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Cooking money: gender and the symbolic transformation of means of exchange in a Malay fishing community

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Many writers have commented on what they conceive to be an apparent antipathy of Malays for money, commercial relations and even labour. This conception which has its roots in the colonial era¹ has led to a long debate centering on the nature or causes of a supposed 'economic retardation' among Malays and refutations of this charge.² While I do not wish to enter into the detail of this debate here, it is significant that much of it has centred around a perceived contrast between the Malay values and those of Chinese traders and middlemen with whom the former are in intense contact. (See, for example, Mahathir 1970, Freedman 1960.) The question of why it is that Chinese traders have managed to be highly successful in precisely the spheres which the Malays are conceived as having difficulty in penetrating has thus pushed the discussion towards a consideration of ethnic differences between Malays and Chinese.

There is an evident contrast between the kinship morality of the Malays and the business ethics of the Chinese. This has been documented by Lim (1981) for a Malay fishing village in Brunei. Lim argues that the moral emphasis of Malay fishermen is on mutual help based on kinship, while those of the Chinese traders centre on commercial relations and the profit motive. The Chinese, who are external to the moral community of the Malays, are thus ideally placed to play the commercial role which is antipathetical to the Malays themselves.

While this argument goes a long way towards explaining the widely observed importance of Chinese middlemen in Malay fishing communities (see Firth 1966, Lim 1981), it still leaves a number of questions unresolved with regard to the symbolic significance of money for Malays. In particular, the different relationship of men and women to money remains problematic. In a Malay fishing village on Pulau Langkawi from where the material presented in this chapter is drawn, as elsewhere in Malaysia and Brunei, men hand over their earnings to their wives who either exclusively manage or dominate in the economic running of the

household (see Rosemary Firth 1966: 27; Djamour 1959: 42; Lim 1981). We thus have a situation where men are the producers of money but it is women who almost exclusively handle it.

This brings us to a number of questions. Firstly, how is it possible to explain the fact that women are so closely involved in the handling of money, and men, having earned it, seem only too anxious to get rid of it. Secondly, following from this, it would seem that by giving money to women, men are relinquishing control and dominance to women, although this dominance is highly circumscribed, and does not, for example, extend to the political sphere. To what extent then is control over money linked to a dominance of women, and if it is, why are men willing to pass control to women in this way? And, further, we are led to consider the symbolic significance of money itself. For, if commercial relations are somehow antithetical to Malay kinship morality, how does giving money to women resolve the problem created by this antipathy. In the concluding section of this chapter an attempt will be made to answer these questions and to draw out the relationship between gender, money and ideas about the moral community.

In order to achieve this it is necessary first to trace out the uses of money – exchange, saving and consumption – in one particular community and to look at the processes of labour in which women and men engage. It will be argued that the household division of labour, practices of consumption, saving and inheritance all reveal a strong resistance to division within the house. Men earn money and fish outside the house in relations of exchange. These relations are conceived as being antithetical to the house and consanguineal kinship. The opposition between the unity of the house and the division represented by economic exchange between houses is played out in terms of gender symbolism. In its use money is mediated by women in and of the household. Just as they cook fish, women transform money from a means of exchange to a consumption good so that it ceases to threaten and actually sustains the household.

The island of Langkawi is situated off the west coast of Malaysia and administratively forms part of the state of Kedah. The village, on the south-west coast of the island, has a population of about 3,000 divided among several named hamlets. The main economic activity of the male inhabitants is fishing, although rice cultivation forms an important agricultural base. It may be helpful to briefly describe the household and its composition in Langkawi.

Perhaps the most important principle embodied by the household is that of unity and resistance to division. Household unity is expressed in a number of ways. It is reflected in the spatial arrangements of the house. In particular, the house never has more than one hearth, *dapur*.

However many couples reside together in one house, they always cook and eat together. And this commensality is a prime focus of what it means to be of one household. There is no gradual spatial separation of young couples before the establishment of a new household.

Another reflection of household unity is the close bond that should exist between siblings. Disputes between adult siblings are always highly threatening and are particularly disruptive when they occur. Appropriately enough, such disputes are particularly likely to arise over the division of household property – inheritance – and generally have far-reaching consequences for those involved. It is in order to safeguard the harmony of these relations that married siblings never co-reside. Members of a single household may be vertically disposed over two, three or four generations, or may consist of a single generation only, but there are no laterally extended households. This proscription is explicitly an attempt to avoid any conflict of interests that may arise between siblings through their obligations to their own nuclear families. That harmony between brothers and sisters should be so carefully safeguarded relates to the fact that siblings more than all other categories of kin represent household unity (as well as wider kinship relations and those with co-villagers). For it is the sibling group that has its origins in one house.

The importance of unity between siblings is reflected in a number of other ways. Marriages of a group of brothers and sisters should ideally take place in the order of their birth and this is particularly important between sisters. The in-marriage spouse who destroys the harmony within a group of siblings by marrying on whose older brother or sister is still unwed is said to 'step over the threshold', *lankah bendul*, in other words to violate the integrity of the house, and incurs a ritual fine. The close ties between sisters is apparent in their warm and affectionate relations as adults. Because of this close emotional bond, the mother's sister is regarded as a particularly appropriate foster mother for a child whose own mother has died or moved away.

Across the generations too, the tie between female consanguines is of major significance. Mothers and daughters tend to have close, intense relations, and daughters prefer to reside with their mothers than with mothers-in-law after marriage. Similarly, in old age, widows prefer to live with their married daughters than sons. If the house represents unity, then this unity is created and upheld above all by female consanguines.

Marriage is the ideal and the norm for all adults. There are no bachelors or spinsters in the village and divorce or widowhood are generally followed by remarriage, even in old age. After marriage residence is rather mobile, villagers lay great emphasis on its uncertainty and unpredictability, and explicitly deny the existence of rules governing post-marital residence. This can be connected with a more general

unwillingness to accord prior rights over a young couple to either the wife's or the husband's kin. However, a general pattern of residence may be discerned: initially a couple commute between the two parental households, spending periods of varying length in each; this is followed by a period of uxorilocality lasting until the couple have one or two children. After this a new household is often established in either the husband's or the wife's natal compound. This is often done prior to the marriage of a younger sibling to avoid the necessity of co-residence.

