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**SOME REFLECTIONS ON COUILLARD'S THE PANGS AND
PITFALLS OF DEVELOPMENT FOR MALAY WOMEN: FROM
THE RULE OF THE DOMESTIC SPHERE TO ITS DOWNFALL**

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INTRODUCTION

Academic scholarship is subject to the vagaries of fashion. But intellectual fashion, more so than others, is at least partially a result of the particular configuration of political power and hegemony, both local and international. In recent times, western intellectual fashion has responded to the partial loss of western hegemony, the emergence of nationalisms, and the western intellectual's loss of confidence in the power of universal reason and the concepts needed to understand the world. This has resulted in a healthy and needed revaluation of received wisdom. But it has also resulted in some silliness, often under the guise of paying due respect to the integrity of other cultures and intellectual traditions.

In the field of Malaysian studies, we have witnessed a partial revaluation of past scholarship and a tendency towards a more generous view of the pre-colonial past, amounting at times to a veritable romanticization of it. To take one instance, the oppressive and predatory ruling class of a Munsyi Abdullah (1969) has mutated into the more kindly ruling class of a Milner (1982).

Perceptions and characterizations of the status of women in Malay society have also felt the force of such influences and revaluations, perhaps even more so. The theme of a "golden age", long since gone, when women enjoyed equality with, even superiority to, men is a long-standing one and perhaps a part of humanity's collective unconsciousness. Scholarship has caused such a "golden age" in western societies to recede into the mists of time. But, as has happened more than once, claims are made, at least, for its partial reality in non-western societies; claims now buttressed by an understanding that concepts applicable to western societies need to be revalued when it comes to non-western ones. Once again, much of value has emerged out of such a revaluation. But also much that is untenable.

Couillard's basic theme, that Malay women have experienced a decline in relative power and status under colonialism and capitalism, is a familiar one. There is much that is valuable and provocative in her argument. However, the following reflections are generally critical in tone and take issue with what, to me, are

questionable assumptions and matters of fact. Its critical tone should not detract from the contributions that her article makes to our understanding.

ON REPRESENTATION

According to Moore (1988), there have been two basic approaches in gender studies. One focuses on "actual" social relations (structure) whereas the other concentrates upon the symbolic-ideological realm (culture). Both have contributions to make. However, those who point out that women are not necessarily subordinate in their social relations have often failed to come to terms with why women have, on the symbolic plane, been often, if not always, relegated to a subordinate or subsidiary status. This cannot be resolved simply by suggesting that "people do not always have a representation of reality which is coherent, or even compatible, with their everyday reality" (Couillard, 1990:70)71), i.e. that it is a problem of ideology or of a discrepancy between norms and actual behaviour.

But Couillard herself senses that there is more to it than this. Thus, she states that "material conditions were such that they effectively prevented masculine dominance from realising itself into systematic oppression and exploitation" (ibid.:70), signalling an awareness that it is not simply a matter of ideology, or representations that are not coherent with reality, but that indeed the representations do have a locus in reality, even if only in some attenuated form.

Moreover, there is a problem with a formulation that seeks to distinguish between something called "reality" and our representations of it. This may not be overly problematic in the study of the natural world. But in social life, our representations of reality are very much a part of social reality. Couillard's formulation threatens to get us into a situation where the observer's representations of reality are cast as "reality", while actor's representations are seen as disjunctive or incoherent with that "reality", i.e., with the observer's representations. The "dynamics of the society and the limits it imposes on social practice" (ibid.:70) are predicated upon the observer's representations or "reality", whereas actor's representations apparently have no constitutive part in these "dynamics" and "limits".

The danger of such a formulation is clearly evident from Couillard's methodological prescription that "with a clear idea of the logic presiding at these practices, we are then in a position to select, from all the contradictory statements that are made in the discourse of the informants, those that fit better with this logic and those which are 'foreign' to it" (ibid.). Translated, what can this mean but that the observer selects those statements that accord with the observer's representations ("reality") and its logic, setting aside those that are incompatible with it!

It may be suggested that such contradictory representations are a source of dynamics as persons try to work out the conflicts within their representations of their world, a world partially constituted by such representations. It may also be suggested that the conflict between various social practices, *including* the practice of representation, would be another source of dynamics. Indeed, it might be argued that conflicts within and between social practices, including the social practice of constructing and articulating representations, are at the heart of social dynamics. If one practice, that of constructing representations, is seemingly at odds with another, that of material production and consumption, then the question must be, "Why?". What is needed, in other words, is an understanding of practice that includes that one practice that above all stamps us as distinctively human - the social practice of constructing and articulating representations of our world.

I believe these considerations to be critical, and insufficient appreciation of them leads one unwittingly to portray the actors as deluded, "easy prey" (*ibid.*), and as failing to "grasp the significance of the process" of change (*ibid.*). This leads to the suggestion of ignorance on the part of women as to the gap between representation and daily gender relations.

