

Chapter 28

My Home Is My World: Women, Shelter, and Work in a Malaysian Town

Norazit Selat

Norazit Mohd Selat has a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, and is currently associate professor in the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. He was a Fulbright Fellow at the College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan.

This paper focuses on two basic issues facing the laboring class of a locality¹ situated in the town of Muar, Johor, Malaysia. The first is related to the problem of finding a home, which, however small or shabby, working people can call their own. (And if they rent it, the rent should be minimal so that they can save money to buy or build their own house later on.) The second issue is related to the role of women, especially with regard to the Malay saying "my home is my world" (*rumah itu dunia ku*). The home should not only provide basic shelter, it should also be comfortable to live in and beautiful so as to be the envy of the neighborhood. Comfort is measured not only in space but also in amenities the homeowner possesses.

The Locality and Its People

The locality, here fictitiously named Lorong Sembilang, is situated about 1 km away from the center of the town Muar. Muar is approximately 180 km south of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, and 160 km north of Singapore.

It has been said that "[modern] urbanization is essentially the product of capitalist development and expansion" (Roberts, 1978:11). The town of Muar is no exception. Structurally, it was the outcome of British capitalism as well as the positive will of the then ruler, Sultan Abu Bakar. Muar was born as the rest of the state of Johor became embroiled in the production of pepper and gambier (Selat, 1987; Trocki, 1979). The town of Muar was planned to grow from a few shophouses that had sprung up in the context of developing capitalistic production into a modern Malaysian town. Like all Malaysian towns, Muar too reflects plural characteristics. While the Chinese and Indians form the majority in the town center, the Malays settled in ethnically defined communities and localities on the outskirts of the town. Lorong Sembilang, although not one of the Malay pioneering communities, is one such settlement. It is the product of the urbanization process, which sees the growth of a large population of landless people, and Lorong Sembilang itself came into being as the need for housing became greater. The locality houses a majority of Malay wage earners of the laboring class.

Lorong Sembilang has been built up on reclaimed swamp land. In a sense, it is a "coastal" Malay locality; the sea at high tide is only half a kilometer away, and the area between the settlement and the sea is covered with thick mangrove swamps. The sea is not visible from any point in the settlement and is accessible only by way of

the two drainage canals, Parit Betuk and Parit Lokan. The settlement consists of sixty-four houses, of which sixty are occupied. One of the four unoccupied houses is used as an occasional lodging house for the Indonesian migrant workers who use the locality as their embarkation point. Ethnic composition of the locality is made up of 1 Indian family, 2 Chinese families, and 57 Malay families. The total population is 227 people, consisting of 70 men, 62 women, and 96 children. Of the 57 Malay families, 5 are renting their houses.

The people of the locality trace their origin to three different areas: Indonesia, Terengganu, and Muar, especially from the Malay community close by. Of the people from Indonesia, only one is a recent migrant. The local people of Muar who moved into the settlement also include those who worked in the town as laborers but upon retirement had nowhere else to go. With the money they received from their Employee Provident Fund, some constructed modest houses for themselves and their families. The rest of the settlers consist of the married children of the residents and others who have moved in from the neighboring areas.

As land available for housing close to the road or canals that service the locality is now scarce, the children of the residents have to build their own homes farther in the swamp land. People wanting to settle in Lorong Sembilang must either be sponsored by a resident or be relatives of one. The applicant does not need the support of the whole community, but it is essential that the applicant's immediate neighbors approve. This is important because it can then be ensured that the land is not earmarked by the neighbors for their immediate kin. The settlement keeps expanding as immediate neighbors of each family build their own houses. There is no physical limit to the development of the locality as yet, for the land is still plentiful for those who are willing to put in a lot of labor to reclaim the swamp land. Those who do so also have to bear with the inconvenience of not having basic amenities like electricity and water.

There are three types of houses built in the locality: (a) the traditional wooden stilt house, (b) the traditional stilt house with a ground level kitchen, and (c) the house built on the ground level but on a raised foundation. Because of the marshy character of the land, clay and rubble are brought from the outside (from demolished buildings) and are pounded into the ground before laying the foundation. A house usually consists of the bedroom, a separate living room, and a kitchen. Houses with two or more bedrooms are rare.

