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# THE GENDER OF THE ANCESTORS: CONTESTING MATRILINY IN HIGHLAND JAMBI (SUMATRA/INDONESIA)

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*Hilang tutur hilang temano*  
*Pusako dapek dek orang*  
*Hilang celak hilang mentaro*  
*Tanah dapek dek kanti*

You lose the kin you cannot address,  
and others will inherit their wealth;  
you lose the border you cannot mark,  
and your neighbors will get the land.

Central Sumatran legal maxim, inscribed as a motto on genealogical charts.

Anthropology becomes aware of a paradox

Central Sumatra is known not only as the most populous area worldwide with matrilineal social structure, but also as the locus of the apparent unique paradox that a matrilineal society can at the same time be devoutly Islamic.<sup>1</sup> Even if matrilineality is often portrayed as being at odds not only with Islam<sup>2</sup> but also with capitalist development and the agrarian laws of the state,<sup>3</sup> part of the available literature stresses the resilience of matrilineality

- 1 Lynn L. Thomas and Franz von Benda-Beckmann 1985, "Themes and Issues". In: Franz von Benda-Beckmann and Lynn L. Thomas (eds.), *Change and Continuity in Minangkabau: Local, Regional, and Historical Perspectives on West Sumatra*. Athens/Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies Southeast Asia Series, p.1.
- 2 Banks, David J. 1976 "Islam and Inheritance in Malaya: Culture Conflict or Islamic Revolution?" In: *American Ethnologist* 3/4:573-586.
- 3 Schrieke, B. 1955, "The Causes and Effects of Communism on the West Coast of Sumatra". In: *Indonesian Sociological Studies: Selected Writings of B. Schrieke*. The Hague: W. van Hoeve. pp. 83-166. Gough, Kathleen 1961, "The Modern Disintegration of Matrilineal Descent Groups". In: D. Schneider and K. Gough, *Matrilineal Kinship*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 631-52. Kemal, Iskandar 1968, "Beberapa aspek dari hukum kewarisan matrilineal ke bilateral di Minangkabau" ["Some aspects of matrilineal to bilateral inheritance"]

in central Sumatra.<sup>4</sup> The Minangkabau are thus often cited as a matrilineal society that thrives in a commercial environment and even manages to reconcile itself with the patriarchic tenets of Islam. How can this paradox be explained?

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in Minangkabau”]. In: Mochtar Naim, *Menggali hukum tanah dan hukum waris Minangkabau [Investigating the laws of land and inheritance in Minangkabau]*. Padang: Center for Minangkabau Studies, pp. 151-162. Maretin 1961, “Disappearance of Matrilineal Survivals in Minangkabau Family and Marriage Relations”, *Bijdrage tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 117: 168-95. Kahn 1980, *Minangkabau Social Formations: Indonesian Peasants and the World Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Stivens, Maila 1996, *Matriliny and Modernity: Sexual Politics and Social Change in Rural Malaysia*. St. Leonard’s, N.S.W.: Allen and Unwin.

- 4 Abdullah 1985, “Islam, History, and Social Change in Minangkabau”. In: Benda-Beckmann and Thomas (eds.) 1985 (op.cit.), p.141-56. Benda-Beckmann, Franz von 1979, *Property in Social Continuity: Continuity and Change in the Maintenance of Property Relationship Through Time in Minangkabau, West Sumatra*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. Kato, Tsuyoshi 1978, “Change and Continuity in the Minangkabau Matrilineal System”. In: *Indonesia* 25:1-16. Naim, Mochtar 1985, “Implications of Merantau for Social Organization in Minangkabau”. In: Benda-Beckmann and Thomas, eds. 1985 (op.cit.), pp. 111-120. Pak, Ok-Kyung 1989, “De la maison longue à la maison courte: les femmes Minangkabau et la modernisation”. In: *Culture (Montreal)* 9/1: 13-20. Tanner, Nancy 1982, “The Nuclear Family in Minangkabau Matriliney: The Mirror of Disputes”. In: *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*. 138/1: 129-51. Reenen, Joke van 1996, *Central Pillars of the House: Sisters, Wives, and Mothers in a Rural Community in Minangkabau, West Sumatra*. Leiden: Research School CNWS. Watson 1992, *Kinship, Property and Inheritance in Kerinci, Central Sumatra*. Canterbury: CSAC Monographs, South-East Asia Series. Whalley, Lucy A. 1996, “Putting Islam into Practice: The Development of Islam from a Gendered Perspective in Minangkabau, Indonesia”. In: *Toward a New Paradigm. Recent Developments in Indonesian Islamic Thought*. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 221-264.

I cannot hope, in this short article, to solve this important and much debated question.<sup>5</sup> Instead I will present a small case study from one village in highland Jambi where it will be addressed from a variety of angles.<sup>6</sup> The investigated area is outside the territory of the better-known Minangkabau, but within the “matrilineal complex” of central Sumatra. I will argue that if the term matrilineality shall have more meaning than a catchword attached to various societies, one has to ask *what* is matrilineal in these societies and what is not, and *who* acts according to matrilineal principles and who does not. P.E. de Josselin de Jong has long ago insisted that despite the dominance of matrilineal principles central Sumatran societies, like all lineal societies, are bilineal, incorporating both matrilineal and patrilineal principles.<sup>7</sup> It is important to keep this fact in mind, since changes that occur in matrilineal practices can be the result of changes which are not primarily directed against the status of women. They may rather be an effect of the diminishing importance of the symbolic significance of the gendered pattern of inheritance which constitutes the bilinear system. And indeed, as my own study suggests, the patrilineal component of the bilinear system may yield to the advance of cognatic modes of inheritance even before the matrilineal component does.

In my analysis I will thus try to keep the category of matrilineality in suspension, so as to avoid its reification, which may account for much of the controversy about it. I am therefore interested in how the villagers actually control resources and what kind of group support they mobilize in the process, and how they act and react in moments of crises, moments in which they often dramatically reveal shifts of their social arrangements.

5 Josselin de Jong, P.E. de 1960, “Islam Versus Adat in Negeri Sembilan (Malaya)”. In: *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*. 132: 65-95, 116: 158-203. Whalley 1996 (op.cit).

6 The research was carried out between summer, 1995 and summer, 1996 in an area and in a village my wife Kathrin Oester and me call Sungai Sepi and Pelosok, respectively, in our publications. The research was generously financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. I gratefully acknowledge many insights Kathrin Oester got from her own research with women from Pelosok. I also thank her and Jürg Schneider for commenting on earlier versions of this essay.

7 Josselin de Jong, P.E. de 1952, *Minangkabau and Negeri Sembilan*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.



Like in other parts of Indonesia – and indeed all over rural areas of the third world – changing land-use strategies in the course of market-integration, the closure of agricultural frontiers, and the resulting competition for land-resources, along with a wide array of state interventions put traditional kinship ideologies and practices under pressure. It will become apparent that the patterns that constitute matriliney, namely matrilineal descent and inheritance, matrilineal post-marital residence, marriage arrangements by mothers, and high social status of divorced women, are beginning to be contested, these days. Matriliney (like other social structures) turns out to be a situational phenomenon, embedded in strategies of production and reproduction, dependent on a certain degree of availability of land resources, rooted in a special kind of political setting, and thriving only when a vast majority plays according to the rules. I will, in this essay, focus on changing patterns of inheritance and owing to the lack of space more or less neglect other features constitutive of matriliney.

