

## Crossing Gender Boundaries: The Anxieties and Dilemmas of Two Spouses

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### ABSTRACT

*The gendering of social roles in human societies complements the idea that men and women are constitutionally suited and naturally adept at certain roles and not the others. Societies create categories for men and women once created, their boundaries come to be internalized as something natural and normal. This gendered categorization of capacities and roles, by itself, has no social significance in that it does not rank one gender above the other. Gendering streamlines men into economically productive work and women into economically unproductive work. While men become identified with productive work in the public sphere, women come to be associated with domestic work in the private sphere. In recent years, we have witnessed a gradual change to the gendered contextualization of work. More women are seeking economically productive work and leaving the child-rearing and household tasks to secondary agents. While there is an obvious and recorded shift in work orientation among women, there is however no recorded corresponding shift among men. This notion of shifting role orientations or merging gender roles among members of a society forms the core of discussion in this article which narrates the experience of two individuals, who by virtue of their gender, evoke different responses from their fellow community members, but at the same time, share similar self-reflection and adaptation strategies.*

*Keywords: Gendering, Rungus, Kudat (Sabah), Roles, Work Orientation*

### ABSTRAK

*Peranan sosial mengikut gender telah memantapkan idea lelaki dan wanita mempunyai kecenderungan dan juga kemampuan semulajadi untuk memainkan peranan yang diberi. Daripada proses pembelajaran, ahli masyarakat mempelajari sistem pengkategorian itu dan sekaligus menghayati makna yang tersirat di dalamnya. Penghayatan ini mencetuskan kepercayaan bahawa sistem pengkategorian itu adalah yang semulajadi, maka diterima tanpa disoal tentang perbezaan kategori tadi. Namun, sistem pengkategorian gender dalam kehidupan sebenar mempunyai makna sosial yang berbeza. Keadaan itu menyebabkan lelaki membuat kerja yang dianggap produktif dari segi ekonomi, manakala wanita pula tidak sedemikian. Sejak beberapa*



*tahun ini, ramai wanita telah meninggalkan kerja domestik untuk membuat kerja-kerja yang dianggap produktif di luar rumah tangga. Kerja domestik itu pula diambil alih pembantu rumah, pengasuh anak atau pusat pra-sekolah. Tetapi, peralihan tugas semacam itu tidak berlaku di kalangan laki-laki. Persoalan utama yang cuba diperkatakan dalam rencana ini ialah apa akan jadi kepada individu apabila mereka melangkahi persempadanan gender itu. Isu ini telah ditinjau dalam hidup seorang lelaki dan seorang wanita kaum Rungus di Sabah. Mereka berkongsi masalah penyesuaian dan pengalaman pahit maung masing-masing.*

*Kata kunci: Penjantinaan, Rungus, Kudat (Sabah), Peranan, Kerja, Orientasi*

## INTRODUCTION

This article is about the life experiences of two individuals, a Rungus man and a Rungus woman who share a common situation. Married with children, they each have extra-gender roles due to a change in their marital circumstances. The man, Paokung, assumes his wife's roles when she became chronically ill after the birth of their eldest child in 1960. The illness recurred when the second and third sons were born in 1968 and 1974 respectively and has persisted to this present-day. The woman, Mulan, becomes a single parent when her husband left the family for another woman. Although both have extra-gender responsibilities, their personal experiences and public responses may be different due to the differential recognition and acceptance of the community on the basis of gender.

## ALL ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS

Most things in society fall into categories. People sharing the same cultural mode can expect, influence and interact with one another in mutually appropriate and acceptable ways. Society can then maintain social order as people have a sense of right and wrong and how they ought to behave (Jackson 1995: 129). The alternative scenario – a world without categories – means chaos and disorder. In this state, people have difficulty organising their thoughts and ordering their behaviours as they have no categories to anchor their sense of the world.

Membership defines our identities, statuses and roles, but more importantly, it indicates the value society ascribes to each category. The higher the value, the higher the category's prestige, status or power. Categorisation draws boundaries between categories and ranks them accordingly. Tsing (1993) and Church (1995) maintain that categories place their members in unequal positions of knowledge, power and control. Placement in categories becomes a 'site of



struggle' (Church 1995) for legitimacy and respect. A health carer, for example, may see a sick person as a 'patient' or a 'client'. A sick 'patient' may expect a patronising and subordinate relationship with the health carer. On the other hand, a sick 'client' may look forward to a respectful and equal relationship with the health carer. Be it 'patient' or 'client', the sick person does not exist as an individual in his or her own right, but as a member of a category so defined.

Membership in a category allows its members to feel they belong and have a legitimate right to be members of that category. It also limits and restricts movement from one category to another. Boundaries drawn to distinguish and separate members from different categories caused members to believe that boundaries are rigid and unchangeable. Consequently, when individuals cross boundaries, he or she is said to challenge the status quo and principle of legitimacy.