These people are squatters² and, as is common with squat-ter housing, the houses are built close together and most do not have a clear boundary demarcating claims, although at the initial stage they may have an imaginary one. Each individual plot is often drawn by convention and usage. Complaints about intrusion are sometimes made but they usually come to nothing; the dwellings, by then, have been raised. As squatters, they have no legal avenues to redress the problem, nor can they bring the issue up with the headman, as the locality does not have one.

More often than not, the houses form into clusters belonging to a single kinship group, often an extended family. Why and where the housing comes into being can be best understood from an actual example. The Celak family built five houses on a plot approximately 100 meters long and 30 meters wide. There is still a vacant lot between the fourth lot and the fifth house for another house. The house nearer to the road is the main house built by Celak when he first settled in the area and is now occupied and owned by his second daughter. The parents gave her the house at the time when she was a tenant in sufferance elsewhere. Celak then built another house behind the original home. The front of the new house is only 2 meters from the kitchen of the original home.

Later Celak decided that, as his eldest daughter did not own a house in the area, he should build one for her to inherit, even though she does not live in Muar. Celak constructed the house on a site immediately beside the kitchen of the original house. The land space is approximately 10 meters which is just enough to construct a two-bedroom house complete with a kitchen, lounge, and attached bathroom and toilet. There is even a small verandah in the front of the house. Celak managed to fit in the house by building it along the wall of the original kitchen. As it shares a common wall, one of the bedrooms is always dark. The dwelling was built by Celak with the help of his sons and sons-in-law. The bulk of the money for the construction was provided by the eldest daughter's husband. When the house was completed, the son-in-law told Celak that "since he was not coming back yet," Celak could rent the place and use the income as his "cigarette money" (*duit rokok*). Celak spends the rent in the town on his morning coffee. Celak charges M\$80 a month rent for the house while the tenant pays his own electricity bill.³ The water rate is shared as there is only one meter for the five households sharing the water. The water charges are about \$10M a month for each house.

The fourth house is an extension of Celak's present house. The extension was built when his second son (Tarmimi) married. He had been working then as a laborer/carpenter with the Town Council for only six months and had no savings. His wedding was financed by the family. After the marriage, the young couple stayed with Tarmimi's parents, his younger brother, and his niece. Tarmimi since became an enterprising young man with responsibilities and built himself a separate house with its own lounge room and entrance annexed to the main house. His part of the house can also be entered through a door from the lounge room of the main house. At the back of this house there is another small house. This is constructed on stilts. Celak built the house for his third daughter who works and resides in Johor Baru with her family. Her husband has property and a house nine kilometers away from Johor Baru, and it is unlikely that she too will return to Muar. Celak cannot rent the house as it has no electricity, so it was turned into a hostel for the itinerant Indonesian immigrants waiting for boats to take them back to Sumatra. Celak charges M\$2 per night for each individual.

Squatting: The Urban Poor's Solution to Shelter

Land, both in the town and its hinterland, has become an expensive commodity and many of the people cannot afford to own it. As a result, the urbanization process has also included the growth of squatter settlements for the urban poor. The birth of Lorong Sembilang is a result of such a process. The characteristics of Lorong Sembilang are clearly reflected in Roberts' observation on the squatter settlement in general: "in most cases, squatter settlements appear in the outskirts of the city and in government-owned land that has relatively little infrastructure for commercial or industry purposes. Striking but common examples are location of land used for rubbish dumps, on swampy ground, or over lagoons" (1982: 375).

Squatting in Lorong Sembilang has evolved from its early beginning to what it is now a response to the urban residents' need to provide their own shelters (cf. Roberts, 1982: 376; Drakakis-Smith, 1981: 63). The excessive cost of housing in relation to their low income means that most of the urban dwellers cannot afford legally to own their houses. In urban Malaysia, the cheapest house is around M\$40,000. In most areas, the housing developers are reluctant to build low-cost houses. They would rather construct double-story terrace houses and maximize their profits. Loans from

the banks are also difficult to secure as the banks need collateral.

