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Indonesian women in the household and beyond: reconstructing the boundaries

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Martini Jufri & C.W. Watson

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Dra Martini Jufri and Dr. C.W. Watson

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We shall be arguing in this paper that a close attention to the process of actual decision-making allows us to dispel several of the misconceptions which plague the understanding of the position of women in Minangkabau and Kerinci society. These misconceptions are found in both popular and academic discourse and are commonly to be found among non-Minangkabau Indonesian observers, among Minangkabau people themselves and among anthropologists and social scientists. Non-Minangkabau Indonesians, having frequently heard of the high status of women in Minangkabau and sometimes knowing something about women's rights to property, can often be heard to claim that in West Sumatra women are the heads of households and exercise authority in domestic situations. The authority for their opinions is often dubious, deriving from distorted accounts heard from friends and from a general mythology relating to the traditions of ethnic groups which circulate as a common folk-lore in Indonesia. Although non-Minangkabau may be vague on the details of the articulation of matrilineal principles, they frequently maintain that what distinguishes Minangkabau women from those elsewhere in the archipelago is the power and authority the former exercise in private and public domains. In a word Minangkabau women are simply more powerful then Javanese or Sundanese women. This we believe is not the case, and is one of the fundamental misconceptions to which we referred.

Among the Minangkabau themselves their own practical day-to-day arrangements constitute the norms according to which they live, but in expressing their opinions they are heavily influenced by external sources of ideology, national and religious. They do not see themselves as especially powerful. The everyday articulation of matrilineal principles does not seem to them to distinguish their positions or their institutions from those of women elsewhere. Indeed they would lay the stress on similarity with, rather than divergence from, a general Indonesian pattern. Asked to state who are the heads of households, most would have no hesitation in referring to male figures, their husbands or fathers. Minangkabau men themselves would also assert that within domestic structures it is they who exercise authority, if anything more strongly than their Javanese or Sundanese counterparts whom they sometimes seem to regard as being too tied to the house and therefore too much subject to their wives' wishes.

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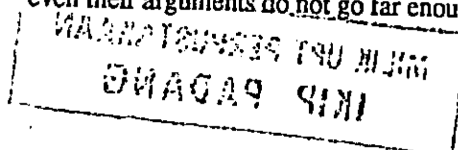
This view of things we also regard as misconceived.

As for anthropologists, haunted by the theoretical literature relating to societies where matrilineal principles of organisation predominate, they regard Minangkabau society as simply one further illustration of the paradox of the matrilineal puzzle: that in societies where women have noticeable rights over property and where matrilineal descent determines lineage membership, it is is nonetheless men who exercise control over political and domestic arrangements. Or, seeking to demonstrate that Minangkabau society is a counter-example they argue that, contrary to what the theory might dictate, women in fact do possess authority. This attempt to dichotomise, either for or against the power of women, is also misguided.[1]

At first glance it might appear that at least one or other of these positions must be the case: either Minangkabau women do or do not possess power and authority, and the correct opinion will simply be substantiated through good empirical observation. But of course to see the issue in such simple terms is equally to misunderstand the real nature of social organisation. The error common to all three positions is to consider the question of authority as an either/or matter - either the men or the women hold authority - when in fact authority is not distributed in this exclusive fashion. Furthermore, related to this error and, indeed, perhaps lying at the root cause of it is a failure to consider what is meant by authority and a failure to investigate thoroughly how within the Minangkabau context it is to be related to concepts of influence, power, control and decision-making. Even early anthropological forays into this issue which sought first to distinguish between public and private domains, and then at a later stage in feminist anthropology to reintegrate the two, have not - at least in the Minangkabau case - made much progress in resolving the issues.

It is important, too, to recognise that this is not simply a question of English terminology [cf. the discussion in Tanner and Thomas (1985: 47)] and to recall that the problems exist for Indonesians, Minangkabau and non-Minangkabau alike. If anything the polarity and exclusiveness are even starker in Indonesian. The two words *berwewenang* and *berkuasa* suggest, respectively, legal authority and domination by force majeure or social status. Consequently, non-Minangkabau Indonesians brought up on what might be called the myth of Minangkabau matriarchy will quite happily state that in Minangkabau '*perempuan*

[1] This summary is a bit unfair to the discussions by Prindiville (1985) and Tanner and Thomas (1985), but even their arguments do not go far enough in our opinion.



yang berkuasa' - 'it is women who have the dominant voice' - something which few Minangkabau - men or women - would recognise as characterising their social organisation. Minangkabau women would also have difficulty with the term '*wewenang*'. Essentially an Indonesian term, it enters Minangkabau discourse with what might be called considerable cultural baggage, brought from Islamic ideology and the modern nation-state. The effect of this is to suggest that there is something orthodox, natural and appropriate for husbands to possess '*wewenang*' within the household. If asked, then, in questionnaires or indeed in an open interview who has '*wewenang*' - ultimate decision-making power in the household - women, whether or not in the presence of their husbands, will always answer that it is their husbands. To say otherwise would be almost blasphemous, and would certainly not be said to an outsider. A similar situation arises with the Indonesian term, *kepala keluarga* 'head of the family'. State and Islamic orthodoxy insist this should be the husband, and hence informants will always confirm this to the questioner.[2] [This is despite the fact that in most cases wives own the house of residence and on divorce or separation the wife is in a position to expel the husband from the house.]

Given, then, these difficulties which arise from both the zero-sum nature of the way in which the question of authority is posed, and give the very real problems of adopting an interpretist approach to key terms such as '*wewenang*', '*kuasa*' and indeed '*keluarga*', what then is the strategy we should adopt when trying to evaluate the relationship between gender and power in Minangkabau society? Our answer to this is that we must look closely at what actually happens on the ground, at real events, rather than rely on one-off surveys or interview sessions.[3] In other words we are arguing that it is only the kind of long-term observation which is associated with anthropological method which can reveal the dynamics of social organisation.

