

THE PANGS AND PITFALLS OF DEVELOPMENT FOR MALAY WOMEN: FROM THE RULE OF THE DOMESTIC SPHERE TO ITS DOWNFALL

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Hujah utama rencana ini ialah kaum wanita dalam masyarakat Melayu pra-kolonial menikmati autonomi relatif berasaskan penglibatan mereka sebagai pengeluar dalam cara pengeluaran utama di mana individu dapat memperoleh hasil usaha sendiri. Dalam keadaan demikian, perhubungan gender lebih setara dan kaum wanita juga memegang kuasa tertentu dalam ruang keluarga. Kolonialisme dan kemasukan perhubungan pengeluaran kapitalis telah mengubah keadaan ini dengan penggarisan pembahagian usaha baru dan penjenisan ruang pengeluaran berasaskan jenis. Wanita Melayu agak susah mengekalkan kedudukan autonomi dahulu dengan perubahan dalam hubungan gender dalam keadaan di mana ruang keluarga dikhaskan sebagai ruang wanita dan kerja rumah tidak diiktiraf dan diupah sebagai satu bentuk usaha.

This paper argues that in pre-colonial Malay society, women enjoyed relative autonomy based on their participation as producers within the dominant mode of production which facilitated individual appropriation of the product of their own labour. Consequently gender relations were more egalitarian and women held a fair amount of power within the domestic domain. Colonialism and the penetration of capitalist relations of production has displaced this relative autonomy with redefined division of labour and distinct male-female spheres of production delineated. With the domestic sphere now identified as the woman's domain, and household work unrecognized and unremunerated labour, gender relations have also changed and Malay women are finding it difficult to maintain their previous position of relative autonomy.

The most prestigious statement a village woman could make in 1965 was "I am a housewife only" ... (Strange 1978:52).

... for changes of any magnitude will not come about without organized pressure from the women most concerned, and effective organization requires as full a historical analysis of the basis for women's oppression as it is possible to provide. (Leacock 1981: 477)

INTRODUCTION

The literature dealing with the impact of development on women, can be divided into three types: one dealing with the way particular development strategies affect the women of the Third World (Boserup 1970, Rogers 1980, Etienne and

Leacock 1979 for instance) putting the emphasis on the involvement of women in the production process. The other analyses these effect more specifically with regards to the division of labour and the special role of women in reproduction (Beneria 1982, Deere and Leon de Leal 1982 for instance). Those approaching the study of the impact of development on women from a reproductionist point of view (the term is from Stivens 1985) assume that men-women relations established with respect to human reproduction are universally unfavorable to women (Alexander 1976:77, Mackintosh 1977:122). The typical relation of reproduction is conceptualised as a relation of domination, i.e. patriarchy or viriarchy. Put in another way, it is assumed that women's oppression is universally tied to her role in reproduction. This oppression manifests itself in the control of women's fertility and sexuality and of the wife's labour by the husband.¹ A third type referred to as gender and development approach, stresses the power relations embedded into gender categories and underlines the pervasive nature of these ideological constructs (Young 1988, Moser 1989, Molyneux 1985). With this approach we move out of economic determinism and into a much more complex analysis in terms of women's interests and women's point of view. The danger here is to forget that culture and ideological constructs take form within specific economic conditions, and that these do put limits to their realisation.

Eldholm, Harris and Young (1977:127) have already underlined the dangers of the type of generalisations² generated by the approach in terms of reproduction, and Rosaldo (1980:415) went further when stating that the most serious problem in feminist research lies in the very tendency to cast questions in universalizing terms and to look for universal truths and origins. Leacock (1981:486), on the other hand, clearly denounced the Western academic women's tendency to project their own experience upon other women. In the following pages I will provide new insights on both the productionist and the reproductionist perspectives and try to circumscribe relevant features of the rural Malay women's experience of gender relations. In a concluding section, I will show how these gender relations are being undermined by the current development strategy adopted by the Malaysian government.

In addressing the question of the importance of the domestic sphere³ for Malay women and the changing role it takes with development, this paper aims at clarifying one source of confusion between rural Malay women on the one hand and those who assess the impact of development on their lives on the other. This confusion arises, I believe, from an assumption concerning the universality of patriarchy, and is to be found in the literature concerned with assessing the impact of development on the life of rural Malay women (Ng C.S. 1985, Maznah Mohamad 1984, Ahmad Zawawi 1982). Pointing out the basis of the incongruity between these two points of views should help to clear the ambiguity.

It will not be argued that rural Malay women of the past were ruling in a matriarchal-like fashion, nor will it be denied that men are, and might have been, said to be the "dominant" partners. Simply, it will be suggested that material conditions were such that they effectively prevented masculine dominance from realising itself into systematic oppression and exploitation. In order to grasp this complex reality we have to go beyond the discourse of both men and women, and beyond the ideological constructs which prescribe ideal gender relations, to look at the dynamics of the society and the limits it imposes on social practice. Providing a clear idea of the logic presiding over these practices will give us a grid to select from all the contradictory statements that are to be found in the discourse of the informants, those that fit better with this logic and those which are "foreign" to it.