Lorong Sembilang, however, is somewhat different from the squatter settlements found in larger towns such as Johor Baru or Kuala Lumpur. There, the squatter settlements are overcrowded and housing space is difficult to find (Kassim, 1983; Suratman, 1979). As living spaces reach the saturation point in a locality, new settlements are established. The poor and the indigent are willy-nilly colonizing the cities and towns, for it is in these centers that the fruits of capitalistic development are most concentrated.

The growth of the squatter settlements in the larger town is, in the main, a result of a continuous rural-urban immigration, for the larger towns offer better opportunities (McGee, 1972). On the other hand, Lorong Sembilang's growth is still slow and is still taking place. As yet, the locality has no serious problem of housing space. Unlike the squatter settlement in Kuala Lumpur and other towns, Lorong Sembilang has managed to avoid being labeled as a squatter area (*rumah setinggan*) and having its houses referred to as illegal houses (*rumah haram*).⁴ The absence of labeling indicates that the authorities in Muar do not as yet view squatting as a threat. More than that, the people of Lorong Sembilang had the protection of UMNO (United Malay National Organization), the main component of the National Coalition Government.⁵ In this sense, the settlement exists as part of a system of state-party patronage. UMNO, and hence the government, need the residents politically to offset the numbers of Chinese who support the opposition party. The state parliamentary seat of Muar is held by the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), so the Malay vote is crucial. As the Chinese vote is split between the MCA and the opposition DAP (Democratic Action Party), the Malay vote tips the balance to the MCA, the ally of UMNO.

Most of the homes in Lorong Sembilang are built by the owners themselves. While in the field, I was able to observe the construction of two houses. The first house was built with the help of some relatives. The owner of the house, after buying all the necessary materials, sought the help of his father and four brothers. They took two months to complete the house. The work done is not refined or *halus*. From a distance, it can be seen that the house tilts slightly, but, as the owner said, it is his own. He rewarded his brothers with cigarettes and money, totalling only one-tenth of the market value of their labor. The other house was constructed using the

neighbors' labor. The owner requested the help of a few neighbors two or three days prior to the raising of the house's structure and, because the dwelling was a small one, it did not take long before the structure was raised and the floor and roof laid. The nailing of the wall was completed later in the day. The owner, in appreciation of the help of his neighbors, served them rice and chicken curry. During the work, he also served them coffee, biscuits, and cigarettes.

The cost of materials for building a house is high, so a few persons constructed parts of their houses with pilfered materials, especially the timber and planks from the nearby construction sites. I was informed that one man in particular had constructed his house, barring the nails, from materials that he had pilfered and accumulated over a period of time. From time to time, those who have the means will renovate or extend their houses. One in particular built a porch with cement bought cheaply from a man who stole it from his workplace. There are others who have built extensions to their houses using discarded materials or materials they have brought home from their workplace.

The Women of Lorong Sembilang and Work

The women of the locality make significant social and economic contributions to the household economy. Most of the women's work is household labor and therefore not statistically recorded. It remains hidden and unappreciated by most economic and anthropological research, and yet women make positive contributions to the household and the community in creating use values. Furthermore, when they toil as wage earners, petty commodity producers, or self-employed businesswomen, their earnings are decisive to the family income and enable the family to enjoy a lifestyle better than that enjoyed by ordinary working-class families.

However, before I discuss this further, it is pertinent to discuss first the status of women in the Malay society. The Malay residential and economic unit is the household (Djamour, 1965: 53; Swift, 1963: 277). It is defined by Djamour "as a group of people who live in the same house and engage in a large number of common activities as well as sharing a common budget" (1965: 53). More frequently, the household consists of a married couple living together with their unmarried children. Heads of the household, the majority of whom are men, are usually the chief money earners (Djamour, 1965: 53; Swift, 1965: 37 and ch. 5; Manderson, 1983: 5). Marriage is what gives sanctity to the Malay household and it is emphasized in the performing of the

family's objective requirements. A wife's primary task is to carry out domestic duties, cook, run the household, and care for the children. The husband is considered the primary provider of the family (Swift, 1963: 277; Roose, 1963: 290). Thus, there is a clear distinction between men and women in the division of labor.