Addressing the conflicts, within one village, among matrilineal principles on the one hand and cognatic ones on the other, and further pointing to situations where these principles are complementary or compensatory to each other, I will show that the discourse which treats Islamic matrilineal societies of central Sumatra as a contradiction in themselves falls short of the complexities of real life. There is indeed a deep conflict between matriliney and Islam, and it can be found in the interstices of official representation, in everyday contradictions and insecurities. But this conflict does not make a matrilineal Islamic society at all improbable. For there is ample evidence supporting the view that conflicts inherent in the matrilineal structure provide room for an anti-matrilineal counter-discourse. Filling it out, Islam has in the past acquired a compensatory role within central Sumatran society. It would therefore perhaps be more convincing (although equally oversimplifying the matter) to say that central Sumatran societies have adopted Islam *because* and not *despite* they were matrilineal.<sup>8</sup>

To the contemporary observer, matriliney in central Sumatra appears as something self-evident, not to be overlooked despite the challenges it faces. But this self-evidence of matriliney is a relatively new phenomenon and the result of a slow process of perception that led with the help of newly emerging scientific models, to a reduction of ethnocentric represen-

8 I am indebted to Wolfgang Marschall for this suggestion.

tations. European observers who were familiar with central Sumatran societies since the 17th century took a long time to at all recognize matriliney. Even the renowned William Marsden who in his *History of Sumatra* (first published in 1783) wrote an entire chapter on the history and the institutions of the Minangkabau, failed to mention the very particular rules of descent and inheritance among them.<sup>9</sup> One might conclude that matriliney is simply a phenomenon in the eye of the beholder. This is certainly not the case. Matriliney is a social reality, in central Sumatra, but its recognition and representation is subject to the interests of outside observers and involved actors alike, and as a social reality, it is in turn subject to these representations.

The British territory on the southwest coast of Sumatra included one area, Anak Sungai, which followed the matrilineal customs of central Sumatra. Here, succession to the title of Sultan was from maternal uncle to sororal nephew. The British were never at ease with this rule and the political complications it brought about, in their eyes. They probably never understood it clearly, as during their rule, from 1685 till 1824, when they addressed questions of Anak Sungai, they consistently talked about sons and fathers only, and never about uncles and nephews. They thus endorsed patrilineal succession as a matter of course, causing fierce resistance and even rebellion among the local elite.<sup>10</sup> The motives for doing so were certainly part ignorance of matriliney, but as certainly part calculated provocation. Since dealing with one patrilineage with the eldest son as designated heir to the Sultan was much easier than dealing with a vast matriclean where not only dozens of nephews, but also younger brothers of the ruler hoped to succeed the Sultan and had to be dealt with accordingly by the British.

Matriliney became a paradigm to interpret central Sumatran society only with the rise of the concept in social theory in the middle of the 19th

9 Marsden, William 1986 [1811] *History of Sumatra*, reprint of 3rd edition. Singapore: Oxford University Press, pp. 330-344.

10 Kathirithamby-Wells, J. 1976, "The Inderapura Sultanate: The Foundations of its Rise and Decline, from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries". In: *Indonesia* 21:63-84. Hashim, M.Y. and Kathirithamby-Wells, J. 1985, *The Syair Mukomuko: some Historical Aspects of a Nineteenth Century Sumatran Court Chronicle*, Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS. Znoj, Heinzpeter 1998, "Sons versus Nephews. A Highland Jambi Alliance at War with the East India Company, ca. 1800". In: *Indonesia* 65.

century. Lewis Henry Morgan's *League of the Iroquois* described a society with close structural similarities to the Minangkabau, and it frequently made use of the concept of matrilineal descent.<sup>11</sup> Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* for the first time gave it a pivotal role in the evolutionary social theory of the day.<sup>12</sup> This is when Dutch observers started to recognize matriliney – or rather “matriarchy” as they would have it – among central Sumatran societies.<sup>13</sup> Within a few decades, not only did matriliney become the all-explaining feature of central Sumatran society for anthropologists and colonial administrators alike, but it also became a popular topos in western travelogues,<sup>14</sup> and even made its way into the self-representation of the largest and most prominent of the central Sumatran groups, the Minangkabau. For them, it has become an ethnic marker, a part of an ideology designed to provide a sense of uniqueness within the nascent Indonesian nation state.

Other central Sumatran groups who lived outside the focus – and impact – of colonial anthropologists (and outside the administrative unit of West Sumatra) kept to a more practice-rooted version of matriliney. Among them are the people of Sungai Sepi in highland Jambi. They renounce the use of matriliney as an ethnic marker not because they are not aware of the peculiarities of their social structure but because they hardly use ethnic markers at all; and this is an important reason why other models of representation of kinship could succeed, to a certain degree, in these areas. Today, one officialized version of local history of Kerinci in the northern parts of highland Jambi represents inheritance of irrigated rice-land as being in the patriline,<sup>15</sup> although most others depict it as the mainstay of

11 Morgan, Lewis Henry 1962 [1851], *The League of the Iroquois*. New York: Citadel Press.

12 Bachofen, Johann Jakob 1975 [1861], *Das Mutterrecht: eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur*. Hrsg. von Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.

13 Wilken, G.A. 1888, “De verbreiding van het matriarchaat op Sumatra”. In: *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* XXXVII:163-216.

14 For instance Catt, Carrie Chapman 1914, “A Survival of Matriarchy”. In: *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 38.

15 Zakaria, Iskandar 1984, *Tambo Sakti Alam Kerinci* [The Sacred History of the Land of Kerinci], Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.

matrilineal principles there.<sup>16</sup> This is evidence of a particular ambivalence in representing kinship ties that has developed in Kerinci and which has caused Watson to experiment himself with an “Escher perspective” on Kerinci kinship.<sup>17</sup> I will turn to his analysis in the final part of this article.

### Sungai Sepi: Land of the calm river

I have chosen one of the more marginal places in Sumatra, for my research, the subdistrict of Jangkat, in the southern parts of the Jambi-highlands. The area is situated just south of better-known Kerinci, which in turn borders the Minangkabau-area to the north. Within the framework of a study on local history and social change I focussed among other things on the establishment of landed private property and on changes in gender-relations as expressions of this deep transformation.

Sungai Sepi is a highland area at more than 1'000 m above sea-level lying astride the Bukit Barisan, a mountain chain that runs through the whole length of Sumatra. Fertile vulcanic soils and abundant precipitation along with comparatively cool temperatures make Sungai Sepi a pleasant place, ideal for a vast range of agroforestry, agriculture and animal husbandry.

Pelosok, the village under investigation, was founded in a previously uninhabited valley about 150 years ago. During the first decades of settlement people were few and far between, dispersed over several upland plains overlooking the confluence of two small rivers. Three or four little hamlets, with six to eight houses each had established themselves along a footpath that linked the gold producing areas of the eastern foothills to the west coast market of Muko-Muko. Pelosok was the last inhabited stop before the week-long trek through the forest to the west coast. A perfect location if one hoped to sell rice to the market goers. The settlement was indeed initiated with a view on trade relations by a federation of villages to the east. Among other motives they wanted to extend the inhabited area

16 Watson 1992 (op.cit.).

17 Watson 1991, “Cognatic or Matrilineal? Kerinci Kinship in Escher Perspective”. In: Kemp. J. and F. Hüsken, eds., *Cognation and Social Organization in South-east Asia*. Leiden: KITLV Press, pp. 55-70.

along the route in order to make the trip to the west coast easier and more attractive for travelers. When the Dutch conquered the Jambi highlands in 1903, they redirected trade relations towards the east, and Pelosok suddenly found itself thrown back at the end of the world, at the dead end of a road instead of at an important trade connection. Nevertheless, the village experienced a ten-fold increase of population, during the last 100 years, due to the establishment of irrigated rice-fields in the alluvial plains which sustained the natural demographic growth and attracted additional immigration from neighboring villages. Today, Pelosok is a village of close to 2'000 inhabitants. Most of them are rice-farmers and growers of cash crops like coffee and cinnamon. Since the village has been made the capital of the underdistrict at the end of the 1980s, a few dozen local men and women work now as government officials.