Barth (1996) calls these boundaries 'cognitive constructs' that people imposed on the world. He argues that these conceptual boundaries are not fixed realities. For example, land and sea, night and day, where does one end and the other begin? Boundaries are not barriers to communication, rather they are fluid and dynamic, connecting, defining and shaping the nature of the interaction. A day needs both 'night-time and day-time'. Earth needs both land and sea. Barth calls for 'the unhitching of the boundaries of categories' to allow us to see categories as connecting, rather than separating, constructs.

As social beings, we are members of a variety of categories, ascribed or achieved. Gender is one principle where society uses to categorise members and regulate their behaviours accordingly. At birth, we are either 'male' or 'female', then we become 'boy' or 'girl', and later 'man' or 'woman'. These categories carry significantly potent meanings that impact on the members' life chances. Woe beholds those who fall into neither of these dominant 'male' nor 'female' categories.

### SHIFTING BOUNDARIES AND DIFFERENTIAL EXPERIENCES

The gendering of women and men's roles in society marks the separation of women from and the integration of men in economically productive work. It also associates separation with low or subordinate status and integration with high or dominant status. Ehrenberg (1989) argues that social status is associated with food or economic production. When a category is ascribed such a role, its members are accorded high status. Otherwise, the members are accorded low status. Prehistoric women, according to Ehrenberg, enjoyed high and equal status with men because of their role as food providers. Men hunted wild animals, while women foraged and gathered natural growing plants. In Neolithic Age, women's high status and productive roles declined with the advent of agriculture – the domestication of plants and animals. It encouraged inventions such as plough, pottery and tools, leading to changes in residential patterns and



livelihood (nomadic to sedentary; domestication of animals, planting of crops, spinning and weaving). Herding of animals for use in agricultural activities and for food became significant tasks. Men became more prominent in doing such tasks, while women's role in farming began to decline significantly. As men began to take on agriculture work, their status increased, while the women's status declined. Women spent more time preparing food, taking care of the children, spinning and weaving yarn.

Boserup (1970: 2 & 211) gathers substantial data to illustrate the contributions women made in productive work. She argues that present-day people take for granted that men bring the food home and women prepare it. They cannot see women existing in any other role, except that of a housewife or domestic worker. Hence, women's role in the productive sector go unnoticed and unacknowledged. As a result, women become an invisible entity in development planning. Decision makers disregard the role and participation of women in the productive sector as well as their contribution to the economy. This neglect reflects their assumption of gender neutrality in the productive sector. This, Boserup maintains, not only affects the life chances of women in particular, it also denies the nation access to a vast potential of human resource.

Present-day women, therefore, have to contend with their dominant role in the private sphere (reproductive and domestic tasks) and their subordinate role in the public sphere (economically productive tasks). The men, on the other hand, have inherited their dominance in the public sphere and a lesser role in the private sphere. When women, in particular married women, step into the public sphere of the men, their new tasks are added on to their reproductive and domestic roles without corresponding change in the latter. They become burdened with triple roles – domestic, reproductive and productive roles. Men, on the other hand, are less likely to shoulder triple roles when they step into the private sphere of the women. It would be, therefore, argued that women, more than men, face increased role burden and constraints when they cross their gendered boundaries and disturb the social cognitions of these gendered boundaries.

#### THE RUNGUS COMMUNITY IN BRIEF

Mulan and Paokung belong to the Rungus community, an indigenous community residing predominantly in Kudat, Sabah, Malaysia. The Rungus people were and still are subsistence hill or dry padi farmers, living in rural villages, without basic amenities such as treated piped water, electricity supply, telephone and communication facilities, paved roads, limited access to educational facilities, health and social services and cash income. To help the Rungus people to diversify their means of livelihood and have access to cash income, the government and private enterprises encourage the Rungus to participate in the tourism sector, in particular ethnic-cum-culture tourism. The Rungus themselves



– their ethnic or cultural practices, lifestyle and livelihood – are transformed and packaged into commodities and marketed for tourist consumption.

Mulan's and Paokung's situation can be better understood in the context of gender relations within the Rungus community. For this, I referred Laura Appell's publication on the roles of Rungus men and women. Laura Appell did her research on Rungus while accompanying her husband, George Appell, when he did his Ph.D. on the Rungus community in 1959-60 and from 1961-63. Laura Appell's main thesis is:

while sex roles are not identical, they are equivalent and both behaviourally and ideologically, they are of equal importance for societal functioning. Male and female roles are primarily balanced in the household economy. For each skill exhibited by a male, there is an equally important one possessed by the female. This applies to household tasks, agricultural activities, hunting and gathering techniques, child rearing, etc. (1992: 4 & 30).

