

## Gender, the Status of Women, and Family Structure in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the question of whether the relatively high status of women in pre-colonial South-east Asia is still evident among Malay women in twentieth century Peninsular Malaysia. Compared to patterns in East and South Asia, Malay family structure does not follow the typical patriarchal patterns of patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence of newly married couples, and preference for male children. Empirical research, including ethnographic studies of gender roles in rural villages and demographic surveys, shows that women were often economically active in agricultural production and trade, and that men occasionally participated in domestic roles. These findings do not mean a complete absence of patriarchy, but there is evidence of continuity of some aspects of the historical pattern of relative gender equality. The future of gender equality in Malaysia may depend as much on understanding its past as well as drawing lessons from abroad.

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### 1. Introduction

In the introduction to her book on *Women, Politics, and Change*, Lenore Manderson (1980) said that the inspiration for her study was the comment by a British journalist that the participation of Malay women in rallies, demonstrations, and the nationalist movement during the late 1940s was the most remarkable feature of post-World War II Malayan politics. The British journalist described the role of Malay women in the nationalist movement as “challenging, dominant, and vehement in their emergence from meek, quiet roles in the kampongs, rice fields, the kitchens, and nurseries” (Miller, 1982, p. 81).

The surprise that European observers expressed with seeing outspoken and politically active Malay women could be attributed the naiveté and cloistered mentality of the colonial rulers. However, Miller’s views about Malay women and their cultural world might well be more widely held (both during the colonial era, and even in contemporary Malaysia). Although scientific evidence about popular attitudes is lacking, the impression is that many Malaysians, including academic scholars, share the belief that traditional cultural values about women’s roles in society, including patriarchy, are widespread in Malaysia (O’Brien, 1983, p. 213, Jamilah 1992, p. 3; Ng & Chee, 1999, p. 176). This view was noted in a recent publication on the continued prevalence of traditional attitudes on gender roles in Malaysia:

“Women’s role is oriented more towards family matters rather than self-fulfilment implying that when faced with having to make a choice between career and family, family is always given priority. In a way, the present Malay women are caught in a dilemma between the modern challenges of life and traditions. While many are now employed, they are still expected to be responsible for the family and to maintain the traditional perception of a woman” (Kalthom, Noor, & Wok, 2008, p. 454).

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This interpretation is reinforced with the poor showing of Malaysian women in a recent report on international gender equality. According to the World Economic Forum (2013, Table 3b, pp. 12-13), Malaysia ranked extremely low (102 of the 136 countries) in the Global Gender Gap Index based on statistical data on male-female gaps in education, economic mobility, health, and participation in political roles.

The claim that Malaysian women lag behind men primarily because of traditional cultural values is challenged, however, by the writings of area studies specialists and social historians about gender roles and equality in South-east Asia. One of the key tenets about South-east Asia as a region distinct from East and South Asia is the relatively high status of women. The distinguished historian Anthony Reid (1988a; 1988b, chap. 4) observed that the relative autonomy and economic importance of women in the sixteenth and seventeenth century South-east Asia probably was higher than in any other part of the world.

This paper surveys the contemporary social science research literature, primarily studies of women's status and roles in twentieth century Malaya and Peninsular Malaysia to ascertain if the historical patterns of relative gender equality have persisted to modern times. There are two important qualifications of this survey. The first is the limitation to the Malay community rather than all groups in the multi-ethnic Malaysian nation. The notion of relatively high female status in South-east Asia described by Reid and others is rooted in the traditional cultures of insular and mainland South-east Asia. If there is cultural continuity, these patterns are most likely to have persisted in Malay, Filipino, Thai, Javanese, and other South-east Asian communities. The status of women in modern Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indian communities may be more closely tied to the traditional cultures of East and South Asia that were allegedly more patriarchal than those of South-east Asia.

The other limitation of this study is the time period, the mid to late twentieth century. There are a number of excellent ethnographic studies of gender roles in rural villages and demographic surveys of marriage and family organisation for this period, but comparable empirical studies were sparse for recent years. For the period under study, most of the Malay population still lived in rural areas. Given the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of recent decades, the patterns described here may not be characteristic of twenty-first century Malaysia.

After a closer reading of the historical accounts of the roles and status of women in pre-colonial South-east Asia, the evidence on three indicators of patriarchy are reviewed, namely customary patterns of kinship and tracing descent, residential patterns of young couples after marriage, and gender preferences of children. The roles of women in economic production, particularly in rice cultivation and commerce, and also the considerable literature on marriage, divorce, and family structure were also reviewed. Although most of the studies reviewed here are based on Malaya or Peninsular Malaysia, some are based on neighbouring regions that share similar cultural orientations.

## **2. The Higher Relative Status of Women in Pre-colonial South-east Asia**

The relative high status of women in traditional South-east Asia is often mentioned by area studies scholars (O'Connor, 2003, p. 66) and also in many specialised studies of gender and the position of women (Andaya, 2000; 2006; 2007; Winzeler, 1974; Ong & Peletz, 1995). However, there is often a nuanced assessment which acknowledges that women in South-east Asia have some power in household decision making, but that the broader political and economic context continues to constrain women's advancement to

full equality with men (Errington, 1990; Stivens, 1996; Ng, Maznah, & Tan, 2006).