This fast growth of population led with time to competition about land. Three events in the recent past sharply enhanced this competition, namely a big flood that devastated part of the irrigated ricefields in 1977, the new village law of 1978 which abolished the hitherto strong and conservative political authority of the head of a supra village administrative body, and the establishment, in 1992, of the Kerinci-Seblat National Park which closed the agricultural frontier for good. As a result the types of deep structural changes set in, which are the topic of this essay.

The way the people of Pelosok deal with competition for land resources is determined by social structure and ideology. Like in most of rural Sumatra, land-ownership is rather evenly distributed, and there are as yet no clear-cut rural classes based on the criterion of land-ownership.<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that there are no inequalities, in this respect. In some old-established matrilineages, partible inheritance of irrigated rice-land has led to plot sizes of a quarter of a hectare or less per household, for the active generation, which is hardly enough to feed a family of four, while in others, plot sizes of close to one hectare, and accumulation of large stocks of rice, are still possible. The succession of settlement of the individual clans on the village territory is responsible for some striking differences in

18 For a general treatment of the topic cf. Scholz, Ulrich 1995, "Agrare Grundbesitzverfassungen auf Sumatra" in: Wälty, S. und B. Werlen, eds., *Kulturen und Raum: theoretische Ansätze und empirische Kulturforschung in Indonesien: Festschrift für Professor Albert Leemann*. Zürich: Rüegger, pp. 203-18.



land access, as we will see. To be able to prove priority of occupation of a stretch of land – by pointing out landmarks like old planted fruit-trees, and reciting the sequence of inheritance from the original clearer of the land – has always been important in mediation of land access in Sumatra. What has changed, now, is that members of old families in the village have allied in the new form of cognatic corporate descent groups, excluding newcomers from access to the former village commons on the uplands and challenging the categories of heritage and the rules of inheritance themselves. In so doing they have partly relied on Islamic laws of inheritance.

#### Heavy and light property: A clear distinction gets blurred

To understand these changes it is first necessary to describe the categories of property and how they relate to each other and to strategies people commonly follow. The inhabitants of Pelosok, like those of central Sumatra in general, traditionally distinguish acquired, light and heavy property.<sup>19</sup> Heavy property is inherited in the matriline and encompasses such things as irrigated rice-land, houses and rice-stocks. Light property consists of a man's weapons, water buffalos and small items of personal property and is inherited in the patriline. But before these things can be inherited and become either heavy or light property they must be produced or acquired and then go through the stage of acquired personal property.

Acquired property is the category that comes closest to the notion of private property. It is owned either individually or, in the case of a married couple, jointly. It can be freely sold by those who produce or acquire it. What happens with this kind of property at inheritance is at the heart of the social system. If it keeps its freely saleable quality for both sons and daughters, cognatic inheritance will be the result. But if certain types of goods must never be sold and if they are assigned exclusively to either sons or daughters, a lineal system will be the result. In central Sumatra it is the women who inherit the unsaleable goods, and the result is thus an

19 For Minangkabau and Kerinci see the comprehensive studies devoted to this topic, Benda-Beckmann 1979 (op.cit.) and Watson 1992 (op. cit.), respectively. The categories are sometimes differently named in those areas but signify essentially the same.

essentially matrilineal system of inheritance. Essentially only, for while certain types of acquired property are transformed into heavy property and are henceforth inherited in the matriline, other types of goods are inherited by men. They are transformed into light property and are henceforth inherited in the patriline. In contrast to heavy property they keep their commodity status. (In a patrilinear system, part of the son's inheritance, in particular lineage land and houses, would be unsaleable.) This clear division of inheritable property into commodities for patrilineages and non-commodities for matrilineages is now contested.

The reason is that transformation of the status of property from acquired to light or heavy tends to be postponed at least for one generation. Here is an example of how this works: Sons very often claim a personal use-right on part of the land their father cleared, and which should actually become the exclusive heavy property of their sisters and sisters' daughters. The sons may argue that they deserve a share in the land, since they helped their father create the property. What we have here, then, is cognatic inheritance in the first generation. Often the sons do not contest in principle the eventual transformation of this land into heavy property, and its transfer to their sisters or sister's daughters in the subsequent generation. But the many conflicts that arose out of this practice have led to new and effective forms of legitimation of transgenerational permanence of acquired property, and hence, continued cognatic inheritance of such property. Today there is, as I will show in greater detail below, a strong tendency to extend the status of acquired property indefinitely, for non-irrigated land in particular, so that the production of heavy property stops, in these areas. This does not mean that existing heavy and light property is actively being wrought from lineage control, but the proportion of such property decreases compared to the quick creation of all sorts of acquired property. The creation of heavy property has not stopped completely, though. In Pelosok, newly established irrigated ricefields and newly built houses are still regularly transformed into heavy property. But there are first instances where this is not the case anymore.

There are strong reasons why the transformation of a property into the "heavy" category should be offered resistance, in the context of increased market integration. Indeed, the traditionally high valuation of heavy property is itself a vestige of a low level of market integration. According to my informants the two categories light and heavy property



can be distinguished by their capacity and incapacity respectively of being "turned into money". Light property is, then, the kind that follows the logic of the market, and it is also the kind of property that can be carried by the mobile men. Traditionally, men married mostly out of their village of birth, carrying with them only few items of personal property. At divorce, a frequent event in former times, men left the house of their wives "with only the clothes on their bodies." Market relations were basically relations entertained by men travelling on foot for days and weeks on end. Women on the other hand were comparatively immobile, as was their heavy property, consisting of land, houses and rice. They stayed in their village of birth and were actually tied to the piece of land they inherited. Selling the land was and is a grave offense and is allowed by the matriline only under severe duress and for highly valued purposes, like paying for the Hajj, for the burial of a relative, or for a fine. Ideally, heavy property is redistributed exclusively among the female members of a matriline.

The association of marketable property with little weight and men carrying it over long distances, and non-marketable property with matriline is a telling one, and one able to shed some light on the origin of matriline in areas far removed from markets. Things changed when the market stopped to be restricted to highly mobile goods and people. The idea that land could have market value first emerged in a consistent way when perennial cash crops were planted on large plots on the upland plains. Even if the land itself was not for sale at first, it got a potential market value, since the things grown on it were sold, and people were disinclined to leave a once occupied piece of land.

Yet the idea of full commodification of land is still severely disputed, and accordingly, there are several competing discourses about the category of property unirrigated land in particular belongs into. When it comes to inheritance of cash crop plantations, more traditionally minded people make a distinction into the trees and the land on which they stand. In a first variant of the traditional matrilineal discourse it is argued that the land is a commons owned by all villagers and the trees grown on it are heavy property and hence inherited by the daughters. The drawback of this discourse is that it has to stretch the notion of heavy property, since it concerns a cash crop, a saleable thing. Nevertheless it is vigorously engaged in, in neighboring villages. In a second variant of the matrilineal discourse the trees are treated as acquired property that should be transformed into light

property at inheritance, so that the sons should be the only heirs of trees. On the other hand the land, even if it was newly acquired or cleared, should become heavy property to be inherited by the daughters. But more often people in Pelosok argue without reference to heavy and light property and claim that both the trees and the land on which they stand should be distributed evenly among the children at inheritance. This is a rather new view, in Pelosok, and it first gained public recognition only at the end of the 1970s, when it found adherents especially among the old-established families. They saw in it a means to limit access to the village commons, as I will describe in greater detail below.