Appell concludes that "although the male and female roles are not identical, they complement each other and are of equal value. Therefore, it is better to say they are equivalent". She argues that Rungus female and male work made up an interdependent whole. Below is a list of Rungus male and female activities as she listed them:

Male activities	Female activities
<i>Agricultural</i>	
clearing and burning swiddens	clearing small debris before planting
planting, weeding, harvesting	planting, weeding, harvesting
<i>Care &amp; Raising Of Domestic Animals</i>	
dogs	pigs
water buffalo	chickens
<i>Hunting &amp; Gathering</i>	
hunting large game with spears	gathering snails and shellfish
fishing large fish with traps and nets	fishing small fish, shrimps with scoops
gathering honey and orchard fruits	gathering wild roots, nuts, berries and vegetables
<i>Domestic</i>	
collecting firewood	carrying water and husking padi
tending children	tending children
making knives, rope, fish traps,	weaving, dyeing, sewing, making
carrying baskets	winnowing trays and baskets for general household use



*continued*

Male activities	Female activities
<i>Property Accumulation</i> marketing of agricultural surpluses bargaining for purchase of brassware and gongs	selling woven materials paying spirit mediums for curing illness and righting ritual imbalance
<i>Child Rearing</i> midwifery secondary role in child rearing	ritual aspects of birth primary role in child rearing
<i>Ritual</i> ceremonies for swiddens ceremonies for property	spirit medium – ceremonies for domestic family and village
<i>Political activities</i> participation in village moot headmanship	advise husbands in village moot

Appell's list suggests that Rungus women participate in food production, although their activities are different from those of men. Referring to Boserup's and Ehrenberg's theses referred earlier, it seems likely that Appell shares similar view with her assertion that Rungus women and men have equivalent roles in economic production.

Although Appell emphasises the balanced and equivalent gender roles between Rungus men and women, she does not categorically state that both men and women have equal status in the family and community. By "equivalent", does she mean "equal"? During the time of her research, most high-ranked positions were held by men – village chief, Council of Elders and village midwife. There was one position in which women were very visible, that is, as spirit mediums or priestess, *bobolizan*. *Bobolizan* acts as mediator between the seen and unseen, between the Rungus people and the spirit world. During her research in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The main means of livelihood for the Rungus community was dry or hill padi farming (shifting cultivation). Rungus men and women worked together to prepare the land for cultivation – clearing, cutting, chopping, burning, planting, weeding and harvesting. Present-day Rungus men and women continue with this pattern of gendered division of labour. There are exceptions, for example, in my fieldwork in 1997 as several Tinangol women are known for their prowess in the clearing tasks – a predominantly male activity. These women informed me that they had much practice as their husbands could not help with the farm work.

In addition, the years between 1952-1973 marked a distinct change in the lives of Rungus people. The Basel Mission arrived in Kudat, Sabah and spread



the Christian religion to the Rungus villagers living in the interior. To win their hearts and minds to the Mission's evangelical cause, the missionaries introduced the pagan Rungus to new ways of doing things, particularly in education, health care and agriculture. They built primary schools, dispensaries and clinics in the villages, introduced adult literacy classes, new farming methods and crops. They encouraged Rungus people to engage in income generating activities such as growing commercial crops like coconuts, cocoa, tropical fruits and making handicrafts for sale. Rungus men were also persuaded to join Basel Mission and undergo training at the newly established Bible Training School in 1965 at Bavanggazo village. For the Rungus women, the Basel Mission set up the Domestic Science School in 1966 at Tinangol village, two miles from Bavanggazo, to be good wives and mothers. In 1995, the school became a handicraft training centre specialising in beadwork, weaving, embroidery for Rungus women. It was renamed Women's Skills Centre.

Following that, handicraft production gradually becomes identified as 'women's work' as women become increasingly interested in producing handicraft for sale. The longhouse or single unit house assumes an extra dimension for the women as it becomes both a home and a productive workplace, replacing the farm or field as place of work. Correspondingly, handicraft production provides the alternative to farm work as the former seems more attractive to the women as it offers them access to cash income. Indeed, the Rungus women are found to emphasise more on the commercial benefits of making handicraft. Their general responses: "For handicraft, we only need to sit down and make it; no need to work under the hot sun, no sweating, doing heavy, manual work; and we have money at the end when we sell to the tourists or the agents, unlike working in the farm".

In this article, it is argued that the Basel Mission plays a significant role in bringing about changes to the status and roles of Rungus men and women. Research data collected does indicate a distinctive hierarchy in the minds of the Rungus people with regard to the place of women and men in the community. Men are said to be more dominant in terms of decision making and leadership. The state and nature of gender relations in the Rungus community might have moved from egalitarian (Appell 1965, 1988 & 1992) where both men and women engaged in food production, to separate and unequal status (initiated by Basel Mission) with men continuing with food production and women concentrating on domestic and reproductive tasks. The women's involvement in handicraft production, however, adds a new dimension. The women's status may have been affected by their disassociation with food production. Present-day Rungus women, however, have re-established their link with economically productive work through their involvement in handicraft making aided by the tourism industry and handicraft business. This productive link and money earning capacity have given the women a renewed sense of empowerment. Some of the women informants do not feel obliged to disclose their handicraft earnings to



their husbands. Most of their husbands are full-time farmers with little or limited cash income. Hence, the women use their earnings to supplement the family's expenditure and children's education. Some of the husbands have paid jobs, but the women informed us that men are more inclined to spend the money on drinks and cigarettes. Hence, the women either do not disclose their actual earnings to their husbands or quote a lesser amount.