We also feel that it is necessary to abandon the notion of division of authority, and talk

[2]On the question of the pervasiveness of national ideology and the construction of ideal womanhood see the brief remarks of Saraswati Sunindyo (1993: 135) who is relying on extensive documentation. In relation to Islamic ideology, Tatiana in a fascinating unpublished paper dealing with women's groups in Hiang, a district in Kerinci, describes (1971: 7) how in religious classes and sermons women are persuaded of the idea that '*Di akhirat penghuni neraka terbanyak adalah perempuan*' ('In hell there are more women than men') and '*Lelaki sahabat malaikat, perempuan sahabat iblis*' ('Men are the companions of angels, women are the companions of the devil').

[3]It is this over-reliance on questionnaire material which we feel mars Schwede's thorough study (1991). Schwede clearly knows a lot from her personal observations, but has chosen to rely largely on statistical analysis.

more about the sharing of responsibility and contributions to decision-making, since this more accurately reflects what takes place. At this stage of our knowledge of Minangkabau and Kerinci society what is required is much more case-study material which will enable us to look at issues such as employment, domestic expenditure, family size, education of children, mobility and independence outside the home, religious practice, social interaction, allocation of domestic tasks. We need to know how information is obtained, what use is made of it, how and when discussion takes place, how arguments are evaluated and the process by which ultimately a decision is made or postponed. Such material would allow us to understand the way in which decisions are reached in relation to these various issues and would help us to avoid making sharp dichotomies.

Once we engage in this method of enquiry, then we will discover that within the Minangkabau and Kerinci contexts, what occurs is a complex and multi-stranded decision-making procedure in which men and women participate not just as wives and husbands, but as sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, brothers and sisters, and that the operative factors which determine who makes the major contribution to a discussion and the eventual decision are not those of gender, but relate to contingent circumstances such as which individual has access to economic capital or which individual has access to special knowledge or has networking connections to influential third parties. And in this respect procedures seem little different from those which obtain in Java. This, however, is to preempt our discussion, and to substantiate our conclusions we need first to describe briefly our own experience of Minangkabau and Kerinci and the research we have been conducting.

Background to Research in Kerinci and Minangkabau[4]

For the purposes of this paper the authors have relied largely on their first-hand experience over the years on the way in which decisions are reached in Kerinci and Minangkabau households.

[4]Having laid such a stress on observation over a long term and intimacy with the way in which actual decisions are made on a day to day basis, we should say something about our own credentials. One of us (Jufri) is in every sense a participant observer. She herself is from Kerinci, was born and brought up there and returns there with great frequency. For the last twenty years she has been teaching in the department of home economics in the IKIP (Teachers' Training College) in Padang during which time she has carried out a number of research projects in the West Sumatra region on subjects related to nutrition and diet and has supervised numerous student dissertations. Currently she is head of the Pusat Studi Wanita in the IKIP where in line with the general aims of these new academic institutions she is working with colleagues to draw to attention the importance of gender issues applied in social research.

Watson is a social anthropologist. His first visit to Kerinci was in 1972 and he has been visiting the area regularly ever since. His principal research in Kerinci has been on the family and kinship about which he has written several articles and a monograph.

Although being well aware of differences not only between sub-regions in the area, but more importantly among social groups - rural and urban, high income and low income, for example - we feel that on the basis of our experience of the range of these differences it is possible to generalise to a degree about patterns of decision-making. In addition, for the past fifteen months with the topic of our paper very much in mind we have been pursuing specifically focused research in Lubuk Dalam (pseudonym) in Kerinci (Watson) and in Teluk Batu (pseudonym) in Payakumbuh (Jufri). We jointly devised a strategy of discussion and interviews with families and with women's groups intended to elicit information about decision-making in the spheres of household expenditure, children's education and allocation of household tasks. We interviewed 10 households and spoke on several occasions with women's groups. In what follows we use some of the information we obtained to supplement our general observations. We begin, however, with an over-view on households in Kerinci and Minangkabau before going on to discuss decision-making and we then consider our recent research material.

Households in Kerinci and Minangkabau

Before describing the organisation of households we would like to stress one significant point which we feel has been somewhat neglected in discussions of the family in the region, namely the importance of viewing the family over the period of its developmental cycle. A young married couple residing uxorilocally behaves very differently and is subject to very different constraints from an elderly married couple with grandchildren. The difference in circumstances has of course major consequences for patterns of interaction and for decision-making, and this should be constantly recalled when describing and accounting for domestic arrangements within the household. We draw attention to some of these issues in our description, but the reader should always have them in mind when considering our account.

Our second point derives from the first and relates to the implications of a focus on households. Because social science in the West takes its terms and its implicit assumptions from Western social and cultural life, the discussion of the household, even when it looks at stem families over generations, has tended to focus on a limited number of roles, husband and wife obviously, then mother and father. In the Minangkabau and Kerinci context, however, and

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indeed we suspect for the whole of Indonesia, there are multiple roles which individuals play: husband and father, but also son and brother, nephew and and uncle; wife and mother, but also daughter and sister, niece and aunt. These roles once acquired persist long into a life-cycle and, perhaps unlike the case in Western industrial nations - but this too requires investigation - they continue to exert considerable influence both in the households in which individuals reside and in those to which they contribute in a secondary but sometimes quite substantial manner. (The obvious paradigm for this in both Minangkabau and Kerinci is the role that the *mamak* (FB) plays in his own household among his wife and children and in the households of his married sisters: this can be a source of concern both for the *mamak's* household - who may feel that he is neglecting them - and for the sisters' households because of resentment of interference.) Again in our description we have tried to indicate how this variety of potential actors on the stage of the household affects the way in which domestic decisions are taken.