However, the division of labor is not rigid and, when necessary, husbands will undertake work normally carried out by wives (Swift, 1963: 278). For example, a Malay man seldom washes clothes, but he will do so if his wife falls sick and he cannot find any female relatives to help him. The dominant position of the husband in a Malay household prompted Swift to write the following: "There is no question that in the Malay's image of their society the husband is regarded as the dominant partner in a marriage. Not only do they maintain that this should be so, but also seem to believe that it is so" (1963: 278).

This image of the husband as the dominant figure is, in reality, only partly true, for a woman also has authority over matters pertaining to the family. She does not hesitate to express her opinion particularly if the issue discussed concerns her as, for example, in the building of a new house or the choosing of a son- or a daughter-in-law (Swift, 1963: 279). Swift also notes that he has seen instances of women exerting their influence in economic matters (1963: 279). Thus, he concludes that, although the Malay husband is regarded as the dominant partner, it must be realized that the Malay family, and the relations between husband and wife, are much more egalitarian than they appear at first sight and than the people say they are (1963: 279). In short, there is a disjunction between ideology and the realities of day-to-day life and its attendant decision making.

It is also generally agreed that the household, as a basic unit of production and consumption, comes under the authority of the women. The women manage domestic finances as well as budget the various needs of the household and its members (Firth, 1966: 27; Manderson, 1975: 95). They usually receive the necessary cash earned by their husbands and assume responsibility for spending and saving (Manderson, 1983: 6). Research on the rural economy also demonstrates that women contribute significantly to the household economy (Firth, 1966: 30; Barnard, 1983; Ng, 1984). Apart from being involved in housework such as cooking, sweeping, and washing, women's labor is crucial in the production of rice as well as in the fishing industry.

It can be clearly seen that women are engaged in every aspect of the economic production of the household, whether in the production of use values or in commodity production. Unlike their rural counterparts, people in the urban centers have to earn their living away from the family estate. Living in a monetized economy, they obviously depend on money to live. One important feature of the urban economy is that in the towns foods such as rice, tapioca, edible ferns, bananas, bamboo shoots, and coconuts which, in the countryside, are grown or gathered, have to be bought. For the most part, urban women's work is also limited to wage employment as factory workers or domestic help. Only a few have been privileged enough to set up their own small businesses.

The majority of women in Lorong Sembilang (68%, N=42) do not work at any form of outside work. Only ten of the active adult females in the locality are wage earners. Of these, four are in full-time employment as factory workers while the other six work part-time as washerwomen. Among the women wage earners, there is a correlation between age and the type of work a person does. The factory workers are young, unmarried girls in their late teens or early twenties, while the washerwomen are married with children and are above forty years old. All the teenage females who work in the factory left school at sixteen when they failed their Lower Certificate Of Education exam (at form three). These girls did so badly that they themselves decided to seek wage work rather than resit the examination. This paper will not focus and discuss the work of the wage earners, especially the factory workers, as the issue has been discussed in great length and detail by a number of social scientists doing research in Malaysia (see Ariffin, 1980; Ong, 1983; O'Brien 1981; Lim, 1983; Lin, 1985; Yun, 1984; Karim, 1985). Instead, this paper will focus on the work of the self-employed women in the locality.

The Self-Employed Women of Lorong Sembilang

Only seven of the women in the locality are self-employed. Six of them run petty businesses, four of whom sell mainly clothing materials bought in Singapore, while the other two sell items such as *batik* cloth, *songket* (cloth made of gold thread) and brassware from Terengganu. One other woman is a seamstress. To understand the nature and mode of operation of these women, we need to look at a few case studies. One of the women involved in buying clothes from Singapore is Gayah who, apart from being a self-employed business-

woman, is also a mother and a housewife. Although Singapore is 160 km away, it holds a great attraction for the people of Muar because of its duty-free goods. There are many others like Gayah and they go on an organized bus trip to Singapore at least once a month. The chartered bus trips cost M\$17 each time. So far, all travel has been on Fridays as this is the most suitable time for Gayah. The school is closed and her daughters are therefore able to cook for the family and do the rest of the domestic chores.