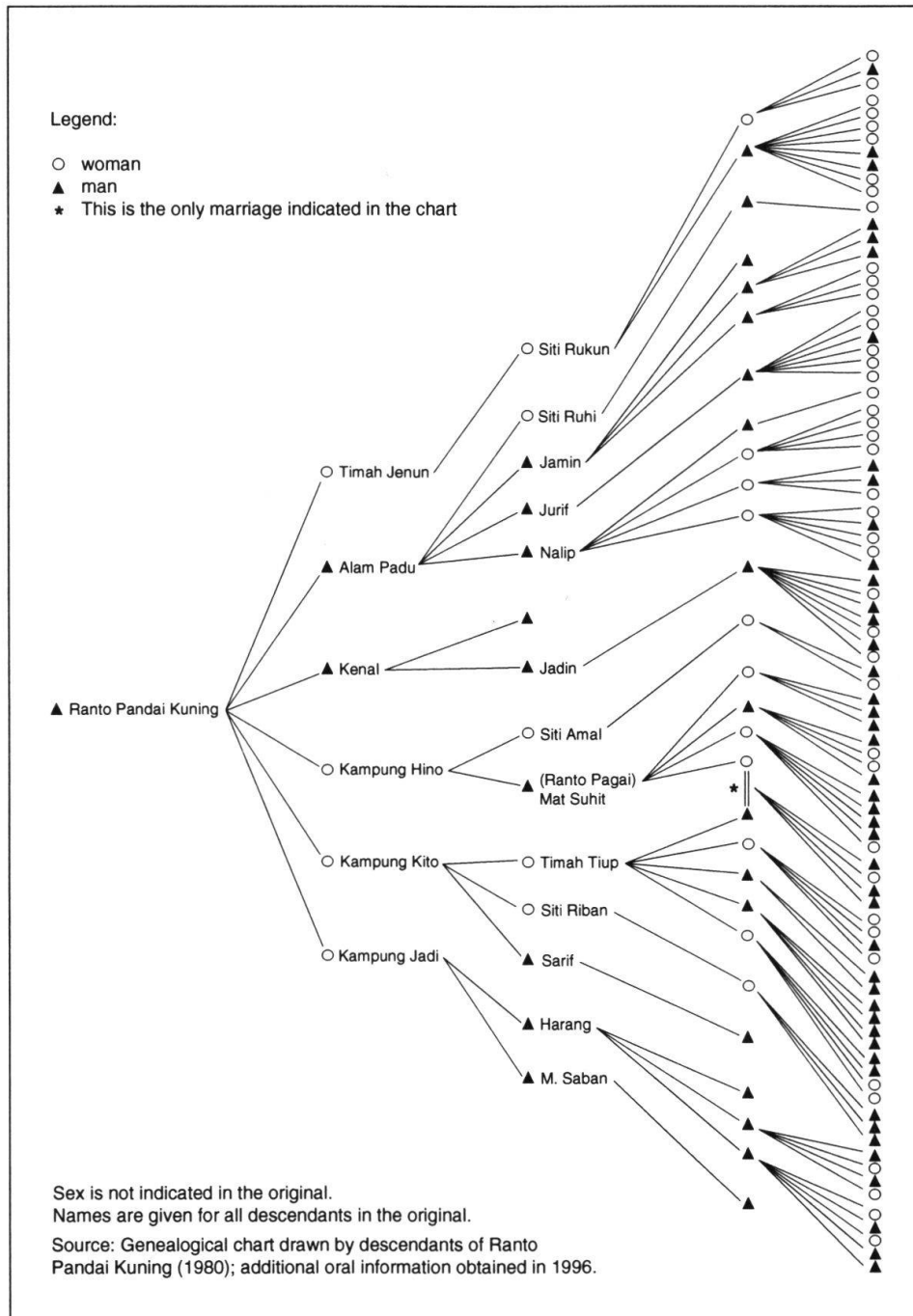
The emerging prominence of acquired property and the permanence of its status has an important effect on the symbolic significance of property for the expression of gender relations. The categories of light and heavy property once reflected a clear division of matrilineal and patrilineal patterns of inheritance. This pattern has become contested with the rise in importance of gender-neutral acquired property. While men became interested in ownership of land as acquired and freely disposable property, women have – hesitantly in most cases – taken to produce and acquire property traded for money on the local market. As I said, with the status of acquired property becoming permanent the production of lineally inheritable property declines sharply. This process goes almost exclusively at the expense of the category of light property, since light property has always been destined for sale, so that existing light property is bound to disappear, if it is not constantly renewed. In contrast, existing heavy property remains little challenged, in a direct way. One can expect that permanent ricefields will continue to be inherited in the matriline for many generations to come. But light property is not only not renewed anymore, it moreover loses its distinctive meaning. Light property was formerly the privileged possession of men. It was their capital in their dealings on the remote markets, which were a male affair. With market integration occurring on a village level and women entering the market, light property has lost much of its symbolic significance as a marker of male identity. One can therefore argue that the rising importance of gender-neutral acquired property undermines the patrilineal component of the bilineal social structure. And since matrilineally inherited heavy property is but a component of this bilineal structure – albeit the dominant one –, it gets undermined symbolically along with its complement.

The persistence, for the time being, of the exclusive tie between women and heavy property, in contrast to the disruption of the tie between men and light property makes Pelosok a strange society, composed of predominantly matrilineally inclined women, new settlers and many uneducated on the one hand and predominantly cognatically inclined men, old settlers and many educated men and women on the other. This image is confirmed by the contending discourses about inheritance which these different groups engage in.

#### The reform Islamic discourse in relation to inheritance

Islamic reformists, whose ultimate goal it is to create an ideal Islamic community following the *shariah*, have occupied a prominent position in this contested discursive field of inheritance, apparently without bothering much about deviant practices, but rather hoping to prepare the ground for incremental Islamic reforms. Islam thus plays an important role as a source of legitimation for the propagation of cognatic inheritance, and sometimes even of the reckoning of kinship itself. As I mentioned already, financing the Hajj with the proceeds of the sale of heavy property is considered legitimate, according to Islamic scholars. A provision of Islamic inheritance law is thus considered to overrule the traditional prohibition of the sale of heavy property. If such a sale does occur it therefore amounts to an act of faith in the face of deviant custom. Village men with an Islamic education frequently describe the complete Islamic inheritance laws as already valid, in Pelosok. According to these laws, the sons are entitled to two thirds of the heritage, while daughters are entitled to the remaining third only. One variant of this reformist discourse then goes on and adds up heavy property against light property, concluding that daughters have more than their share when they get the irrigated ricefields and the mother's house, so that all unirrigated land as well as the valuable cash-crops planted on it should go to the sons exclusively. Another variant claims that even if the sons would actually be entitled to a much greater share of the land, including two thirds of the irrigated land, they renounce on it out of compassion for their sisters. They may add that this is all right since it is their sisters' responsibility to look after the parents in their old age.

Figure 1: Genealogical chart representing bilateral descent from apical ancestor



Marriage is one of the most important fields where kin groups play out their corporate strategies, and it is no coincidence that Islamic reformists try to change the matrimonial rules as well. In central Sumatra, cross

cousin marriage was and continues to be by far the highest valued one, permitting as it does the brothers to take an interest in the land of their sisters, as they can hope that their son will marry their sister's daughter and thus live in the house where he was born, and work the land on which he had worked in his own youth. For men who married out of their village of birth, cross cousin marriage is an important means to keep in touch with their village of origin, and thus to reconcile them with the frustrations matrilineal descent can imply for them. The most hard-nosed Islamic reformists have recently begun to propagate and practice the marriage of parallel cousins, which is the ideal marriage according to Islam, but which is considered the closest degree of incest, according to local tradition.

This is only the latest in a series of very often successful challenges by Islamic reformists. Since the 1930s, they formed a small but powerful elite in the village that succeeded, against a more traditionally-minded majority, to gradually abolish public performances of rituals for the ancestors and rice-deities, and of dances and courtship-songs. By the 1950s, the sons of these reformists got educated in religious schools, in Jambi, the provincial capital. (It was not until the 1980s that the first women were allowed to be educated in town.) When those first educated men eventually returned, they had a powerful influence on village politics, and their agenda clearly reflected the views with which they had become acquainted in Jambi.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, this group started their up to today most momentous reform project by "inventing" from scratch cognatic corporate descent groups. Up to then, cognatic inheritance principles had been applied to acquired property for one generation at most, and after that it was converted into heavy and light property, respectively. This was the first time cognatic principles should occur over more than one generation and acquired property should never revert to either light or heavy property.