The extraordinary account of pre-colonial South-east Asian women's status and roles by Reid (1988b; 1988a) does not claim that there was a complete absence of patriarchy in South-east Asia, but rather that the status of women in the region was much higher than anywhere else. This conclusion is based on the observations of European, Arab, and Chinese visitors to South-east Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A number of these explorers and travellers wrote books and chronicles to describe the societies and peoples they encountered before the period of high imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the features of South-east Asia that surprised and fascinated outsiders was the visible roles of women in public life, especially in commerce.

Women were active traders and money changers in markets throughout the region, including Myanmar, Siam, Cambodia, Tonkin, Melaka, and Maluku (Reid, 1988b, p. 164). In an often cited quote, Raffles (1965, I, p. 353) observed that in Java, "It is usual for the husband to entrust his pecuniary affairs entirely to his wife. The women alone attend the markets and conduct all the business of buying and selling. It is proverbial to say the Javanese men are fools in money concerns." Some women even became large scale traders and engaged directly in negotiations with European merchants.

Visitors were also surprised with attitudes toward sexual relations between women and men in pre-Islamic Southeast Asia compared to the prudishness of European societies. Reid (1988b, p. 153) reports that premarital sexual relations in Southeast Asia were regarded indulgently, and virginity at marriage was not expected of either party. If pregnancy resulted, couples were expected to marry, making illegitimacy uncommon. Women also took an active part in courtship and had high expectations of sexual and emotional gratification (Reid, 1988b, p. 147). The fidelity and devotedness of South-east Asian couples were also surprising to many Europeans, whose expectations of marriage were not centred on mutual affection (Stone, 1983). In contrast, the relative ease of divorce in South-east Asia created incentives for husbands and wives to make efforts to keep their marriages harmonious (Cameron, 1865, p. 131).

Reid's (1988b, p. 146) conclusion was that the independence and high status of women in sixteenth and seventeenth century South-east Asia "probably represented one extreme of human experience in these issues." One sign of the value of women was the custom of 'bride-wealth' or the passing of gold and property from the groom's family directly to the bride. Men and women were not considered equal in all respects, and there were separate spheres of men's and women's activities and authority. Men generally retained authority in statecraft and in formal aspects of religion as well as work involving metals and large animals, such as felling trees, ploughing fields, hunting, house building, and metallurgy (Reid, 1988b, p. 163). But the women's sphere extended from the household to include a broad range of productive economic activities, including rice planting and harvesting, gardening, weaving, pottery marketing, and marketing. Women were also active in spiritual matters, ancestor cults, and as spirit mediums.

This paper surveys recent research literature to identify how many of these cultural patterns have persisted to the modern era.

### **3. Measuring Patriarchy**

The concept of patriarchy embodies attitudes and customs of male supremacy, but measuring patterns of gender equality within and between societies has proven to

be a major obstacle for empirical research. Even societies that are not considered to be patriarchal, such as hunting and gathering societies, have a gendered division of labour. The sexual and reproductive differences between men and women create interdependence and complementary roles in family formation, childbearing, and child rearing. The challenge for researchers is to distinguish between differences in roles that are adaptations to biological differences in childbearing and breast feeding, and those that are shaped by patriarchy (Huber, 2007; 2008).

This analysis skirts around these complicated theoretical issues and primarily focuses on three indirect indicators of patriarchy, namely patterns of tracing descent in kinship, residence patterns of newly married couples, and gender preferences for children. In addition to capturing elements of patriarchal customs, these three indicators are often measured in demographic surveys and ethnographic studies. Given the tendency for patriarchy to prevail, any evidence of gender neutrality is regarded as a sign that South-east Asian cultures might be different from those in other parts of the world.

Descent can be traced through the husband's family (patrilineal), the wife's family (matrilineal), or both (bilateral). Bilateral kinship systems give relatively equal status to both sides of the family in terms of authority, closeness of contact, inheritance, and social relations more generally. The residential location of newly married couples is often tied to patterns of descent. Patrilineal societies generally have the custom of patrilocality, where the bride comes to live with her husband's family in an extended household or in a nearby household. Without the support of her natal family, the new bride must adjust to the preferences and authority of her husband's parents. In matrilocal societies, the newly married couples join the bride's household or lives close by. In these societies, inheritance and social influence usually pass down through matrilineal kinship lines.

The third dimension is whether parents have strong preferences for male children, especially for the first birth. Preferences for male children are most common in societies that have male inheritance and the obligations of sons to support their parents. The inheritance system of primogeniture means that the eldest son inherits all of the parental property. Although these family patterns are often linked as part of a broader cultural matrix, we review each of them independently.