In Singapore, the bulk of Gayah's shopping consists of dress materials for women, which she resells. Occasionally, she buys domestic electrical appliances such as blenders and toasters or other household items such as plastic flowers, Pyrex plates, dried longan (fruit), aluminum tea pots, and bath towels. She buys these items only when she has special orders from her clients. The electric blender is in great demand among her clients because it makes the task of grinding spices easier. Gayah can buy only one such item on each trip because the blender is a taxable item, and it is cumbersome and bulky, she smuggles it through the custom checkpoint at Johor Baru.

Gayah has evolved her own method of escaping duties on the goods that she buys in Singapore. She and the rest of the passengers leave the bus just before it reaches the checkpoint enclave. The bus is then driven to the other end onto Malaysian territory and waits for the passengers there. The passengers sort out their own belongings and declare them to the officers. Generally, Gayah avoids the check by walking across the checkpoint laden with the shopping bags containing part of her haul while the custom officers are busy with the other passengers. Even if the custom officers detect her, they can only yell at her as they cannot leave their posts. As there are so many people around, Gayah soon loses herself among the crowd.

When the security is tighter and there are more custom officers on duty, Gayah employs other methods to protect her goods. She stuffs the clothing material into her handbag or into the teapots that she has bought. At times she places the material right at the bottom of her shopping bags, leaving one or two pieces of material on the top to escape prying. She also makes sure that the cloth pieces are distributed among all her shopping bags and are not stacked in just one bag. She hopes to make it tiresome for the customs officer to place his hands right into each of the bags and check all the contents. The materials placed on the top are meant to make the officers believe that she has just "bought a few but they

are for my own use." Gayah always removes the packaging bearing brand names prior to the customs check up. By removing the boxes and wrappings, she visibly reduces the bulk of the goods, as well as their actual volume and weight, thereby making it innocuous.

Gayah's mother, Limah, is active in the small business domain too, but she is not a regular visitor to Singapore. She goes shopping only when she visits her two daughters and their families who live in Johor Baru, for a few days once every two to three months. On these occasions, she goes to the Woodland shopping center, the nearest shopping center after the causeway in Singapore, at least twice to do her shopping. She then leaves the bulk of her clothing materials at a relative's house, who lives close to the shopping center, carrying only a few items across herself. Again, because of the small quantity she is not taxed at all. When Limah gets back to her daughter's house in Johor Baru, she asks her granddaughter (daughter's daughter), who works in one of the electronic factories in Singapore, to take the materials across the causeway, one or two pieces a day as she returns from work. Given that the material that her granddaughter brings across is small in quantity, she also is not taxed. Thus, bit by bit, all Limah's materials are taken through the checkpoint and it will be time for her to return to Muar.

Mode of Business

The customers of these small businesswomen are located not only in the district of Muar, but also in the district of Batu Pahat. Gayah's customers, for example, are also located in Melaka and even as far away as Kuala Lumpur. In Muar itself, Gayah developed a network of customers who themselves expand the network further by word of mouth. Pahl refers to these sets of relationships as "gossip networks" (Pahl, 1981: 149). Thus, when Gayah delivers an order to a customer, other women in the neighborhood who happen to be around may also have a look. If they are interested, they too can place an order with Gayah. In turn, they might introduce their friends or relatives to Gayah as well.

