stivens (1991) 'The Evolution of Kinship Relations in Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia', in F. Hüsken and J. Kemp (eds.) *Cognition and Social Organization in Southeast Asia*. Leiden. KTLV Press (Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology): 71-90.

*Main Image: Women in front of a village dry goods shop, Rembau , mid-1970s.
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