### 3.1 Bilateral Kinship in South-east Asia

In her pioneering study of the Malay community in Singapore, Djamour (1965, p. 23) observes that the Malay kinship system is "bilateral in the sense that equal or almost equal importance is attached to kin on the father's and on the mother's side." Although Malay families do not have multigenerational surnames, each person retains their father's name for one generation, for example, "given name son/daughter of father's name." Djamour (1965) notes that this custom reflects the 'Islamic system of naming,' but it does not connote any special preference for father's kin over that of the mother. Malay kinship terms, such as *datuk* (grandfather), *nenek* (grandmother), *bapa saudara*, (uncle), *emak saudara* (aunt), and *sepupu* (cousin) are the same for both sides of the family. In everyday practice, Djamour (1965, p. 32) observes that most Malays are more likely to visit, seek advice and assistance from maternal kin, even though there is nominal deference given the more important status of men. The ties to maternal relatives are reinforced through the very close bonds between mothers and their daughters and also between sisters (Djamour, 1965, p. 34).

There are two well-known cultural traditions of defining descent in Malay *adat* (custom). *Adat perpatih* is centred on a matrilineal tradition drawn from Minangkabau migrants from West Sumatra who largely settled in the state of Negeri Sembilan in Peninsular Malaysia. In *adat perpatih*, the ownership of land passes from mothers to daughters. It is generally reputed that Malay culture outside of Negeri Sembilan is governed by *adat temenggung*. Wazir (1992, p. 62) reports that *adat temenggung* is structured by patrilineal descent for Malay royal lineages, but “in all other matters, (it is) significantly bilateral, in principle and content.”

In systems of bilateral kinship, the nuclear family has double the number of potentially valuable kin supports than in a strictly patrilineal or matrilineal system. These ties are reinforced through everyday social contacts and in social support for the care of children, and the elderly. Given the close emotional bonds between mothers and daughters, and between sisters, the bilateral kinship system creates a strategic resource for Malay women to maintain their status, and to moderate the patriarchal influences from Islam and westernisation (Wazir, 1992, pp. 230-231).

### *3.2 Residential Patterns of Newly Married Couples in South-east Asia*

The most important aspect of kinship structure and influence is proximity. Newly married couples that live apart from parental households, especially those that live sufficiently far away to inhibit regular interaction, have the potential to make independent decisions about family matters. In contrast, the parents of the groom or bride generally have greater influence when a son (or daughter) marries and brings a new spouse into the parental household. In the classic case of patrilocality, the new bride loses the social support of her natal family and is expected to defer to the authority and expectations of her husband's parents. The relative low cost of house construction in rural villages means that proximity (within walking distance) to kin may be much more common than joint extended households.

Within the traditional Confucian cultural region of East Asia, patrilocal residence patterns persist in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam (Thornton & Lin, 1994; Hirschman & Nguyen 2002; Morgan & Hiroshima, 1983; Morgan & Rindfuss, 1984). The general pattern is for a newly married couple to reside with the groom's parents following marriage, at least for some time. In contrast, matrilocal patterns are typical in South-east Asia, including Malaysia. Keyes (1995, p. 133) reports that the

“most common pattern of post marital residence is one that leads to a husband to settle with his wife's family, at least for a short period following marriage....in north eastern Thailand, Laos, and northern Thailand almost invariably...and (the majority, but not all) in Cambodia and Burma” (also see Chamrathirong, Morgan, & Rindfuss, 1988).

Drawing upon the writings of early colonial observers, Gullick (1958, p. 33), describes the kinship structure of traditional Malay villages as “a definite preference for matrilocal marriage” though young couples generally build a house of their own nearby when grandchildren arrive. Gullick (1958) notes that matrilocality was the norm, but other factors, such as the shortage of land compel couples to live at a distance from the bride's family. In an ethnographic and demographic survey of Malay families in Kelantan, Tsubouchi (1975, p. 136) reported that decisions about post-marital residence were flexible, depending on the relative economic status of the couple's parents and the availability of land.

Demographic surveys of Peninsular Malaysia have found that, controlling for ‘availability,’ Malay brides are more likely to live with their parents, while Malaysian Chinese

brides are more likely to live with their parents-in-law (Palmore, Klein, & Ariffin Marzuki, 1970; Morgan & Rindfuss, 1984). These cultural differences in residential patterns are also evident for other age groups with elderly Malay parents tending to live with their daughters (DaVanzo & Chan, 1994).

The preference of Malay, or South-east Asians more generally, for matrilocal residence appears to be loosely held, and is not as strongly followed as the East Asian tradition of patrilocal residence. But the preference is consistent with the earlier finding of strong emotional bonds between Malay mothers and daughters.

### *3.3 Gender Preferences for Children in South-east Asia*

In a pattern that is similar to the patrilineal and patrilocal norms of East Asian cultures, there are very strong gender preferences for male children in Chinese societies, and those moulded by Confucian traditions (Arnold & Kuo, 1984; Williamson 1976; Das Gupta et al., 2003; Bélanger, 2002; Guilmoto, 2012). The preference for sons is partially rooted in the desire for continuity of the patrilineal family, but also because sons have the expectation and obligation to care for their parents. In East Asian cultures, a married woman assumes primary responsibility to care for her parents-in-law after joining her husband's family.