In Batu Pahat, and in Kuala Lumpur, Gayah's younger sister and youngest brother assist her in the sale of the clothing material. In Melaka, she has a distant female relative to act as her agent. Gayah's younger brother also sells materials belonging to the mother, Limah. But the brother finds it easier to sell Gayah's material rather than his mother's because his mother's taste in designs is old (*tua*). What Limah considers to be beautiful is

seen as old-fashioned by customers in Kuala Lumpur, many of whom are fashion- and status-conscious women at the son's workplace. These customers prefer Gayah's materials because they are not only modish but also are not available in Kuala Lumpur. Gayah pays her brother and sister, plus her distant relative in Melaka, either in cash or kind, for acting as her sales agents. While the relative in Melaka is paid at a fixed rate of 10% for her efforts, Gayah pays her brother a token sum. The sister prefers her payment to be in kind; sometimes she receives materials in payment, but once she asked Gayah to find her a blender or an electric rice cooker. Instead Gayah soon bought her sister a rice cooker because she felt that the labor expended has reached the monetary value of the rice cooker.

Gayah's relationship with her brother and sister is not solely based on money. In fact, the relationship is founded on the notion of reciprocity and need. Knowing that her sister is relatively poor (her husband is employed as a carpenter and is only seasonally employed), Gayah often buys her sister's children clothes or fruit on her Singapore trips. The sister too gives Gayah some of the produce from her garden every time Gayah visits her. While in Kuala Lumpur, Gayah sleeps at her brother's house. Gayah depends on her siblings' continuation of her business for, apart from selling, they also collect the money owed by the customers and Gayah needs the cash flow.

Gayah and the rest of the businesswomen sell their products on credit. The people in and around Muar repay a standard installment of M\$5 a month, so it takes a person six months to pay a debt of M\$30. Gayah keeps all the details of the debts in a little black book which she carries around when the repayments are collected. Gayah's "agents" also sell her products on the same terms. The only difference is that, because her customers in Kuala Lumpur, for example, have regular employment, they pay off their debts at M\$10 a month. She also encourages them to pay cash by telling her brother to charge up to M\$5 less than the credit price. Thus, if Gayah buys a piece of material for M\$22, she'll sell it for M\$40 on credit and M\$35 if the customer pays cash. Gayah charges more for credit payments because of the inconvenience of having to collect the debts, having to wait for cash and also because this method of payment entailed a few risks. Many of them have deferred payments or reneged on payments.

In her line of work, Gayah faces intense competition from other businesswomen, not only from within the locality but also from elsewhere. To maintain an

advantage over her rivals, Gayah sometimes goes to the extent of creating her own market, forming a demand for items that will give her a good return. Once Gayah found that there was a woman in Muar who was good at sewing floral embroidery with her sewing machine and whose prices were reasonable. So Gayah bought plain-colored materials from Singapore to make tablecloths or bed sheets and pillow cases and got the woman to embroider them. They cost Gayah M\$50 to produce and she sold them at around M\$70. I saw another example of Gayah's ingenuity when I first moved into my rented house. As decoration, I hung various kinds of bamboo hats on the wall. Gayah saw them, liked the idea, and promptly went and bought some hats. But she went one better. On one of her trips to Singapore, she bought a variety of silk cloth flowers and wove them through the hats. She set a new trend and soon she had orders for them from neighbors and visitors to her house.

Gayah also sells goods that she casually buys on her local business trips. She once bought some brooms made from the spines of the coconut leaves and sells them at a profit of 20 cents each. She also sells grated coconut from her house. She originally bought the electric coconut grater for her daughter's wedding, but because she can get coconut cheaply from one of her customers, she decided to sell grated coconut as well. She has a profit of 15 cents on each coconut. Thus, Gayah's business is not limited to selling high-priced products. She sells anything as long as the product has an exchange value. According to her, 20 cents would buy her a small packet of salt or a bunch of herbs, which she uses to flavor the fish dishes.

Most of the time, Gayah is also able to make some money by selling the products of her own household labor. A few of the Indonesians who move regularly in and out of Lorong Sembilang eat their meals at her house; consequently, they pay Gayah a small sum for the meals she cooks and also pay her for the afternoon teas and snacks. Gayah does not see this as an extra chore for she has to cook for the whole family anyway—she simply prepares an extra quantity of food.