Both Mulan and Paokung, the two references for this paper, live in this scenario of gendered ranking of status and division of labour. By crossing the boundaries of their respective categories, they have become fodder for public scrutiny and criticism. Through their individual account of their personal and public responses to their extra-gender existence, we see how each of them cope with their predicament and the nature of social support they receive from their respective families and community members.

### PAOKUNG'S STORY: MAN IN WOMAN'S *SARONG*

#### PAOKUNG: THE FAMILY MAN

Paokung, aged 62, is a full-time farmer. He and his wife, Itoi, aged 59, live in a longhouse together with 24 other households in his village. They have three adult sons. The eldest, aged 35, worked as a forestry official but is temporarily on half-pay leave. He is married with 3 young children, 11, 8 and 6 years old. His wife is a midwife working at the village dispensary. The family lives in a house owned by the government. The second son, aged 29, is single and unemployed. Occasionally, he finds work as an odd-job labourer and stays with his parents in the longhouse when he is in the village. The third son, aged 25, is married with 2 children (2 years old and 2 months old). He lives with his wife who belongs to another ethnic group in her hometown. When he comes home to the village, he and his family stay with Paokung.

Paokung has divided his land among his three sons. They have no permanent jobs. The land provides an alternative or contingency for them to do something productive. "It is better if I was the one without food or clothes rather than my sons. They are still young while I am only a step away from the grave," Paokung says to me. The sons, however, are not interested in farming or living in the village. Hence, while his sons look elsewhere for work and help him in the fields whenever they feel like it, Paokung continues to work alone on the land that now does not belong to him. He plants mainly dry or hill padi and maize. In 1996 and 1997, his padi field was five acres. He also has a three-acre coconut plantation. Occasionally, his two elder sons help him with the farm work. In addition, Paokung joins the mutual-aid system in the village for farming tasks, like clearing the land for planting the padi, burning, planting and harvesting. For Paokung, "work" revolves around doing economically unproductive work, that is, planting dry padi once a year, which constitutes a year-long activity. The



work begins with clearing the area in June or early July to burning and re-burning July or August, to planting maize in August, then padi in September, weeding and re-weeding in October to January and finally, harvesting in April.

A self-educated man, he first learned to read and write from a friend, a police officer. When the Basel Mission introduced adult classes in the village to teach the villagers the 3Rs in the late 1950s, Paokung joined these classes for a year. His wife, Itoi, suffers from chronic illnesses and mental stress. She began to have health problems after giving birth to the eldest son in 1962. Thereafter, her condition worsened when she gave birth to the second and third sons. She could not take care of the children, do housework or work in the fields. Since 1995, however, she seemed to have recovered greatly and is now able to do some housework. Presently, she spends most of her time at home doing beadwork with the hope of earning some cash income.

Because of his wife's indisposition, Paokung had to take care of his children when they were born and throughout their growing years. When he worked in the field, he brought the child with him, put him in the cloth cradle hung over a beam in the shelter. His wife could not breastfeed and he himself had no breastmilk to feed the baby. Fortunately, the village dispensary gave free milk powder, hence, he fed his sons with milk powder. At nights, he would be the one to get up and tend to his children when they cried or were ill. Since he had to look after his sick wife and his young sons all by himself, with occasional help from one of his sisters-in-law, Paokung says he was unable to have a large padi field nor do the things he had planned to do once he got married. He wanted to rear poultry, pigs, buffaloes, make musical instruments and weave baskets as part of his plan to engage in economically productive work and have some access to cash income. But it was not to be. His daily life was occupied with working in the field, looking after the children and sick wife, gathering food, firewood, doing the household tasks – washing, cleaning, preparing food and cooking. Rungus customary practice dictates that people worked in pairs or groups but Paokung says this is applicable to couples or people without problems. For him, he has been working alone since the early 1960s and has got used to being alone. One villager informs that Paokung's face has a "permanent grimace or scowl". That is why, she continues, his sons do not like to work with him. Paokung himself acknowledges that he is so used to being and working alone in the field that people think he does not need help or excludes himself from others. He reasons that he has no one in his immediate family to help him: his wife is frequently ill and his sons are not too interested in farm work. He knows many Rungus men will not do what he does. In his case, if he does not do it, who then? He has to be the one since he is the able one and also, he cannot depend on others for his family needs. Paokung maintains that he does not feel ashamed or inferior over his 'extra-gender role' because it is his destiny or luck. "I have to accept my destiny ... fated to have a wife who is always sick, sons who are not interested in farm work



and no daughters to help with housework. So, why should I be ashamed to do all the work”?

