

A SHARE OF THE HARVEST

Kinship, Property, and Social History
Among the Malays of Rembau

MICHAEL GATES PELETZ



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PREFACE

The inhabitants of the Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan have long fascinated and baffled outside observers. Although Muslims, they have matrilineal clans; houses and land tend to be owned and inherited by women, and in times past most agricultural work was performed by women. Early observers interpreted these features of Negeri Sembilan's social system as evidence of a "primitive matriarchy." Subsequent accounts, however, have dispelled this as myth. They have also suggested that the matrilineal system has broken down under modern pressures and given rise to institutions characterized by patriliney or bilaterality, and that contemporary kinship and social relations have become "loosely structured."

This study examines persistence and change in the social organization of Malays living in the Rembau district of Negeri Sembilan during the period 1830–1980. It is especially concerned with the evolution of kinship and property relations in the face of British colonial rule (1887–1957), modern market forces, and Islamic nationalism and reform. The study demonstrates that the system of matrilineal clanship retains many of its earlier (precolonial) features and moral entailments. It has neither broken down nor given way to patriliney or bilaterality: property codes still exhibit a strong bias toward females in the proprietorship and inheritance of houses and land, and there is little if any evidence to support the assertion that present-day kinship and social relations are "loosely structured." More generally, the study provides new perspectives on the social history of Negeri Sembilan Malays, as well as a critical reassessment of the structure and organization of kinship and property relations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—with important implications for comparative analyses of social structures and social change and for current debates on matriliney, siblingship, and gender.

Negeri Sembilan is one of thirteen states comprising the Federation of Malaysia; situated in southwestern West Malaysia (Malaya), it encompasses 2,566 square miles. In 1978–1980 I lived for sixteen months in the Rembau district of Negeri Sembilan, which is both a modern administration unit (*jajahan*) and the locus of a once largely autonomous polity. The village in which I resided, here called Bogang (a pseudonym), had a January 1980 population of 476 individuals, all of whom were Muslims, with the vast majority of them holding membership in one or another matrilineal clan (*suku*). Their economic pursuits involved the subsistence-oriented cultivation of wet rice, the collection and sale of forest products, and small-holder rubber tapping. In Bogang and most other villages in Negeri Sembilan, the production of latex for the world market was the main source of cash income and the principal means of satisfying domestic needs.

A number of factors influenced my decision to settle in the village of Bogang. I had already decided that I would be best off living by myself, but I wanted to find an empty dwelling close to currently occupied houses. Thanks to the transportation, advice, and other kind assistance of the local parish headman (*penghulu mukim*), who had many relatives and contacts in the community, I was able to locate such a house in Bogang.

My first lesson in Malay kinship and social relations began even before I settled in Bogang in December 1978, largely as a result of my search for someone in the village to hire to cook one or two meals a day and do laundry. Although I had assumed that this would be relatively easy to arrange, I was mistaken. The parish headman, among others, told me that rural Malays were not accustomed, nor did they like, to be paid in cash for the labor and other aid they provided friends and fellow villagers; they would be especially ashamed and embarrassed (*malu*) to accept cash in return for cooking and cleaning, which are usually done for free in the context of relationships of reciprocity. At the same time, the parish headman and others observed that Bogang undoubtedly had many households composed of married couples whose children had left home, some of whom would surely welcome me to join them at their afternoon and evening meals. This possibility struck me as ideal, especially since it would present me with many of the research and social benefits of living in a Malay home.

Within a few days of settling in Bogang I discussed the matter with the wife of the village headman (*ketua kampung*), who was a close relative of

the parish headman and one of my immediate neighbors. I asked her if she knew of any households without children that might like to have the newly arrived anthropologist join them at their afternoon and evening meals in exchange for payment. She replied that most villagers would be reluctant to accept such an arrangement because “people here aren’t comfortable with the idea of charging guests for meals.” So I decided to upgrade my sparsely provisioned kitchen to allow some improvement on the meals of eggs, bananas, peanuts, and tea I had been preparing for myself since moving to the village.

In our initial conversations, the headman’s wife had plied me with numerous questions about my eating habits in America, the composition of “typical” American meals, and my experiences with Malay cuisine. Although much of what I told her elicited only puzzlement (about the unfathomable ways of *orang putih*, or “white people”), a fair number of my remarks also met with approving nods and comments such as “my husband likes that too” and “that’s just what we eat.” It did not occur to me at the time that she was exploring our culinary compatibility and trying to assess my reactions to various Malay dishes, including, especially, her favorites. Nor was I aware, needless to say, that she would soon—and perhaps already did—regard me as her “adopted child” (*anak angkat*).

Within a week of my arrival in the village I realized that I was both welcome and expected to join the headman and his wife for lunch and dinner, and that they had in fact adopted me. Informal adoptions among villagers are extremely common; the important point is that our eating together on a regular basis presupposed our having a relationship couched in the symbols and idioms of kinship. The imperatives of this relationship were quite varied but most definitely included the unspoken expectation that I reciprocate the sustenance and care I received from my adoptive parents as village-born children of working age (ideally) acknowledge and repay their obligations to their parents—that is, through periodic gifts of cash and store-bought consumer items such as tobacco, tea, canned or imported fruit, and good cuts of fish and meat.