Several demographic studies of gender preferences in Malaysia have found that Malay parents do not have strong sex preferences for their children, while Malaysian Chinese express strong preferences for boys (Pong, 1994; Noor Laily, Tan, & Tey, 1984). The lack of gender preferences in Malay culture is consistent with similar findings for the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand (Arnold & Kuo, 1984; Knodel & Prachuabmoh, 1976; Wongboonsin & Ruffolo, 1995). A recent study of geographic variations in gender preferences in Indonesia reports almost no evidence of son preference in most regions of the country except for the eastern islands with a substantial Melanesian population that is more patrilineal (Guilmoto, 2015).

The social value of having daughters is well expressed in an ethnographic interview conducted by Rosemary Firth (1966, p. 15) in a Kelantan fishing village:

“A man, whose wife was pregnant said he hoped the child will be a girl, as a girl could be of more help in the house. ‘When one is old and ill, a daughter will come and look after one constantly; a son comes every couple of days, looks in and says “Ah, father is ill” and so goes. But a daughter tends one, prepares drinks, and so on. So I think of the time when I will be old, and I want a daughter,’ he said.”

## **4. The Household Division of Labour**

The three patterns reviewed in this paper (i.e., bilateral kinship patterns, the absence of patrilocality, and gender-neutral child preferences) are considered as independent dimensions, but they are elements of a broader Southeast Asian cultural matrix that is inclined to greater gender equality than in most other traditional societies. It would be going too far to say that Malay society, and South-east Asia more generally, lacks patriarchal tendencies. Gender based violence is still a major problem (Ng et al., 2006), and the very low ranking of Malaysia on the Global Gender Gap Index indicates that Malaysian women are far from being on par with their male peers (World Economic Forum, 2013, pp. 12-13). Yet, there seems to be some indications that the historical patterns of relative gender equality heralded by Reid (1988a) have continued.

Another important dimension of patriarchy is the intra-household division of labour (Huber & Spitze, 1998). Even if all the formal and informal barriers to participation in

civil society (education, economic, and political) are eradicated, most women will still be disadvantaged because they are expected to play a disproportionate role in domestic work. Women who work full time in paid employment are often exposed to the 'second shift' meaning that they are still expected to do most of the cooking, housecleaning, and childcare at home (Hochschild & Machung, 1989).

There are relatively few studies of the household division of labour in traditional Malay communities. Historical, but still highly relevant, sources of detailed observations are the ethnographic studies conducted by Raymond Firth (1966) and Rosemary Firth (1966) on a Malay fishing village in Kelantan based on fieldwork in 1940 and additional fieldwork in 1963. Given the ethos of the era, the Firths focused more on the exceptions to the traditional gender division of labour rather than the expected norms.

Going out to sea on boats was the exclusive province of Malay men, but both Firths called attention to the active participation of Malay women in economic activities. Raymond Firth (1966, p. 80) observed:

"One of the notable features of Kelantan peasant life is the freedom of women, especially in economic matters. Not only do they exercise an important influence on the control of family finances, commonly acting as bankers for their husbands, but they also engage in independent enterprises, which increase the family supply of cash. Petty trading in fish and vegetables, the preparation and sale of various forms of snacks and cooked fish, mat-making, spinning and net making, harvesting rice, tile making, the preparation of coconut oil, the selling of small groceries in shops are some of the occupations followed by women."

Firth goes on to explain that about 25% of women regularly receive a regular income from work and another 25% are gainfully employed from time to time.

Rosemary Firth (1966, p. 31) expands on the economic roles of women and observes that: "...in most cases, it is the desire not for subsistence, but a higher standard of living, which impels them to work, and with this, in a number of cases, is associated the desire for some independence of action and income."

Malay women's high rate of economic activity appears to have impressed both Firths, but the point by Rosemary Firth (1966) about the motivations of married women to be independent and to raise family income suggests a blurred rather than a sharp line between men's and women's economic activities. She also notes that men will sometimes help with the cooking and other household duties if the wife is ill or busy. One wife spoke positively about her husband's domestic abilities, "he can make a very good curry" (Rosemary Firth, 1966).

The most thorough and detailed account of household division of labour was reported by Cecilia Ng (1999) with time budgets of Malay men and women in a rice growing village in the Krian District in Perak. In padi production, women's labour inputs often exceed those of men, especially in the transplanting of seedlings and the harvesting of mature rice stalks. There were some roles reserved for men, especially ploughing, working with a large scythe, and thrashing. In higher status households, especially when the husband held steady wage employment, women were slightly less economically active than women in poorer households. Husbands did make a time contribution to household activities, primarily childcare, but their time commitment was much less than that of women.

In an interesting study of childcare in low income urban families with working women, Noor Laily Abu Bakar and Rita Raj Hashim (1984, p. 91) report that Malay husbands help

with cleaning, marketing, washing clothes, and cooking twice as much as Malaysian Chinese husbands. These findings, in both urban and rural households, do not constitute gender equality, but rather the openness for women to participate in economically active roles, and at least a willingness of many men to assist with childcare, marketing, and other traditionally feminine domestic duties.