Representations are the structure of, often conflicting, meanings within a given society. It is in terms of these meanings that people understand their actions and their relations and value them. If these meanings are not fully realized in their actions and relations, the possibility that they then devalue these actions and relations and perhaps blame their material circumstances for their inability to achieve such a realization must be given serious consideration. In such an event, it may well be that rather than failing "to grasp the significance of the process" of change, they may indeed understand it quite well and see in it the realization of the structure of meanings within which men-women relations are conducted. It might be suggested that it is precisely because public representation of men-women relations portray women as "obedient to their husbands, that they limit their work to what is prescribed by religion, that their primary role is one of support of 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" (*ibid.*:71), that it has been relatively easy to constrict the domain of the domestic and consign women to certain roles; why they are "reluctant to fight to gain access to men's domain" (*ibid.*:70). When observers characterize this as subordination, they are engaged not merely in objective description, but in an attempt to substitute a different structure of meanings, which if successful results in a different valuation of these relationships and a consequent attempt to re-cast them in accord with the new structure of meanings. We should never underplay the all-too-real power of representations.

In brief, social relations are not something out there, separate and distinct from the meanings that people assign to them. Social relations include the meanings they are assigned, and it is this that characterizes them specifically as social relations. Granted, a description of social relations in terms of actor's representations alone is incomplete, but no more so than a description in terms of some observer's representations which separates them from actor's representations.

But Couillard, in any case, accepts that contemporary rural Malay women do labour under a patriarchy, whatever may have been the situation in the past. This patriarchy, it is acknowledged, is constructed upon the consignment of women to a delimited domestic sphere. Do women accept such a construction? What do women say in private? Do they offer other representations at odds with the public ones? We are not told, beyond the tantalizing statement regarding "contradictory statements". Precisely here would have been a rich vein to mine, not only regarding "real" social relations, but the manner of their representation by women, for women.

On this matter, I believe Couillard is in error in her interpretation of what it is that a sample of Malay women students were trying to distinguish in denying that there was such a person as "Malay woman" and affirming only that there are "Muslim women" (ibid.:71). She suggests that the distinction drawn by the students reflected an awareness that Malay adat is incompatible with Islam, an awareness fueled by the Islamic resurgence, resulting in the rejection of Malay adat, hence the denial of "Malay woman".

However, it can be argued that what we are witnessing is a revaluation of both Islam and adat, in which the representations of both are being re-cast and re-worked, and within which the sense of person/self and other is being re-presented. Thus, in the revaluation of one strand of thought, there should be no other person than the Muslim. Malay personhood is a partial personhood in a partial community, to be rejected in favour of a universal, transcendent personhood, in unity with all other similar persons in a universal, transcendent community. What is occurring is not some ahistorical Islam at odds with an ahistorical adat. Both Islam and adat are practices, discursive and otherwise, and as such subject to changing re-presentations.

ON HISTORY: GENERAL REMARK

Let me now turn to matters of fact, especially in the characterization of both the pre-colonial situation and of the changes brought about by colonial rule. But first a general point. There appears to be a rather cavalier attitude towards temporality in the paper. Thus, in what purports to be a reconstruction of the past, reports pertaining to events and situations in the post-World War II and

post-independence period is cited as evidence. For instance, while Couillard suggests that woman have lost the autonomy enjoyed in pre-colonial times, she cites as evidence for this past autonomy data deriving from studies in the 1940s, 1950s and 1970s. Such use of data undermines both parts of her argument.

The first point to be made about claims regarding pre-colonial Malay village society is to ask: When and where? One cannot and should not collapse centuries of history spread over relatively diverse spaces into one all-encompassing experience, denoted as pre-colonial, unless one has good grounds for doing so. Our present state of knowledge does not yet provide sufficient grounds.

True, there was self-and other-identification of Malay and Malayness, particularly, I would suggest, from the 15th/16th century onwards. However, one must be conscious of the nature of this construction particularly as it relates to village society. Differing productive regimes, encapsulated within differing (perhaps variant-political structures, surely made for great local variation. It is hazardous to assimilate village society in, say, the central Kedah plain with that in, say, the outlying regions of Kedah such as Sik, or in remoter areas of Perak.

For instance, I believe it can be established that the extent of central control in the Kedah districts of Kota Setar, Yan and Kuala Muda was rather extensive, and had been extended to considerable portions of Kubang Pasu by the late 19th century. On the other hand, central control in Perak in the 18th and 19th centuries was, for the most part, weak; but lack of central control need not mean lack of control. Indeed, lack of central control may actually mean more uncontrolled depredations by local power holders.

In connection with this, flight/avoidance as a means of protest should not be overemphasized. In, say, a wet-rice regime, considerations such as the amount of labour invested in converting a piece of land into rice land, the need for some sort of joint cultivation of a tract of land (i.e., several households individually cultivating contiguous plots, jointly making up that tract of land-arising from problems with pests as well as depredations of wild animals, and from the need for some degree of collective labour whether in the form of communal labour or as labour exchange, militated against movement except for extreme circumstances. What would constitute extreme circumstances cannot be determined solely or even primarily by some material measure but also by reference to ideological constructions of the proper social order.