Paokung says his wife wants to help with the housework and farm work. But, he does not allow her as it may aggravate her condition. Instead, he asks her to stay at home and rest. He takes care of her because he loves her. Despite all these efforts, he knows neighbours have been passing unfavourable comments about him – that he mistreats and physically abuses his wife. He says it is his wife’s relatives who spread rumours that he is a bad-tempered, foul-mouthed, impatient, fussy and demanding man. They blame him for his wife’s illness and inability to work. Paokung says the Rungus are inclined to blame others as they will then be able to demand compensation (gong and/or brassware) from the perpetrator. Paokung will not succumb to the bait as he believed he has done nothing wrong. He admits, however, hitting his wife once on the cheek many years ago, when she accused him of having an affair. As a village elder, Paokung was frequently asked by villagers from within or outside his village to help settle disputes or arguments. He had to travel often and at times, came home late. Paokung informed his wife of his whereabouts and purpose, but she thought otherwise.

While some villagers claim he is too demanding; others say he is too soft, spoiling his wife and children by doing all the work himself. One villager informs that Paokung’s wife is very lazy and just putting on an act of being sick all the time: “If she walks alone, she walks fast and energetic. If Paokung walks with her, she pretends she cannot walk fast and takes a walking stick. She is able to do work in the field and in the house but does not want to. Just lazy, that is what she is”.

#### PAOKUNG THE COMMUNITY LEADER

Paokung was a former chairperson of the Village Development and Security Committee from 1989 to 1992. He received monthly allowances from the government. His responsibilities included working together with the village chief in safeguarding the security of the village, planning development projects together with the villagers and applying for government sponsorship. Together with the village chief and several other villagers knowledgeable in Rungus customs, laws and sanctions, Paokung is a member of the Council of Elders in the village. The Council acts as a magistrate or Justice of Peace. Paokung says people usually come to him for help, causing some other council elders to remark that Paokung is hoarding the limelight to himself or showing off his prowess. Paokung says it is not easy being an arbitrator because “you don’t know the problem before being called and you have to make decision there and then. You have to be patient and tactful, gentle and mindful of raw nerves and heightened emotions. You have to accept that the event has occurred and move on from there”. His strategy is to allow others to speak first and he listens. This is where the richness of vocabulary and power of words comes into play. The words and the way



they are used may mean success or failure in arbitration or negotiation. Paokung tries to cool the hearts of the parties involved by adopting an indirect, soft approach. For example, he says to the perpetrator: "Your action is not a conscious or deliberate one; it is truly a mistake, unintentionally done. Everybody makes mistakes, you know this too". According to him, a direct, attacking approach such as: "You are useless, can't you think of something better to do than this? It is better you go away from this village" – would make matters worse as the perpetrator would feel threatened and become hostile. Hence, a council elder may be knowledgeable in Rungus customs, laws and sanctions but it does not mean he knows how to use his knowledge wisely and effectively. Aulun adat is an expert on Rungus customs; but he is a *kihukum*, a wise person, when he knows how to apply his knowledge to the case at hand and solve the dispute in a way that allow the parties concerned to feel comfortable with the verdict with his honour and pride intact. Paokung is happy that people still refer to and approach the village elders. It is an indication of their continuing respect for the elders and the village way of settling disputes. He says being a ulun adat and *kihukum* involves creativity, hence it is an art that has to be mastered over time. His role model is his father who was a village chief and well-respected *kihukum* in his day.

#### SCALING THE HILLS – PAOKUNG, THE MAN OF UNREALISED DREAMS

"How can anyone be rich and have a happy life if the wife or husband is always sick?" is Paokung's lament on his fate. Time passed without him achieving most of the plans he had made. He considers himself perpetually poor in monetary term, because his wife's persistent illness requires expenses for medication, whether traditional healing or modern medicine; because almost all his material possessions – livestock, heritage gongs, brasswares, jars, some cash savings – were all used for her treatment, as means of payment (*suul*) and gifts (*insanong*) in exchange for the services rendered by the spirit medium and village healers as well as expenses for hospital treatment, because he and his sons have no paid employment, hence no regular source of income; and because he only has a small plot of dry or hill padi field and coconut plantation.

Life in the earlier years of marriage was miserable for his family. He could not do many things at one time by himself. On many occasions, their sole meal was rice. One of his younger brothers as well as the Basel Missionaries helped out by giving him food sometimes.

"Why don't you remarry?" – such is the constant encouragement from kin and neighbours alike. They think he deserves to remarry since his wife is of "no use" to him. Needless to say, Paokung constantly finds himself the subject of uninvited match-making and proposals. His wife too tries to persuade him to remarry. She feels sorry for him as she cannot be a proper wife to him. Paokung says it is easy to leave his wife or have a second wife: "That is what many people would do, but I am not like these people. I do not want another wife. What if I



was the one who was sick and my wife left me for another man? How would I feel then? What would I do?" He says he has difficulty to support one wife and one family. How then could he support two wives and two families?

Paokung asserts that he loves his wife despite her condition and inability to fulfil her role as a wife and mother. He says this sounds like he is praising himself, but it indicates his love for her: "How else could I have stayed by her and with her all these years? My love and care for her is steadfast (*opihot dot ginavo*), enduring (*alanut dot ginavo*) and ever-growing (*okosog dot ginavo*). He is not angry or disillusioned with his situation. "What is the point of being angry? I am poor, I do my wife's work, I am not ashamed. I am a responsible man, husband and father and I do all these because things could not have been better. Anyway, it could have been worse".