Most households in the village have about four or five members. Adult men and women do not live alone, nor do married couples before the birth of at least one child. The single person household is sterile, unproductive and asocial. Although households embody both the consanguineal and the affinal principle, the latter tends to be subsumed to the former. As is revealed by the frequency of divorce, the marital bond is potentially more fragile than those of consanguinity. Nor are new households established until this consanguineal principle has been asserted through the birth of children. It is through marriage and the birth of children that new sibling groups come into being and new households are established, households which embody the principle of consanguineal unity and indivision, and which are dominated by a core of related women.

Division of labour between household members

The two fundamental principles which govern the division of labour within the household are sex and age. The most clear division is that women do not go fishing and men do not generally engage in household labour. Agricultural labour is, to some extent, shared between the sexes. However, women predominate in all but the heaviest tasks. Age governs the extent to which the two sexes engage in their respective spheres of labour activity, both by imposing physical limitations and through the operation of an age-based hierarchy within the household.

Household labour

All household labour is performed by women. Men do not engage in the major tasks of household work which are shared between women of the same household. The sharing is not an equitable division but operates according to the principle of age hierarchy whereby older women do less work and only the more prestigious kinds.

Young girls are expected to help with household labour from an early age, although the amount they are expected to do gradually increases with age. During school years they perform tasks rather intermittently and generally only after some nagging from their elders. In contrast,

young boys are not expected to help with these kinds of labour. Once she has left school a young girl, *anak dara*, is expected to apply herself to housework with great diligence. Her work is supervised by her mother and general conduct will be noted by visitors to the household.

It is not infrequent to find *anak dara* in their late teens or early twenties who perform the major part of all the household work while their mothers criticise and supervise their efforts, taking only a minimum role in the labour themselves. When there is more than one young female household member, they will share the main tasks of household labour between them. The division will not be formalised and will vary, depending on the age and capacity of the women concerned; but the more menial household tasks will generally be performed by the younger women. As a woman grows older, she will gradually resign household work to her adult daughters unless she is the only adult female in the household.

We can see, then, three main principles of organisation of household labour. The first is that it is shared between women of one house. All women, unless incapacitated by age or illness, participate in the labour of the household of which they are members. However, in the case of older women who co-reside with younger, the labour tends to be occasional and rather symbolic. The second principle, then, is that of an age-based hierarchy operating between women of one house. This is strongly expressed between generations and is also present, although in a weaker form, within generations – that is, between sisters or sisters and sisters-in-law. Thirdly, it is important to emphasise that household labour is performed separately by women of different households. Cooperative work does not take place in this sphere, although in exceptional circumstances, for example, illness or childbirth, neighbours from the same compound or close kin may give their assistance.

Agricultural labour

While household labour is exclusively female, and is shared only by women of one house, agricultural labour is undertaken by both women and men, and its organisation is often the subject of a variety of rather complex cooperative labour arrangements. There are two main spheres of agricultural labour: the wet rice fields and vegetable gardens. I shall discuss here only the more important of these: rice cultivation. However, the same broad principles apply to work in the vegetable gardens.

Rice labour

The different tasks of rice cultivation, associated with different phases in the crop's growth, are generally performed by either men or women but

not by both together. However, the division of labour is flexible enough for it not to be unusual to see exceptions to this rule. The organisation and most of the labour itself are dominated by women, particularly by those in middle age who are no longer tied to the house by young children. Indeed, this division of labour between younger and older women is one of the marks of the dominance of the latter within the house. Work in the rice fields, *kerja bendang*, is generally preferred to housework, *kerja rumah*. Although older women sometimes claim that their daughters remain at home because they enjoy housework, this is usually strenuously denied in private by young women themselves.

The fact that rice production is predominantly female is partly a concomitant of men's involvement in fishing. In this respect women see a difference between themselves as the wives of fishermen, and women in mainland communities who are perceived as being more confined within the home. Women's dominance in the sphere of rice cultivation is not merely of practical significance. The centrality of rice in South-east Asian cultures is well documented. For Malays, not only is rice the basic staple and the most important constituent of all meals (in fact 'cooked rice' in Malay means food), it also plays a role in almost every ritual and, in the recent past, padi was itself the subject of a major set of rituals. The vital role of women in the cultivation of this economically crucial crop with its rich symbolic load provides us with one clue to the authority of women in Langkawi, and this authority in fact begins to rise at precisely the age when women are most active in the organisation of rice labour.

The rice seed is sown in nurseries by women. The work is generally done individually; however, women who are not planting a large area frequently use the same nursery. A charge may be levied but when those concerned are close kin and neighbours, as is usually the case, this is generally not paid.

Clearing and ploughing the padi fields is men's work and today is done with the aid of Japanese mini tractors, which are hired along with the labourers to use them. Once the land has been cleared, ploughed, fertilised and flooded, all tasks performed by men, it is ready for the seedlings. Preparation of the padi fields, then, the only phase of rice cultivation undertaken exclusively by men, has been almost completely commercialised, utilising hired labour and machinery.

Transplanting the seedlings from the nurseries to the padi fields is exclusively female labour. The work is occasionally done individually but generally women prefer to work in groups. After transplanting, rice plots must be kept free of weeds and the water levels checked. This maintenance is performed by men or women individually. The final stage of the rice cycle is the harvesting. While reaping is done exclusively by women, threshing is undertaken mainly, but not exclusively, by men.

Harvesting and threshing small plots are sometimes done by members of a single household working together, but in general larger labour groups consisting of up to twenty-five people, many of them from different households, are preferred. Harvesting, even more than transplanting, is a time of cooperative labour. The atmosphere during such work sessions is festive: the midday meal and break are minor informal celebrations where news and stories are exchanged. Children may be present, food is plentiful and good, it is eaten with particular relish; behaviour is highly informal and women and men tease each other and act without the constraint that is normal within the house. Women may dress up in each other's clothes, exchange jokes which are often heavy with sexual innuendo with each other and with men, and they laugh freely. It is no wonder, then, that women say they prefer to work in groups, that it is faster, pleasanter and less lonely, that way.