Before colonial intervention, Malay women enjoyed relative autonomy in the economic and social spheres, and a fair amount of power within the domestic domain. However, "home" then was not exactly the same as "home" today, in spite of apparent similarities. With development, both their autonomy and their power are being undermined, but they seem to fail to grasp the significance of this process, and thus they often contribute, willfully or not, to their own ruin, by endorsing the idea that to be the "queen of the house", *suri rumah tangga*, is self-fulfilling and self-gratifying. I believe that, like the Kaititj women studied by Bell (1980), Malay women are reluctant to fight to gain access to men's domain (c.f. Manderson 1980), but they do not hesitate to fight to protect and enhance the domain that once assured their security and independence. For that reason, they are easy prey to those who, like the official government representatives or the Islamic teachers, claim that their place is at home, rather than in the work place.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

For want of a model of rural Malay society before colonial interference, most writers dealing with the question of the impact of development on rural Malay women use what is known of the prevalent ideology to reconstruct men-women relations. In doing so, they refer to the Islamic and customary discourse and law as if women were conforming to them equally no matter what their origin and condition. Underlying this procedure is the assumption that 1) what people say is a reflection of what people do and 2) what people say, or what they believe, is determinant of their behavior.

Social reality is far more complex than that, however, and very often, the beliefs people hold, the way they represent their social relations, is very different from the actual reality of these relations. Men-women relations, in so far as they are social relations, are subjected to the same rules. When asked to discourse on it, people may define these relations in one way but live, on a day to day basis, in a very different manner. Some argue that this is a difference between norm and reality, I prefer to say that people do not always have a representation of reality

which is coherent, or even compatible, with their every day reality. This should be explained, accounted for, of course, but first and foremost it should be acknowledged by those who carry on research.

Malays have been Muslims for more than 5 centuries, and the sincerity of the faith of most of those I met always impressed me. They are aware of Islamic prescriptions regarding men-women relations, and they try to conform to the Islamic ideal and adjust their behavior to its teaching. When asked about gender relations, most informants, men or women, will readily give a brief overview of these prescriptions, suggesting that this is the way they organise their behavior. One can accept that this conforms to reality and conclude that Malay women are obedient to their husbands, that they limit their work to what is prescribed by religion, that their primary role is one of support for their husbands' endeavours, that they do not leave the house without his permission, that they do not use contraceptives without his permission, if at all, and that none of them ever have abortions. If we accept this description, Malay women seem to be entangled in patriarchal relations (relations which control their labour, their fertility and their sexuality). This is probably what prompted Ng (1985) to say:

A gender ideology of male domination, as perceived by both men and women, also exists to uphold the patriarchal order in rural society. Societal interpretations of gender roles in *adat* and Islam are utilized as ideological justification for gender hierarchy and female reproductive roles.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that within the ideological level itself, the Malays draw from two distinct traditions: the Islamic and the customary (*adat*). Both traditions have many points in common, both stress the role of women as mothers, and those who take this discourse at face value hastily conclude that they both justify gender hierarchy because of the emphasis on the reproductive functions of women. However, I believe that the place given to the mother, and to women in general, is totally different in each of these traditions and in each of these ideological constructs.

Malay women themselves often sense this, even if they lack the perspective to conceptualise the difference. This is probably why female informants refused to answer Ayse Nilufer Narli's question: "What are the characteristics/ qualifications that best define an *ideal Malay woman*?" According to them there is no such a thing as "*Malay women*", there are only "*Muslim women*". Hence, they accepted to answer the question only if the terms "*Muslim women*" replaced the expression "*Malay women*" (Ayse Nilufer Narli 1984:132). These informants were all university students more or less involved in a Islamic fundamentalist movement, and they were particularly aware of the implied difference between these two terms. If, to be a truly faithful Muslim, one has to reject one's tradition, surely it must be because this tradition offers a model which is not compatible with Islam. This is especially the case with respect to

men-women relations, and this is what I am going to show, so that every one might be aware of exactly what is being rejected, or sacrificed.

These clarifications will also be useful to researchers who may then be more sensitive to the meaning behind the discourse of rural Malay women who have not been schooled in Islamic doctrine sufficiently to really appreciate the extent to which this doctrine differs from the manner in which men-women relations are understood and practiced daily. Neither they, nor the men, realise the extent to which their every day practice is foreign to the Islamic representation of gender relations. This might explain why such a contradictory situation has persisted till today, only to be exacerbated by development and its accompanying fundamentalist movement.

Not only is the contradiction unveiled today but whatever existed customarily is being more or less denied or assimilated into the Islamic discourse. This is where the pitfall lies, since rural Malay women are made to believe that what is asked of them today is in fact exactly the same as what they have always been doing, namely, to look after the every day needs of husbands and children, as good Muslim wives should do. What is not said though, is that this will be carried out not in a "Muslim society", nor in a "traditional Malay society", but in a modern, capitalist society (representing the ideal goal of development), in which these tasks entail unremunerated and unrecognised work and in a context where everyone is socially defined according to their productivity and their earning capacity. In other words, by limiting themselves to their home, Malay women would not only be excluded from production but also from all that is socially significant in such a society, and from whatever political power there exists. When they are faced with this reality, the pangs might be acute, specially since they are being deceived by those in whom they place their trust.