"If I think too much, I have these headaches and could go crazy" – Paokung feels burdened with his extra-gender roles and being the only person to do them. Nevertheless, he has learned to schedule his work on a real and practical basis, to do things in their own time and pace: "The work is always there, why rush and hurry? When we do the work hastily in this hot and humid weather, we tire easily. We won't sustain long. Moreover, we are our own boss, so we can work, stop, rest, chew our betel leaves and nuts, talk, continue work. Little by little, slowly but steadily progressing, we will accomplish our work in the end".

Paokung represents the older generation of Rungus male – men in their fifties and above, who work full-time on the field, cultivating food crops like dry or hill padi, maize, tapioca and small plot of coconut trees as the main cash crop. Paokung and people like him live their daily lives around their farming activities: daily, from morning to evening, they go to their fields, some, needing only a few minutes walk, others, a couple of hours walk. When in the field, they keep themselves going by taking occasional breaks and chewing the ubiquitous betel nut and leaves. He could go without rice for a day and still feel energetic, but not the betel nut. These farming activities, each with its own season and necessary tasks, connect Paokung to his fellow villagers. Everybody does the same activity and task almost at the same time. They help one another through the mutual-aid exchange system or wage-labour service, involving villagers from the same or different villages. Yet, Paokung is different from his fellow males in one significant way – he is also a "housewife". Someone says "he is like a woman, doing the work woman does at home". Paokung knows and he knows that others know that at home, he is "a man wearing the woman's *sarong*".

## MULAN'S STORY – WOMAN IN MAN'S TROUSERS

### MULAN, THE ESTRANGED WIFE

Mulan, aged 35, married in 1985 when she was 22 and he, 24. The husband was a former parish priest. She met him when she was working at a primary school in



his village. Together, they built a wooden house where they lived with their four sons from 1985 until June 1996, when the husband decided to leave Mulan for another woman, who was then 5 months pregnant. Mulan, who was herself 6 months pregnant, and her sons aged 11, 10, 4 and 2, returned to her village. She stays in her mother's single wooden and bamboo house. The house has three small rooms, one for her mother and younger sister; one for a younger brother, his wife and their two-month old son; and one for Mulan and her sons. Her husband continues to live in the house they had jointly built. When his church authorities knew of his actions, they stripped him of his priesthood.

In September 1996, Mulan gave birth to her youngest son. After leaving his family, the husband did not visit, contact nor send any remittances to help Mulan support the family. In April 1997, however, he began to re-establish contact. He visited his family and informed Mulan and her kin that he wanted to return to them. Mulan was not prepared for a reconciliation. She had made the necessary moves for a divorce – her application for divorce was, as at September 1997, pending a meeting among members of the district tribunal at the Kudat District Office, awaiting their decision to forward the case to the Kota Kinabalu High Court.

Her husband told Mulan and her kin that he had not had a happy life with the 'second wife'. He has decided to leave her and return to Mulan. When Mulan informed him that she has no intention for reconciliation and that he has no right to come and go as he wished, the husband told Mulan she has no choice as they are still husband and wife. He said he would leave the 'second wife' but to give him time to do so. In the meantime, Mulan should accept him and treat him like a husband. The husband continues to go to Mulan's village. His three younger sons do not mind to be with him. The two older sons, together with Mulan, keep their distance. Mulan's mother, elder sister and brother-in-law try to persuade Mulan to relent and accept her husband. Neighbours are talking about her husband's regular visits and wondering what is happening. For Mulan, the husband's re-appearance is causing much pain and trauma. Personally, she wants a divorce but when she thinks of her children without a father, her decisiveness wavers. Mulan asks her two older sons how they feel about their father. The eldest son says it is up to her. The second son says he has no feelings for the father. The father does not visit them or help them when they need him. When they are sick, the father does not come to see them. His mother, Mulan, has to do everything, working in the school, in the farm, taking care of them. Hence, the second son says it is better if the father leaves them completely. They can manage even better with the mother alone. The second son wrote a letter to his father and asked Mulan to give it to the father. When the father read the letter, he cried. He confronted Mulan and showed her the letter. He accused her of teaching the boy to write in that manner. Mulan said the boy did it himself. In his letter, the boy asked the father: "Are you our father or uncle? We call you uncle, so you must be our uncle. If you are our father, why are you



not living with us? Who is our mother? Is she the one who is living with you at your village or is she the one living with us and whom we call mother?" His children call him "uncle" even though they know, especially the two older sons, he is their father.

Torn between her own interests and the children's well-being, Mulan decides to accept her husband on condition that he leaves the 'second wife' first. He had left his "first" family and lived with the other woman without fulfilling the relevant rituals and ceremonies. Now, that he wishes to return to his "first" family and leave his "second" family, he has to do it the proper way. Mulan does not want the other woman to encounter the same situation. Unfortunately, the husband shows no signs of doing anything for the moment. Meanwhile, he continues to come to the house, expecting his wife and her family to treat him kindly. He comes and goes without a care to the attention and gossip his visits have created among the villagers. Mulan has to contend with the queries and insinuations from her friends, neighbours and family members with regard to the present development. Is she back with her husband? Is he leaving the other woman? Does Mulan agree to be the first wife, so that he could have both women as co-wives?