Gayah is not the only one among her relatives who engages in this form of business. Her mother as well as her sister-in-law do not miss an opportunity either. They have their own Indonesian customers, charging them M\$3.50 for a packed meal (*nasi bungkus*), which consists of a generous portion of rice, fish curry, *sambal* (chilly condiment), vegetables, and plenty of gravy. On a good day, these women may make around M\$30 to

M\$50. This source of money is seasonal in nature. Nevertheless, when the Indonesians are around Gayah never fails to sell them some of her materials as well as items such as bath towels and embroidered pillow cases. Gayah sells *kretek* (Indonesian clove cigarettes) which she buys from the newly arrived Indonesians who desperately need Malaysian currency for their onward fares. The *kretek* are resold through her networks in Melaka and Kuala Lumpur. In Kuala Lumpur, for example, the *kretek* are sold through her brother-in-law (sister's husband). The brother-in-law takes whatever money Gayah gives to him as his *duit kopi* and *duit minyak* (coffee and petrol money). The reference to "the expenses for coffee and petrol" is a hint to Gayah that the money to be given should be an adequate reward. Yet this is not a source of strife because her brother-in-law is never placed in the position of having to demand compensation or reward as Gayah gives freely of her own accord. Here again, the elements of kinship and give-and-take interweave.

One of the women in the community works at home as a seamstress to earn extra income for the family. The work is seasonal, the bulk of her orders coming just before *Hari*

*Raya*⁶ and the beginning of the school year. She specializes in women's dresses and charges M\$10 for the *baju kurung* (loose blouse) and M\$12 for *baju kebaya* (tight fitting sarung and blouse). She does all her sewing inbetween her household tasks, so it takes her between two and three days to sew a Malay dress. The *baju kurung* takes slightly longer as the collar of the dress has to be embroidered with herring-bone stitching. In these intricate relationships among customers, relatives, and the trader, gift exchanges, kinship, and commerce are combined with feminine identity to create and sustain the small business structure.

Self-Employment and the Appropriation of Nature

The women in Lorong Sembilang also depend on the swamp, not only for their own food but also for extra income. The mangrove swamp is a source of various types of shellfish and edible snails. The shellfish collected are *lokan*, which are semi-circular in shape and can reach the size of the palm of a young child, and *sepetang*, which are tubular in shape and are around five to seven centimeters long. A good snail is about the size of a thumb. The work of collecting is laborious. If the shells gathered are for sale, then (because of the number to be picked) the work will take a lot longer than if the

women gather them for food. The mode of collection and the time required varies according to the type of shellfish.

The food items are gathered by women in groups. *Lokan* are collected during dry weather when they can be easily located and when walking on the dry mud is a lot easier. The *lokan* are found close to the surface, but only a trained eye can detect the slightly open shells which enable the creature to breathe in air. Sometimes all that is visible is a small crack about two or three centimeters long on the surface of the mud. In a good dry season, the women may gather the *lokan* in areas far away from Lorong Sembilang. When this happens, they place the bags, as they fill, at well-marked locations and walk home. Later, their husbands will bring these bags back to them on their motorcycles or bicycles. Thus there is much cooperation and interdependence between the men and the women.

Sepetang (the other kind of shellfish) are collected when the swamp is still wet. The *sepetang* have to be dug out from the ground with a sharp stick or a *parang* (machete). Not only is the task more laborious than the collecting of *lokan*, but the *sepetang* are also more difficult to find. The gathering of *sepetang* is not popular with the women even though they fetch a better price in the market. Snails or *siput* are easier to collect, but they are best gathered during high tide. At low tide, the snails scatter over the ground to forage and are thus difficult to detect, whereas at high tide they climb the trunks of the mangrove trees to escape the rising water. They can be gathered easily from the trees. A person can collect a bucketful within an hour or so.