People in Langkawi distinguish several different ways of recruiting the collective labour that is used in transplanting and harvesting, and it is significant that both of these labour processes are dominated by women. Of these different categories one of the most widely used is *gotong pinjam* (literally, 'borrowed cooperation'). This is unpaid help given to kin, neighbours and friends on a single occasion, for example, one day of harvesting, for which no short-term reciprocation is required. In practice, labour reciprocation, though not precisely calculated, is often made within one planting and harvesting season. Those who are called upon to help are usually close consanguines, neighbours or affines. Often these categories overlap, and, in general, those involved are those with whom ego is closely involved and with whom exchanges of visits, food and services are frequent. There is often a noticeably high proportion of affinal kin in such groups.

A second important category of cooperative labour is *berderau*. Under this system a team of women (usually between two and thirty) work together for one season of planting and harvesting. They all transplant or harvest each member's crop in turn, exchanging labour on an equal basis on each person's land in rotation. Reciprocation always occurs therefore in the short term, and is rather precisely calculated. The composition of these groups does not present a great contrast with those of *gotong pinjam*. Once again close consanguines and affines are well represented. In the larger groups unrelated neighbours or more distant relatives are included, categories that would not normally be found in *gotong pinjam* groups.

Villagers say that in the past the *berderau* system was used more extensively than today and it does appear that the role of wage labour is increasing. As we have seen, it is particularly prevalent in the preparation of the fields for planting, the only exclusively male task of the rice cycle. Where hired labour is used for transplanting and harvesting, i.e.,

female tasks, it is often used together with the unpaid or partly paid labour of close kin.

Between reciprocated labour exchange and wage labour there is thus a further category of cooperation known as *upah pinjam* (literally, 'borrowed wages') whereby a proportion of the going wage rate is paid usually to distant kin or affines. Generally, those recruited in this way live outside the immediate neighbourhood of those who are paying them and are not involved in the intense exchange relationships that are characteristic between neighbours of one compound or between close kin or affines.

Although *upah pinjam* is strictly speaking wage labour, it in fact occupies an intermediate space between relations which are so close as to be quite incompatible with financial reimbursement for labour and those which are distant enough to tolerate a pure commercial content. Such intermediate relations are typically with distant consanguines and affines. In other words, they are with co-villagers. Wages paid for rice production are thus always qualified by kinship and community ties. Labour recruitment through *upah pinjam* and other arrangements which have a commercial element but are yet not fully commercialised and which rely heavily on the moral content of such ties show this very clearly.

Cultivation is almost entirely for household consumption. Female dominated rice production then involves household members, their closest consanguines and affines and co-members of the community in subsistence production which is for the household as an individual unit. While some aspects of production are partially commercialised, in particular, those in which men predominate, the degree of commercialisation is limited by the moral precepts of kinship and community. In all these aspects rice cultivation provides an almost complete contrast to fishing.

Fishing

I will summarise the basic principles concerning ownership of boats, division of earnings and recruitment to fishing crews in order to be able to sketch a comparison between male and female cooperation.

First and most important, women do not go fishing.³ Menstruating women may bring misfortune to a fishing trip through their presence on the boat or by touching the nets. The effect of this belief is to exclude all women from marine fishing trips.

Men begin to fish after leaving school when the normal practice is to engage in migrant work on the mainland. Most young men leave the village and work on the big fishing trawlers that operate from the mainland Kedah coast. This phase of productivity is a prelude to marriage and the assumption of full adult status in the village. The

young men's earnings which are crucial to this process are sometimes remitted to the parents and are defrayed against the expenses of marriage. It is significant that the greater part of this money is normally spent on rebuilding or extending a parental house at the time of a marriage.

After marriage, men reside and work in the village. It is a husband's duty to remain with his wife. Men fish in local waters in small boats, most but not all of which have inboard engines. Some of the fish caught are sold and consumed locally but the majority are bought by Chinese middlemen, *towkays*, and exported to Penang and Singapore. Fishing is thus highly commercialised and is not a subsistence occupation.

Most fishing crews consist of between two to four men, aged between early twenties and late forties – the most productive years for fishermen. The majority of fishing boats in the village are owned individually by single owner-users. Joint ownership is rare but a significant minority of boats are owned by the government fishing development agency which puts up the money, which the fisherman then repays in monthly instalments, eventually becoming the owner himself. The third type of boat ownership involves those owned by Chinese middlemen who usually take 50 percent of the earnings of the boat or buy the catch at half price. The rest is divided between the crew.

The heavy investment necessary to buy boats and nets is generally financed by loans – either from the government or from Chinese *towkays*. Thus, the category of single owner-users includes many fishermen who are repaying loans to Chinese *towkays*. In these cases the fisherman repays the loan gradually. Payments are made with fish rather than money, and the amounts vary with the catch. From the fisherman's point of view, a more flexible open arrangement with a Chinese *towkay* may seem more attractive than a government loan with scheduled repayments, especially as the former loan is 'interest free' in contrast to the latter.

Fishermen who are repaying loans to Chinese *towkays* are involved in a long-term contractual relationship. They sell all their catch to the *towkay* at a fixed price which is usually 5 to 10 per cent less than the market price. The fisherman is described as being *terikat*, 'tied', 'bound', to the *towkay* who in return distributes various 'favours'. He may agree to defer a repayment during a poor fishing period, use his connections to negotiate a good price on new equipment, give further loans for repairs to the boat or engine, or may loan his own boat when that of the fisherman has broken down. It is clear that such 'favours' in fact serve to perpetuate the relationship until the fisherman is bound in a web of debts and obligations, and this fact is clearly perceived by the fishermen themselves. The relationship between *towkay* and fisherman may even be passed from father to son. When a young man begins to fish on his own, the most likely person to look to for a loan to finance new capital

will be the *towkay* of his father with whom there is already an established relationship.⁴

The distribution of earnings between crew members, the captain, and the boat owner if different from the latter, varies according to the kind of fishing and the particular crew.⁵ However, in all cases one basic principle applies: apart from each person's earnings, a separate share is calculated for the boat, this is the *syir bot* which accrues to the boat owner. From it he pays for fuel, the cost of maintenance of the boat and, in many cases, repayments on loans. As much as possible of the boat share is saved separately against future expenses on fishing equipment. It is not used for general household expenses.