The economic activities of women are often under-reported in censuses and demographic surveys. The standard labour force concept is supposed to include unpaid family workers in productive economic roles, such as agriculture, and animal husbandry, but not in childcare, cooking, and housekeeping activities. This distinction is almost impossible to observe in rural households where women not only raise chickens, maintain gardens, engage in small scale trading, and work seasonally in rice production, but also take primary responsibility for household maintenance. In spite of these measurement difficulties, censuses and surveys in the 1960s and 1970s generally showed that 30% to 40% of Malaysian women were active participants in the labour force (Hirschman & Agahajanian, 1980; Jones, 1965; Fong, 1975). Although recent Government surveys show that only 46% of women in Malaysia are in the labour force, more detailed fieldwork finds that many of the reported non-working women are active in small business activities, including their management (Franck & Olsson, 2014). Many of these economically active women played down their remunerative work for a combination of reasons such as fear of government oversight, deference to the nominal authority of their husbands, and their primary identity of a homemaker and caregiver.

## **5. The Significance of Women's Economic Participation**

Drawing on the theories and research from multiple disciplines, Lenski (1966; 2005) and Nolan and Lenski (2015) have proposed a theory of ecological evolutionary development of human societies from the hunting and gathering era to the modern industrial period. The central idea is that technological change, especially in the context of environmental constraints and opportunities, shapes the development of economic and political institutions, and also cultural attitudes. The objective is not to account for all variations between societies, but to offer a theoretical perspective that helps to organise the common patterns that are evident in the spread of homo sapiens across the earth, the transition from foraging to agriculture, the rise and fall of empires, and the impact of industrialisation on demographic patterns, family organisation, and religious beliefs. This is further discussed by Diamond (1997) and Chirot (2011). The theory is particularly effective in explaining long term trends and patterns in inequality and stratification.

Drawing upon the theory of Lenski (1966; 2005) and the pioneering work of Friedl (1975), Blumberg (1984) proposed a macro sociological theory of gender stratification with the central hypothesis that women's relative control of economic resources influences their social status in the family and in the broader society. In hunting and gathering societies, there was a gendered division of labour, with men engaged in hunting and women gathering roots, fruits, and other vegetable products. Since women's work generally provided the majority of caloric intake in hunting and gathering societies, their roles as economic producers was highly valued in addition to their reproductive roles.

In the early stages of agricultural development, women were the primary economic producers in swidden agriculture. However, with the invention of the plough, especially when combined with the use of large draft animals (horse or water buffalo), men took a major role in agricultural production. Moreover, many large agrarian empires became



more gender stratified with permanent settlements, larger families, and warfare as a way of life, and a women's sphere defined by reproduction and domestic responsibilities. Since households were the primary economic unit, women continued to work in production, but their roles were often gender typed. The growth and spread of world religions during the agrarian era created an ideology of gender segregation in extra-household (public) activities that was layered on top of the differentiation and stratification of gender roles (Reid, 1988b).

Industrial societies expanded upon the stratification of gender roles of agrarian societies. In the early industrial period during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, women (and even children) were the preferred workforce by employers in textile mills, garment factories, and other industries because of their smaller size, physical dexterity, and willingness to accept lower wages. The political and social responses to the horrors of early industrial life, as well the growth of male-dominated industrial sectors in mining, iron and steel making, railroads, and manufacturing, led to a growing separation between work and home. Men were expected to leave home during the day to work in factories and offices, while women were left at home to care for children, manage the household, and to prepare the meals and comfort for men when they returned from work. These roles were reinforced by an ideology of females as weaker creatures who needed to be protected from the competitiveness and harshness of the urban industrial world. The ideology of highly gendered roles at home and work was made possible by the growth of modern twentieth-century industrial firms that paid 'breadwinner' wages to men (Ruggles, 2015).

There were cracks in the gendered division of labour with women finding a niche as teachers, sales clerks, secretaries, and in domestic service, but participation was highly stratified by age, marital status, and ethnicity. As a general rule, there was the disapproval of married women from careers in the formal sector of paid employment. In recent decades, these cracks have become wide fractures with changes in the structure of the economy (more services, less manufacturing), demography (smaller families), and political pressures from women's movement. In this paper, our focus is not on recent changes in industrial societies, but rather on the implications of the ecological evolutionary theory on gender roles in agrarian societies.

The theoretical claims by Blumberg (1984) are broadly consistent with contemporary theories of 'women and development,' which generally emphasised the significance of women's participation in economic production. Boserup's (1970, p. 54) pioneering study of women and development which focused on international variations of women's participation in agricultural and urban employment found that systems of gender stratification in developing countries were strongly influenced by the history of colonial rule, and other influences from the West. For example, colonial administrators, and also European technical advisors discouraged the participation of women in the agricultural sector of developing countries by directing resources and technical assistance exclusively to men. Based on her work in international development in the 1950s and 1960s, Boserup (1970) observed that virtually all Europeans shared the opinion that men are superior to women in the art of farming. The ideology that work was a man's world and women were best suited for domestic responsibilities is a modern idea that began in advanced agricultural societies, and was widely accepted in the industrial societies for much of the twentieth century.