SOME HYPOTHESES CONCERNING THE PAST: TOWARDS A RECONSTRUCTION OF PRE-COLONIAL MALAY VILLAGE SOCIETY

In this section I put forward a number of theoretical propositions⁴, the validity of which is briefly illustrated with reference to ethnographic facts. I want to stress that these are theoretical propositions and not deductions from observations. There is hardly any way to know the past other than through hypotheses, the validity of which are tested through their ability to explain current social processes. I am aware that these hypotheses do not conform to the prevalent model which asserts that Malay society was of a feudal type and that personal dependence was the dominant mode of interpersonal relation. I nevertheless go ahead with these hypotheses as they seem much more convincing in unraveling today's gender relation in the rural population.

I do not deny that important centers of the Peninsula were organised along feudal and slave relations. But I suggest that these were circumscribed to urban parts and later in the XIXth century to the Muda plain which was colonised under personal dependence type of relations. This does not mean, however, that the whole of the rural Malay population lived under such relations. What I suggest is that beside these centers, and in their periphery, existed other modes of social production and organisation. I am concerned here with clarifying one of them. Unfortunately, the court centers were in a position to produce literary works and texts of laws which have been kept to this day, while the culture of villagers leaves few material traces. What is left then to reconstruct the life of Malay peasants of the past? As much as I believe that the literary works and texts of law do reflect the social relations of those who came into close contact with the urban centers, I hesitate to postulate that the whole of the population was subjected to such relations. It would take too long to make this demonstration here, but whoever has worked with rural Malays from the foothills⁵ can testify that it is not a feeling of one's personal dependence which dominates the mental representations, but rather one of pride and an assertion of one's autonomy.⁶ This is what I am trying to account for in the following pages.

I have shown that the main relation of production in Malay village communities of pre-colonial times (located away from urban centers), was one based on *individual appropriation of the product of labor by the producer*.⁷ I postulated that the fundamental social relation which was necessary for this relation of production to exist and to perpetuate itself was the *relative autonomy* of the individuals involved in this mode of production.⁸ Given the prevalence of this fundamental social relation I hypothesised further that men-women relations, as social relations, were operating within the limits set by this relative autonomy.

This means:

1. That, under normal conditions, all those who produce, appropriate the product of their labour process.

This is rather difficult to document, especially for the pre-colonial period since data is scarce. But then, all the corollaries flowing from this basic proposition conform to what we know of rural Malay society.

2. That the *relative autonomy* of the producers is necessary for this appropriation, and reproduced by it, i.e. the producers enter the labour process as relatively autonomous individuals and by appropriating the product of their labour they ensure that this relative autonomy is maintained.⁹
3. That in so far as women are producers, they will be enjoying this relative autonomy.

Indeed, all those who wrote on Malay women (Firth 1966, Djamour 1965, Strange 1980, Manderson 1980, Massard 1983, 1985) noticed this autonomy, but nobody could relate it to the fundamental dynamic of the society.

4. That given this situation both men and women will be producers only in so far as there exist labour processes suitable to each of them, according to the sexual division of labour. This means for instance that in an area where hunting is the only labour process possible, and where hunting is considered men's work, then women do not have a sphere in which they can exercise their relative autonomy and they might find themselves dependent on men. This kind of situation would provide fertile ground for men's dominance to realise itself and become domination. On the other hand, if both men and women have access to distinct spheres, or labour processes, within which each sex can exercise its relative autonomy then each can ensure for itself the perpetuation of this relative autonomy. These spheres may not be necessarily limited to production. For instance, among the Iroquois, men controlled the military institution and women controlled the domestic institution, both of which were central in the society, so both men and women enjoyed relative equality (c.f. Brown 1975).

This is what happens among rural Malays where women were traditionally responsible for agriculture while men were responsible for bringing back prestige goods or the means to acquire them (c.f. Couillard 1986).

5. That if women are considered relatively autonomous individuals, their relation to men will be one of equality, and that whenever they cooperate with men or with other women they will do so as relatively equal partners.

This is particularly striking in two very different domains, first in the work group organised by women for rice production, and second, in the relations within couples. The work group called *derau* in Kedah, is structured in very egalitarian manner around a person playing the role of what we could call "the first among equals" (*kepala kawan*, "head of friends"). *Pakat*, or consensus, is the principle organising these activities. It is the same principle which we find at play within the couple. All informants, men and women, agree that consensus is what obtains when anything has to be decided by a married couple, and observation confirms this. Marriage is very much considered a contract between partners (Djamour 1965:67, Swift 1965:105, Wilder 1976:165), and divorce, which is in fact initiated either by men or women, serves as a safety device in case of breach of this contract (and it can play this role precisely because of the economic autonomy of women, Couillard 1986, 1987). This means that the couple, husband and wife, constitute an economic unit, ideally helping each other carry out their work and sharing the product of different labour processes.

6. That if individual appropriation of the product is the basis of the dominant mode of production, then sharing and mutual help will be found to play an important role since sharing and mutual help constitute a counter-weight, a counter-balance, to this individual appropriation, serving as a form of social security that guarantees everyone his or her subsistence (Testart 1985:63 ff). Since individuals of both sexes are relatively autonomous, then they should all be involved in sharing and mutual help on a more or less individual basis. Conversely, individuals would be responsible to create and maintain the networks of sharing and mutual help which will provide them with basic security.