The usual practice is for the earnings to be divided in half. One half is the boat share and the other is divided equally between crew members, including the captain. Apart from their cash earnings, fishermen also divide up a small proportion of the day's catch between them. In contrast to their money earnings, however, the shares of fish are precisely calculated so that each member of the crew, including the captain, takes an exactly equal portion of the catch home with them.

While participants state that the particular division of cash is fixed for each fishing crew and type of operation, it is in fact subject to substantial variation depending on the size of the catch. Almost all the owners reduce the boat share when the catch is small. In the majority of cases I was told that if the earnings were very low – as often happens – they would be equally divided so that on these occasions the income of the owner was the same as that of the other crew members. Periods of successful fishing would maximise income differences between the two categories of fishermen, while periods of low productivity would be associated with greater equality of income.⁶ Reductions in the boat share are particularly likely to occur when (a) the captain is also the owner and (b) when he and the crew members are closely related, generally through kin ties. The tendency to reduce the boat share reveals very clearly the tension involved in engaging in purely commercial relations with Malay co-villagers, especially when they are close kin.

Informants comment that in recruiting fishing crews there is a clear preference for non-kin. The relationship between crew members is temporary, flexible and mobile; there is a rather rapid turnover in the personnel of fishing crews, with people frequently participating for a matter of months or even weeks. This mobility coupled with the highly commercial nature of the relationship is ill-adapted to the kind of behaviour ideally associated with close kin – relations which are built above all on a notion of permanence and reciprocity.

The overriding commercial nature of the relationship is underlined not only by the precise calculation of earnings and the temporary nature of

crews, but even in the way that fishermen eat together on the boat. Or rather, in the way that they do not eat together, for instead, each fisherman brings his own individual portion of rice and takes his meal separately and without sharing. Eating rice together is a potent symbol of household and kin unity which does not occur on a fishing boat. Fishermen, it seems, are neither of one house nor even of one boat. After a successful day's fishing the captain may treat the crew in the coffee shop but this food consists of drinks and snacks, not a full rice meal. It is neither eaten in the boat nor in the house and, most important, it is bought. If it is paid for by the captain, *tuan bot*, this further underlines the hierarchy of the relationship. It is worth contrasting these commensal patterns with those already described for cooperative work parties in rice production. In the latter case, when kin and neighbours work together, they eat a full rice meal together in the most festive and informal atmosphere. The meal is indeed the climax of the occasion.

Fishermen frequently spoke of the dangers which might result from having kinsmen as crew members: any disputes arising from the commercial activity of fishing would have severe repercussions on harmonious relations between kin. The manner in which this subject was discussed was reminiscent of the way fears were expressed on the subject of marriages between kin. In the latter case the potential for disputes between the married couple having a wider significance for relations between kin was seen as an important factor working against kin endogamy. In much the same way it seems that a highly commercialised relationship is unsuitable amongst kinsmen – there is simply too great a risk of disputes arising and disrupting the community.

The low proportion of kin in fishing crews, which is also documented for Malays in other areas,⁷ relates to another aspect of relations between crew members which makes them problematic for some categories of close kin. The relationship between the *tuan bot* and his crew is a highly hierarchical one. Not only does the *tuan* receive an income which is at times substantially higher than that of his crew, but his behaviour during fishing trips clearly reveals his superior status. The *tuan bot* continually gives orders to the crew and supervises the work of its members. He is responsible for the route the boat takes, the timing of the casting of the nets and for all other aspects of the labour process as well as the division of the earnings at the end of the day. He is in many ways in the position of boss.

The strongly egalitarian nature of social relations in Langkawi, and the attempt to cast all relations as far as possible in a non-hierarchical mode is very marked. This is particularly true of relations within the same generation where this is a narrow age difference and there is no overriding difference of status.

Where kin ties are recorded within the fishing crew the most frequent are those between father and son or between brothers. The former relation is always a hierarchical one, while the latter tends to take this form when there is a large age difference between the brothers. In other words, although fishing together is best done with those who are completely unrelated, the activity *is* compatible with one form of kin relation: that between kin who already have a clearly hierarchical relationship – father and son or older and young brother. It is highly problematic in a relation of amicable equality such as that between first cousins, and it is notable that cousins are rarely found together in fishing crews.

As in other spheres, we see that the avoidance of disputes, especially between affines, is one of the most important factors in determining recruitment to fishing crews. Relations within the crew are preferably with those with whom a dispute would be least disruptive – non-kin, or with categories of close kin where there is a relatively great ability to avoid such disputes because of an 'inbuilt' tolerance of hierarchy and where the closeness itself inhibits the possibility of relations breaking.

Not only do crews preferably consist of non-kin, but many of the above characteristics of fishing are categorically in opposition to ideals of behaviour between kin. In a community united by a web of consanguineal and affinal ties and in which there is, moreover, a concern to conduct relations on an egalitarian basis, fishing is in many senses 'anti-community' as well as 'anti-kinship'. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that there has been traditionally a tendency to enter relationships in this sphere with the Chinese who remain outside the social and moral community of the Malays.

Finally, it is possible to draw out the contrast between fishing and rice cultivation. We have seen that the former, carried out exclusively by men, is conducted on an entirely different basis from the latter which is female-dominated. Whereas rice is grown almost entirely as a subsistence crop for the household, fishing is the most important means of acquiring cash; it is a highly commercialised activity. While rice production involves cooperation with close consanguineal and affinal kin as well as more distant relatives and co-villagers, fishing is carried out either individually or, ideally, with unrelated men. Cooperation between women in rice production for cash, when undertaken, typically involves equal sharing of earnings, whereas we have seen that income from fishing is highly differentiated and the labour process itself is one in which orders are given and taken.