#### An unexpected set of genealogical charts

The reformists' weapons in this attack on custom were genealogical charts, and their prey were the fertile upland plains surrounding the village. These charts traced the inhabitants of the village back to the first settlers. I was



puzzled when I first saw them, since they looked like very ill-fated attempts indeed at representing kinship-ties. Unlike genealogical charts I was used to, they neither represented marriages – with one rather coincidental exception – nor the sexes of the individuals, but only descent. In my reproduction of one of these charts (see figure 1) I have indicated the sexes, following additional inquiries, in order to enhance the fact that it does not plot lineal, but bilateral descent. These charts thus do not reflect that they were drawn by members of a matrilineal society, as they make no attempt at all at representing what has always made kinship a passionate topic, in Pelosok, i.e. the politics of marriage alliances engaged in by matriclans. But this, I soon realized, is their point.

I went through the three complete charts that exist as yet with some of those men who were involved in researching and drawing them. More charts are being worked on, since there were more ancestors in the generation of the pioneer settlers, but progress is slow. Each chart has an apical ancestor at the top and represents the four generations after him. Members of the fifth generation are now mostly between 30 and 60 years old. The sixth and seventh generations have not yet been charted.

The apical ancestors were the pioneer settlers of Pelosok, or rather of a number of small hamlets on the upland plains that predated the core settlement of the present village. They are all men, which is particularly strange for a matrilineal society. In the myth of origin of the federation of which Pelosok is part, the first ancestors are women, while the fathers of their children are as anonymous as the wives of the apical ancestors in the written charts. There occurred thus a change of shift among the ancestors, as it were, from women to men.

Some of these male ancestors have reverential names or epithets like Ranto Gedang Dero (old man big burp), Ranto Pandai Kuning (old man goldsmith), Ranto Nyabé (old man cheek twister). The individuals of all subsequent generations are called by their proper names. From figure 1 it becomes evident that all children of Ranto Pandai Kuning were still given names in the old local tradition, i.e. metaphorical or metonymical ones in Malay that related to the character of the child or the situation it was born in. (“Alam Padu” means solid world, “Kampung Hino” means humble village) In the subsequent generations, Arab names dominate and reflect the enhanced prestige Islam acquired at the turn of the 20th century. It is interesting that the apical ancestors should not have been called by their

proper names, like all their descendants. This is probably due to the fact that they are addressed from the perspective of the descendants, while all descendants are addressed from the perspective of the apical ancestors. And indeed, bilateral descent *is* visualized most effectively from the perspective of an apical ancestor.

The names "old man big burp" and "old man cheek twister" clearly reflect this child perspective towards the apical ancestors. (Old people in Pelosok typically twist the cheeks of small children if they want to convey their affection). One of the oldest men in the village confirmed this when he remembered laughingly having seen as a small child "old man big burp" in his old age, sitting at the window of his hut and confirming from time to time his epithet. In Malay culture in general senior people should not be addressed by their proper names but by teknonyms. Having established the apical ancestors at the top of the chart, all descendants could be represented with their proper names, as if addressed by the ancestor. This perspective from the ancestor has the additional advantage for the authors of the charts of attenuating the awkwardness of having to represent many revered and in part still living older people by their proper names.

There are no dates of birth or death, in the charts, nor, as I mentioned already, are there indications of sex, in the original. But since ideally everybody in the village has an exclusive name, this is enough to identify the individuals. The charts have two apparent additional drawbacks. If one wants to read from them who was married to whom one has to compare all existing charts and look for the place where their children show up a second time, as the offspring of their wife or husband. This arrangement makes it also very difficult to trace lineal descent upwards. A woman who wants to trace her matrilineage, with the help of these charts, may end at her maternal grandfather in one chart and have to look for the maternal grandmother in a different chart, and then for her matrilineal great-grandmother in the third chart.

But while these genealogies make it very difficult to trace lineal descent they achieve perfectly to plot cognatic descent. One just has to check if somebody shows up in a chart to know if he or she is a descendant of an apical ancestor. A technical advantage of this kind of genealogical chart, and an advantage that compensates for some of the drawbacks it may have otherwise, is that it avoids the problems of representing frequent



divorce and remarriage, which was a common practice until about 20 to 30 years ago. Each individual is represented with all his or her children, no matter who the other parent was.

Many villagers show up on more than one chart, as they share more than one of the apical ancestors. But while outmigrants and their descendants are all represented, late immigrant families and their descendants are either not represented at all or only poorly, as the result of intermarriage with locals.

What purpose do these genealogical charts serve? To understand this, we have to go back in the history of the fertile upland plains surrounding the village.

### Changes in land use

Around 1860 or 1870, the first settlers moved to the upper reaches of the Mentenang river. They came from villages some ten to thirty kilometres to the east, and they first settled on one of the upland plains. Here they made swidden fields which they rotated in short periods, as they had used to in their villages of origin. According to one controversial story, these settlers divided the plain among themselves, claiming vast stretches of land for their – cognatic – descendants. This story, as it is retold by most villagers, today, makes sense from today's perspective, as Pelosok, a village of 2000 inhabitants, runs short of good land close by. It would not have made much sense for maybe 6 or 8 or pioneer-households to divide a plain of 250 ha among themselves, as there was no shortage of land and as they would never have been able to actually occupy it all. There was no demand for such large plots of land, since for subsistence purposes land could be replanted in five-years cycles, and for the purposes of market-production a tiny plot was more than enough, given the extreme limitations to transport. The story thus very much looks like having been made up by the very descendants the ancestors are supposed to have been worrying about a hundred years earlier.

Migrants who moved to Pelosok after the initial occupation of the land, and their descendants, are denied use and property rights on the upland plains. Quite naturally, they tend to be sceptical about the supposed division, five generations previously, of these fertile and conveniently

located pieces of land. And they counter it with a different story. In all other villages of Sungai Sepi, so they argue, the fertile plains close to the settlements are commons to this day, and so it used to be in Pelosok before they became contested. The fact that the first settlers cleared part of the plains does not give their descendants any special right, since in the meantime the land had been used as a commons during many decades, and without this use the land would have reverted to forest.

Indeed, even if one concedes that the upland plains may not have been commons when they were first settled in the 19th century, they certainly were treated as commons from early in the 20th century onwards. After the turn of the century, and very likely at the instigation of the freshly installed Dutch administration, irrigated ricefields were established in the alluvial plains, which provided more reliable harvests than rain-fed fields. Upland rice-growing was given up and vast stretches of the upland plains were turned into common pasture for livestock. In between, along the footpaths criss-crossing the plains, women made small fenced-in vegetable gardens, where they together with their husbands also planted tobacco, bananas, coffee, cinnamon, aren palms and fruittrees. There was very limited marketing of coffee, tobacco and cinnamon, at the turn of the century, and with the world economic crisis of the 1930s, the commercial use of these small gardens disappeared altogether. During more than half a century there was little reason for arguing about land claims that may or may not have been staked by the pioneers, since land was plentiful and demand small. There was a significant rise of livestock husbandry and the sale of livestock was the major source of income, in Pelosok, around the middle of the century. Grazing the cattle on a commons was most economical, since efforts to fence it in could be shared and kept low.