This is what we find among rural Malays, where kinship is the medium they use to talk about sharing. We find that given the cognatic nature of the kinship system each individual finds himself in the midst of a complex network of kin within which he chooses certain people who will serve as support in times of need.

7. That in so far as women bear children and nurture them, childbearing and childrearing might be considered a labour process, the product of which might be appropriated by the producer according to the logic of the dominant relations of production. This would mean that women would want to retain their children in their sphere of influence. Given the sexual division of labour they might put more emphasis on keeping their daughters (since mothers and daughters work together in the fields), which would result in uxorilocality and close mother-daughter ties. It means also that women will want to marry their children to those of women who are close to them and that marriage preferences will be such that women will manage to keep their children at least symbolically.

Again, data confirm this proposition easily. Malay women put great emphasis on their tie to their mothers and they try (at least they did so till recently) to establish themselves close to their living quarters (uxorilocality). We also find that the preferred marriage partners are *adik-beradik*, that is cousins (cross and parallel, given that the kinship terminology is of the hawaiian type), and that children of sisters were, till recently, the best suited match. In marrying their children to the children of sisters (according to the hawaiian terminology) Malay women manage to in fact keep them within the family. Economic factors do play a role in choosing marriage partners, and the better off villagers will generally try to retain their children, sometimes marrying them to poorer partners so that they will be attracted away from their families of origin.¹⁰

8. That in so far as women ensure the reproduction of the labour power of their husband, in so far as they are responsible for his upkeep, they are involved in a labour process, and they would want to appropriate the product of this labour. Since the labour power is part and parcel of the very person who is being upkept, it cannot be directly appropriated (except in a slave mode of

production, which is not discussed here). However, part of the product this labour power will produce might be appropriated instead, in which case we could say that women are "remunerated" for their work. Hence, in so far as their labour power is being reproduced by women, men would then have to surrender all or one part of the product of their labour to the women responsible for their upkeep.

Again, this is exactly what happens among rural Malays where men give their wives all, or an important part, of their earnings. In pre-colonial times, when money was hard to come by, men would bring back prestige items to their wives from their journeys downriver to the trading centers in the ports. This division of labour resulted in men being considered the official link with the outside world. Politically they were, and they still are, the representative of their partner and her children vis-a-vis any outsiders.¹¹

In such a context, what appears to be the basis of women's exploitation and oppression elsewhere, i.e. the fact she is responsible for both the biological and the every day reproduction of labour power, turns out to be almost an advantage to the extent that 1) as a mother she enjoys a particularly close relationship to her children, who remain affectively and economically tied to her for as long as she lives. And 2) as a wife, in so far as she has to reproduce the labour power of her husband, she also has access to at least part of the product of his labour. The price to pay for these advantages is that women would have a triple job, they would be involved in three simultaneous labour processes: 1) their own involvement in production; 2) their producing children; 3) their so called "domestic" work. They would have less leisure time, and would probably work more hours than men, but this does not necessarily mean that they were exploited or even oppressed. There might be contexts in which this would work to their advantage: they might appropriate the whole product of their and their husband's labour process and enjoy remittances from children as well as their help, while the men would have to make sure they behave properly if they want to have a wife to look after them and the right to see the children born of their union (this is more or less the situation described by Pak 1986, for the Minangkabau of Sumatra.¹²)

However, the fact that men were the political representatives vis-a-vis the outside world constitutes a weak link in the structure of men-women relations. Men were the bearers of hierarchy.¹³ They brought back from their journeys and from their link with outside political powers the notion of fear, *takut*, an organising principle of human relations in exploitative societies. Confronted with exploitative and hierarchical systems whenever they left the communities, the men learnt to cope with and function within such constraints. Within the village, they seemed to have been forced to adopt the more egalitarian relations rooted in the dominant relations of production, and maintained by women. But whenever the "outside" world encroached upon the community, men were in a

better position than women to benefit given their familiarity with its structure and its the male-oriented character.

To some it might seem that the whole village constituted a "domestic sphere", in so far as village life and production was organised and structured according to the principles which organised women's work and women's social relations, i.e. consensus, mutual help, sharing, "all features which Malays even today give as the characteristic or rural "Malay" culture. Within that sphere, be it called domestic or not, women enjoyed a privileged position precisely because of their reproductive role. Not only were they producers of children, but they were also the main producers of rice, the staple food of the community. The rice plants were symbolically identified with new born children, and women possessed special skill and special knowledge, that made them fit to handle them and ensure abundant harvest year after year. Hence, the very survival of the community can be said to depend on women in their mothering and nurturing role. Women as mothers, and as nurturers, were then at the very center of village life both economic and symbolic. Because of this central position, I believe that they were able to counterbalance men's political advantage within the limits of the village community.¹⁴

These propositions provide a grid to reconstruct the material basis of pre-colonial Malay villages. This material basis constituted the limiting framework within which men-women relations were operating. It worked as an effective constraint operating on the Islamic discourse advocating hierarchical relations between the sexes and the submissiveness of women. As long as this relative autonomy has been maintained, it has contributed to relatively egalitarian men-women relations at least in the actual day to day practice, if not in the discourse. The social transformations initiated with colonial intervention in the area greatly undermined the relative autonomy of the individuals, and men-women relations are being redefined according to a very different logic.