If fishing can be seen as in some way 'anti-household' and 'anti-community' and this is symbolised by the non-commensal relations of men of one boat, rice cultivation, by contrast, can be seen as precisely embodying many household and community values. And this is neatly

summed up by the fact that cooperative labour groups always eat a full rice meal, *makan nasi*, together – indeed this is the high point of the working day. We can now begin to understand why it is that women are completely excluded from fishing – an activity which embodies a negation of all the values with which they are most closely associated. Perhaps even more significantly, we can also see why it is that men are *not* explicitly excluded from rice production, why they *must* be included in this activity. For the contrast between male economic relations and those which underlie predominantly female cooperation in rice cultivation is not only interesting in itself, but is highly significant when we consider the notion of community and its basis in social relations. It is out of the kind of cooperation which women engage in that at least one notion of community can be seen to derive. And yet, as we shall see, the fact that this notion is a 'female' one is often problematic. Men's inclusion or reintegration into this notion of community is always finally necessary.

Income

Without going into the details of household income here, it is clear from the division of labour between household members that almost all cash income is earned by men – in their youth as migrant workers and later through local fishing. Women's ability to earn money is extremely limited: small amounts may be earned through the sale of home-made cakes and snacks, from collecting bivalves from the rocks along the sea shore and from the sale of eggs, fruit and vegetables. However, such produce tends to be consumed at home rather than sold for profit. Cash income from these sources is both limited in amount and occasional. As supplements to the diet these contributions are highly valued. More so than any other is the basic staple and most ideologically significant crop, rice. Almost no households in the village produce a big enough rice surplus to sell but perhaps one third manage to achieve self-sufficiency. In this way women's labour provides a major contribution to household income and provides perhaps one clue to the basis for their domestic authority.

It is important to emphasise here that women neither engage in the processing nor the marketing of fish. Nor, indeed, do women in the village engage in trade in any major way, as they do elsewhere in Malaysia.⁸ Most of the sundry shops in the village (and the main town of the island) are Chinese owned and run. In fact it is notable that, even when selling such items as home-made snacks, women tend to use men or children of the household as intermediaries. In this way the material presented here provides a direct contrast to that of Stirrat for a Sri Lankan fishing village (see chapter 4) where women and the market are closely associated. I will return to this point in the conclusion.

Household budgeting: expenditure and saving

Although it is men who provide most of the household's cash income, it is women who have the major role in running the household finances. At the end of the day, when men return from fishing, they turn over their day's earnings to their wives, keeping only a small amount of 'coffee money', *duit kopi*, for themselves. As well as the money that men hand over to their wives, they also give them the fish which they have brought home. The fish will be cooked by women in the kitchen and eaten later in the day.

Although I knew of cases of husbands who were known to keep money back from their wives, in general these cases were exceptions. When a fisherman returns home after a day's work his wife will ask him how much he has earned and expects to be given the day's earnings. Men are expected to ask their wives for money when they need it and, just as the husband who keeps money back from his wife is frowned upon, so is the wife who does not give money to her husband when he asks for it. Both forms of behaviour occur but are likely to cause disputes. Income earned by either a husband or a wife is regarded as belonging to the couple jointly and equally. Husbands and wives do not maintain separate funds or save separately. Cash handed over by a husband to the wife is thus administered by her but belongs to both of them.

While spending patterns may vary from household to household, certain principles clearly emerge. The most obvious point is that household budgeting operates on a daily basis. Almost all necessities are bought in small quantities every one or two days and these take up the major part of a household's income. All regular items of household expenditure are administered by women. It is they who thus have control over the day to day running of the household economy and this in fact means the greater part of decisions over expenses. Although women control the way money is spent, they often send children or men of the household to do the actual buying in a manner which is reminiscent of their reluctance to engage in direct sale for cash.

Major decisions over expenditure are usually arrived at after joint discussion by wife and husband (or the main income earner of the household). While in some households men may take a more active role in decision making, I know of no case in which a woman was totally passive in the running of household affairs. They may share important decision making with a husband or father but they never completely resign their control over the household economy. Women's authority continues to rise with age long after men's has begun to decline. This means that in old age a wife's control of the household economy is at its peak, while her husband, by contrast, no longer active in fishing, is in a

state of almost childlike economic dependency in which he must ask his wife for pocket money if he wishes to visit the coffee shop.

When more than one adult couple reside together, decision making and accounting can become more complex since it is the married couple that is the basic economic unit of the household. We have seen that the earnings of husband and wife are regarded as joint property, *benda syarikat*. As long as the co-resident couples continue to be economically self-sufficient they always maintain their own funds and save separately. This also applies to unmarried young men, who, as we saw, are substantial income earners. These young men, however, although they spend more freely than married men, nevertheless do not save money on their own behalves. Instead, they give their surplus to their mothers or sisters for saving.

Once a couple has ceased to be self-sufficient, the economic separation within the household will no longer be maintained. For example, in one household, consisting of a married couple of which the husband no longer went out fishing and their married daughter, almost all expenses were met by the young son-in-law's earnings as a fisherman. The household operated out of one fund, all earnings were pooled. In contrast, another household I knew well was maintaining three separate funds, that of the parents (still self-sufficient), a married son and his wife and an unmarried son. All three economic units saved separately and the household also kept three totally separate savings pools for the running expenses of three fishing boats.

So far we have seen that cash enters the household economy mainly through the individual efforts of men; once there it becomes part of the joint property of a married couple. The married couple is the smallest unit which can make up a household. As long as couples living together in one house continue to be economically self-sufficient they could potentially form a viable household unit by themselves. The maintenance of separate savings can be seen, then, as a way of avoiding a potential conflict of interests within the house and of facilitating separation of resident couples should disputes occur.

The separation and division represented by highly individuated earnings and, for households with more than one conjugal unit, only partially unified household funds, is negated in the way money is spent. We have already seen that the notional centre of the house is the single undivided *dapur*, kitchen, hearth, stove. It is highly significant that while couples may save separately from each other, the precise division of everyday household expenses, which are actually called *belanja dapur*, literally 'kitchen expenses', is explicitly left uncalculated. Thus, although I was able to obtain detailed accounts of household expenditure with great ease, it was extremely difficult to get accurate information on how much money had been spent by individual household members and on what.