In giving a general account of households in Minangkabau and Kerinci we begin with a generalisation which is so patently true that not only would no serious observer challenge it but one would hardly think it worth making: women spend more time in the house than men and socialise (meet and talk with one another) in house space far more than men. This holds true from childhood through to old age. It is not just that men work out of the house. Even as boys they play outdoors rather than inside, while their sisters either play or work indoors. Young men meet each other outside the house, at the small coffee stalls and snack shops, or in a backroom somewhere, gambling or simply strolling around the village or town together. Young women although not subject to strict *purdah* are expected to spend their leisure hours indoors, if not in their own houses in those of relatives or friends. Newly married husbands whether living uxorilocally or neo-locally will find it embarrassing to spend too much time at home with their wives - what we may label spouse-avoidance - and they will seek the company of their peers. Young wives on the other hand will receive numerous female visitors and in turn will visit. This dependency of women on each other for advice and support continues right on through middle and old age, and again is to be found among all social groups and in all residential environments, rural and urban. One of the most obvious expressions of this mutual cooperation in the urban middle-class context is the *arisan* (a form of rotating credit

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association) and among the poorer rural classes it finds expression in labour groups (*bo* or *andil* in Kerinci). Men do in certain circumstances band together; usually, however, this is in the sports arena, or in pig-hunting or cock-fighting, outdoor occasions, never in each other's houses.[5]

The immediate consequence of this congregating of women together in each other's houses - again we should note that this coming together occurs on occasions where women may be playing one or more of a number of roles as daughter, mother, sister, sister-in-law, aunt, neighbour, school friend - is that the house is woman-focused. Note that this is not quite the same as matrifocal [cf. Tanner (1974) on the term matrifocality]: the latter term would put the emphasis on the single role of mother, whereas what we wish to stress is that the house is associated in the imagination of the community with women in general. It is women who give the house its character not simply in terms of its appearance but, and this is much more important, in terms of its general ambience and reputation, for example as a place for a convivial gathering, some good cooking, generous hospitality, good humour, or, conversely, gloomy, inhospitable and unfriendly. Thus it is women who set the tone of the house. Even in cases where men do contribute a presence which runs counter to the spirit of the women - when for example there is a surly brother or husband on the scene - these men are isolated and confined to areas in the house where their bad-temperedness can be contained.

The house, then, is recognised as women's space. What consequences, though, does this have for the household and for decisions which relate to it? Simply put, the answer is this: since the house is strongly associated with women, and the house is the principal arena for discussion and consultation, at least in relation to informal, intimate exchange of ideas and information, women are able to exert a very strong influence on decision-making in all spheres. Men do visit each other and indeed they often need to discuss things together, but they are always obliged to do this in a somewhat formal and rigidly institutionalised manner. One obvious demonstration of this lies in the division of space within Minangkabau and Kerinci households: the front part of the house is for male visitors; it is the quasi-public space of the home. The back space, the kitchen area, is for the women, and occasionally for men who are

[5] On the associations of Minangkabau men see Errington (1984), especially Chapter 7.

close relatives or daily visitors to the house. Men's speech as heard in the front of the home, precisely because it is out in the open, accessible to all, is always guarded and circumspect. It is true that men too sometimes meet and discuss things in the house, but when they do so it is under the watchful eye of the womenfolk in conditions where the men are certainly not at their ease. We need to say a little more, however, about these men's discussions in order to put things into context, before we go on to describe everyday decision-making and the relative contributions of husband and wife in those situations where it is only those two who are sharing ideas and making decisions.

Both in Kerinci and in Minangkabau men are the formal spokesmen for their mothers and their sisters: it is men who represent the latter in issues at a family level, for example disputes with neighbours over fences and boundaries, marriage negotiations or marital disputes. Their role as mediators and representatives is referred to as *tengenai* (Kerinci) and *tungganai* (Minangkabau). Thus one hears frequent reference by women to so-and-so being our *tengenai*, or the question may be asked '*sapo tengenai umoh 'tu?*', 'who is the *tengenai* of that family (house)?' meaning who is the senior male representative. This institution of the *tengenai* is an exceedingly important one in the dynamics of everyday life in Minangkabau and Kerinci, and to our mind has not been given sufficient attention in the literature.[6]

Anthropologists and others in trying to understand the role of men in Minangkabau have been over-concerned by the role of the MB, the *mamak* and his relationship with the Z, ZH and ZS. In particular research has been almost exclusively concerned with the extent of authority which is exercised over the ZS and the potential clash of interests between affection for Z children and own children. This rather exclusive focus on the *mamak* - a kin term - has been to the detriment of the analysis of the institution of *tengenai* - a political term.[7] In fact the *mamak* is often of course the senior *tengenai*, but in this analysis this role he plays as mediator is often neglected. The reason for this may be that the anthropologist with only

[6]Kato (1982: 211), we feel, does not give the contemporary role of the *tungganai* sufficient weight in his analysis of the household because he is over-anxious to stress the division between authority within the descent group and authority within the domestic group, but his discussion seems to us to confuse the roles of *penghulu* and *tungganai*.

[7]Tanner (1971: 113) rightly understands this distinction, but in fact she too has surprisingly little to say about the role of the *tungganai* in domestic disputes. Von Benda-Beckmann (1979: 435) describes the *tungganai* as 'head of the group living in a *rumah gadang*, *kaum* head' but also seems to miss the *tungganai's* role as mediator and arbitrator in domestic circumstances.

limited residential experience is unlikely to be given the opportunity to observe the crucial significance of the role.