COLONIAL INTERFERENCE AND GENDER RELATIONS

Colonial interference in the area dates back to the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁵ This outside interference had various disturbing effects on the local society (c.f. among others Loh 1969, Lim 1977, and Stevenson 1975), but I will retain here only those that had a direct impact on men-women relations.

First the British introduced private ownership of land, including agricultural land (Wong 1975). This modified radically the traditional relation Malay cultivators had with their environment since, as shifting agriculturists, they had always enjoyed free access to land. While before the colonial era it was sufficient to work on a piece of land to establish one's rights on it (c.f. Couillard 1987), now it was necessary to hold a title and pay land taxes for this right to be recognised.

Women seem to have been specially penalised in the process since, according to the informants, they used to enjoy the fruit of their labour in the fields but now, the fields have to be in their name for them to fully enjoy its products. In addition the registration of land seem to have penalised women, since roughly 60% of the land titles are now in the hand of men and only 40% in the hands of women (c.f. Couillard 1987) while women claim they had equal rights before. As important is the fact that those without land are now in a difficult position to acquire any. Land has to be bought (or inherited or received as a gift) where traditionally it was appropriated through labour. With time, and with population growth, the land holdings have become fragmented and often insufficient to ensure the subsistence of the cultivators who have to seek alternative means of livelihood very often in urban areas.

This major modification in the relation to the land meant that Malay cultivators were forced to become peasants, tied to their piece of land and dependent on it for their survival. The colonial administration clearly thought that the Malays should be the rice producers of the country and put all its efforts into the realisation of this "dream" (c.f. Lim 1977, Kratoska 1982). In their mind peasants were men, and women were simply to help along. Yet for centuries, it had been the women who had been in charge of rice cultivation, and responsible for its success (c.f. Couillard 1987), while men were occupied in a vast range of occupations once the first felling of the forest had been done. Many of these occupations were curtailed with colonial interference in the region, so men were forced to fall back on agriculture¹⁶ and women were forced to adjust to this new reality.

In addition, in order to improve the production of rice, the colonial administration introduced new technologies. Though the rice cultivators seemed to have been slow in adopting them, they nevertheless had an effect on the role of women in the agricultural process. Most important is the fact that rice was thereupon considered a commodity, a product without soul or any special dimension which had to be nurtured by feminine hands. Rice was desacralised, and women became producers just like any other agricultural producers. This was not done overnight, and the Malays were slow to adopt the tools that were offensive to the soul of the rice, like the sickle for instance (c.f. Skeat 1967:227).¹⁷ But the new trend had been started, and it was only a question of time before women would be completely dissociated from rice production.

Moreover, the introduction of the *hevea brasiliensis* in the region brought commodity production right into the village. Rubber smallholdings were strongly discouraged by the colonial administration (Lim 1977) but the Malay cultivators managed to plant trees and harvest the latex in spite of official interdiction. It is interesting to note that while in some countries only men appropriated the new cash crops, among Malays both men and women tap rubber and earn a living from it. This means that while in the past men were those

responsible for bringing back money or prestige goods, now women were in a position to do so as well. The division of labour, and relatively distinct male and female spheres of production have been completely altered. This in itself is not negative. On the contrary. As men were more and more present in rice agriculture, women could fall back on rubber tapping to maintain their relative autonomy. We could even say that it is because of the importance of the relative autonomy of the individual producers that women could manage to get access to this new crop.

What is more important is that with the establishment of a real and strong state apparatus, the producers had to surrender an important part of their product to the State in the form of various taxes. However, I believe that the better off among rural Malays could maintain an illusion of relative autonomy since most of these taxes were levied on the circulation of products. They were thus less visible, and probably less resented,¹⁸ though they did cause great hardship on the producers when combined with all the other effects of colonialism, including the penetration of merchant and usury capital.

All these changes did affect men-women relations within the family as well, as the figures for divorce for the 50s clearly show. We have postulated that when economic autonomy is prevalent, divorce is a kind of safety valve that prevents systematic exploitation of one partner by the other. Under normal conditions it seems that marriages should be relatively stable: both partners join knowing what to expect from the other. However, the very high percentage of divorce that we find during the 50s¹⁹ is clearly indicative, in my opinion, of the very disturbing effect of all these changes on men-women relations. Rather than tolerate a partner who did not adjust to the new situation, the rural Malays preferred to separate and look elsewhere for a more suitable associate. The percentage of divorce is decreasing recently²⁰ and some attribute this to the benefits of modernization (Raybeck 1975:11-12), others to the rising status of women in the community (Kuchiba 1979:34)! It seems that the declining rate of divorce is more an indication of the erosion of the relative autonomy of both men and women, but more specially of women. For divorce to be a possible alternative to exploitation and/or oppression, women must be enjoying personal autonomy specially in the economic sphere. If on the contrary, women depend on men, either for access to land, for their daily subsistence or even for having access to government subsidy and new technology, then it seems obvious that they will try to avoid divorce and that is exactly what they do.

DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT WOMEN: HOW TO SEND THEM HOME?