My adoption also aligned me with other members of the lineage compound in which the headman and his wife resided, as did the location of my house, which was in the same compound. Consequently, during the initial months of fieldwork I became much better acquainted with the members and dynamics of this lineage than with those of other lineages in

the village. Although this situation might have posed obstacles to my interacting freely with the members of other segments and factions of the community, fortunately it did not; soon after settling in the village, I managed to establish close working relationships with a number of village elders outside my lineage compound.

During the initial four months of fieldwork I devoted most of my time to participant observation and to building rapport with my neighbors. I attended numerous ceremonial feasts (*kenduri*) held in connection with weddings, funerals, and the Islamic ritual calendar, and I spent a great deal of time at village *kedai*, where dry goods and other supplies are sold, but which have the more important (social) function of serving as “coffee shops” where men congregate, relax over cups of coffee or tea, and discuss issues of local interest. Throughout this period I collected data on the content and ideology of bonds among members of households and household clusters, as well as between individuals and groups residing in different parts of the village; the basic characteristics of lineages, clans, affinal ties, kin group alliances, and kinship terminology; and forms of exchange, sharecropping, and tenancy. In addition, I began detailed sketches of local political alliances and various secular organizations. The material gathered during these early months increased my awareness of local sensitivities with regard to community factionalism and strife (and various national-level political and religious issues); it also helped me organize more structured interviews and design a comprehensive household survey.

My interaction with villagers during the early months of my research was greatly facilitated by my fluency in Malay/Indonesian. The fact that my speech incorporated certain Indonesian (to wit, Jakartan) idioms was, initially, a source of great amusement to adult villagers, some of whom were nonetheless quick to take me aside and instruct me in the more appropriate (local) conventions. Somewhat to my surprise, a fair amount of this instruction—and the ribbing that typically preceded it—came from women over fifty years of age. I soon realized that in most situations adult women of, or senior to, the generation of my adoptive mother (aged fifty-three) were just as accessible as, and in addition were typically more informative and uninhibited (in their dealings with me, at any rate) than, their male counterparts. Partly because of these unforeseen circumstances, I spent the greater portion of my time—especially during the first three or four months of fieldwork—among middle-aged and elderly women,

where I was able to collect extensive data on the dynamics of women's relationships with their natural and classificatory sisters and other kin. These dynamics appeared in especially sharp relief in the context of labor and other exchanges associated with feasting, and in women's appraisals of one another's behavior and motivations.

My observations of interactions among sisters, along with other experiences with villagers of both sexes, confirmed many points emphasized in the literature on Negeri Sembilan, for instance, that ties among adult natural sisters were of central importance in numerous realms of society and culture. At the same time, however, my observations led me to question other published conclusions. The moral force of relationships cloaked in idioms of siblingship, for example, appeared far more compelling than the available literature suggested, yet many such relationships were infused with ambivalence and tension as well. I was similarly struck by the fact that most of the local terms and categories villagers used to describe their ties to their relatives were keyed to concepts of siblingship, and only secondarily, if at all, to notions of descent. Initially, I interpreted the relative hegemony of siblingship and the profound ambivalences surrounding these and other types of relatedness as indicating the erosion or collapse of an earlier (precolonial) system based primarily on principles and idioms of descent. Only much later did I realize that norms and values derived from matrilineal descent were far less pervasive in precolonial times than other observers had assumed, and that principles and idioms of siblingship have long, and perhaps always, been of comparable if not greater significance in myriad domains of society and culture.

In April 1979 I left the village for approximately six weeks, which I spent largely in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and the United States. In late May I returned to Bogang with my American wife, after which time I no longer ate regularly at the headman's house. My wife's presence in the village was greeted with considerable enthusiasm even though she spoke no Malay at the outset and had to devote much of her first few months in the village to informal language study. Her commitment to learning Malay and to exploring the experiences of Malay women and children was extremely rewarding to her and enriched my own understanding of women, gender, socialization, and other issues.

By September 1979 I had finished much of the informal, open-ended interviewing pertaining to kinship, property relations, and local history, as

well as the survey questionnaire that I administered from October 1979 through January 1980 to each of Bogang's 106 households. The questionnaire focused on basic census issues: the residential and marital histories of household members and their formerly resident children; the acquisition, utilization, and future conveyance of various categories of rights over houses and land; tenancy relations and labor exchanges; and income sources, living standards, and participation in various Islamic rituals and other religious activities. The scope of the questionnaire was, in retrospect, overly broad; but it did yield a wealth of valuable information that lent itself to quantification, diachronic analysis, and a fairly precise delineation of continuity and change in numerous realms of village society and culture.

In January 1980 I began a month-long study of all District Land Office records for the village of Bogang (from 1888, when land titles were first recorded in writing, through 1980), to augment the household survey data and elucidate continuity and change in property and inheritance relations from the late nineteenth century to the present.

The final months of fieldwork (February–May 1980) were devoted primarily to gathering, through open-ended, taped interviews, additional information on the substance and local conceptualization of kinship bonds and other social ties. I also collected mythical material on the origins of the universe and human society, the initial settlement of Negeri Sembilan, and the domain of spirits.

