Pride of place

Adat Perpath hold women in high esteem and the standing of a family and clan is judged by how well they treat and respect women.

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OCITSEB, the unit is almost unrecognizable. But it is used in Norani Muhammad’s picturesque ancestral home in Kauli Prata, Negri Sembilan, even with the sun beating through the windows.

The house, with its upstairs balustrade that marks the rows of the buffalo, is characteristic of the local Minangkabau architecture and the most visible physical manifestation of the Adat Perpath customs practiced in Negri Sembilan.

Norani’s family’s ancestral home is over 100 years old, and sits on a 1.2ha ancestral land, passed down from her great grandmother.

Even though a taste test has replaced the traditional wooden sticks, the house on stilts still stands strong and proud, and is often used by members of her clan for weddings and festivities.

Negri Sembilan is the only state in Malaysia that observes Adat Perpath, a combination of practices and rules that govern various aspects of social life that originated from the Minangkabau Highlands in Sumatra, Indonesia. What makes Adat Perpath so special is its traditional customs which hold women in high regard.

"Women are revered in Adat Perpath customs. The standing of a family and clan is judged on how well their women are treated and respected. Women are seen as the carriers of the land and homestead, that the land is passed down through the women in the clan and it cannot be said. It has to stay within the clan. If a family doesn’t have a girl child, the land will go to the nearest female kin, with the agreement of the members of the clan and the Bokor Lembang (male leader of the clan)," explains Norani, who in the Minangkabau culture as a woman leader of her clan, also known as a ‘Ki Bu’ Masar.

According to Adat Perpath customs, a man is a member of his mother’s clan only after marriage, where he is received into his wife’s clan.

When a man gets married, traditionally he moves out of his mother’s house to live in the homestead of his husband’s clan and work. This is so that he can earn wages to support himself and his family, and contribute to the community’s welfare, which is a traditional practice, while also enhancing the clan’s reputation.

Although men are the elected leaders (Budong or Datuk Penghulu) of each clan through marriage, they assist and coordinate, each clan will have a woman leader, known as the ‘Ki Bu’ Masar, who plays a vital role in the community, says Norani.

Taking charge

"It’s said that in the old days, all the mothers in a clan would look after their clan. Even before a child could do anything or get in trouble, most would get back to his mother because the entire village was looking out for him. These days, people don’t have the community spirit anymore and tend to mind their business. This community spirit is really the essence of Adat Perpath," explains Noor Fathi, who in the Minangkabau culture as a woman leader of her clan, also known as a ‘Ki Bu’ Masar.

Children and grandchildren are often allowed to stay with their grandparents, which helps to keep the family strong and united.

"Adat is very important in our society as a guide on how we must conduct ourselves, teaches us to respect one another and also maintains order in society. Why do we say four men and a woman must salute the child, but not your country?" says Noor Fathi.

The role of the ‘Ki Bu’ Masar is to uphold and pass down the customs. In any community such as at weddings, the role of the ‘Ki Bu’ Masar is an important role in maintaining customs and traditions are followed properly. These practices may seem very cultural, but they actually are structures that hold the community together," says Noor Fathi.

"Traditionally, these days not all young people see the importance of following these customs, but it is important to ensure that these customs are not forgotten over time. We must keep these customs alive and ensure that they are passed down to the next generation. As a ‘Ki Bu’ Masar, I have the responsibility to ensure that these customs are upheld and maintained," says Norani.

Ancient land belongs to the clan but women are the caretakers of the land, says Norani.

There are 12 women leaders for the 12 main clans in the state and they are well respected women in their communities, elected by their clan members based on their abilities to lead and nurture. They are seen as repositories of social and cultural knowledge and values, which the community believes is crucial for the continued survival of Adat Perpath.

"Adat Perpath is an important part of our culture," says Norani. "And Adat is very important in our society as a guide on how we must conduct ourselves, teaches us to respect one another and also maintains order in society. Why do we say four men and a woman must salute the child, but not your country?"
Ibu Soko and her clan play an important role in ceremonies such as the Adat Menyalong to introduce a new Datuk Lembuga.

Holding the community together

Upholding their adat, says Rusanawati, isn’t the extent of an Ibu Soko’s role. “As the leader of the women in her clan, Ibu Soko is also the ‘go-to’ person if women or families face problems or difficulties and they need help with. We also try to empower the women in our clan by encouraging them to start a business or find ways to earn a living. And we also nurture the younger generation and look out for young women with the potential to be leaders in the future, when we are no longer around.”

Not everyone can be an Ibu Soko, explains Mohd Khairil. “She has to be an elder in the community, knowledgeable and, most importantly, respected by her clan. She is chosen by her people.”

The immense social responsibility of nurturing and guiding the young and empowering women is a task that the Ibu Soko take seriously. To facilitate their work, they’ve formed the Persatuan Ibu Soko, and they meet monthly to discuss programmes for their anak waris (women and youth in their communities).

One of the main challenges for the Ibu Soko is getting the younger generation interested in their adat. “It is normal. Young people will not find this interesting. As a child, even though I grew up surrounded by the practices and customs of our people, I only got interested in learning about our adat after I retired and moved back to the kampung,” admits Maimun, 70, a retired civil servant.

Rusanawati jokes that she knew the key things about the Adat Perpatih customary laws: that one can’t marry within the same suku (sharing the same suku is akin to sharing the same blood).

“That was important for us young girls. Before falling in love with a boy, we had to check if he was from the same clan before things developed further,” she says, laughing. Rusanawati adds that if a couple from the same clan were to fall in love, the man would have to leave the clan in order for them to marry.

To introduce young students to Adat Perpatih, some schools in the state have introduced Adat Perpatih Clubs. At the launch of SMK Tuanku Muhammad’s Adat Perpatih Club last September, state education director Datuk Pkharuddin Ghazali said the clubs can introduce students to the uniqueness of their culture and, hopefully, pique their interest.

“This is a good initiative that I hope will be practised in all schools. We don’t want Adat Perpatih to be something you just learn about in history books or in museums,” says Mohd Khairil.