On the Sulu Sea

This book is of a Borneo village on the Sulu Sea. The rain thundering on the zinc roofs. The tinkle of an empty can as waves push it against the poles of a house. Medicine sessions at night and talk of timber royalties in the morning. The house shaking when young girls and boys dance the Travolta. Being swept by panic at the rumour that headhunters have been sighted.

It is of everyday talk in the village shops. Washing clothes at the public tap under the bamboo grove. The smell of frying fish. And the hush at twilight as the village goes silent at the time of evening prayer.

Supriya Singh

On the Sulu Sea

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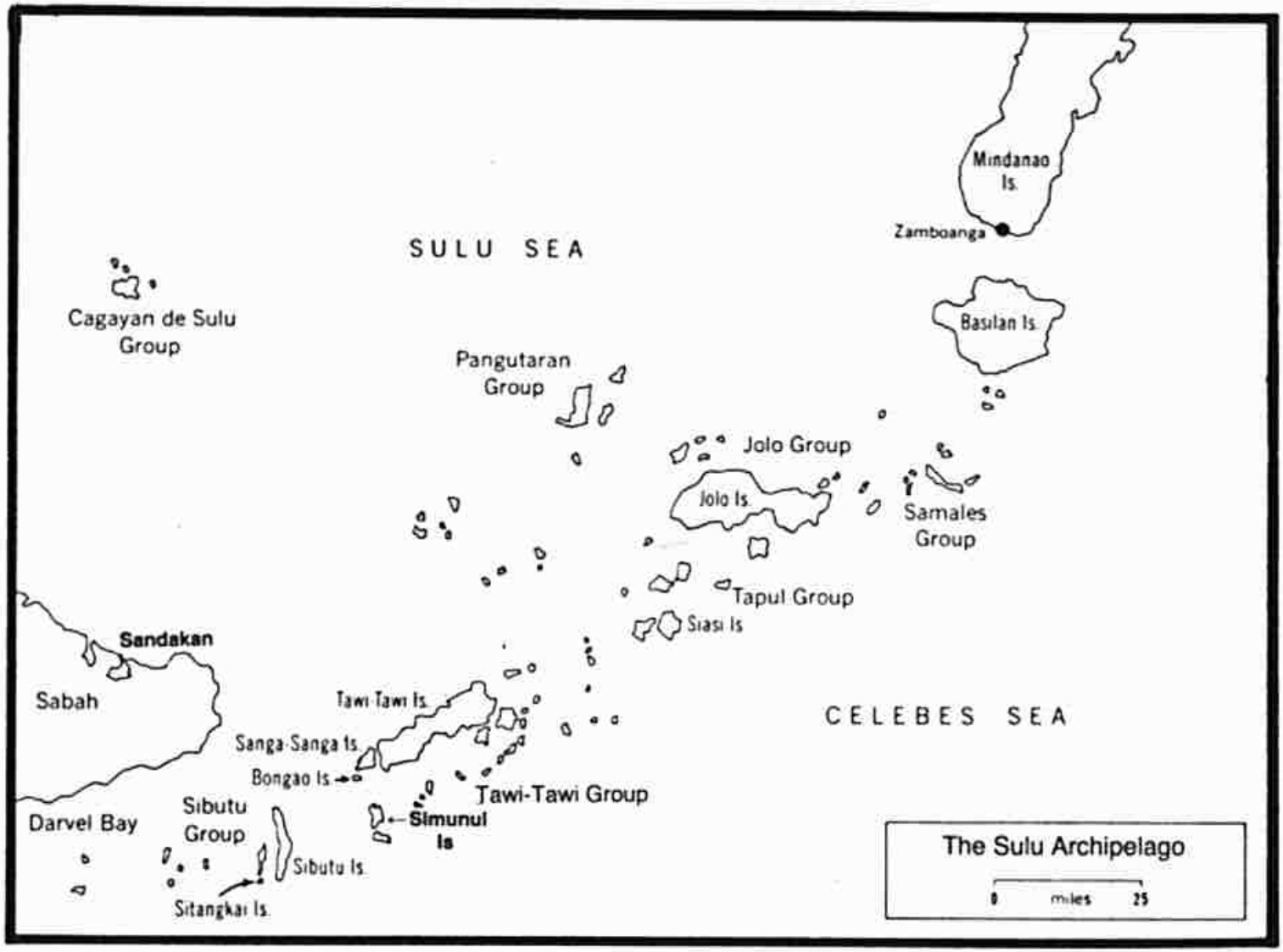
For my mother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Cagayan de Sulu Group
Basilan Is.
Pangutaran Group
Jolo Group
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Tapul Group
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Sanga-Sanga Is.
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Preface