Women in all these households would say the division of daily expenses was not calculated, 'whoever has money goes to buy'. 'Whoever has money spends.'⁹

In this way the individuation represented by money earned through fishing is negated by the interposition of women. We have seen how fishing is in many ways opposed to the principles which the house represents. When money enters the house it is first transferred from men to women, and, secondly, it is de-individualised, becoming the property of the married couple. Thirdly, this de-individualisation is pushed further in the way that money is spent by women on household expenses, *belanja dapur*. Division within the household is deliberately played down; there is one *dapur* to the house and its running expenses are, at least in theory, met by all adult household members collectively. 'Whoever has money spends', in other words, individual ability to pay is unmarked, differentiation between household members and between couples is minimised. Earnings may be tainted by ideas opposed to kinship, by commercial and individualistic values, but in their passage through the house, the central symbol of kin unity, and through the hands of women, they become imbued with the ideals of kinship and thus 'socialised'. The negative, anti-social power of money is thus neutralised through the action of women associated with the house.

If spending and consumption seem to be as far as possible undifferentiated within the house, saving is not necessarily confined within one house. There is one form of saving which in fact involves cooperation between houses. As we shall see, it is in fact aimed less at the accumulation of money and more at a kind of generalised consumption focusing on the house, and especially on the very heart of the house, the *dapur*, and which involves many houses in a kind of chain of generalised consumption.

As we have seen, married couples save jointly: one household may have more than one post office savings account for each couple's personal savings as well as for the running expenses of any fishing boat owned by household members. Apart from these accounts and cash kept in the house, there is another method of saving which operates according to different principles. This is the rotating saving society, *kut*.¹⁰ This institution is dominated by women and is a further example of women's power to negate the 'anti-kinship' and 'anti-social' aspects of money. In this case, however, the 'socialisation' of money goes further for it involves not just the single household but neighbours, kin and affines – the wider community.

The *kut* is a mode of saving which usually involves about ten to twenty women, organised by one woman known as the *kepala kut* – head of the *kut*. Each member of the society contributes a fixed sum of money which is usually collected weekly by the *kepala kut*. Each week one member of

the *kut* receives the total amount of money collected from all members. Often a small sum is deducted from this and kept as a commission by the *kepala*. The order in which the different members receive the total sum is fixed by drawing lots or by mutual agreement at the beginning of the *kut*'s existence.

The *kut* may be terminated after each member has received the total collection once – or it may begin again. There are cases of *kut* which endure for many months in this way although some terminate after only one cycle. Some *kut* are a means of collecting cash but in the majority of cases money is raised for a specific purpose, such as buying crockery, cooking pots or other household articles, each member receiving the same article in rotation.

Although the amounts involved in each contribution are usually small, many women are members of several associations. This means that the total amounts of money paid to *kut* per month can be quite significant. It also means that even if the membership of different *kut* overlap, each woman's participation in several involves her in relations with a wide circle of other women. In terms of the total amounts of money and the numbers of people involved, these associations are, then, highly significant in the community.

It is important to stress that these organisations are run by and for women. They either raise cash for the purpose of buying household articles or these articles are directly acquired. However, these goods are not just associated with the household in general, they are often closely associated with cooking and eating and with the *dapur* (for example, cooking pots, crockery, trays, glasses).

When women were asked about how members of the *kut* were recruited, they always mentioned the importance of being able to trust, *caya*, other members of the *kut*. The persons involved must be reasonable and reliable, capable of committing themselves to giving a fixed sum every week over a period of several months. Equally, the members must trust the *kepala* to administer the *kut* honestly and responsibly.

Kepala kut prefer to recruit *orang dekat*, literally 'close people', as members. This means neighbours and relatives; geographic closeness is partly a matter of convenience, since it makes the collection of contributions easier. But as one *kepala* emphasised when discussing this, *orang dekat jadi adik-beradik juga*, 'neighbours too become (are like) kin'. In other words, the closeness of relations with others is based as much on locality as on kinship. It is in fact the overlapping and cross-cutting of the categories of neighbour and kin that is at the heart of the intense exchanges between people of one neighbourhood.¹¹

Analysing the kin relations between the *kepala kut* and other *kut* members, as well as any kin ties between the members themselves, I

found that out of 170 women involved in 11 *kut*, only 16 were unrelated to any other *kut* member. In other words, the mutual trust between members of a *kut* has its basis above all in kinship; the large majority of members are kin either of the *kepala* or of other members. The most frequent kinship links in these associations are those between first cousins, between aunts and nieces, mother and daughter and between sisters. In other words, *kut* members tend to be united by close consanguineal lines. There is a relatively low proportion of affinal connections between *kut* members which can be related to qualitative aspects of relationships between female affines. Briefly, these relationships are often tense and strained and women tend to prefer to cooperate with their consanguines rather than with affines in many contexts of their daily life.

If we recall the principles of recruitment to fishing crews discussed above, the difference between male and female association for economic purposes becomes even more clear. We saw earlier how there is a preference for non-kin in fishing crews and that nearly two-thirds of all fishermen are in fact unrelated to other members of their crew. The principles of recruitment to those two forms of cooperation offer a very clear contrast in this respect. In the one case non-kin are ideal members of a temporary, commercial, hierarchically-based association and this is explicitly to avoid the possibility of disputes with kin; in the other it is kin who can be trusted and relied upon in a relationship which, although economic, has a strong social and moral content.

If the categories of kin which regularly occur in the two forms of organisation are compared we find a further contrast. In fishing groups, the prevalence of the father/son tie was linked to the relation of dominance which the *tuan bot* has with the crew members and the fact that this is difficult to accommodate to more egalitarian kin relations. Between the *kepala kut* and members, however, it is ties between first cousins and between aunt and niece which are more frequent than any other. The more egalitarian kin relations dominate in an association whose hierarchical content, even between *kepala* and ordinary members, is minimal. The *kut* is an association of equals in which the head is, essentially, an organiser without significant power, and the benefits are reaped by all members in rotation. The commission levied by the head is either non-existent or minimal. Significantly, then, it is precisely the categories of kin that are totally absent in fishing crews that are the most frequently represented in the *kut*.