When cinnamon prices went up again, in 1965, what had remained of the old trees was quickly harvested. There were conflicts about many of these trees, since those who had planted them were in many cases long dead, and ownership had become uncertain as it had not been asserted during the decades of the market break-down. Now, the trees yielded hundreds of kilograms of bark, and its sale provided instant wealth. More important than the conflicts about the bark of the trees was, however, that these old plantations, together with old aren palms and stands of bamboo, were later used to prove that there was indeed continual use of the upland plains by the descendants of the first settlers, and that their claim to the

land thus had never extinguished. The commons, so to speak, was only in between the old planted trees, a use-right over land temporarily ceded by the owners of the trees.

This was the time people started to argue about who owned the old plots. Memories of missed or stolen fortunes of cinnamon lingered on and influenced future events. The uplands continued to be used as pasture and for vegetable gardening, but cattle-raising went into a slow decline, as more and more men started to turn to cinnamon as a source of income, establishing fenced-in small plantations in succession to vegetable plots on the plain. In the early 1970s, cinnamon was still looked upon as a speculative enterprise, transportation costs were still exorbitant, and trust in an enduring market was still small, so that these gardens were not considered a permanent infringement on the land. Small cinnamon-plantations of a few dozen trees were deemed compatible with the use of the uplands as a common pasture, as long as the planter fenced them in and did not complain about damage done by cattle.

Things changed dramatically, when, in 1977, a flood hit the valley of the Mentenang, destroying harvests and rice-barns. Everybody flocked to the upland plain and planted dry rice for subsistence. During the emergency itself nobody was excluded from access to the plains. For the first time in more than 60 years, a large proportion of the plains were cultivated, and as cinnamon growing had become popular during the previous years, many people planted tree seedlings in between the rice stalks. As a result, within a year or two, and for the first time ever, large parts of the upland plains came under permanent cultivation. Almost immediately, there emerged a new economic regime on this land, which consisted in commercial agricultural production on individually owned plots. Ever since, this regime has made progress, marginalizing not only the use of the plains as commons for grazing buffalos and cattle, but also its use for the women's small vegetable gardens. The long fences inclosing vast pastures have disappeared, in the process. In a new ruling, owners of buffalos were forced to tie them on ropes for grazing. Nobody has more than two or three buffalos since, and most own none. In the 1940s and 1950s, owners of eight or ten buffalos had been numerous.

### Proclaiming ancestors to claim their land

It was at this moment that access to the upland plains became a political issue. The head of the supra-village unit of which Pelosok was a part and the leaders of the majority of villages that made it up were in favor of the maintenance of the status of the uplands as village commons, and they were against the establishment of large permanent cash crop plantations on them, since these would jeopardize the reversion of the land to commons. But in Pelosok a small group of educated men – and at that time this still meant men with an Islamic education – challenged the notion of the uplands as commons and argued for restricted access in favor of corporate cognatic descent groups. That they should succeed was due in part to a coincidence. Just one year after the flood of 1977, which had resulted in the uplands being overrun by the victims of the flood, the field of local politics was changed in a radical way. In 1978, the Indonesian government, in a major administrative shake-up intended at asserting the state's authority against local elites, abolished the supra village administrative unit of the *marga* and the office of its head, the *Pasirah*.<sup>20</sup> The experienced and committed *Pasirah*'s voice lost its weight in the ongoing debate, while a young and inexperienced village chief was installed by the government and put in charge of village politics. He was more subject to the maneuvering of pressure groups within the village. In this moment of lacking political authority the reformers were able to get their way.

The men who took this initiative were personally very interested in the upland plains. They determined the borders of the plots with the help of old markers like bamboo stands, aren-trees and streams. Three of these plots were especially large, comprising between 15 and 30 hectares. They are the plots of those ancestors for whom the genealogical charts have been drawn in the years between 1979 and 1981, in the immediate aftermath of the flood and of the demise of the *Pasirah*. And that they indeed were intended as a weapon to secure land-rights is made clear by the little motto on the upper left on each chart, which I have quoted at the beginning of this essay.

20 Galizia, M. 1995, *Aufstieg und Fall der Pasirah. Soziale und kulturelle Veränderungen im Spannungsfeld zwischen zentralstaatlicher Vereinnahmung und lokalen Machtstrategien*. Berlin: Reimer.

It happens that the man who pushed hardest for the drawing of the charts was a descendant of all these three supposedly land-greedy pioneers. People remember that there were nasty conflicts, at the time. Only part of the freshly planted cinnamon-plantations were kept up, as an effect, while the disputed ones were abandoned. Eventually, since no counter-story of similar authority could be mustered against the rhetorics of boundary markers and impressive genealogical charts, the upland plots got uniformly treated as the collective property of cognatic groups of descendants from the first settlers.

### Women's predicament

For women it became evident that from now on they could make their gardens on the uplands undisturbed only if and where they managed to assert a property right. Suddenly, in order to secure land-claims, they had to know their bilateral ancestors among a number of intersecting cognatic groups and to ally with the powerful men that represented their descendants. Up to then, the only restricted access to land had been on irrigated ricefields, and claims to this land had always been settled within the well-defined group of their own matrikin. They had always known exactly what was theirs. Plots for gardens on the upland plains, in contrast, had been openly accessible and had not demanded any consideration of kin-relations. The newly defined access to upland plots and the complicated genealogical relations that crisscrossed the traditional notions of who was kin and who was not, was traded mainly among those men who drew up the charts. Women found themselves in kin-groups that were defined by the ambitions of their husbands and fathers.

They were thus drawn into a lose-lose situation. Their problem was that if they asserted access to land with the help of their cognatic kin they might compete with men or women to whom they were matrilineally related, weakening their ties to them, in the process. The establishment of cognatic inheritance on the upland plains thus tended to divide matrilineals. For many, renouncing their claim on such land altogether was the only possibility to avoid conflicts with their kin. But if they did renounce on asserting landrights through cognatic descent for this reason, their own



matriclan became, not a provider of land as it used to, but an obstacle in the access to a certain category of land.

This is one instance of the impact of cognatic inheritance of land on the upland plains on matriliney, even if the principle of matrilineal inheritance of irrigated land in the lowlying plains was never directly challenged. Other developments equally started to undermine the leverage of matriclans.

#### The losers take to the woods

As we have seen, newcomers without kin-ties to the pioneers were now excluded from all permanent land-use on the uplands. Others, who were formally entitled got outwitted by their kin and still others, even though entitled, did not assert claims on the upland plain out of protest against the disbandment of the commons, and in order to avoid the deepening of conflicts within the village. As an educated elite aggressively prepared the field for the establishment of private property on the best available land, the traditionalists deemed it wise to give in to the demands of the raiders.

This latter group perhaps best reflects the self-defeating effects, in the context of market-integration, of traditional conflict-avoiding strategies. They saved peace at the double prices of the loss of common ownership of the upland plains and of the division of the villagers into the privileged old families and the marginalized newcomers.

The losers are very reluctant to talk about their exclusion from the plains and about specific conflicts that took place at the time. Typically, they would say that those who excluded them are sinners, and that they would not be able to take their profits from the land to the hereafter – using once again, in a religious transformation, the concept of heavy property ... This religious idiom, directed as it is against the dominant group of Islamic scholars in Pelosok, reflects the bitterness that lingers on among villagers, 20 years after the traumatic blow the land-raid had dealt their self-image as a society of equals.

Dozens of the now marginalized or estranged families migrated, either to town or to a pioneer settlement some 30 km south of Pelosok. Others remained in Pelosok and started plantations on neutral territory, on the fringes of the village in as yet unclaimed forests on the hillsides. The

conflicts about unirrigated land have thus expressed themselves in a spatial differentiation of land-ownership, with the old families, and especially the educated men among them, occupying the easily accessible land close to the village, and the newcomers and the marginalized transforming the forest at a growing distance from the village core.