Another paper, or indeed a book, needs to be written about *tengenai* and the function he performs in dispute settlement and negotiation; here, however, we wish simply to outline very briefly some typical situations in which the *tengenai* is called upon. A mother having been approached by her son and daughter or a third party about a potential spouse for her child will make further enquiries herself about the seriousness of the proposal: she is likely to ask her close female confidantes - her sisters, but also her friends - what they think. There will also more than likely be some discussion with her husband, although this will usually occur after initial enquiries are underfoot. When she has decided to proceed further she will discuss things with her *tengenai* who may be her brother(s) or her MB or some more distant male relative depending on the circumstances - in Kerinci it can even in certain circumstances be a non-uterine relative within the close kindred. At this point the *tengenai* then approaches the *tengenai* of the potential spouse and formal meetings take place between the two sides, each being represented by one or more *tengenai*. The *tengenai* are fully briefed by the women of their families with whom they have discussed the issues of, for example, future prospects, residence, financial security, potential obstacles, agreement of family members. These meetings - and there may be several of them before a decision is reached - take place in the houses of the mothers of the potential couple, and are semi-secret, since if the negotiations break down, it is important not to lose face. Once a final decision is reached it is quickly communicated to the women who then take over the matter and make the arrangements for the wedding among themselves. Each side quickly organises a 'wedding committee', of men and women, who are given the responsibility of seeing to various tasks: obtaining contributions for the expenses, issuing the invitations, arranging the borrowing of wedding costumes, deciding who will be the speech-makers, etc.

A similar procedure of discussion and negotiation occurs in instances of marital disputes. A husband unhappy about the way in which his wife handles the money he gives her, or a wife suspecting her husband of infidelity will in the first instance usually approach their closest women kinsfolk who will try to effect a reconciliation and then, if they fail, bring in the

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tengenai for discussions at a more formal level, having fully briefed them on the issues and listened to their opinions.

This description of the *tengenai's* functions illustrates what we take to be the salient features of the institution and its significance within household decision-making. In the first place we note that it is, as we might have expected, given our description of the centrality of women's cooperation and mutual support within the home, the women who initiate discussions, do the investigation and supply the relevant information. The men act as their mouthpiece in the formal discussions which ensue, and the formal role they play is crucial to the proceedings which bring matters to a conclusion. It is important, however, to avoid over-stressing the contribution of women and minimising that of the men. The latter do in fact make substantial contributions to an evaluation of the circumstances in their discussions with the womenfolk, and to that extent to see them simply as mouthpieces is perhaps unduly marginalising their role.

A useful way to conceptualise the nature of the *tengenai's* contribution, and one which we think represents the view held within Kerinci and Minangkabau society by both men and women alike, is to see men's very remoteness from the centre of issues as allowing them to take a more detached neutral stance. Because they are not so passionately and directly involved with things of the house, they are in a position to bring a different perspective to bear on the issues, and this different, more detached perspective is enhanced by the institutionalised nature of their negotiations where certain procedural rules govern the way in which matters can be discussed and things said. All this is very finely understood and appreciated by men and women in the society, and there is a great sensitivity to the different levels of discourse.

The above analysis, however, does not seem to take into consideration the possibility of disputes between brothers and sisters. What happens, for example, when there is a dispute between a woman and her *tengenai*, that is her brother(s) or her *mamak* (MB) or do such disputes never occur? In fact they occur quite frequently, especially in relation to property. In principle, however, the negotiation proceedings are the same. Informal discussions with the close uterine relatives will occur with both parties trying to win support, but if the issue cannot be resolved, then more formal negotiations take place with the chosen *tengenai* - more distant male relatives - acting as arbitrators.

Before leaving the discussion of the *tengenai* and considering the general issue of decision-making within the household, one last point needs to be made. In addition to acting as the official representative when negotiations need to be undertaken close male relatives who are the *tengenai* of a house may, depending on their general personal relationships with their sisters and sisters' children, frequently pay social visits to the houses of their kinswomen. On the occasion of such visits they may frequently be asked for advice about a range of domestic issues from whether it is worth planting a crop of clove trees through to whether higher secondary education is advisable for a certain child. In this way male relations often participate in general pre-decision discussions, especially in relation to matters relating to the outside world - formal education, dealings with local government offices - with which women are not as a rule in Minangkabau and Kerinci society so familiar.

Having considered, then, the role men play as outsiders, and having argued that it is by and large women who dominate the home and are consequently able to exert a lot of influence through virtue of their control of information, let us now look more closely at the range of everyday affairs which are decided upon by husbands and wives themselves acting as couples, albeit often after responding to the advice of third parties.

In general terms we would argue that decisions are taken jointly by husband and wife, except in cases where one of the partners is obviously the more astute and capable of the two. We have known cases, for example, where because a wife was slightly feeble-minded, her husband took it upon himself to make all decisions except the minor ones. Conversely, we have also known cases where the wife was the superior of the two - this is often the case, for example, where a wife is relatively highly-educated and works in a local government office as a *pegawai* or a *guru* whereas her husband is a school dropout - and made all the decisions about household expenditure, education of the children and farming decisions relating to land cultivation. These cases were, we feel, exceptions and the general pattern is one of discussion and arriving at a mutually satisfactory decision, the initiative lying as much with the men as with the women.

Housekeeping is almost always the province of the wife. The husband surrenders his wage-packet or a substantially large part of it to his wife who budgets according to household

needs. On occasion, what these needs are may be discussed, but usually the wife proceeds to act independently buying food and clothing as necessary, or attending to the children's special needs at school. When occasional but regular demands arise, then these are discussed jointly, for example the need to pay for a school outing for a child or the purchase of a large item of furniture. In initial years of marriage the subject of housekeeping and domestic expenditure may frequently be a matter of dispute, and a young housewife may have to rely on advice from other women, her own family or even her sisters-in-law, but if the marriage endures, husband and wife reach a *modus vivendi.*

Decision-making and the exercise of authority in the household is not, however, confined to financial matters, and there are other areas which we need to reflect on, for example those which relate to education and religion. Informal education and the disciplining of children are, again, jointly undertaken by father and mother. In general we find, however, that the role of disciplinarian is played by the father. This too is a consequence of the women being dominant in the house. Since children spend a lot of time in the house and come into more contact with mother rather than father, it follows that mothers have more to do with their children. At least this is the case until boys reach adolescence when they, too, like their fathers and uncles, begin to dissociate themselves from the house. Fathers may frequently be asked by mothers to have a word with a child for a particular misdemeanour, but mothers tend on the whole to avoid bringing fathers too frequently into situations like this for fear that the latter may over-react in anger to a situation. Mothers are especially indulgent to sons, and sons feel emotionally closer to their mothers rather than their fathers. Boys are equally distant from their MB who are sometimes regarded as playing a disciplinary role similar to the fathers - at least in the older literature. Boys will almost always use their mother as an intermediary to intercede with their father or to make a special request. They will rarely approach their father directly. Indeed, from adolescence onwards there is almost an avoidance relationship between them.