While Couillard acknowledges regional/spatial differences (ibid.:73), her subsequent discussion proceeds as though what she initially claims to be but one type of Malay village community to be typical of Malay village communities in general. Either it is or is not one of a number of types; it cannot be both a type, yet representative of all. If it is but one type, then a pertinent question would be

the conditions of existence of such a type, given that she suggests that it was distinct from the type that was subject to more direct control from the centres of power, and given that centres of power would normally exhibit aggrandizing behaviour.

INDIVIDUAL UNITS AND PERSONS

Local variation aside, Couillard's notion of the "individual appropriation of the product of labour by the producer" (*ibid.*) must be examined. There appears to be an elision here from "individual" meaning "individual unit of production" to "individual" meaning "person". I believe this leads to serious confusion.

The individual producer in the agriculture, particularly rice agriculture, of the Malay peninsula was and is the household and the relationship of gender and production has to be analysed within that context. Men and women do not individually enter into production. Rather, men and women bound in a determinate relationship called the household enter into production. One cannot properly talk of gender relations within the household, for the household is a gender relation. The structuration of the household is simultaneously a construction of gender and gendered relations, not the only one, but arguably one of the most important.

Similarly, the immediate appropriation of the labour product is not by individual men and women. The appropriation is immediately by the household. Virtually by definition, the form of this appropriation and of its consumption reproduce the household. Different modes of reproduction may come into play depending on the form of appropriation and consumption, e.g. whether it is mediated by commodity exchange, and the division of labour in domestic work. The extension of commodity exchange may provide the means by which some dimensions of the household as gender relation is altered, because such extension plays a role in the structuration of the household.

Granting the relative autonomy of the individual producer unit within the social structure does not and cannot lead to the conclusion that this relative autonomy is transferred to individual women. That would depend upon the nature of the individual producer unit. Indeed, some (Leacock, 1978; Sacks, 1979) have argued that the emergence of the family, hence by extension the household, as a relatively autonomous economic unit has been at the root of women's subordination.

What does "relative autonomy" mean in the case of women whose participation in production, appropriation and consumption derives from their membership in a household which, ideologically at least, is headed by a male, and where the division of labour in domestic work places the major onus upon women? This division of labour defines, at least partially, the value of their person in

accordance with their capacity to perform such work satisfactorily, and perhaps constitutes a major parameter of the definition of woman as person.

WHO GOT WHAT?

Leaving aside this apparent confusion of individuals as persons and as units, the major empirical point to be established, it would appear, is that "under normal conditions, all those who produce appropriate the product of their labour at the end of the labour process" (Couillard, 1990:73). Despite a major admission that "this is rather difficult to document, specially for the pre-colonial period since data is scarce" (ibid.), Couillard proceeds to make some sweeping claims without feeling the need for due caution. The characterization of the "pre-colonial" situation is, I believe, inaccurate. Going by known facts, it is not the case that all cultivation was shifting cultivation in the 18th and 19th centuries (ibid.:77ff.). In Kedah, the state which Couillard uses as the primary basis for her arguments, sedentary cultivation was common, and rice cultivation for the market, i.e. rice as commodity product, was quite widespread. A Malay manuscript from the first quarter of the 19th century attests to the existence of both an internal and export market for rice (Khuo, 1988; q.v. Hill, 1977:42, 49-59; Zaharah, 1966; Muhammad Hassan, 1968:42, 78, 114 - 126 *passim*).

Claims about rice being "desacralized" under colonial rule just will not bear up, at least as far as Kedah is concerned. In addition, the implication that commodity production is the antithesis of "sacralized" production reflects a conception of the world that will not stand scrutiny: the production of commodities can coexist with ritual sanction and ceremony. The division of the world into mutually exclusive sacred and secular realms is a late product of European capitalism. Other societies and cultures could and did blend (simple) commodity production with ritual sanction and ceremony. In any case, "sacralization" and the association of women with the sacred need not mean that women are not subordinate.

Furthermore, there appears to be an inconsistency in Couillard's position that commoditization of production resulted in a decline in the position of women. That commodity production cannot be straightforwardly correlated with a decline in the position of women is proposed by Couillard herself when she discusses the introduction of rubber (Couillard, 1990:78-9). According to her, women as well as men had access to the new crop; that the new crop meant that women now had access to both money and what she calls "prestige goods"; that rubber assisted women in maintaining their relative autonomy.

Nevertheless, her picture of rubber may be altogether too simplistic, again predicated upon the elision of individual producers and individual persons. Women's access to rubber would have been mediated by one of two (or both) considerations: (1) access to rubber land, which in her account became more

restricted with land registration and the system of landownership brought about by colonialism; (2) access to rubber trees for the purposes of tapping, which would be dependent either upon membership in a household which owned rubber land or whose individual members did so or upon access to either share-tapping on land owned by others or to a job as tapper in a rubber estate.