The 1980s saw a steady expansion of clearing of primary forest on the margins of the village territory. By the 1990s, a small market for these newly established gardens had developed, as a new village elite, the state-officials, started to buy young plantations from poor villagers in need of cash. State-officials had become more numerous and wealthy, when Pelosok was declared the capital of the sub-district, in 1988.

In 1992, the Indonesian government declared the establishment of the Kerinci-Seblat National Park, which stretches about 300 km along the main ridges of Sumatra's Barisan-mountains. Its border is just about a kilometer south and west of Pelosok. All over the sub-district, and in many other places in southern and central Sumatra, the national park has provoked a preemptive land-rush into untouched forest along its long border, and often beyond. One can see large plots that have been cleared a few years ago and that are, with the exception of a few precarious cinnamon saplings here and there, overgrown with young secondary forest. What looks like amazingly inefficient agroforestry and a waste of resources to the unexpected is in fact the assertion of land-occupation. In Pelosok it is not different. By the means of such signal-clearings practically all remaining land-reserves have by now been claimed by individual villagers. The frontier that had been opened up more than a hundred years earlier by the pioneers, has quite suddenly closed, by the combined effect of the actions of the state and the villagers themselves, and not everybody in the village has yet come to realize the meaning of this. Like the exclusion of part of the villagers from the upland plain, the closing of the frontier is a traumatic event. In the near future, young men will have to buy plots of land to start their enterprise or otherwise work someone else's land. But for the moment, this can still be avoided. Men, young and old, married and unmarried, have created vast personal land-reserves on the hillsides that far surpass the combined surface of the irrigated ricefields and of the upland plains. They will in most cases not be able to establish plantations on all their plots of forest land. But they will bequeath it to their sons and



daughters, according to the newly established cognatic pattern of inheritance.

#### A new marriage pattern emerges

These two events, the land-raid of 1977 on the fertile uplands by the old families of the village, and the rush to the forest, in 1992, have taught a lesson to the young men and women: land-access is more than ever dependent on being rooted in one's *village*, not in one's matriclan alone. It therefore pays to marry within the village. For women this has been true ever since irrigated rice-fields became their most valuable asset for subsistence security. Marrying out of the village meant being without personal resources and therefore without prospects for remarriage in case of divorce. Marriage has always been uxorilocal, in Pelosok, that means daughters stayed on the land of their mothers, while young men married into the household of their wives.

For men, marriage into a neighboring village was quite common, until recently, although their mothers tended not to marry them off too far away from their own place, since they continued to be important in family matters, there, too, as son, as brother of their sisters and as maternal uncle of their sister's children. As long as the mainstay of the economy was the growing of rice on the women's fields, and men looked for some money-income in seasonal bouts of work in the lowlands, men had little to lose by marrying out of their village. Nowadays, young men establish their first cinnamon-gardens as bachelors, they inherit part of the forest-plots planted by their parents, and they have, in many cases, access to the valuable land on the upland plains. They have thus a lot to lose, if they marry outside the village. To hold on to these resources at a distance is difficult. Women are equally poorly served if they marry an outsider. The fast population-growth has reduced the plots of irrigated land women inherit to a size often too small to grow enough rice for their household. They are better off if they marry a fellow villager with whom they can easily combine land resources. If need be, they have a better chance of growing a crop of rice on one of the upland plots they own among them.

Subsistence resources are thus not anymore exclusively controlled by the matrilineages. For women, this means that their husbands and brothers

are crowding into a realm that used to be the basis of their standing and prestige. They do offer them some resistance. If one talks about land access to women one gets the impression that they are still in full control. According to them not only their rice-fields but also the cinnamon-plantations that have grown out of their vegetable-gardens are here to secure the livelihood of their children and will eventually be inherited by their daughters. They claim that their husbands have little say in the future distribution of the gardens. In case of divorce, so they assert, the men will leave everything to them, if they have common children. "They will leave the house with only their clothes on."

Men talk differently. While they concede the ricefields and houses to their wives and daughters, they have a strong interest in their cinnamon plantations. For them it is evident that they are intended for the education of their children, and that means, in part, of their sons. And the sons themselves claim a share of the gardens of their parents. Once they are harvested, so they say, they will care themselves for the shoots that quickly sprout from the roots.

The rules of divorce do indeed privilege subsistence security of women and their children. Men lose their share of the wealth acquired by the couple, in case there are common children (otherwise they can take with them half of the commonly acquired property). So if they want to enjoy the fruits of their investment into cinnamon plantations, which is a long-term enterprise of 10 to 20 years, they better stay with their wife. And since most men act according to these long-term cycles of accumulation, divorce has become rare.

This reluctance to divorce tends to undermine the strong position of women, in the household, and with it ultimately, matriliney. Pelosok used to have very high rates of divorce, in the past. And each time a woman divorced a man and he had to leave her house emptyhanded, her strong standing was evident, while the man had shamefully to look for shelter. Divorce still favors women over their husbands, but it has become a threat rarely realized, since there are now greater risks at stake for both partners. While men fear giving up their share of the commonly acquired possessions, women would have much greater difficulties now of finding a new husband than was the case even for the generation of their mothers. This is due to demographic developments and to ideological reasons propagated by the state and Islamic circles. Without a husband they cannot generate the

money-income needed for the education of their children. They are more at the mercy of their husbands, these days. And many a long-term husband takes advantage of this shift of power in the household by reducing his own workload at the expense of his wife. There is a rhetoric among men that working the ricefields is a losing concern, anyway, since they yield only rice, while clearing the forest allows to grow upland rice, vegetables and perennials like cinnamon and coffee. So they much rather do not bother too much with the ricefields. Women have taken over part of the backbreaking preparation of the ricefields that used to be done almost exclusively by men. But they are still expected to do their share of work in the gardens.

As an effect of the new marriage and divorce patterns, families have become more stable, and as most men stay with their wives and in their village, villages have become more assertively territorial. Kin-relations between villages become fewer and less important. In former times, they used to be the backbone of supra-village federations that controlled parts of a trade route crossing the mountains. Young men could move along extended stretches of these paths and always stay with close relatives. The pacification of the territory by the state together with public transportation on roads has made these federations of matrilineally related villages politically superfluous. Today, young men who marry into a neighboring village find themselves at a disadvantage, as they arrive there emptyhanded and are even treated as unwelcome competitors for land. It is now much more common for young men and young educated couples to migrate to the cities than to a neighboring village: they give up their land-based resources in their village of birth only if they have a chance of earning a living in the city. In a way, the cities are now closer to them than their neighbor villages.

#### Islam and matriliney: less of a puzzle

For many men, in traditional society in Sungai Sepi, uxorilocality meant that they arrived at the home of their wives with very little in terms of property and status. They had more to say in the matriclans they had been born into, but if they married out of their village, their kin were often at a considerable distance, so that their day-to-day life brought them little public rewards. In parts of highland Jambi a distinction is made at official

occasions into *anak jantan* and *anak tino*, “male and female children of the village”. The former comprised the men who married within their own village of origin, the latter comprised all women of the village plus all men who had become residents of the village by marrying one of the local women.<sup>21</sup> This female official gender of inmarrying men reflects the generally weak status men had as fathers, in the matrilineal societies of central Sumatra. One of the consequences of the lowly status of inmarrying men was that they were eager to take advantage of alternative sources of prestige. In former times, when matriclans still dominated politics, there were particularly few such opportunities. One was to acquire personal wealth before marriage. Another was to become a shaman or some other religious specialist. In the most public realms, the ritual specialists had to be members of the local matriclans. Rice rituals were the domain of women, and the communication with ancestors was the domain of male members of the local matriclans. Things changed for the better, for men in general, when since the 17th century, Islam offered prestigious positions in a ritual sphere that was, at least in its purified version, completely outside the control of matriclans.<sup>22</sup>

It therefore becomes evident that a matrilineal uxori-local society like the one in Sungai Sepi produces a lack of prestigious positions for precisely those men who conform most to its rules, i.e. who marry out of their village of birth. Any source of prestige outside the control of local matriclans must therefore have a strong appeal to these men. This is why one could argue that a matrilineal Islamic society is not, after all, so astonishing a phenomenon as one may at first be inclined to think. But as the seeming paradox of a matrilineal Islamic society reveals itself as a not unlikely combination of part conflictive, part compensatory principles, the question remains if Sungai Sepi should still be represented as matrilineal at all, and not rather as at least in part cognatic.