Based on data from the 1950s and 1960s, Boserup (1970, p. 189) found that women in South-east Asia were more active in agricultural work, home industries, and services

than in most other world regions. What was even more surprising was that Boserup (1970) found that employment opportunities were open to urban women in both the traditional and modern sectors. These patterns are consistent with the ethnographic reports of Raymond Firth (1966) and Rosemary Firth (1966) and also the time budget data reported by Cecilia Ng (1999). In a broader study of rice family systems across Asia, Barker, Herdt and Rose (1985, p. 130) observed that women contributed most of the work in transplanting, weeding, and harvesting.

These historical patterns seem to be changing, however, with the mechanisation and commercialisation of agricultural production. Cecilia Ng (1999) returned to the rice farming village in Krian district five years later to observe the impact of the implementation of double cropping schemes with modern infrastructure and technology. The increase in tractor use led to a decrease in the hours of women's labour while increasing the work of hired male labour. In fieldwork in Tajong Karang, Cecilia Ng (1999) found similar patterns. Mechanisation had eliminated traditional patterns of transplanting and harvesting, tasks that were previously done by women. Modern technology had 'liberated' women from backbreaking work in agriculture, but with the perverse consequence that women were increasingly confined to household work and reproductive roles.

Notwithstanding this recent development, the historical role of Malay women in productive labour had considerable significance for the status of women. Daughters were not an economic burden for their parental household. In addition to looking after younger siblings and helping their mothers with household duties, daughters were a source of productive labour in rice cultivation. Women also worked as rubber tappers. If married daughters lived nearby, as they often did, they could continue to work in the rice fields along with their mothers, sisters, and other kin.

Women also contributed to the family economy through small scale trading. Women often reared chickens and grew vegetables in excess of their family needs for sale at local markets. They also prepared snacks and sweets that were sold at markets and to other households. Alexander (1987, p. 31) reported that the local markets in rural Java were women's domains, both in terms of vendors and customers. This is also true in some areas of Peninsular Malaysia, especially in Kelantan and the East coast. The ability to handle money, manage the household budget, and own property has broad implications on family dynamics. Husbands tend to consult with their wives on business matters. Geertz (1961, p. 46) observes that although Javanese women give formal deference to their husbands, wives typically control family finances and make most of the household decisions.

Based on his ethnographic study of the Malay village of Rusembilan in southern Thailand, Fraser (1960, p. 149) wrote:

"The Malay villager .... puts certain Malay tenets before his Islamic precepts. The chief among these is the treatment of women. There is no segregation of the sexes, women are not veiled, and there is a feeling of equality between men and women."

Similar to the observation by Wazir (1992, p. 230-231) that Malay *adat* has been able to resist patriarchal influences from Islam and westernisation, Fraser (1960) concludes the Malay culture has maintained relative gender equality. The significant participation of women in economic production appears to be a major reason for their relatively high social status.

## **6. Traditionally High Divorce Societies**

Jones (1997) shows that divorce rates in Islamic Southeast Asia (modern day Indonesia and

Malaysia) were declining in the middle decades of the twentieth century just as divorce rates were rising in Western societies. Although the reasons for the rise of divorce in the West are well known, at least in general terms if not in specific details, the fact of high divorce rates in traditional societies appears to be an anomaly in standard sociological and demographic theories of modernisation and family change. One leading theory, sometimes labelled the 'second demographic transition,' posits that increasing education attainment, occupational choice, and secularisation have contributed to autonomous decision-making oriented to self-realisation (Lesthaeghe, 2010, p. 2014). This means less of a commitment to life-long marriage and a greater willingness to change partners in search of personal happiness and fulfilment. Although these values began in Western Europe and North America, they appear to be spreading to Asia (Raymo, Iwasawa, & Bumpass, 2009).

The traditional pattern of high divorce rates in Malaysia and Indonesia do not reflect the modern idea of self-fulfilment, but rather the less well known case of 'stable high divorce rate system' that was identified by Goode (1993). The traditional pattern of high divorce rates in Islamic South-east Asia is not evident in other Islamic societies in South and West Asia (Jones, 1994). Other traditional high divorce societies included Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand (Goode, 1993; Hirschman & Teerawichitchainan, 2003). In these societies, modernisation has led to a decline in divorce (Heaton, Cammack, & Young, 2001; Jones 1997).

Estimates of the proportion of Malay marriages that were dissolved by divorce ranged from 25% to 40% (Jones, 1981; Jones, 1994; Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan, 2003). Ethnographic studies of villages in Kelantan and Negeri Sembilan report even higher figures (Rosemary Firth, 1966; Tsubouchi, 1975; Swift, 1958). Some, but not all, of the high divorce rates can be explained by the phenomenon of divorce before marital consummation. Young brides who are disappointed with their arranged husbands can simply refuse to move from their parental home to live with the groom (Geertz, 1961; Hull & Hull, 1987; Singarimbun & Manning, 1974). Although there may be some embarrassment on the part of the bride's family, her decision is accepted and a divorce is soon arranged.