In matters of religious observance, too, responsibility for the children will largely lie with their mother. It is she who will encourage them to learn to pray, to begin fasting a few hours at a time, to learn how to recite the Koran. In families where the father is a local religious figure, who preaches or leads prayers in the mosque for example, then the mother will feel it

especially incumbent on her to encourage the children in good religious practice, and the father may assist her efforts with words of advice, but very rarely will he take the primary responsibility for instructing the children.

In matters of health and illness again primary responsibility lies with the wife and mother. Health and illness are common topics of conversation in both Minangkabau and Kerinci, and in our observation medical treatment consumes a relatively high percentage of the domestic income, with visits to local polyclinics frequently supplemented by visits to pharmacists and specialist doctors. Both husband and wife will have access to the medical knowledge and health information which circulates in the community, but it is certainly true that women are the more aware in relation to health matters concerning their children. This is especially the case after the targeting of women in Government health programmes over the last twenty years. Consequently, decisions about what medicines to use, whether to consult a doctor or a local healer, what reaction to take to specific symptoms will often be the mother's. Of course, this must be qualified. In matters of children's illnesses usually a host of people are consulted and opinions asked - sisters, sisters-in-law, mother, neighbours, etc. - before a decision is taken. And in addition there will be men who have specialist knowledge, as traditional healers, medical orderlies, polyclinic assistants, whose opinions will also be solicited. Furthermore, in matters of illness we would stress that the nature of the individual personalities of the husband and wife, as well as their general competence in dealing with critical issues, will also be important determining factors, but, *certeris paribus*, it is usually the mother who takes the initiative.

This brief description, then, of everyday situations and how they are handled within the household has, we hope, given sufficient indication of the general procedures by which decisions are made. From the description, we would like to summarise what we regard as the principal characteristics of domestic organisation in Minangkabau and Kerinci: 1) that both husbands and wives make important contributions in relation to significant household issues, and decisions are taken jointly; 2) that the voice which carries greater weight within the household is not gender-determined but determined through an acknowledgement of which of the two has superior competence (or connections); 3) that in a large number of instances

numerous outsiders and extended family members are consulted for their opinion and advice which will have a major influence on the ultimate decision; 4) that dependence on others and what may be termed spouse-avoidance decreases with the length of the marriage union as a consequence of increasing familiarity; 5) that women because of their association with the house and because of the social structure and the specific culture of gender (i.e. the bonding of women and the isolation of men) have greater access to the knowledge and information required for taking initiatives with regard to household matters.

We are aware, however, that the pattern we have described will appear to the reader to be over-general, and there may be some doubt about the reliability of such a crude account. To try to allay that scepticism, what we have done in the second part of this paper is to look at three specific areas of decision-making, household expenditure, decisions on children's education and allocation of tasks in the household based on observations derived from our recent research in Lubuk Dalam and Teluk Batu.

Household Expenditure

Under this heading what we wanted to establish is the degree to which women and women alone were responsible for household budgeting, the extent to which men participated in decision-making, and whether disagreements ever arose in relation to expenditure.

Of all those couples whom we interviewed in Lubuk Dalam and Teluk Batu, household budgeting was the responsibility of the wife. Not only did she have freedom to dispose of her own income which in some cases might be considerable, but she was also given a regular sum by her husband which was specifically understood to be for family maintenance, i.e. for food and clothing and for children's educational expenses. It was the wife who decided on how the domestic income would be allocated, although when it came to major items there was often consultation with the husbands. In Kerinci it was said that husbands took the ultimate decisions about the major items, but in Payakumbuh it was the women's opinion that was most influential: indeed there was sometimes a suggestion that men were only consulted for form's sake.

Women, then, are universally considered in the region the appropriate people to be the

household managers. And when this expectation is not fulfilled, it may be a good reason for divorce. We heard several cases where a woman had been given a sum on which to manage and had for whatever reason failed to satisfy her husband. This gave rise to quarrels, the intervention of the *tengenai* and then eventually to divorce. This seems frequently to occur among newly married couples. In one case a man blamed his wife for not managing properly and she countered by arguing that he never gave her enough.

This example and others like it would seem to suggest that men are exercising control over their wives, controlling funds, demanding good management and threatening divorce if standards are not high. Such an interpretation would, however, be mistaken since the argument could equally be reversed: wives demand appropriate maintenance sums from their husbands; deliberately refuse to provide adequately if they do not get such sums; and have the authority to throw husbands out of the house if quarrels become intolerable.[8] We knew of one case, for example, in Lubuk Dalam, where the wife was a primary school teacher and the husband drove a cart. They were living in the wife's house. The husband had been asked to work some of his wife's rice-fields, a traditional arrangement. She provided him with daily expenses to pay for the agricultural labourers who were working the fields. This went on for some time, until near harvest-time the wife, having been alerted by a neighbour, became suspicious of her husband. On investigating she discovered that what had happened was that at the beginning of the planting season her husband had rented out the field (*sasih*) for a small sum which he had pocketed, that he had been consuming the daily expenses himself, and that there was consequently no harvest to be expected that year. She was understandably furious and was all set to divorce her husband and kick him out of the house. In the event, the *tengenai* on both sides managed to patch things up and the wife agreed to take back a suitably contrite husband.