In mid May 1980 my wife and I left Bogang and went to Kuala Lumpur to spend four weeks analyzing early British administration reports on Negeri Sembilan and other historical documents deposited at the Malaysian National Archives (Arkib Negara Malaysia). We then spent six weeks in archival study in England, focusing on colonial records housed in the Public Record Office, the British (Museum) Library, and the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London.

The collection and interpretation of the data on which this study is based also owe much to the existence of a vast body of published literature on Negeri Sembilan. Various British accounts containing valuable (but highly unsystematic) information on the area appeared in the early 1800s (e.g., John Anderson [1824] 1967; Begbie [1834] 1967; Newbold 1839). In subsequent decades many essays were published on Negeri Sembilan's early political history and on numerous aspects of what came to be known

as “customary law” (e.g., Hervey 1884; Lister 1887, 1890, 1891; Hale 1898; Parr and Mackray 1910; Wilkinson [1911] 1971; Caldecott 1918; Winstedt 1920; Taylor [1929] 1970, [1948] 1970; DeMoubray 1931; Gullick 1949).

Since the 1950s there has been continued interest in Negeri Sembilan’s political and legal institutions (e.g., Gullick 1951, 1958; Hooker 1969, 1971). In addition, and of greater relevance here, the 1950s witnessed the initial phase of anthropological research in Negeri Sembilan and the earliest contributions to a now voluminous corpus of ethnographic material that includes the writings of de Josselin de Jong (1951, [1956] 1977, 1960), Swift (1958, 1965), Lewis (1962), Abdul Kahar bin Bador (1963), A. Wahab Alwee (1967), Nordin Selat (1976), Khadijah binte Haji Muhamed (1978), and Stivens (1985). The works of de Josselin de Jong (1951, [1956] 1977, 1960), Swift (1958, 1965), Lewis (1962), and A. Wahab Alwee (1967) are among the best-known contributions to the literature on Negeri Sembilan and are most pertinent to the principal concerns of this study.

My analysis of kinship and property relations in Negeri Sembilan differs from those of de Josselin de Jong, Swift, Lewis, and A. Wahab Alwee largely because of developments in anthropological theory and method that occurred after these scholars’ investigations. By and large, theoretical and methodological orientations are more important here than either regional differences among our respective research sites or the fact that my investigations took place in the period 1978–1980 as opposed to the 1950s or 1960s. My concern to document the conceptual and organizational importance of principles and idioms of siblingship has yielded numerous insights that eluded earlier observers, all of whom accorded analytic primacy to features of descent and/or alliance. Also different from the largely synchronic perspectives and methodologies employed by most other scholars working in Negeri Sembilan is the historical thrust of my research, which permitted a fairly precise reconstruction of the structure and organization of the sociopolitical order characteristic of Rembau and other parts of Negeri Sembilan during the fifty or so years prior to British colonial rule. Such a reconstruction is, in my view, essential to any discussion of social and cultural change under colonial administration.

My explication of data entails introducing various Malay terms, most of which I have spelled in accordance with the conventions of Standard Malay (as set out in Awang Sudjai Hairul and Yusoff Khan’s 1977 *Kamus*

Lengkap). I have provided English translations for many such terms, both for the sake of convenience and for the benefit of readers not familiar with the Malay language. The exceptions involve lexical items for which the English language has no satisfactory equivalents.

The Malaysian unit of currency is the *ringgit*. One ringgit (M\$1) was worth approximately U.S.\$0.46 at the time of my fieldwork.

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partment of Islamic Religion (Jabatan Agama Islam), the Department of Agriculture (Jabatan Pertanian), the District Office of Rembau (Pejabat Daerah Rembau), the Rembau Office of Islamic Magistrate (Pejabat Kadi Rembau), and the Office of Rembau's Undang (Balai Undang Rembau).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARDIDNS	<i>Annual Report of the Drainage and Irrigation Department, Negeri Sembilan</i>
BUR	Balai Undang Rembau Files
CRACNS	<i>(Further) Correspondence Relating to the Affairs of Certain Native States in the Malay Peninsula in the Neighborhood of the Straits Settlements</i>
FMGG	<i>Federation of Malaya Government Gazettes</i>
FMGGGNS	<i>Federation of Malaya Government Gazettes, Government of Negri Sembilan</i>
JAR	<i>Annual Report on the State of Jelebu</i>
LNS	<i>The Laws of Negri Sembilan</i>
MARDI	Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute
NSAR	<i>Negri Sembilan Administration Report</i>
NSGG	<i>Negri Sembilan Government Gazettes</i>
NSSSF	Negri Sembilan State Secretariat Files
PMIP/PAS	Pan-Malayan Islamic Party
PMS/PMU	Peninsular Malays' Union
SUAR	<i>Annual Report on the State of Sungei Ujong</i>
SUSCP	<i>Sungei Ujong State Council Proceedings</i>
SU/JAR	<i>Administration Report of the States of Sungei Ujong and Jelebu</i>
UMNO	United Malays National Organization

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