Rosemary Firth (1966) notes that there are many reasons for divorce, including childlessness, attachments to parental homes, and disagreements over money, but the major factor is incompatibility. Because married women are economically active and often living close to their natal kin, divorce does not lead to economic impoverishment or the lack of social support. Most importantly, there is no stigma associated with divorce. Rosemary Firth (1966, p. 44) observes:

"...the freedom of divorce has the great virtue of easing relationships in cases of maladjustment between husband and wife....(it avoids) the degrading spectacle of a man and woman tied together by law and religion even though they no longer wish to remain together... Freedom of divorce allows the first marriage to represent a probation, an experimental period. If the union works, then no more needs to be done; if it does not, then it is severed and both parties can start again with the experience they have obtained."

Although Firth is describing a traditional marriage system, the attitudes and customs seem remarkably similar to the modern Western pattern of serial monogamy described by Bumpass (1990) and Cherlin (2009).

Although Muslim law and practice generally give men the formal authority to initiate divorce, most ethnographic studies suggest that Malay women who are dissatisfied with

a marriage have the informal power to provoke or prod their husbands into requesting a marital dissolution (Djamour, 1965; Rosemary Firth, 1966, p. 43; Jones, 1994, p. 229). The expectation of marital compatibility, the ability to be economically active in agriculture and trade, and the absence of a stigma of divorce combined to create a traditional, but very flexible Malay marriage system.

## 7. Women in Political Roles

There is general agreement that Malay women, past or present, have not played an important role in statecraft or politics. With few exceptions, Malay women's prominence in economic and ritual matters has not led to leadership roles in the public or political spheres. On the Political Empowerment Score, one of the four components of the Global Gender Gap Index, Malaysia ranked 121 in the world (World Economic Forum, 2013).

Malaysian political parties have organised women's auxiliaries; the largest and most visible one being *Kaum Ibu* later called *Wanita* UMNO in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the leading Malay political party. According to two definitive studies by Manderson (1980) and Dancz (1987), the role of *Kaum Ibu*, and women's auxiliaries in other political parties, was to 'manage' women's political aspirations and energies in support of the male dominated political parties. With the assumption that cultural traditions would inhibit Malay women from interacting with and speaking before men, the male dominated political leadership of the UMNO directed *Kaum Ibu* to organise separate activities, including cooking, sewing and religious classes for women and to always defer to party leadership. When the third leader of *Kaum Ibu*, Khadijah Sidek demanded more participation of women in the UMNO leadership in 1956, she was expelled from the party (Manderson, 1980; Dancz, 1987). Although *Kaum Ibu* was a mass organisation that played a critical role in the mobilisation of women for electoral campaigns, its influence was largely limited to back stage lobbying for women's rights and a few token women elected to political office and cabinet positions.

In spite of this history, there was a striking presence of women in the political movements in the late 1940s. The late 1940s, following the collapse of Japanese rule in Malaya in September 1945, was the most turbulent and politically charged era in Malaysian history (Boestaman, 1979; Firdaus, 1985). The British blithely assumed that they would have a free hand to resume power and rearrange their administrative structure. The British proposal to establish the 'Malayan Union' led to the well-known nationalist movement led by Dato Onn bin Jaafar, a Malay aristocrat and civil servant, who was then Chief Minister (*Mentri Besar*) of Johore. A second political movement, somewhat less well known, was the radical Malay Nationalist Party (MNP), led by Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Himy, Ishak bin Haji Mohamed, and Ahmad Boestaman. History is written by the victors, and the standard interpretation of the path to Malayan Independence is accorded to the political movement led by Malay aristocrats and civil servants that become the UMNO. However, it might have been the early efforts at political mobilisation by the Malay Nationalist Party that opened the door to Malay women to play an important role in the nationalist movement.

From its founding in late 1945, the MNP was a major force in organising Malay peasants and workers to oppose continued British colonialism, and to demand immediate political independence (*Merdeka*). Several of the MNP founding members were journalists and they used newspapers, political rallies, and marches to awaken the Malay masses and build their political organisation throughout the country. The MNP was strongly influenced

by the anti-colonial struggle in Indonesia (the Dutch East Indies) led by Soekarno. As part of the overall strategy to mobilise all wings of the Malay population, the MNP organised a youth group, labelled *Angkatan Pemuda Insaf* (API) and a women's section known as *Angkatan Wanita Sedar* (AWAS). In 1946, there were possibilities for the MNP and the UMNO joining together, but differences in the backgrounds of the leaders and political objectives led them to different paths.

With the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency in 1948, the MNP was banned and the leadership was imprisoned. In 1946 and 1947, however, the MNP was a political force to be reckoned with. From the outset, the MNP included a women's division, whose head was a member of the party's central committee. Boestaman (1979, p. 58) observes that public speaking was an important role for women leaders at the political rallies. One of the earliest leaders of the MNP women's divisions was Aishah Ghani, who later became a leader of *Kaum Ibu* and Minister of Social Welfare (Dancz, 1987). In 1946, the MNP women's division was formally recognised as AWAS with Shamsiah Fakeh as its leader (as the successor to Aishah Ghani). In her autobiography, Shamsiah Fakeh (2009, p. 22) describes her role in political mobilisation:

"After some time, when the MNP, including its women and youth wings, had been set up in several places, I began operating independently and went about on my own rather than tailing other party leaders.....I went all over Malaya to meet the Malay masses. I spoke at huge gatherings. I do not know how I could make long speeches and spoke in such fiery tones as if I were inspired by God."