While both forms of association show fewer affinal connections than consanguineal ones, and this has been related to the tension involved in the former, it appears that there are a higher proportion of affinal relations between *kepala kut* and members than within fishing crews. This can be linked to the previous point – that it is more easy to maintain

these kind of fragile or tense relations within an egalitarian context than in a hierarchical one. Whereas such relations might be directly threatened by the kind of cooperation involved in fishing, they may actually be strengthened by that of the rotating saving society.

The *kut*, then, is another example of how women's economic cooperation is embedded in relations of kinship and in this respect is very different from its male counterpart. Once again, money is removed from the context in which it is earned by men, an individualistic and commercial one, and circulates through the activity of women in associations which have their basis in kinship and locality and which involve the participants in economic exchange which is firmly based on the morality of kinship and community. Once again 'individual male money' becomes 'shared-female-kin-money'.¹²

We have also seen that although the *kut* and institutions like it tend to be characterised by the actors themselves and by anthropologists as saving or credit associations (see Ardener 1964: 217), in Langkawi they are in fact focused on consumption of household articles, in particular, articles associated with the *dapur*. But, significantly, this consumption is shared between houses rather than involving one individual household. Houses or hearths are linked together in a chain of equal and shared consumption of the same articles. And, in this way, there is an avoidance of an association between the house and the accumulation of money, i.e., of values which somehow negate the house. In other words, just as in budgeting and day-to-day expenditure there is an attempt to avoid the divisive and individuating effects of money, this is also present in the way money is saved, which, in the last analysis, is here only a deferred and generalised form of consumption involving many houses.

Conclusion

I have argued that there is an opposition between male and female labour. Whereas women share labour between them within the house and cooperate extensively in labour groups in the cultivation of rice on an equal basis, men form fishing groups that, ideally, are not based on the household or kinship links and in which relations are hierarchical, short term and commercialised. Further, while women's labour is almost exclusively within the subsistence sphere, it is fishing which is the main cash earning activity in the village. Men bring money into the house where it is handed over to women who control the day-to-day running of household expenses. Expenditure and saving are unmarked and de-individualised as far as possible within the house. Women save in associations of kin and neighbours which once again operate on an egalitarian basis. In this way women create an association of house-

holds, a community, through the circulation of money for the purpose of the household, in other words, of domestic consumption.

We can begin to see that men and women have a very different relationship to money respectively. In the introduction to this paper reference was made to Lim's account of a Malay fishing village in Brunei, where women seem to occupy a very similar position to that of women in Langkawi, controlling daily household expenditure. Lim argues that the commercial relations of fishing are opposed to the values of reciprocity and equality and the kinship morality of the Malay community. Money itself is 'hot' and in some sense anti-social (Lim 1981: 203). Thus far our arguments are essentially the same. Lim, however, goes on to state that 'The men also see their village as a community of men, as most village affairs in reality are the men's concern. Women in general are isolated and removed from the central stage and often banished to the kitchen' (ibid.: 204).

As far as men are concerned, he argues, women are outsiders to the Malay community. In this capacity the polluting and anti-social qualities of money can be banished to the world of women. In contrast, I would suggest that women, being central to the Malay house, Malay kinship, and the Malay community, have the ability to purify money, to socialise it and invest it with the values and morality with which they themselves are most closely associated. Divided male money becomes united kin money through the interposition of women in the house.

How can we reconcile these two perspectives? From one point of view they can be seen perhaps as reflections of the gender of the individual field worker, or more significantly, of his or her informants. For one aspect of this issue is that through working in a society which is to a large degree sex-segregated, Lim has elicited a 'men's view', while the model I have outlined can be glossed as a 'women's view'. This however, only raises the more fundamental question of the place of women in the Malay kinship system and community, and, further, the very notion of community begins to be revealed as problematic.

We have seen that economic activities take different forms for men and women respectively. Women associate with others of the same household, with kin and neighbours; they emphasise hierarchy in their relations with close kin across the generations, but equality on a wider cooperative basis. Above all, they avoid purely commercial relations and it is important to remember that women in Langkawi do not usually trade. Men on the other hand, tend not to engage economically with their close kin but form more commercialised exchange relations in the wider community, particularly evident in fishing groups and in their relations with the Chinese.

Rather than seeing Malay women as outsiders to their own commu-

nity, it is possible to see that there is a basis for more than one notion of community. On the one hand, there is the model of community based on exchange relations, for example through fishing crews, in the coffee shop or in marital exchanges. This model stresses differentiation, competition and alliance; it is potentially divisive and liable to disruption. This is the model which underlies the male political community, men's relations in the coffee shop, the fishing economy and the predominantly male Muslim community centred on the mosque. It is also present, although in a more problematic and ambivalent way, in the manner in which men and women exchange brides and grooms in marriage.

The second model is one based on the household. This unit is dominated by a group of consanguineally related women. Men are, to a great extent, marginal to it. In all contexts what is stressed within the house is unity and indivision. This appears clearly in the down-playing of individual ownership of property within the house, and in the enormous problems caused by inheritance, resulting both in an avoidance of discussion of the topic and in a tendency to defer inheritance until long after a particular death has occurred. Division within the house, demarcation and differentiation are avoided because they are antithetical to the principles on which the house is founded. In terms of kinship relations this is expressed in the close ties between female consanguines and in the great emphasis placed on close and harmonious ties between a group of siblings who have their origin in one house.

At the core of the house there is, as we have seen, the single, undivided *dapur* where the full rice meal is cooked by women and eaten by co-resident household members. Thus, the *dapur* and commensality are at the centre of what it means to be of one house. This model of community, then, is that of a collection of similar households, dominated by women, united internally by close consanguineal ties which receive expression in commensality.