In the context of rubber smallholdings, it was extremely unlikely that an individual woman would individually work a piece of rubber land. Besides labour requirements, the regime of tapping rubber meant and means going out in the pre-dawn hours to a lonely area often set some distance from the house. Given both ideology and social practice, particularly in the past, it was most unlikely that young unmarried women would have been permitted to do so individually on their own and married women were unlikely to have done so unaccompanied, with the usual caveat that the very poor and those without the possibility of accompaniment had no choice but to do so. Thus, rubber land was likely to be jointly worked by husband and wife, if either husband or/and wife owned such land, or, in the case of such land being owned by a single (widowed, divorced) woman with no male children of suitable age or male relatives willing to work the land jointly with her, it would likely have been leased out on a share-crop basis to a male or a couple. The other option would be to look for a group of similarly positioned women to jointly work the land - an unlikely outcome.

The other mode of access to rubber was to hire oneself out as tapping labour to an estate in return for wages. The ideology and resistance of Malay peasants against such waged employment in the past has often been noted. But leaving that aside, such employment, if undertaken by a single individual woman, even if interpreted as an act of autonomy of a woman, meant subordination to the regime of wage labour. In such an instance, can one discuss female autonomy and ignore the very real subordination to capital?

More importantly, and speaking empirically, how common was such an undertaking on the part of individual women, as opposed to women as part of a husband-wife pair or household? It would be even more unlikely for unmarried women to be permitted to engage in such labour, even if estate preferences were in that direction, which they were not. Married women were likely to do so, if at all, as part of a couple, in which case it is their joint subordination to capital, and within that context, given the mode of payment, the subordination of the woman to the man. As for widows and divorcees on their own, estate preferences would likely have ruled them out. Estate preferences were for family labour and against Malay labour. The numbers of Malays in estate employment were relatively insignificant and those characterized as Malays in labour statistics were often Javanese immigrants.

Finally, there is the question of the mode by which payment for rubber was and is obtained by those working their own land. Rubber must be sold. If men are considered, as Couillard does, to mediate relations between the household and the wider economy, then the sale of rubber is men's work. Doesn't such a mediation have any consequences for gender relations? Indeed, doesn't such a mediation itself signify the character of gender relations? (The same could be asked of sale of rice.)

Incidentally, the instance of Kedah also calls into question claims about relative autonomy of producers with respect, at least, to the appropriation of the product, if not to production itself. The existence of a fairly centralized state in the 18th century, if not earlier, with a well-developed revenue structure, including some sort of poll or hut taxes as well as taxes on land, not to mention the triennial tax for payment of the tribute to the neighbouring state of Siam (now Thailand), and a series of taxes on goods in circulation including padi and rice, salt, tobacco, buffaloes, poultry, fruits, etc. surely bore serious consequences for the agricultural producers who formed the tax base.

The practice of compulsory corvée labour also undermines considerably the relative autonomy of producers thesis. While a royal monopoly existed, lesser power holders did avail themselves of this source of labour which, again, was provided by agricultural producers.

With regard to Couillard's claim that there was no private ownership of land (*ibid.*:77), again Kedah is instructive as to the danger of over-generalization or the imposition of inappropriate categories taken from one culture upon another. Private ownership in the Roman sense of absolute right of use and abuse was absent - but was or is it present anywhere in the world with respect to land, except as a legal fiction? But if private ownership of land is taken to mean the right to sell, lease, mortgage or rent out the land, then such private ownership did exist, at least by the second half of the 19th century. Thus, there exists a fake land title, issued to a woman, for 6 relong (about 1.7 hectares) of house and rice land - the existence of a market for fake titles is itself illustrative - dating from 1867 on which is recorded three sales, one of which is a sale in consequence of a mortgage loan (Khoo, 1990:197n). The extremely detailed regulations pertaining to renting and sale of rice land in the Kedah Laws is yet another indication of the existence of a market in land as well as the notion of a market price for land.

All this suggests a rather more complex situation, one which does not accord with the fiction that until colonialism came along a sort of paradise reigned in which cultivators "enjoyed free access to land" (Couillard, 1990:77). Indeed, it may well be suggested that in the case of Kedah, colonialism essentially simply laid hold of a ready-made state and streamlined the machinery; it had little need to re-fashion the state to meet its needs.

But even if one were to grant that the situation was as Couillard casts it, her arguments do not necessarily follow. For instance, assuming that cultivators had free access to land and that possession was established by clearing it, the question must then be: Did possession accrue to the one doing the clearing? If so, was not the work of clearing defined as men's work? If it was, did possession therefore accrue to men and not women, except in those instances where women employed men to clear the land on their behalf? Was this latter occurrence a common one? Given Couillard's assumptions, a corollary would be an extremely limited labour market and hence women would have had difficulty obtaining the necessary labour for the work of clearing land. Women thus were most likely to gain possession of land not through right of clearance but through right of inheritance, i.e., by their membership in a household. In this manner, we are led back to the character of the household as gender relation, and a complex one at that in which the position of matriarch must be distinguished from that of unmarried daughter, married daughter from that of daughter-in-law, and so on, and not as a simple sum of atomistic individuals who contractually enter a relation which they can terminate at any time.