Mulan is very troubled by her husband's return and his reluctance to commit himself to the conditions. She feels she is losing control of her life, having to wait for the husband to decide what he wants to do. She begins to have headaches and heart palpitations. I completed my fieldwork in October 1997 and returned to Edinburgh. We correspond with each other but our mails are not regular. To post a letter, Mulan has to go to Kudat town, some 24 miles from her village. Until December 1998, there is no further development on her husband's part as well as the divorce proceedings. But, one factor persists: Mulan continues to be troubled by her husband's presence. Her headaches worsened, preventing her to work for some weeks. The strain of putting up with her husband's behaviour, the family's instigation and the villagers' insinuations are taking toll on her. As a woman, they feel she should relent and be "soft" on her husband. "What is wrong with being a co-wife? You can let him come back to you before he leaves the other woman, this way, your sons could have their father back," they told her.

#### MULAN, THE FAMILY PROVIDER AND HOMEMAKER

Mulan is a dual-career woman. She has a half-day job as a typist-cum-clerk in a government primary school. Her monthly salary is based on the number of working days at RM16 per day. Her half-day job at the primary school not only gives her access to cash money, but also allows her to work in the field during the other half of the day. Mulan's wages goes to the family's daily household expenses, including her extended family. Her wages are insufficient to see her through the month, as she has to use some of the money to pay the monthly loan for her motorcycle. Sometimes her elder sister or brother-in-law has to help her to



pay this motorcycle loan, so that it will not be repossessed. Mulan says this is a common practice in her family where the siblings help one another financially. While waiting for her 'O' level results back in 1983, she found a job at a plastic factory in Kota Kinabalu, getting RM250 per month. She sent half the money home for her siblings' school expenses.

Mulan's high regard for her government job, although temporary and daily paid, is indicated by her reluctance to give up the job when she accepts a new posting to a rural school located in another district, some 120 miles away. It is a promotion to a monthly paid, permanent post. Despite being a single parent, with five young sons in tow – two currently attending school and two still being breastfed, Mulan is willing to make the move. She says she may have to leave the three older sons with her mother and take the two younger ones with her. She has a younger sister living in the district she was going. She can leave her sons with the sister and her family. In addition, she can borrow a piece of land from the sister which she can work on during the weekends. Such is her desire to hold on to the job that she has thought of all her possibilities. Mulan has to report at the school before the September 1st, 1997. Together we went to the school, each riding our respective motorcycles. There is no public transport to the school and the journey involves long stretches of uphill gravel road, locally called "timber roads" that are frequently used by lorries transporting logs from logging area. In the meantime, Mulan has appealed for a transfer to any school located in Matunggong, where her village is located. For this, we went to the Education Office at Pitas (the district for her new school), the Education Office at Kudat (the district for her former school) and the State Education Department at Kota Kinabalu, the capital. While waiting for the outcome, Mulan worked at the new school for several days, travelling daily on her motorcycle (for which she has no licence yet!). Fortunately, in December 1997, she received the good news. She is posted to a school at Matunggong, about ten miles from her village. Later, in February 1998, she was re-posted to another school, this time, one that was nearer home, about 4 miles away. To date, she is still in this school.

A day in her life normally goes like this: in the morning, she prepares breakfast for her family and helps her elder sons get ready for school; then she herself sets off for work. At mid-day, she finishes work at the school and returns home. Occasionally, her youngest sister or sister-in-law prepares the lunch; but usually, Mulan comes home to find nobody has cooked lunch. She would have to cook then. After lunch, she goes to her farm, about a mile away. She brings the third and fourth sons with her, but leaves her youngest son with her mother or sister. The two eldest sons help her with the farm work when they do not have extra-curricular activities in the afternoons. They do not mind working in the farm, but since living with their grandmother and aunt, they do not want to help with the cooking and washing.

Apart from the occasional help from her mother and the mutual-aid service system for certain farming activities, Mulan does the farm work alone – clearing



the land, slashing, chopping, cutting, burning; spraying insecticides and weeding; planting; harvesting. She plants maize, dry or hill padi (both as food crops) and tapioca (cash crop) on her 5-acre field. Mulan plans her daily life around her farming activities – what, when, where and how much to do. Mulan says she is used to doing farm work at an early age. During the school holidays, she worked in oil palm plantations as a contract worker. She did the men's work – clearing, chopping, cutting, burning. At home, she helped her father as she had no elder brothers.

In the evenings, when she returns home from the field, she cooks the dinner and later, washes her family's clothes at the village well. A day in her life therefore revolves around working half day at school and half day at the farm. In between, it is housework and tending to the children. During the weekends, her activities include attending meetings or participating in the activities organised by the church. Mulan is a committee member (women's section) in her village church.