Here was a case where the economic clout of the wife gave her a great deal of authority, even though in the first instance that authority had been subverted. In a similar case in Teluk Batu where again the wife was a primary school teacher, and the husband a casual labourer, it was very clear that the wife was in control of household finances. The husband contributed a certain sum of money per week (Rps 10,000.00), his contribution to the upkeep of the family,

[8]Cf. Tanner's comment (1971: 76) 'Conflict between husband and wife also generally revolves about the question of whether or not the husband is adequately fulfilling his duties to his wife ...'.

which it was important for him to give as much for his own sense of self-respect as for the general understanding that husbands should maintain wives and children.

We only came across one example of a husband making a financial decision independently, and this was a decision that related as much to worries about a child's welfare as expenditure. A father refused to let a daughter go on a two-day school outing because of a fear of the expense it might involve.

It was noticeable that in terms of discussing household expenditure families tended to speak without prompting of two kinds of expenses, those outside the house - mainly expenses relating to the husband's occupation, establishing a working capital, etc. - and those inside the house - food, clothing and education. There was a consensus that for internal household expenditure, and for whatever related to the wife's occupation, e.g. sundry trading, letting out boarding rooms, the wife could act autonomously; and, conversely, men controlled their own expenditure outside the house. On further discussion, however, it transpired that wives are heavily involved in their husband's professions - from street-trading to rice-farming - and that in several instances it was the wife's opinion which had determined a certain course of action.

Women's contributions to decision-making increase in direct proportion to the length of marriages. It was clear from our interviews and discussions that in terms of decisions in relation to everyday expenses women could act independently, and with respect to unexpected large expenditure, decisions were made jointly. In Kerinci, at least in Lubuk Dalam, where, given the village's proximity to the town, there is a high percentage of civil servants in local government office, husbands may intervene more when it is a matter of large purchases. We are not sure, however, whether the expressed deferences to husband's opinions which we heard genuinely reflected decision-making in households in Kerinci, and if they did whether this involvement of the men in turn reflected socio-cultural differences between Kerinci and Minangkabau or whether it might be a reflection of the greater access to public knowledge which men in Lubuk Dalam have as a consequence of being near the *kabupaten* chief-town. This greater access could be seen as empowering them in relation to their wives. More research is required to answer this.

In sum, then, what we find in both Kerinci and Minangkabau is that women are effectively in charge of domestic income and expenditure; that they usually take the initiative in

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relation to major expenditure; and that in circumstances in which they feel that husbands are not making appropriate contributions to the household budget, they can resort to sanctions such as refusing to prepare adequate meals, rejection of a husband's sexual demands and, ultimately, separation and divorce.[9] This is not to say that men have no contribution to make. On the contrary, we have seen that their opinions are frequently solicited, especially in cases where they might have specialist knowledge. There can be little disagreement, however, that on the whole it is women who both decide upon and manage household expenditure.

The Education of Children

We were not surprised to find in our interviews and discussions that the formal education of children was regarded as a topic of major importance. Formal education and qualifications have been regarded as a channel to economic and social success in the region since about the beginning of the century, and the desire to see one's children making a success at school is very common. Parents whose children have gone on to higher education take a proper pride in the fact that their children have demonstrated their ability and that they themselves have had the financial capacity to give the children the opportunity. Conversely, parents whose children have dropped out of the school system are disappointed and apologetic.

What did, however, surprise us was the degree to which parents claimed that educational decisions were left very much to the children themselves. There was general agreement that again it was the mothers who were largely responsible for the informal education of the children. Again this was a function of home-centredness: the women were at home bringing up the very small children and ready to receive the children of school age when they came back from school. Consequently they had the opportunity to talk to children and give them informal instruction and advice. In this way both boys and girls at a young age received direction from the mother, with the father only stepping in occasionally to discipline the children.

However, this period of socialisation appears to cease round about the time children reach secondary school age. It seems to be the case that from then on parental influence rapidly

[9]One small point in relation to divorce. In some ways the new Marriage Laws of 1974 have made it harder for rural women to obtain a divorce because of the new lengthy procedures which have to be undertaken. It should also be noted that there seems to be more stigma attached to divorce than there used to be in the past. But this impression needs further research.

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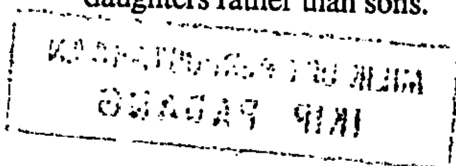
declines. Boys who had once been prepared to help in the house now spend the time with their peers out of doors and leave chores - cooking and washing - to their mothers and sisters. Girls, although still spending a lot of time at home, are also moving into peer groups based on school or locality. In these circumstances parents appear to allow a lot of independence to children, and rarely impose strict discipline. One mother in Kerinci said that she felt that at SMP (lower secondary school) age children seemed to listen more to teachers than parents. In Payakumbuh one parent said that they had tried to persuade their son to stay at secondary school, but he was reluctant and they could not force him. Most other parents too said when it came to educational preference - which secondary school, what kind of further training - they left things up to their children.

Our impression, but this would need to be confirmed, was that in rural areas boys were dropping out of school, because they saw little point in staying on and looked forward to earning a living and getting experience. The desire to *merantau* - travel away from home - is still very strong, and of those families we interviewed - especially in Payakumbuh, less so in Kerinci - many had young men working in an unskilled capacity as shop assistants in big cities. For girls it was not so much the temptation to do something else which led to their dropping out, as a feeling that they had learned enough, that as far as their future careers were concerned, further education was unnecessary. Where parents had the finances, however, and were encouraging, girls might stay on at school; boys, however, even with encouragement frequently dropped out.

Our conclusion, then, in relation to decisions concerning the education of children were that things were not clear-cut. It was certainly mothers who provided encouragement and, where necessary, adjusted the household finances to pay for education. At the secondary school level, however, both parents offered advice, and again, fathers who had privileged knowledge - because they were teachers or simply because they had access to knowledge of the administrative educational system - would put the options before the children. Ultimately, though, the choice was the children's, and they in turn often responded to peer pressure. If mothers did retain an influence over their children, it was more likely to be with respect to daughters rather than sons.