Specifically, inheritance of land was a complex matter. In the case of the rich, if one can use practice in the first quarter of this century as a guide, property was divided consequent upon death and division was often along Islamic lines, i.e. generally on a male:female ratio of 2:1, with major caveats on whether the deceased was male or female and if female, single or married, with or without issue.

In the case of the poor and less well-to-do, land was often not divided immediately upon death. Instead, it was made over to the management of, usually, some male heir who oversaw the rights of access of his co-heirs. Division might then occur perhaps only after one or even two generations by which time matters were extremely complicated and recourse would probably be made to the religious authorities for the correct calculation in which event men would generally benefit more than women. In the meantime, cheating or mismanagement, such as mortgaging the land unbeknown to the co-heirs, by the managing heir could and did occur.

Incidentally, up till now there has been insufficient study of the processes of inheritance as they affect gender relations. We know simply that sometimes property is divided by Muslim law and sometimes by *adat* (custom), the distribution of cases apparently slightly favouring *adat*. In the case of *adat*, the inheritance is usually equally shared, but it can also favour the female or male heirs. Is the mode of division indifferent with respect to the value and type of property? Who is likely to initiate division and what type of division? What kinds of conflicts emerge during division? These are matters requiring further investigation.

Taking all this in account, Couillard's finding that 60% of the land titles are now in the hands of men cannot be used without further data to suggest that land registration has penalised women.⁴ It might actually have assisted women, except in cases where they were cheated by those to whom they entrusted the registration of their land, an occurrence resulting from a general ideology of partial exclusion of women from the "public" sphere. Couillard herself suggests that men represented women in this sphere, thus suggesting that it was not only ideology, but actual practice. This is one instance where available data suggests that women were not so beholden to such an ideology and were not averse to making representation on their own behalf whether to the courts or to the land office, etc.

How could registration have assisted women, if one subscribes to Couillard's claims that the previous situation was one of possession by land clearance? Simply because they could now apply for land without having to seek the labour to clear it. They could register inherited land in the names of their daughters - Couillard is surely right to stress the bond between mothers and daughters, and between sisters. They could refer to the courts to seek ownership of land acquired in the course of a marriage instead of submitting to a straightforward Islamic division of property which their sons, especially step-sons, might favour. There exist moving affidavits where step-mothers, even mothers, were seeking a greater share in the property of their deceased husbands against the counter claims of their step-sons or sons on the grounds that the land was acquired during marriage as a result of the joint efforts of husband and wife. In this matter, there is some evidence that married women may have had a relatively better deal in pre-colonial times with respect to property rights. One version of the Undang-Undang Kedah recounts how a particular Sheikh-ul-Islam in consideration of the work of women ruled that one-third of a deceased man's property should be allocated to his surviving wife, with the remainder to be divided according to Islamic law. The ulama concurred in this ruling, in the words of the manuscript, "rejecting the law of God, upholding the law of *adar*"⁶.

There is, however, another consideration besides land which must be taken into account in considering gender relations and status with respect to economic resources. This other consideration may perhaps have been even more important than land.

Wet rice land was generally operated with draft animals, viz. buffaloes and cattle. In the final quarter of the last, and the first quarter of this, century such draft animals, in "normal" times, cost virtually as much as rice land. Periodically, every five or ten years, they cost considerably more than rice land. This was a consequence of the devastation wrought by cattle disease which ravaged the area every five or ten years. In addition, rental of buffaloes for the purposes of land preparation fetched as much, if not more, than rental of land.

In brief, draught animals were not only an important form of wealth and accumulation (if only because animals reproduce whereas land does not) but also of economic power. Studies of stratification that do not take this into account omit consideration of an important economic resource. Who controlled these animals?

The immediate answer is: individuals within households and households. But within the household, care of draught animals was usually the work of men (and boys). The work of ploughing the land with draught animals was similarly the work of men. This does not and did not mean that women did not own buffaloes or cattle; only that they generally had to have access to male labour to do so. Such a requirement generally meant that men were more likely than women to be owners of such draught animals and more likely to own more of them, and where ownership was jointly in the household, men were more likely to have control of them and to be the immediate recipients of the income they generated. At the same time, the wealthier were more likely than the poor to own them. Indeed, an inspection of property declarations upon death reveal this to be the case. A list of parish (*mukim*) headmen (*penghulu* dating from 1921 reveals them to be substantial owners of buffaloes and cattle but not necessarily of land. Such headmen were often chosen on the basis of their wealth.

DIVORCE AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

What do divorce and divorce rates tell us about the state of gender relations (Couillard, 1990:79)? On their own, without information as to who is the more likely to initiate divorce, the distribution of household assets following divorce, etc., they tell us nothing, especially in a context in which even when the woman initiates the divorce, it is men, in the form of religious authorities who sanction it, or men, in the position of husbands, who must utter the appropriate words!