21 Watson 1992 (op.cit.) p. 21.

22 Dobbin, Christine 1983, *Islamic Revivalism in a Changing Peasant Economy: Central Sumatra, 1784-1847*. London: Curzon Press. Watson 1985, “Islamization in Kerinci”. In: Benda-Beckmann and Thomas, eds. 1985 (op.cit.), pp. 157-79. Znoj, Heinzpeter 1997, “Islamische Kalenderreform in einer matrilinealen Gesellschaft Zentralsumatras”. In: *Traverse* 4/3: 23-35.

### Matrilineal or cognatic – a question of representation?

In recent years, the question of representation in relation to kinship in central Sumatra has been posed.<sup>23</sup> It has sometimes been treated, however, in a way as if kinship representation were of little consequence to the life of the people so represented<sup>24</sup>, or similarly, as if it were an innocent activity, without necessarily being part of political agendas. In this vein the renowned Minangkabau scholar Taufik Abdullah contends that the main thrust of conversion of central Sumatran society to Islam “was not how society should be rearranged or restructured but rather how society should be conceived. Islam provided new systems of meaning, on the basis of which reality should be understood, rather than regulations of conduct.”<sup>25</sup> He goes on to make a sharp distinction into mere Islamic representation, which characterizes Islam in Minangkabau up to today, (and which may account for cognatic or even patrilineal representations of inheritance rules, one might add) and legalistic implementation of Islamic concepts of social organization, which would be a real threat to matriliney, if it ever gained enough followers. Abdullah would probably interpret the case of Pelosok in the same way. Here there is also a reformist discourse that appears to be contenting itself with such rhetorical representation only. But as we have seen, this rhetoric prepares the field for actual change and the direction it takes.

Bill Watson proposes a similar, although more complex argument.<sup>26</sup> He argues, quite rightly, in my opinion, that in Minangkabau studies the model of matrilineal social structure is so pervasive that it is assumed that social organization is completely determined by it. This results in a neglect

23 Sanday, Peggy Reeves 1990, “Androcentric and Matrifocal Gender Representations in Minangkabau Ideology”. In: Sanday, P.R. and R.G. Goodenough, eds., *Beyond the Second Sex: New Directions in the Anthropology of Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 139-68. Peletz, Michael G. 1996, *Reason and Passion. Representations of Gender in a Malay Society*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

24 Kahn, Joel 1993, *Constituting the Minangkabau: Peasants, Culture, and Modernity in Colonial Indonesia*. Providence: Berg.

25 Abdullah 1985, (op.cit.), p. 150.

26 Watson 1991, (op. cit.).



of the study of such things as territorial proximity as a factor for social life, of the affective relationships among kin, and of political and social control within the village. These are precisely those fields of study which receive most attention in research on cognatic systems in Southeast Asia.<sup>27</sup> In neglecting these fields, Minangkabau studies may have overlooked features typical for cognatic social structure that may cast doubt on the clear-cut interpretation of this society as matrilineal.

He argues that Kerinci society, which is mostly treated as matrilineal in the literature, could also be seen as essentially cognatic. Without taking sides which view is correct he proposes the metaphor of Escher perspective for this ambivalence. According to him, the ambivalence in kinship representation may be congenial to Kerinci society because it may have originally been cognatic and only later have acquired a matrilineal ideology. In former times, there may have been only small villages with cognatic social organization in Kerinci, and young men would have felt it necessary to marry out of these villages. (One might add as an additional reason for outmarriage of young men the existence of village federations along trade routes across the mountains, as I have argued earlier.) The generalized uxori-local marriage pattern would have resulted in whole villages consisting of local women and inmarrying men. Titles and property would then quite naturally have been inherited in the matrilineage. In addition, according to Watson, the influence of Minangkabau custom would have made it more accepted to represent this essentially cognatic arrangement in matrilineal terms.

The Escher perspective Watson proposes thus lies in the fact that one and the same social arrangement, outmarriage of young men and inheritance of titles and land in the matriline, may be alternatively interpreted according to a model of cognatic kinship, and to a model of matrilineal kinship. The fact that part of the people in Kerinci represent their own social structure as cognatic would then be just a mode of representation of the social facts, not less legitimate than the interpretation of the same facts by others as constituting matrilineal kinship.

Watson's own metaphor of Escher perspective offers an avenue to a critique of this way of dealing with alternative representations of kinship. Escher's pictures function because they lead us through enhanced graphic

27 Watson 1991, (op. cit.), p. 58f.

application of perspectival *topoi* to view the whole picture as a perspectival representation of space: straight converging lines, staircases, views on foreshortened plains from above and below, diminishing sizes of similar objects in a row. Using this enhancement of the perspectival *topoi* for two different projections at the same time, Escher creates the illusion of a self-contradictory space. Of course, such a self-contradictory space can never exist in reality, and what we marvel about when we see his pictures, is not space, but simply the confusion created by the application of self-contradictory projections of two perspectives in the same picture. The picture is overdetermined in the signs it offers us to interpret it.

Watson may have created a similar *trompe l'oeil* by overenhancing the model-traits in his representation of Kerinci kinship. As sceptical of traditional kinship models as he may present himself, in evoking the seeming paradox of Kerinci kinship flipping back and forth between a matrilineal and a cognatic aspect, he relies on just these rigorous and pure kinship models. And like Escher academically applies perspective to create paradoxical effects of representation but does not break with this mode of representation, as the great artists of the early 20th century have done, Watson applies in too rigid a manner the idiom of kinship classification in order to create a paradoxical effect, without conveying a radically new mode of representation of kinship.

Watson's paradoxical Escher perspective on a kinship system depends on an equally totalizing representation of society as does the *topos* of a paradoxical combination of Islam and matriliney. Watson and Abdullah both ultimately dissimulate the conflicts within central Sumatran societies, between matriclans on the one hand and on the other groups of men who try to establish new modes of access to land resources and group affiliation, among others with the help of Islamic teachings and cognatic representation of kinship.<sup>28</sup>

I do not think that cognatic, matrilineal or patrilineal representations of central Sumatran kinship has ever been as materially disinterested, as Abdullah and Watson see it, each in his way. I agree with Peggy Sanday and Michael Peletz (whose case study is on matrilineal Negeri Sembilan in

28 In his book (op. cit. 1992) Watson avoids the seductive appeal of such modelling and provides an excellent account of the complexities and conflicts of Kerinci kinship.



West Malaysia) that it rather always stood in the service of political interests, be it of European administrators in the 18th century, or of Islamic reformists in the 19th and 20th, or of promoters of ethnic identity.<sup>29</sup>

My own example suggests that competing representations of kinship, as they occur in Pelosok in relation to unirrigated land, are not just representations, but reflect material interests and cause deep conflicts. As I have shown, conflicts over the mode of access to non-irrigated land has even effects on matriclans controlling irrigated land, since if their members are forced to compete with each other over upland plots as members of different cognatic kin-groups, this has disruptive effects on their matrilineally defined relationship.

I therefore argue that the ambivalences in representing central Sumatran societies in terms of social structure cannot be solved by selecting one simple model or another, and showing how society switches to and from these models, but by showing how the various simplifying representations are used by identifiable competing groups of people claiming their entitlement to scarce resources and using the strongest arguments at hand in doing so.

29 Sanday (op.cit.), Peletz (op.cit.).