The development strategy of the Malaysian government since independence has been aimed at improving the living conditions of the rural poor, who are mostly Malays. Various programs and institutions have been created to better their working conditions and they benefit from technological input, facilitated access

to credit and various subsidies. One consequence of this strategy, exposed brilliantly by De Koninck (1987, 1984, 1982, 1981) is the complete control and supervision of all agricultural production by the State. The Malay cultivators are being transformed into petty commodity producers, working for a State which controls almost every step of the production process and the sale of the products at the end of this process. The introduction of new technologies (new high yielding varieties, fertilisers, pesticides and machines) accounts for the intensification of production and the displacement of marginal small holders who cannot afford the shift to modern agriculture. This puts women cultivators, specially women heads of households, in a very difficult position.

In the mind of development agents, the productive unit is assumed to be the family, and the man is declared the head of the household responsible for production and for the administration of the family's income and expenditure. The wife is seen as the "queen of the house", supporting her husband's endeavour, raising the children who are the wealth of the nation.

Hence this paragraph in the fifth Malaysia Plan under the heading "Women and Development":

Women who account for about one-half of the population and constitute one third of the labour force, play an increasingly active role in the socio-economic development of the country, through their involvement in the mainstream of economic activities. They have and will continue to contribute towards developing a united and self-reliant society. Equal opportunities will continue to be given to women with respect to employment, education, and access to other social benefits. At the same time, the role of women in family development will continue to remain important in helping to build a united, just, stable, and progressive society through the inculcation of good and lasting values in their children (Malaysian Government, Fifth Malaysia Plan 1986-1990, 1986:28).

This paragraph constitutes the only allusion to women's role in the development of the country in a five year plan of more than 567 pages. In fact the last sentence reflects in a much more accurate fashion than the others the manner in which this role is conceptualised. A statement made by the government in a different context belies its position with regards to women:

In times of unemployment, women should stay at home and have babies, and let the men do the work (quoted in Lochhead 1985:94).

It seems obvious that it is as mothers and wives that women are expected to contribute to the development of the country, and only peripherally as workers when needed, specially by the multinationals. If women constitute one third of the labour force it is because they fight to retain a certain financial autonomy, this might explain why against all expectations so many young girls are allowed

by their mothers to join the work market.²¹ The figures show that the greatest number of women participating in the labour force is found among those between 20-24 and it declines steeply thereafter both in the rural and in the urban population, though the former maintains a higher rate of participation throughout (after a slight drop between the ages 25-35, the child-bearing years) (Malaysian Government 1983:114).

Hence it is the young unmarried women who participate in the labour force²² and, as we will see, it is mostly they who "benefit" from the various development projects put up by the government. Older women (40 and over) either go on working in agriculture (be it rice agriculture or rubber tapping) as unrecognised labourers or else, if they can afford it, they "retire" at home, depending on the remittances of their children and the income of their husbands. In both instances they remain "outside" of development, even though they are obviously affected by it.

While the different development agencies are training the men to use the new technology and teaching them how to handle the various bureaucratic networks in order to have access to subsidies and to credit, the women are taught how to become better housewives. This is done through two types of programmes: those with an educational content and those with an economic dimension.

The educational programs were the first to appear in 1961, in the Community Development Division of what is now the Ministry of National and Rural Development. The goal was to train a number of young women from various rural areas in cookery, tailoring, handicraft-making, child care and house management, and to send them back to their villages hoping that they would spread this knowledge to other women (Ramachandran and Lochhead 1982:30-40). These women were very much left to themselves after the initial training and most programs never led to much. An evaluation of some of these programs carried out by an independent researcher²³ showed that when they were organised these "classes" attracted mostly young unmarried women with some basic education.²⁴ Other development agencies have since created similar programs, all aiming at making Malay women into better housewives. The rational seems to be that modern women know how to keep their houses clean and tidy and their children neat and fat. Development, then, means bringing these skills to rural Malay women.

Parallel to these programs various Islamic classes are being held, with the aim of instructing the women in the real teaching and practices of Islam, since, according to the government: "Material development alone at the expense of the spiritual needs of man will be detrimental to the wellbeing of the Malaysian society" (Malaysian Government 1986:30). Given the fact that Islam stresses the role of women as mothers, and the place of women as being in the home, we can

see that this teaching is very useful to a State that does not seem to know how to integrate women in the development process.

Beside these educational endeavors we also find programs aiming at providing women with subsidiary income. In so far as men are perceived as the main breadwinners, whatever income a woman may earn is conceived as subsidiary, an addition to the family budget, which would contribute to improve the living conditions of her family. This is particularly shocking given the fact that Malay women have always been, and still are, involved in agricultural production as much, if not more than, Malay men. More shocking even is the fact that the agencies make an important profit on the work of these women. Artificial flowers made in the village are paid M\$2 per stick to the producer, and sold by the first agency to a second one at M\$4.50. The last agency sells the same stick at M\$6. When asked whether the women were adequately rewarded the official in charge of the program replied: "They are happy" and added that "M\$2. is M\$2. more than they would have earned if the ...program had not been there." (Ramachandran and Lochhead 1982:47)

These income generating projects are conceived so as to utilise what is believed to be women's skill. Some involve food preparation and sale in the local market, others prey on a defunct handicraft industry and encourage women to make mats and baskets to be sold to tourists (Ramachandran and Lochhead 1982:45). None of them address women as major agricultural producers in spite of the fact that agriculture has always been their privileged sphere both at an economic and at a symbolic level (though some programmes encourage women to cultivate vegetable gardens close to their houses in order to better their children's diet, these programmes still define women as secondary and their activities as supplementary).