Couillard appears to assume that women are the usual initiators of divorce as indicated by her statement in explanation of the decline in divorce rates that where women are dependent upon men, they will seek to avoid divorce "and that is exactly what they do" (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, it is almost surreal to see a discussion on divorce in contemporary Malaysia without any reference whatsoever to the changes in the syariah vis-a-vis the terms and conditions of divorce. Thus, divorce rates *may* have gone down because of changes making it more difficult for men to seek divorce.

There is also a major flaw in the argument. First, it is suggested that "when economic autonomy is prevalent, divorce is a kind of safety valve that prevents systematic exploitation of one partner by the other" (*ibid.*). Granting this to be a real possibility, nevertheless, the statement that "under normal conditions it seems that marriages should be relatively stable: both partners join knowing

what to expect from the other" (ibid.) cannot stand on its own. What are "normal conditions" and what should be the relative stability under such conditions? Beyond this, the assumption of marriage being a contractual arrangement between the two individuals entering the marriage, each knowing full well what to expect from the other (ibid.:74), sounds too much like a modern bourgeois conception. While such a conception may, with qualification, be in some senses reflective of contemporary Malaysia, I believe it fits the situation in the first half of the 20th century only in the most procrustean fashion.

Marriage was arranged - as such it was at least as much a relationship between the families entering into the arrangement as between the immediate individuals involved. Further, even if the individuals concerned were consulted and gave their consent to the match, surely the insight of sociology and anthropology is that individuals are structured, not autonomous, undetermined beings - individuals are the result of complex, multiple determinations. As such consent in such a context must be viewed against the social fabric within which such consent is sought and obtained. And none of this takes account yet of the ideology of marriage, the status of being married and of having children, etc.

Incidentally, the considerations above about consent apply to the notion of consensus which Couillard takes unproblematically and at face value as the characteristic principle governing decision-making in the conjugal couple: "All informants, men and women, agree that consensus is what obtains when anything has to be decided in a married couple, and observation confirms this" (ibid.).

Then it is suggested that the very high percentage of divorce in the 1950s is indicative of the "very disturbing effect" (ibid.:79) of changes wrought by colonial rule on gender relations. These changes were considered to be corrosive of the relative autonomy of women. Thus, the high divorce rates are apparently intended as an indicator that relations between men and women had turned exploitative and hence divorce was the way out for women. Couillard is not quite clear on this point, but read in context, the interpretation suggested here is more than viable. Yet, the subsequent decline in the divorce rate is viewed as an indicator of the declining autonomy of women, because women no longer have the autonomy to utilize divorce as a way out.

Leaving aside the question of the late date of the evidence cited, a number of other comments are in order. First, what is the reliability of the figures and the basis of calculation: the footnote (ibid.:79, n. 19) cites Strange (1981), who cites Gordon (n.d.). Secondly, where is there the comparative data to suggest that the divorce rates of the 1950s were higher than previously? Thirdly, the implied suggestion (ibid.) that Johor's having the lowest rate had something to do with it being the last to be colonized (not, incidentally, the last to join the

Federation, for Johor never joined the Federated Malay States) is untenable. Studies of 19th century Johor amply document the extent to which Johor's rulers emulated the socio-political and economic regime of the states under British rule, that the date of formal colonization (1914) had little connection with social and economic conditions in Johor.

There is also a problem of logic. There is the suggestion of a secular decline in the relative autonomy of women from pre-colonial to colonial to post-colonial times. Against this secular decline, the implication is that divorce rates went up, then down. Both the increase and the decrease are suggested to be indicative of this decline in the relative autonomy of women. One surely cannot have it both ways, particularly since the high divorce rates being cited are for the 1950s, some considerable time after British colonial rule began.

BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to make some observations on some issues not already touched upon above.

Couillard rightly questions the universal applicability of analyses deriving from a consideration of biological reproduction as the basis of the subordination of women, made famous in the simplistic binary opposition, male:female: culture:nature. She is also surely right to insist on the need to consider the specificity of cultures and societies and of gender relations in them, and to beware of imposing universal categories which only serve to flatten all difference. Specifically, she makes reference to the once popular domestic/public opposition, wherein the content, and the relationship, of the domestic and public spheres respectively were essentially derived from the experience of Europe as it emerged from the feudal era. She attempts to distance herself from this in her use of the category "domestic sphere" and in her effort to demonstrate that its content has changed, shrunk, over time.

This is all unexceptionable, except that in rejecting the earlier characterization of the domestic and public spheres, she appears to have lost sight of how such a separation came into existence, and of its consequences. She tends either to reduce the public to a virtual residual of the domestic or else to juxtapose them as possible co-equal spheres. For instance, she writes "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" (ibid.:74), adding that these spheres need not necessarily be limited to production. As an example, she cites the Iroquois which she characterizes as a society in which "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" (ibid.). With regards

to Malays, she suggests that "the whole village could be said to constitute a 'domestic sphere' (ibid.:77), the public being the residual category of the "outside world" (ibid.), or "outside political powers" (ibid.).

Is it sufficient simply that women have a distinct sphere which they control and within which they exercise relative autonomy? Could it not, after all, be said that that exists today in the case of women who work as housewives?