These two models of community are not isolated from each other. Men participate as household members in the 'female-household' model. Finally, men are also part of the female community and this is clear in the way work parties for rice cultivation operate and also in the context of communal feasts. Thus money earned by men and associated with inequality and competition becomes problematic for them. Just as fish are given to women to be cooked in the *dapur*, so money, the equivalent of fish, can be transformed by being handed over to women in the house for 'cooking' and then consumed. The *dapur* is not just the place where raw fish is cooked by women and eaten by the household, it is the site of a many-faceted act of transformation, or 'cooking', performed by women, on fish, on money, and even on themselves, as in the well known Malay rituals that follow childbirth, where women are actually heated over a

fire or hearth.¹³ The *dapur* is the centre of the house and the central location of these transformations.

Women, then, purify or socialise money, endowing it with the values of kinship morality, by cooking it in the *dapur*. By so doing they transform the one kind of community, based on differentiation, exchange and alliance, and primarily male, into the other, based on the notion of a collection of similar female-dominated houses.

We can now understand that the symbolism of money is not just that of a means of exchange (although it is that too, at least for men) but more importantly, it is that of a consumption good. Women's close association with money is founded on consumption. In spending money for the house women reproduce the household. Further, in organising the *kut*, women actually create a community of households, a female community, by linking houses together in a chain of *dapur*-centred consumption.

There is thus both a female and a male meaning for money, just as there is a predominantly male and a predominantly female model of community. And this female version of money can itself help in understanding the notion of the female community. We can also see why it is that women in Langkawi avoid trading while yet associating themselves so closely with money. For money as a symbol of exchange is particularly male, and only as a symbol of consumption is it associated with women. In order to be able to transform the one into the other, women must isolate themselves from the former.

The contrast with the Sri Lankan case mentioned above (Stirrat, chapter 4) now becomes clear. There women are the channel through which the ideology of the market enters the village. Women's close association with the market and the further association that is made between money and pollution enables men to isolate themselves from the competitive and disruptive effects of commoditisation in the community. In Langkawi, as we have seen, although women are closely associated with money, it is precisely from money as a means of exchange that women isolate themselves. Thus it is women who transform and overcome the competitive and disruptive relations of the market.

While it is possible to build up a series of oppositions between

women	and	men
cooperation		individualism, competition,
kinship, the house,		commerce, achieved
ascribed relations		relations
unity		division

which seems to culminate with that of community/anti-community, these oppositions are not as straightforward as they perhaps appear; the final one does not lead to a resolution of the problem of the nature of the

Malay community, but instead must lead to a closer examination of the concept of community itself. For the world of men, achieved relations, commerce and competition is not in any straightforward way antithetical to the community, it is itself in fact an aspect of this notion. Nor can it be satisfactory to exclude one half of the population – men or women – from 'the community'. Rather we can see that there is a basis for more than one notion of community, corresponding to three terrains of labour which were examined at the beginning of this paper.

Firstly, there is the household and the unity of consanguineally related women within it, who perform household labour together. Secondly, on a wider basis, there is the unity of female kin, neighbours and affines of different households who are mobilised in agricultural labour and in saving associations. Finally, there is male cooperation in fishing: achieved, anti-kin, commercial, competitive. These three spheres of labour can be seen as the building blocks of community in its different aspects. However, these aspects are not isolated from each other, or they are only partially so. Finally, as was clear in the operation of work parties of rice cultivation, men, at least, are reintegrated into the 'female community'.

In handing money over to women, men avoid the divisive dangers of a community as a group of potential rivals, engaged in complex, tense and competitive exchange relations. By cooking fish or money in the *dapur*, women transform this kind of community into one based on the idea of a family meal dominated by consanguineally related women, a collection of like households.

Notes

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1 See Swettenham 1955: 134; Clifford 1927: 19, cited in Lim 1981:23.

2 See Firth 1950; 1966: 82, 96; Parkinson 1967; Wilder 1968; Senu Abdul Rahman 1971; Mahathir 1970; Alatas 1977.

3 This is also true elsewhere in Malaysia, see Raymond Firth (1966: 105).

4 See Raymond Firth's references to the *daganang* system for a similar description (1966: 60–2, 377–84.)

5 See Raymond Firth (1966: 235–57, 318–29) on the complexities of the distribution of earnings among east coast fishermen and the difficulties of acquiring such data. I did not conduct detailed research into this area. The following information is therefore only a rough guide to the principles involved.

- 6 Scarlett Epstein (1967: 241ff) has described a similar correlation between agricultural yields and rewards in rural South India.
- 7 See, for example, Firth (1966: 105) for the non-kin based composition of fishing crews on the east coast; and Fraser (1966: 34-5) for Malays in southern Thailand.
- 8 See Strange's (1980) description of women's involvement in the processing of fish, and hawking in Trengganu as well as that of Rosemary Firth (1966) and Raymond Firth (1966).
- 9 In contrast Rosemary Firth (1966: 17) notes that it is 'quite easy for different groups to live under the same roof, and conduct quite separate cooking and budgeting activities'. However, her own data (pp. 17-21) make clear the diversity of procedure over separate budgeting with certain resources being pooled. She continues, 'The eating of meals on all ordinary occasions is not the social affair it is with us, and food is frequently eaten in solitude.' In Langkawi I would argue that separate saving and budgeting do occur but only to a limited extent within the household. And it is precisely in cooking and eating that the division is negated.
- 10 This is short for *kutipan*, a 'collection', 'subscription', or *kutipan duit* from *duit*, 'money'. See Ardener (1964) for a comparative survey of such institutions.
- 11 Jay (1969: 418) also notes that in rural Java the core membership of credit associations are based on the neighbourhood. As in Langkawi, they are also organised by women. However, in contrast to Java (Geertz 1962) and Minahasa (Lundstrom-Burghoorn 1981), where members of such organisations hold regular meetings which constitute elaborate social occasions, in Langkawi such meetings are not held and frequently children are sent round to collect the contributions.
- 12 Similar, Jay (1969: 419) has shown that the concept of mutual aid in these organisations is derived from that which pertains to close kin and neighbours.
- 13 Space does not allow an analysis of these rituals here. Briefly, I argue elsewhere (Carsten 1987) that these rites, which focus on the production of children in marriage, can be seen as a transformation or cooking of affinity into consanguinity.

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