#### BUILDING DREAMS – MULAN, THE WOMAN WHO DOES NOT SAY 'DIE'

As an estranged wife, Mulan may have more than she can handle – her single parent status, her extra-gender roles and responsibilities, her part-time job, her family members' persistent questioning of her unwillingness to accept her husband unconditionally and the neighbours' constant gossip about her marital situation. The villagers view her as "the wife left by the husband or abandoned wife". This knowledge certainly affects Mulan's self-image and self-esteem. The villagers ask why did the husband find comfort in other women? The last affair was not the first one. Mulan cannot help but think the villagers believe it is her fault that the husband left her for another woman. Someone commented that Mulan is too independent. She acts as though she does not need a man in her life. Rungus women apparently do not ride the motorcycle. The villagers make allowances for women who are engaged in the retail business as they need the motorcycle to transport their goods and get to the marketplace. But, Mulan is not a trader but she goes everywhere on her Honda motorcycle. She works on her land, doing all the male-associated tasks. When the husband left her at her mother's place, Mulan built her own house, annexed to her mother's house. She drew the plan of the one-bedroomed house, complete with design, building materials and estimated time schedule and financial cost. She collected the logs, wood and bamboo herself. Her brother-in-law helped to process the sawn planks (she footed the fuel expenses) and she bought the zinc and thatched palm leaves. Apart from her brother-in-law's help with processing the planks and fixing the roofs, Mulan did most of the construction work by herself, finding time during the weekends or public holidays. We had the opportunity to witness the gradual development of the house building which was completed in April 1998. In August 1998, Mulan sent us a photo of the completed house. Mulan finally



accomplished what she has desired: a house for herself and her sons. No matter what her situation may be, she is comforted by the knowledge that she has a roof and a home for her sons and herself.

Mulan has planned a list of short and long-term projects, starting with the house building. Next on her agenda is chicken rearing. She intends to buy four male chickens and forty female chickens and build a chicken house for them. Her other projects include planting more tapioca (which she has done on a gradual basis) and enlarging her vegetable plot so that she can plant more vegetables for sale. In mid-1997, she started a joint project with her elder sister making and selling banana and tapioca crisps. They made the crisps every other day during the nights so that Mulan could deliver the packets to the sundry shops and school canteen on her way to school. The business continued until her elder sister gave birth in March 1998. Alone to handle the preparation and cooking, Mulan could only make the crisps during the weekends. Since August 1998, we have not news about the project from Mulan.

Mulan feels much harassed with her role as a single parent. She feels very alone in decision making and managing her children and her life. On disciplining the children, for example, she feels she has to be more strict with them. She does not want them to think they can get away with her being alone, that she cannot handle them. On the other hand, she pities them because they have no father. She also wants to do more for her mother. Since returning to her mother's house after the separation, her mother has been a pillar of support and strength. Despite her frailty, preoccupation with farm work and recent bereavement (Mulan's father died in July 1995, a year before Mulan's separation from her husband), her mother goes out of her way to look after the children, while Mulan goes to work in the school and at the farm.

Mulan says she thinks about her situation all the time, how to cope, how to make things better, what to do. With five young children, all needing her attention and other demands at her workplace, she is certainly wearing more hats than she can possibly manage. Like Paokung, she accepts her life situation as destiny. Yet, she does not want to succumb to the situation and allow it to take hold of her. Thus, she carries on, fulfilling her role as mother and father and working on her plans and projects.

## CONCLUSION

Both Paokung and Mulan find their extra-gender roles very stressful and limiting. Besides shouldering the double work burden, they have to put up with persistent pressure from relatives, neighbours and friends to do something about their situation. For Paokung, it is either to divorce his wife or get a second wife. For Mulan, her family and fellow villagers encourage her to return to her husband, even if he does not want to leave his second wife. According to them, the



children will be better off with a father than with no father at all. Both suffer from constant headaches, thinking about their situation.

Paokung has lived with his situation for nearly 38 years. He has somewhat reconciled himself with his predicament, especially now that his sons are all grown up. Mulan, on the other hand, feels betrayed and responsible for the separation. She loved her husband, but has had enough of his sexual misbehaviour. She struggles to come to terms with her predicament. Presently, her estrangement is the talk of the village. Even her own family members are angry at her stubborn refusal to return to her husband without conditions. She has to occupy herself with work, not only for the subsistence it provides but more importantly, to take her mind off unwanted thoughts and anxieties.

Paokung's position as a village elder enables him to enjoy an honoured position within and outside his own village. His extra-gender role does not affect his reputation significantly as he has gained a tremendous amount of respect as a village elder among the Rungus people. Mulan, as a woman, has no such leadership position or cultural skills to help elevate her 'tarnished' reputation as an abandoned wife. Her extra-gender role evokes criticism and innuendoes from the community.

Paokung and Mulan share a common situation; but the problems they face differ in nature and extent, principally because they both belong to different gender categories. Both aim to be recognised as individuals with their own right despite having extra-gender roles. Nevertheless, the struggle for legitimacy poses to be a greater problem for Mulan than it is for Paokung.

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