Allocation of Household Responsibilities

We have already seen that there is a strong ideology of division of labour within the household and this finds expression in the immediate expectations which husbands and wives have of each other: men will provide and women will take care of the meals and clothe the children. So fundamental is this conception of marital responsibility that even in cases where women are earning more than their husbands - which is often the case when women are civil servants or teachers - they will expect husbands to contribute substantially and, conversely, husbands will expect them to cook satisfactory meals and keep the house in good order. Even in cases where husbands may be occasionally competent housekeepers - having learned to be independent and to cook, sew and wash while in the *rantau* - they will be unwilling to exercise their skills in their married homes, because of loss of prestige. This was brought home to us by several accounts. In Kerinci it was observed that if a husband was known to do housework, for example washing or washing-up dishes, then the first to complain would be his sisters, since they would feel that their brother was not being treated with sufficient respect. They would remonstrate with their sister-in-law, and if the situation persisted they would recommend that their brother divorce his wife. Some women recorded that their husbands were prepared to help with the housework and occasionally did so, but they were embarrassed to be seen doing it.

In general terms, then, this ideology of a strict division of labour within the house clearly does influence the allocation of tasks: women should do the mundane chores - washing, cooking, sweeping - and men are assigned the 'more difficult (*berat*) jobs - occasional house repairs, collecting wood for burning. In practice, however, we find that men actually do little in the house, not so much because they are in a position to order the women to work - although some brothers might attempt to impose on their sisters in just this way - or because they are reluctant to work, but more frequently because they feel awkward about the house and the women prefer to keep the house and kitchen space to themselves.

On the other hand, we find that in those work-spheres outside the home which are usually considered to be the domain of the men, whether in farming or non-farming activities, women play an active role in both prompting and encouraging their husbands and offering them

physical support. A good example of this is to be seen in one of the couples we interviewed in Teluk Batu. The husband had not succeeded in a small business he had tried as an itinerant saté seller, and his wife had then encouraged him to try a small cottage industry - making mattresses - which had done reasonably well. Wife and daughter although busy with their own tasks - the wife was a teacher - assisted whenever they could in the making of the mattresses.

In Kerinci women often help in the *ladang*, the upland gardens, if necessary, doing what is traditionally regarded as men's work, e.g. clearing the scrub and turning the soil. Furthermore, they will be responsible for marketing much of the vegetable produce of the *ladang* - as opposed to crops such as coffee and cinnamon - thereby contributing substantially to the domestic income.

Beyond the regular and routine division of labour there are occasional tasks to be performed, frequently involving contact with local government officials: an identity card to be obtained; a small property tax to be paid; a letter to be sent; a relative to be visited; a religious function to attend; a ritual ceremony to contribute to. All these tasks we find are very much open to negotiation, especially when they are not clearly gender-specific. One couple in Kerinci recalled, for example, how when it was a question of taking their young four-year old child to visit his maternal grandmother (also incidentally his FFZ) at the other end of the village, there was often a dispute about whom the task should fall to. Again, however, we find that the longer marriages persist, the easier it is for couples to compromise on such matters, husband and wife each becoming aware of what the other does best.

Where more serious dispute does appear to arise occurs in the organisation of leisure time. This is somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth mentioning briefly here to put the discussion of the household in a context which does not confine it exclusively to the home. Men, as we have seen, when they do come together, usually do so in relation to leisure pursuits: wild-pig hunting, gambling, adat groups learning adat lore or marital arts (*pencak silat*), or - more rarely - religious groups. These can sometimes take them from home so frequently that they neglect their household duties, or, more importantly, they engage in these pursuits to the point where they are squandering money and failing to make their proper domestic contribution. In such circumstances major disputes occur and we knew of several cases in which *tengenai* had been called in to mediate disagreements, very often without

success.

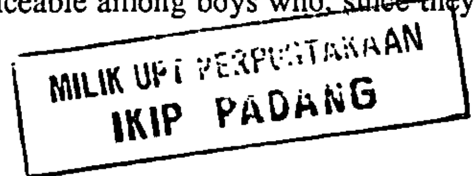
Women, too, however, often participate in women's groups, either specific agriculture work-groups which meet on a regular basis, or ad hoc groups which come together for a ceremonial or religious celebration, or also in regular religious instruction groups. If a wife is considered to be spending too much time in such groups, particularly those which meet in the evenings, this can be a source of contention. In particular husbands are uneasy if wives go regularly to mixed religious instruction classes: there is considerable sexual jealousy. Again disputes may flare and the *tengenai* may be summoned. Both husband and wife, then, have the opportunity to assert a certain independence of movement but this is constantly open to renegotiation, and unlike the situation in relation to a division of labour, there is no clear ideology which might help establish hard and fast rules.

Conclusion

Our position in relation to household decision-making in Minangkabau and Kerinci should by now be clear. In general we feel that in large measure it is women who are primarily responsible for making decisions and taking action. This, however, is not the same as saying that women control the social organisation of the society, or that they have the ultimate authority within the community. On the contrary, what we have shown is that there is considerable discussion and negotiation between husbands and wives within the home,[10] and within each individual home the degree to which one or other dominates the decision-making is often a function of the special privileged position of the spouse in terms of specialist knowledge, and, though this is secondary, financial leverage. Nonetheless, though negotiation and discussion does go on between husband and wife - and their respective families - we find that as a consequence of both the specific culture of gender, and of the identification of the place of the home with women, it is women who often take the initiative and make the most significant contributions to the running of the household.