The shells and snails the women gather are sold to both Malay and Chinese dealers in the market. The *lokan* fetch M\$2.80 per 100; the *sepetang*, because they are difficult to gather and popular with the Chinese, are worth M\$6.00 a kilogram. The snails are the cheapest at M\$0.80 a kilogram. For a few hours work, the women can earn between M\$5.00 to M\$10.00 a day. The women keep some of the *lokan* and *snails* for their own family, although the snails have to be kept in a covered basin for a few days for them to "spit out" the mud in their bodies. Otherwise the consumer is likely to suffer a bad stomach ache.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the Malay culture expects the husband to be the breadwinner of the family but the situation in reality is different. In Muar, the earnings of husbands in

many families are barely enough to meet the families' basic needs. The husbands take on supplementary work to earn enough money not only to provide more and better food for the family but, in a few cases, to buy luxuries such as television sets, armchairs, and hi-fi sets. The women work as wives, mothers, and housekeepers but also take up tasks that will bring in cash to increase the family income. There are women in the community, usually with small children, who cannot participate in any form of money-earning activity. Such women are invariably poor. I would also like to note here that four of the women in the community have little choice but to work. Three of them are widows while the other's husband is crippled. All four women work for themselves (and in one case for the husband as well), but as their children are already grown up, their needs are limited. Two of the women work as small business-women while the others are washerwomen.

The rest of the women in the locality who work do it for various reasons. Some work so as to be able to afford clothes for themselves and the children. The money they earn is also used to buy jewelry which the husband cannot afford. One woman wants to save her earnings so that she can make her pilgrimage to Mecca. But all the women, whether working or not and for whatever reason, avoid being overly dependent on their husbands. As one of them said, she does not have to put up with her husband's growls or questions every time she asks him for money.

Gayah works so that she can afford to buy goods which, apart from being useful, also bring her prestige. With the money earned so far, she has managed to install a new asbestos ceiling in the house, replacing the plastic sheetings made from sugar bags sewn together, install a ceiling fan, buy a gas stove complete with oven, paint the house, buy a coconut grater, and install a sink in the kitchen. Gayah is able to lead a life style characteristic of white-collar workers. She is the first person in the community to own a color television set and a hi-fi set. With her earnings, Gayah has also bought her four daughters gold bangles, necklaces, and earrings. She has a savings of about M\$1,000 in the bank too. Gayah's contribution to the family income is much appreciated by her husband, who believes that he is a very lucky person to have Gayah as his wife. Apart from being a good wife, mother, and good to kin, Gayah's efforts enable the family to enjoy a good life style.

Thus, urban women, because of greater opportunities not only in self-employment but also in selling their labor,

even if only as domestic help, have a degree of independence. They can afford to buy personal items such as jewelry and household goods such as rice cookers and blenders.

Notes

¹ I use the term locality and not community because Lorong Sembilang not only does not have a proper territory, it also does not have a headman, a prayer house, or a community center which are normally associated with a community. The initial field research in the locality was undertaken over two extended periods. The first was between June and December, 1983 and the second between February and September, 1984. Thereafter, regular visits were made to the locality because the landlord and his family, whose house I rented during my stay there, had adopted me. Each visit normally lasts for three to seven days and during each visit I inquired about and made observations of the progress of the locality and its people. The last visit was in 1990 during the Malaysian election. A colleague from the University of Malaya stood as the ruling party's candidate and I went to Muar to help campaign for him. Lorong Sembilang is part of his constituency.

² I use the term squatter to mean: "illegal or unlawful occupation of land, whether alienated or unalienated by individuals or groups of individuals" (Kassim, 1983:60).

³ I stayed in this house during my stay in the locality.

⁴ Rumah haram literally means illegal house. It is also known as rumah kilat or lightning house, referring to the speed with which these houses are built. Normally, it is built overnight. Now it is commonly known as rumah setinggan or squatter house.

⁵ Malaysia is governed by the Barisan Nasional or National Coalition party consisting of the various ethnic-based parties, such as the United Malay Organization Party (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), etc. UMNO is the main component party and the constitution states that the Prime Minister must come from this party.

⁶ Hari Raya is celebrated by the Malays, who are Muslims, immediately after the fasting month of Ramadan.

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