

Pride of place

Adat Perpatih 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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OUTSIDE, the heat is almost unbearable. But it's cool in Noraini Muhammad's picturesque ancestral home in Kuala Pilah, Negri Sembilan, even with the sun beating through the shuttered windows.

The house, with its upswept gables that mimic the horns of the buffalo, is characteristic of the local Minangkabau architecture and the most visible physical manifestation of the Adat Perpatih customs practised in Negri Sembilan.

Noraini's family's ancestral house is over 100 years old, and sits on a 1.2ha ancestral land, passed down from her great-great-grandmother.

Even though a zinc roof has replaced the original wooden shingles, the house on stilts still stands strong and proud, and is often used by members of her clan for weddings and festivals.

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

"Women are revered in Adat Perpatih custom. The standing of a family and clan is judged on how well their women are treated and respected. Women are seen as

holding the most important role in society because, as mothers, they shape and nurture the next generation," explains Mohd Khairil Hisham Ashaari who is the curator at the Tuanku Jaafar Royal Gallery in Seremban.

In matrilineal tradition, ancestral or customary land and property are passed down the female line, although the men in the family have the rights to use, live and earn off the land.

"Our customary laws protect women," declares Ibu Soko Maimun Shamsudin, of the Seri Lemak Minangkabau clan. "A woman will never be displaced because she will always have her ancestral home and her land. Even though a Negri Sembilan woman may have moved to the city, if she is widowed or her husband leaves her, she will never be left in the lurch or become homeless because she has her home and land in the kampung to fall back on. And she will be welcomed back with open arms because the land is hers."

Being the only daughter in her family, Noraini inherited the ancestral land (tanah pusaka adat) and house (rumah adat) from her mother and she, in turn, will pass it down to her only daughter.

"Actually, the ancestral land doesn't belong to the woman; it belongs to the clan and women are the caretakers of the land and homesteads. But the land is passed down through the women in the clan and it cannot be sold. 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 Datuk Lembaga (male leader of the clan)," explains Noraini, who is the Ibu Soko kanan (senior woman leader) of her clan (Ulu Muar).



According to Adat Perpatih customs, a man is a member of his mother's clan until after marriage, when he is received into his wife's clan.

When a man gets married, traditionally he moves out of his mother's home to live in the homestead of his mother-in-law and wife. With modernisation and the migration of the younger generation to bigger cities for studies and work, this tradition is now seldom observed.

Although men are the elected leaders (Undang or Datuk Penghulu) of



Adat Perpatih customary laws empower and protect Negri Sembilan women, says Maimun.

Ancestral land belongs to the clan but women are the caretakers of the land, says Noraini.

each clan (though matrilineal, they aren't matriarchal), each suku will have a woman leader, known as Ibu Soko, who plays a vital role in the community, says Mohd Khairil.

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 something naughty or get in trouble, word would get back to his mother because the entire village was looking out for him.

"These days, people don't have that community spirit anymore and tend to mind their own business. This community spirit is really the essence of Adat Perpatih," explains Mohd Khairil. "That's where the Ibu Soko come in. They are integral in keeping the community together by maintaining our traditional practices, while adapting them to the modern way of life."

Ibu Soko is the title given to women leaders of each clan (suku) in Adat Perpatih society.

There are 12 women leaders for the 12 major 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 regarded as repositories of social and cultural knowledge and values, which the community believes is crucial for the continued survival of Adat Perpatih.

"We are the custodians of our adat," says Ibu Soko of the Biduanda clan, Normaintan Ujang. "And adat is very important in our society as it guides us on how we must conduct ourselves, teaches us mutual respect and also maintains order in society. That's why we say, *biar mati anak, jangan mati adat* (let the child die, but not your customs)."

The job of the Ibu Soko is to uphold and pass down the customs. In any ceremony, such as at weddings, Ibu Soko plays an important role in ensuring customs and traditions are followed properly. These practices may seem merely ceremonial but they actually are structures that hold the community together," says Rusnawati Jada, Ibu Soko for the Tuga Batu clan.

"Unfortunately, these days not all youngsters see the importance of following these cus-



(from left) As the Ibu Soko for their respective clans, Noraini, Maimun, Normaintan, Rusnawati and waris soko Normah Abu are well-versed in Adat Perpatih customs.



Ibu Soko and her clan play an important role in ceremonies such as the Adat Menyalang to introduce a new Datuk Lembaga,

toms and sometimes, they don't even invite the Ibu Soko or the leaders to their weddings. They fail to see the importance of adat.

"If we don't have our adat, what do we have? It's our identity. Adat is actually a guideline on how to behave. It also protects our rights," explains Rusnawati, a retired teacher, adding that Adat Perpatih teaches respect for elders, family members, leaders, women, community and advocates harmony.

Mohd Khairil explains that close community ties in the past played a big part in resolving domestic disputes.

"In those days, if a marriage had some problems, the Datuk Lembaga would step in as the arbitrator. He would first ask the husband to leave the wife's home and stay in the surau to give them some space. The husband's meals would have to be taken care of by his wife's family but they were not to interfere in the dispute. The Datuk Lembaga would then call the couple together and act as an arbitrator. This must be done within seven days. In most cases, the problem is resolved, unless there is a scandal or a third party involved, in which case, the couple will divorce and the man will move out of the house," says Mohd Khairil. "These days, everyone gets involved and domestic problems become public."

Holding the community together

Upholding their adat, says Rusnawati, 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 Maimum, 70, a retired civil servant.

Rusnawati 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. Rusnawati 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.