The most ambitious program involving women is surely the World Bank funded handicraft project started in 1979 with a budget of some M\$7 million for the first two years of operation (Ramachandran and Lochhead 1982:19). This major project employs 22 full-time administrative staff and should involve 22 villages, where women will be making machine embroidery, paid on a piece rate according to the quality and the amount of goods produced. The administrators provide a building, machines as appropriate, including a generator if necessary, training and instruction (ibid). Conceived by a consultant from Bangladesh (who misunderstood the political structure of the village and of the country) this project started with the praiseworthy ideal of forming cooperatives of craftwomen with the major economic control being exercised by the workers themselves (ibid:25). In actual fact, it has been taken over by the State and has become, like all other development projects in the country, a means by which to control and supervise producers, who will be nothing more than wage earners in a cottage industry. The young women chosen to be the instructors were hardly asked whether or not they wished to participate, and they were sent for training with a

few week's notice. Other women who were to participate were given no information at all concerning the conditions of their employment (*ibid*). the program was implemented from above, and the women were only puppets that served the goals of the planners. They were supposed to be glad to be earning this supplementary income, and they were not expected to take part in the administration of the project. They were thought of as unthinking hands.

Once more, mostly young unmarried women were engaged in this project probably because they were free to adapt to the planner's schedule having nothing else to do. Partly also because their mothers might have sent them so that they will pick up whatever can be gained from these projects while the older women will go on ensuring the subsistence of the family. By sending their daughters over whom they have a certain control, the older women could be said to be utilising the government's programmes as best they could, while not disturbing their own productive activities. The older women, by remaining "outside" of the government's programmes protect themselves from its control. The younger women, however, will have to fight really hard if they wish to retain the relative autonomy that has been handed down for generations, in the face of programmes and policies that aim primarily at making them into housewives and mothers, dependent on their husbands for everything, including their livelihood.

TO SUM UP

Only the future will tell us whether or not we are right in linking the relative autonomy of individuals in rural Malay society, and of Malay women in particular, with a specific mode of production based on the individual appropriation of the product of labour. As this mode of production is being eroded, with the penetration of other types of relations of production, the relative autonomy will be increasingly difficult to maintain. It would be most interesting to study the strategies that Malay women will adopt in order to resist outside control, and specially men's control, that is if they do try to resist. In any case we can postulate that theirs will be a very difficult struggle given the fact that the State uses various means, including religious injunctions based on "divine" prescriptions, to put them in their "proper place". Moreover, rural Malay women, like everyone else, are seduced by the perspective of having some leisure, and being the "Queen of the house" often implies free time and release from the hardship of agricultural production. So, in the end, who can blame them if they endorse happily a development strategy which aims at making them into housewives? The real challenge then, will be for them to realize the need to maintain their relative autonomy in the face of conflicting interests and strong outside pressure.

NOTES

- ¹ See McDonough and Harrison 1978:334: "The social relations of human reproduction ... comprise the form of control of the wife's labour in the family and also the form of control of the wife's sexual fidelity... the procreative process has - like the labour process - been shaped by a relation of control, specifically in this instance by a relation of patriarchy. At marriage, the wife gives into the control of her husband both her labour power and her capacity to procreate in exchange for subsistence for a definite period, for life."
- ² While at first sight it seems absurd to suggest that women's role is often presented as unchanging, the gender categories founded in the ideas of biological reproduction and the sexual division of labour have a magnetic power of attraction; even as we recognize the important differences between women's role in differing cultures, classes, and historical periods we are drawn back to universals.
- ³ Though the expression "domestic sphere" is used, it does not make reference to a universal model according to which women everywhere are tied to the domestic, while men are to be found in the public domain (c.f. Rosaldo 1980:396 ff). The domestic sphere, referred to here, will be defined precisely for the rural Malay context, and be used as a reference point in discussing women's qualitative relation to men.
- ⁴ A much more thorough exposition of this theoretical framework and of the data which it can explain can be found in Couillard 1987. It is obviously difficult to summarise here 580 pages of a tightly woven demonstration.
- ⁵ With their mixed economy and their relative isolation from the main development pushes, these populations are probably much closer to pre-colonial rural Malays than those living in urban centers or even in the large plains which have been subjected to systematic development input for a long period of time.
- ⁶ This does not mean that the proximity of highly stratified nexus did not affect the areas where the groups were less hierarchised. Another study should try to define the various relationships existing between these very different types of social organisation. But before studying relations between, we have to know something about each of the parts involved rather than take for granted that we do know.
- ⁷ My theoretical framework rests on Testart's work on capitalist societies (Testart 1985). Testart, following Rey, defines a relation of production with regards to the mode of appropriation of the product of labour and not with regards to the ownership of means of production as we so often see in the literature.