The Iroquois have been often cited as an example of a society in which women held considerable power. But that power derived from the fact that the so-called "domestic institution" which Iroquois women controlled was, in fact, the Iroquois economy, not just a part of it. In other words, the separation of domestic and public was only weakly present, and to characterize the women as controlling the "domestic institution" is misleading (see, Leacock, 1978). On the other hand, it must be mentioned that even in the Iroquois case, consideration must be given to the fact that even though women selected the leaders, only men were eligible for selection, just as it appears that while men could have temporary wives when on the hunt, women who chose not to accompany their husbands could not take on temporary husbands. Men controlled what Couillard calls the "military institution", so-called men's domain. But ultimately it was the inability to obtain consensus in the military domain that was an important factor in the demise of the Iroquois League.

The point about the domestic is that where the separation between public and domestic has occurred, it was a process which did not result in two co-equal spheres. The separation of public and private or domestic was precisely the process by which women were increasingly confined to the private or domestic and consequently deprived of the right to participate in the full life of the community as persons in their own right. Current industrial development may actually mitigate this process in more urbanized areas, even as development in the countryside further erodes the position of women. But in so far as more than half the population will be living in urban and semi-urban areas, and industrial employment is rapidly becoming the single most important source of jobs, and the participation of young women in such jobs is very high, the overall balance must be judged to be more favourable than unfavourable.

While Couillard's desire to portray the specificity of "rural Malay women's experience" (experiences might have been more accurate) is well-taken, the underlying assumption of homogeneity is questionable. And I do not only mean class, however that may be interpreted. There is also age to consider. Thus, if a woman's status rises when she achieves the status of mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother, that fact alone should alert us to where women stand in the social order. To take a well-known example, Chinese women grew in status as they gained in age, more accurately as they became mothers to sons and mothers-in-law to daughters-in-law. Their daughters and daughters-in-law (and their

daughters would become daughters-in-law to someone else), however, were in an unenviable position. The status of the Chinese matriarch was derivative of her location in a household, not something attaching to her as a person.

Age and its attachment to the individual and family development cycle, it would appear, affects not only women, but also men. Thus, in attempting to demonstrate the superior position of women in Malay village society, Couillard cites the plight of elderly single men in Minangkabau in Sumatra, disputing that their plight is a function of matrilineal inheritance, citing as counter instance that similar situations exist in Peninsular Malaysia among non-matrilineal people. Gender cannot account for all. Nor can age. In such instances, clearly propertylessness, coupled with the powerlessness of the elderly, is central, and affects elderly single women too.

Similarly, the assumption of village homogeneity is also highly questionable. Hierarchy was not a characteristic of the outside world, which stopped at the village gate, so to speak. It permeated and permeates the village community and structured it. Couillard's arguments regarding motherhood and wifehood are strange (Couillard, 1990:75)76. As a general consideration, questions of subordination and exploitation surely cannot hinge upon whether labour is or is not remunerated. For instance, no one would claim that workers are not remunerated, yet many would argue that workers are subordinate to and exploited by capital within a capitalist productive system.

As a cautionary note, one should not be economicist about the notion of subordination and exploitation. Subordination and exploitation does not occur only when the producer does not directly, immediately or individually appropriate her total product. Taking Marx as an exemplar, he nowhere suggested that labour should appropriate the total labour product, understanding full well that if that should occur, society would go into an entropic tail-spin. Thus, a certain proportion of the labour product will always have to be set aside to cover investments and social security requirements. The point is that there is an irreducible power dimension to subordination and exploitation. It is not remuneration as such, but the mode of remuneration, that is at issue. Thus, in the labour-capital relationship, the mode of remuneration is such that it enhances the power of capital over labour, that in the process of production and reproduction, the capacity of capital to further control the life-directions of labour is increased, and labour's autonomy is continually undermined.

Couillard suggests that the husband-wife relationship amongst Malays is such that the wife "appropriates" the product of her labour of upkeep of her husband and hence is "remunerated" for her work. This is achieved when husbands "surrender all or one part of the product of their labour to the woman responsible for their upkeep" (ibid.:76) by handing over to their wives "all, or an important part, of their earnings" (ibid.), or in pre-colonial times, by their giving of

"prestige items to their wives from their journeys downriver to the trading centers in the ports" (ibid.).

Leaving aside the comments pertaining to remuneration and the question of subordination and exploitation, it is valid to raise the question here whether this attempt at assimilating the work of wives to wage work is well-conceived. Delphy (1984) has pointed out crucially that "wages" and "maintenance" should not be assimilated to one another as they signify different relationships and have different symbolic values. If a wife is given jewellery in appreciation of her wife-work, that denotes a very different relationship to when a worker receives wages for work rendered. The category of wages is already sufficiently opaque in terms of the capital-labour relationship, but compared to such "gifts of love" or "maintenance", the wage category is very transparent.

There is nothing very exotic in all this. It is all too familiar in contemporary society, and is one of the bases for arguing that wife-work is unpaid work and unrecognized labour. But the point is that even if it were paid, that would not necessarily mean that subordination and exploitation would not characterize the relationship. One needs a specific analysis of that relationship to come to that conclusion.