At approximately the same time, between late 1945 and early 1946, Dato Onn and his followers were also organising rallies and public demonstrations to protest British plans to impose the Malayan Union. These events also included numerous women participants. Dancz (1987, p. 85) noted the observation by a British official about seeing Malay women in the political movements in May 1946 (also see Manderson, 1980, p. 43):

"In the towns, there were demonstrations of 5,000 to 10,000 people.... the most remarkable thing of all was the part the women were playing...in the 14 years I lived in Malaya, I had scarcely spoke(n) to a Malay woman. But today, they go up on political platforms and make speeches: unmarried girls make speeches through microphones that would have not have disgraced anybody in this committee."

Perhaps the most dramatic event of this era was the speech given by Sakinah Junid, a leader of AWAS in Padang Rengas, Perak in February 1947. This story has been told in almost every account of the women's movement in Malaysian history (Manderson, 1980; Dancz, 1987; Ng & Chee, 1999), but the most complete account was presented by Boestaman (1979, pp. 60-62). In February 1947, in Padang Rengas, Perak, about 300 young men and women were waiting for a bus to go 6 miles to Kuala Kangsar to attend a rally to celebrate the first anniversary of API. They did not know that the British authorities had threatened all bus owners with the loss of their licenses if they transported the crowd of political activists. After waiting a long time for the bus to stop for them (none did) a young woman, Sakinah Junid, stepped out in front of the crowd and spoke:

"In Indonesia, young men and women struggle to shed the last drop of blood to defend their Independence... young men and women of Malaya, we've not been

asked to do more than shed a drop or two of sweat... Brother members of API, are you ready to make it on foot with us? If you are not ready, stay behind, but before you do, you will have to be prepared to change clothes with us women from AWAS."

The account was often recalled when politically active Malay women in AWAS invited API men to change clothes with them if the men's spirits were lagging or if they refused to engage in political action.

In many countries, these accounts of politically engaged women would not be considered remarkable. However, they are at odds with the image of a traditional Malay culture which constrained women to domestic studies and rendered them uninterested in public and political affairs. This was the view of senior UMNO leaders when asked about the paucity of Malay women in leadership positions in the 1970s (Manderson, 1980, pp. 207-208, see endnotes 2 and 5).

### **8. Why is South-east Asia Different?**

In an update of her theory of gender stratification, Blumberg (2004) sought to explain the high rate of female economic participation in South-east Asia. Her original theory posited the highest degree of gender inequality (and of inequality more generally) is evident in advanced agrarian societies which used the plough and iron. In these settings, men spent most of their time in productive agriculture and women were pushed into purely domestic roles. With little control of economic surplus, women were only valued for their production of children and serving men's needs. For the most part, Western industrial societies inherited the cultural ideals of advanced agrarian societies, which discouraged married women's economic activities, if the husband earned a breadwinner income (Ruggles, 2015).

Based on additional research, Blumberg (2004) proposes an important distinction between agrarian societies based on their use of irrigation. Irrigated agriculture is labour intensive and tends to draw all able bodied workers, men and women, into production. The prototypical example is irrigated rice fields that allow for increases in output with additional labour input. In contrast to the labour surplus that was pushed off the land in many agrarian societies, it is often possible to absorb surplus labour in irrigated agriculture, though with much diminished productivity. The classic pattern is the case of 'agricultural involution' described by Geertz (1968), which included women's transplanting of individual rice shoots and harvesting individual rice stalks by hand.

According to Blumberg (2004), it is not just participation in economic production that raises women's status, but control over the product. She argues that South-east Asia is a unique case where irrigated agriculture is combined with patterns of bilateral descent and proximity to the wife's family. If the wife's family owns the land, and she is active in economic production, then she has more control over the economic product, more authority in the household, and higher status in the community.

Although Blumberg's (2004) interpretation is plausible, correlation does not always mean causation. Perhaps bilateral kinship and women's economic participation are both determined by more distal factors and conditions, such as ecological conditions, population density, and deep culture. The higher status of women in the region may reflect historical aspects of Austronesian language cultures that have shaped gender patterns for a millennium or more. Recent research shows that bilateral kinship and

matrilocal residence after marriage are quite common in many Austronesian language cultures that have spread across the Pacific (Jordan et al., 2009). One interesting feature of some Austronesian languages (Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Indonesia and Tagalog) is the lack of gendered nouns or pronouns.

Regardless of the ultimate cause, it appears that many aspects of the relative high status of women in sixteenth and seventeenth century South-east Asia identified by Reid (1988a) persisted to the mid-twentieth century in Peninsular Malaysia (Malaya) and in neighbouring societies. Intergenerational socialisation can be a powerful force in the reproduction of cultural patterns. It may also be due to the continuity of female participation in economic activities and family patterns that valued descent from both the paternal and maternal sides. Proximity to the natal family by most married women was another important resource that created a more equal status of men and women.

In recent decades, social change has decreased agricultural employment to very low levels and also pushed a majority of the population to towns and cities. If women in South-east Asia are to maintain their status in the coming decades, they will need to rely on different supports than they have in the past.

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