We noted this especially to be the case in relation to domestic expenditure. In relation to children's schooling, we found that particularly when children pass through puberty, parental control is less easy to exercise. Boys and girls who were formerly closely tied to their mother now begin to assert themselves. This is especially noticeable among boys who, since they

[10]This point is well-made by Alfian and Anwar (1983: 144).



spend far less time in the home, can ignore parental requests and advice almost with impunity. Neither mother nor father is in a position to exert authority, and children quickly begin to make their own decisions. This development applies less to girls than to boys, since girls continue to spend time in the house.

One of the factors which constrains the behaviour of girls and keeps them more at home is gender ideology, which lays down for them what appropriate behaviour should be, in this case not wandering too freely or too frequently away from the house [cf. Postel-Coster (1987: 232) on the reference to this in Minangkabau literature).[11] It is gender ideology, too, which we have argued continues to have such a pervasive influence on the division of tasks within the household. Despite changing economic circumstances and very different labour arrangements in terms of professional occupational responsibilities, the notion of man as provider, woman as housekeeper, is strongly rooted in the mentality of the society. It is a significant component within the culture, and an issue which we need to consider further for a moment.

One point we touched upon at the beginning of our paper was that among the misunderstandings of Minangkabau and Kerinci culture which were frequently voiced were those which arose among the Minangkabau and Kerinci people themselves. To argue that people are wrong about their understanding of their own culture seems at one level to smack of anthropological arrogance of the kind against which we have been warned. (For example, see the forceful remarks of Lewis (1980) in relation to how it is the anthropologists, not the native people themselves, who get things wrong when it comes to interpreting ritual.) We need, therefore, to explain ourselves further.

Women in Minangkabau and Kerinci have for some generations now been exposed to an ideology which sees them as subordinate to men. In part this ideology derives from religious discourse which on the occasion of the religious marriage service and subsequently in religious sermons stresses men as the family decision-makers - women should not stay out of the house except with their husbands - and as the head of the household. At the same time the State too has its view of the ideal household in which men are the controllers of their wives and have privileges and responsibilities as a consequence of their status as head of household. So imbued has this concept of the natural family become as a consequence of formal and informal education that it has now found universal acceptance, at least at the level of people being able to

[11]For a comparative reference to the influence of gender ideology in Madras, see Vera-Sanso (1995).

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reproduce statements of the official ideology: thus women will always acknowledge a deference to their husbands, and not only will they frequently refer to the husband as head of household - even when the house is the woman's property alone - but they will also maintain that it is the husbands who control the household. It is this now ingrained thinking which we feel also perpetuates the gender division of labour.

It may be that the deference towards men has always been a part of the culture of gender in Minangkabau and Kerinci. Certainly if one reads the adat manuals and some of the Kaba, the traditional stories - all of which are written by men - a case could be made for women being given an ancillary or secondary status *vis à vis* men, but our impression is, nonetheless, that this general acknowledgement of subordination to men is a relatively new phenomenon.

Impressions, however, need to be confirmed or rejected by further research, and this leads us to an important point related to ideology. We stated at the outset that we were sceptical of research which relied largely on questionnaires and surveys. Our distrust arises directly from that perception of ideological bias we have just mentioned. Asked to respond to survey questions and structured interviews, women in Kerinci and Minangkabau will almost always, we have found, stress the centrality of the men. They do this because they feel it is expected of them. The survey results which thus attempt a crude measure of decision-making will always record this bias and consequently the analysis will throw up an erroneous and distorted account of the situation. In our experience the only way to overcome the bias, not the observer's bias but the participant's bias, is actually to note in some detail the actual mechanisms of decision-making as they occur. We advocate intensive rather than extensive methods, and the adoption of an anthropological approach which looks hard at the discrepancy between what people say they do and what in fact they do do.

This paper has taken a tentative step in the direction of that intensive method. We are very much aware of our limitations with respect to our small number of case studies and the largely unsystematic nature of our selection of families and locations for interviews. Nonetheless, we feel that our long acquaintance and familiarity with the region, Jufri's in particular as participant observer, allow us to speak with reasonable confidence of the situation as it exists.

The final point we want to make refers again to methodology, but also leads us in the

direction of some comparative remarks. By stressing how ideology may lead to a distortion of information obtained from surveys, we wish to call into question not only much of the literature and opinion relating to Minangkabau and Kerinci, but also that which relates to other areas and ethnic groups of Indonesia. The religious and State ideologies are pervasive, but so too are the cultural stereotypes which often lead to polarisation and contrast when in fact it is similarity which should be stressed. We have seen, for example, how non-Minangkabau Indonesians set the Minangkabau apart - to use popular academic parlance, defining them as 'other' - because they hold the view that Minangkabau women exercise matriarchal control. And we have seen, too, how anthropologists mesmerised by the difference between matrilineal and cognatic societies, between Minangkabau and Java, also concentrate on issues of difference. It is ideology, albeit of different kinds, which in both cases leads to distortion and accentuation of difference. If we really wish to compare the Javanese and the Minangkabau, and the position of women in both societies, we should begin not at this conceptual level, but at the level of decision-making and what case studies can tell us about processes and procedures in the practice of everyday life.

We suspect, again on the basis of personal experience and a knowledge of the literature, that in terms of household decision-making it is the similarities of the experience of Javanese and Minangkabau women which will be most striking, and that far from being the passive subordinates suggested by the stereotypes the Javanese women are both influential and dynamic. The systematic research, however, remains to be done and the hypothesis explored. The proper avenue of investigation at this stage is, however, and we make no apologies for repetition, intensive fieldwork and detailed case-studies. We hope we have been able to convey in this paper on the situation in Minangkabau and Kerinci something of the valuable insights which such methods can yield.

Dra Martini Jufri
IKIP, Padang

Dr. C.W. Watson
Eliot College, The University
Canterbury

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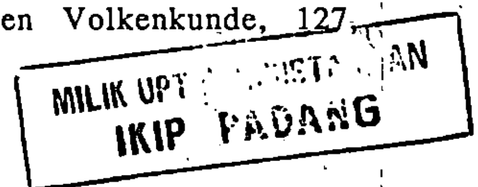
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