So also, the simple fact that a husband hands over a significant portion of his income to his wife cannot tell us anything as such about the situation of women in a society. Many of us would be familiar with such a situation where our fathers probably handed over a significant proportion of their pay-packets to our mothers. Many of us would recognize that as implicit recognition that our mothers bore the responsibility for running the household, while our fathers had the responsibility for bringing in the money. Yet many of us would acknowledge that even if this meant an even-handed relationship within the household, that did not mean that women did not have a subordinate position within society. In fact, however, the handing over of the pay-packet may be construed as signifying a particular power relationship, a power relationship reproduced anew and strengthened each time the pay-packet is handed over. Incidentally, such handing over of the pay packet is not such an uncommon event in western societies, yet its signification there is interpreted as one of subordination.

Couillard also suggests that women as mothers appropriate the product of their labour by retaining their children, specifically daughters, within their sphere of influence, using as one means, marriage to a close relative, preferably the children of sisters. This sense of "appropriation" is interesting. But again, what does it tell us about the position of women? Here, consideration should be given to women as a differentiated category: women as mothers and women as daughters and daughters-in-law, as well as the expectations upon daughters as

compared to the expectations upon sons, the range of tolerable behaviour from daughters as compared to the range of tolerable behaviour from sons.

Thus Couillard's conclusions with respect to these aspects strike one as strange, if not tortuous, that "what appears to be the basis of women's exploitation and oppression elsewhere, i.e. the fact that she is responsible for both the biological and everyday reproduction of labour power, turns out to be *almost* an advantage" (ibid.; emphasis added). For if her arguments are accepted, then the representation of the position of women elsewhere as oppressed and exploited is deluded, because what she suggests could as easily be transferred to women elsewhere.

But I wish to simply point out that her statement that "they (women) might appropriate the whole product of their and their husband's labour process and enjoy remittances from children as well as their help" is grossly inaccurate. Even if the woman as mother and wife were given all the income she, her husband and her children generate, that income goes towards reproduction and maintenance of the household. The distribution of consumption, hence income, within the household is a function of the household's character, not of who manages the purse strings. We are back again to the gendered relation that is the household. For instance, we should ask what happens in the context of shortage: Who is likely to go without and have their needs or desires unsatisfied?

Considering the above arguments, it seems to me that Couillard has not established her argument, except for the characterization of the Government's perception of women today. But, the Government's perception may not be shared by women, especially younger women. The Government's project may thus not be realized as it may not be the project of women.

In reality, the situation is more ambiguous, both on the part of Government and on the part of women. Current industrial employment practices have resulted in the massive influx of young women into the factories. For the first time, many of them have both the means, necessity and opportunity of living away from home, deciding on their own their daily actions outside work. This has exposed them to a charge of immorality, a charge itself illustrative of the representation of women in, at least, the society of men. Many are deferring marriage till later. Many will go on in wage employment (even if not in the preferred factories) even after marriage as urban living on a single income becomes increasingly difficult. On the other hand, other women are pushing a contrary project of getting the young women back into the homes. But universal education - a contribution of capitalist development in Malaysia - means that this will not be so easy. The horizons of many extend beyond home, husband and children, although they surely do not reject them. The battle is just beginning. In so far as Couillard points this out, she has done a service. But in so far as she romanticizes the past and, to a degree, the rural present, she does not provide the

tools necessary to make sense of contemporary experience. At worst, she holds up a false mirror to that experience and in a sense undermines the emancipatory possibilities of the present.

NOTES

- 1 See, Couillard (1990). I am grateful for comments and suggestions from Tan Liok Ee and Otome Hutheesing. The usual caveat applies.
- 2 The phrasing is curious. It virtually acknowledges not only "male dominance" but the existence of "oppression and exploitation", only denying to this "oppression and exploitation" a "systematic" quality. What can this actually mean?
- 3 Khoo (1990) makes this argument.
- 4 One would have liked to have been given data as well on percentage of land held by men and by women, the average size (and standard deviation) of land held by men and by women, and the percentage of holdings (all the parcels of land under one owner) held by men and by women. The most comprehensive survey on landownership in the central rice plain of Kedah reported that in 1976, men held 56.5% of holdings and women, 43.5%. While the average female holding was 3.62 relong (1.01 ha) and the average male holding 5.45 relong (1.53 ha) suggested relative privileging of the male, the large standard deviations - 8.05 relong (2.25 ha) for women and 7.34 relong (2.06 ha) for men - might mitigate against too rapid conclusion in that direction. See, Gibbons, D.S., Lim Teck Ghee, Elliston, G.R. & Shukur Kassim (1981).
- 5 Although she may have extended it too far, mistaking kinship terminology for social relations, and the terminology of address, not reference at that; otherwise I fail to see the significance of her insistence on sisters "according to the Hawaiian terminology"
- 6 The actual words are: "menolak hukum Allah, menegak hukum adat". See Khoo (1985).

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