- 8 The notion of "relative autonomy" is therefore a concept and not a deduction from observation. It is a parallel to "personal dependency", the conceptual tool necessary to make sense of a feudal system. It goes without saying that the autonomy referred to here is relative, since it involves people living in society. Moreover, it is impossible to provide "proofs" of its existence, as we lack the kind of data that would be relevant. I believe we can still use this concept as a means to decipher gender relations. Its relevance will be proven if it can account for a sufficiently large number of socio-cultural elements and practices and for the current reaction to changes.
- 9 This mode of production is therefore radically different from an exploitative mode, characterized by relations of personal dependence, such as a lineage, a slave, a feudal, an asiatic mode of production. It might exist in close proximity to such modes and be tied to them in various ways. It might even be incorporated into such modes and lose its dominant character (c.f. Taylor 1979 on the question of articulation of modes of production).
- 10 While talking about wealth one does not talk necessarily about stratification. I have shown elsewhere that wealth accumulated by one generation was frequently squandered by the next (Couillard 1987). The idea here is to try to retain labour force for the exploitation of the farm. Villagers never reported marriages with the royalty, though captures of slaves (to become concubine, servants, etc.) did happen. This would be one illustration of the link between the two systems.
- 11 This could be understood as being similar to being the representative in the public sphere, but this would mean that there was no "public" domain in the village, which is a weak hypothesis. I prefer to retain "outside" as a reference to links with other socio-economic systems and their representatives. Inter-village liaisons were often done by women, so it is obvious that "outside" does not refer to "outside" of the village.
- 12 "There are many elderly men from landless lineages who have to support themselves because they were divorced by their wives, they have no youth or energy left to find jobs to satisfy their minimal needs. Usually these men do not have a house of their own and find it difficult to meet their daily food requirements. This does not happen to women from the same impoverished lineages, as these have at least a house and can usually find wage work in the ricefield without capital investment. Men's waged work, on the other hand, is normally for ploughing, which requires a buffalo and physical strength to pull/push the plough. The same problem applied to men from land holding lineages, although there is a norm that an old man can return to his sister's house and be fed there. The village gossips a lot about how miserable life is for these men...their lineage sister cooks but gives them only simple food. They cannot complain however because they

are the dependents... Women do not have this problem because of the matrilinear system of land tenure." (Pak 1986: 478). Pak finds an explanation for men's situation in the matrilinear structure of the Minangkabau society (from Sumatra, Indonesia). This explanation is problematic since it cannot account for the fact that we find very similar situations in Peninsular Malaysia for instance, among people who do not practice matrilinearity.

¹³ This follows from note 11.

¹⁴ This precarious balance between two drastically different perspectives on social relations would have been tilted in favor of men whenever outside links provided them with the material means to create dependents within the community. The powerful *penghulu*, or village headmen, were men with political and probably financial ties to outsiders that put them in a favourable position within the village. They were then able to use the customs of mutual help and sharing to create dependants among their fellow villagers, thus introducing exploitative and hierarchical social relations. These were often closely associated with the personality of the leader, and very often they dwindled, and later vanished, after his death.

¹⁵ We should recall that the British bought the Island of Penang from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786 and founded Singapore in 1819. These were autonomous free ports. They established protectorates in the Peninsula between 1874 and 1896 forming the Federated Malay States in that year. The non-federated Malay States of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu were integrated in 1909. Finally Johore joined the ranks in 1914. It was only after the war, in 1948, that the Malayan Federation was officially constituted, and in 1957 that it gained independence.

¹⁶ For instance the sale of jungle produce declined drastically (Dunn 1975), war expeditions (Gullick 1965) and piracy (Trocki 1979) were curtailed.

¹⁷ The traditional *tuai* a hand blade replaced by the sickle is still used in some parts of Pahang (c.f. Massard 1983) and it was still widely used some 20 years ago throughout the Peninsula.

¹⁸ The colonial administration imposed a land tax to be paid by each land owner on a yearly basis, but it seems that offenders were numerous (Wong 1975). From our data, it seems that it was only during the 50s that the State managed to collect this land tax in a systematic manner.

¹⁹ Up to 77% in Kelantan for the period 1948-1957, 71% in Trengganu, 67% in Perlis, 61% in Kedah, etc., the lowest figure being 30% in Johor, the last State to join the Federation (1914) (percentages are from Strange 1981: 150, quoting Gordon no date)

- 20 Kelantan had only 51% divorce in 1978, Trengganu 38%, Perlis 34%, Kedah 35%, the lowest was Malacca with 6% (Strange 1981:152).
- 21 In fact chances are that these figures underestimate greatly the rate of participation of women in agriculture. During our surveys many women answered that they were housewives, while they, in fact, worked in the fields as much as their husbands.
- 22 In 1970 not more than one thousand Malay migrant women were employed in manufacturing; by 1976 it was estimated that over 60,000 of them were found in various manufacturing companies (Ong 1983: 429 quoting Jamilah Ariffin 1981).
- 23 Dr. O. Hutheesing, attached to the KANITA project, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1980.
- 24 In the area studied, 32 participants had between 10 and 15 years; 22 had between 20 to 29 years, 2 had between 30 and 39 years; and 2 had between 40 and 60 years (Hutheesing 1980: 19).

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