I stayed in Kampung Bokara for eight months, from December 1978 to August 1979. Kampung Bokara is in Sandakan, on the north east coast of Borneo. It is part of the Malaysian state of Sabah. The village is four miles from the Sandakan town centre. It is the oldest urban village in Sabah, with its houses built on land and sea. In 1979 it was a fair sized village with 929 people and 67 houses.

The people of the village used to be fishermen. Now nearly half of them work with the government or in the timber industry. This has made the village rich. It is now known for its Mercedes cars and the heavy gold chains the women wear.

What sets Kampung Bokara apart from the neighbouring villages is that it is a Simunul Bajau village. Most of its people trace their origin from Simunul Island. This is part of the Tawi-Tawi group of islands in the Southern Philippines.

Over the years, because of intermarriage, the village has become multi-ethnic. In 1979, there were 21 communities represented in Bokara. Despite this, the language of the village is Simunul. Though there are many words which are similar in Malay and Simunul, Simunul is a different language. It belongs to the Sama-Bajau subgroup of the Austronesian language family.

The Bajau community group is composed of many diverse groups spread largely in the Southern Philippines, Sabah and Indonesia. In Sabah, according to the 1970 Population and Housing Census, the Bajaus were the largest indigenous Muslim community group, numbering 77,271 persons and forming 11.8 per cent of Sabah's population. These are the latest figures available, for in 1980 the Bajaus were no longer enumerated separately in the Census.

Kampung Bokara is a village bound by a common language, Islam and kinship ties. A statement one always hears in the village is, "We are kin. There are no strangers here."

In December 1978, I was the stranger in this village on the Sulu Sea.


126 Miles
1 Inch.
Kota Belud
Labuk & Sugut
KOTA KINABALU
Beluran
Sandakan
Sabah
Lahad Datu
Tawau

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Part one

The house rocks

The house rocks as the waves hit it. The village is silent. The only constant sound is the waves lapping against the houses. A log bangs against the poles on which the house stands. Can it take this continuous buffeting?

It begins to rain. In the town it rains. Here it falls thundering on the zinc roof drowning out the rest of the world. Then it is quiet again and the frogs begin to croak.

It is only now I allow myself a sense of panic. The small room I rent in Si Sai's house in Kampung Bokara feels strange on my first night. I am still unused to its shadows in the night.

What will it be like to live in a village? Alone in a rented room in a strange house? A woman alone in a traditional environment? An Indian among the Simunul Bajaus, a Sikh among Muslims?

Already I miss my children who have remained behind in Sandakan town with their father. Sandakan town is only four miles away, but a room in a house on the Sulu Sea seems far away from an apartment in a multi-storey building in town.

After a week's stay in the *kampung*, that is the village, everybody still wonders about me. The usual questions are: Where are you from? You live here? Your husband? In Sandakan? Isn't he angry that you live apart from him? Do you have children? How many? How old are they? Only eight and nine? Don't you miss them? Boys or girls? Boys only? Now you must have a girl, everybody says without fail.

Then back it is to the first question. You mean you live here? With a family? How much is the rent? Who cooks? You eat with them? How do you eat? Do you really eat with your hands? You are learning how to speak Simunul? Within three months you will 'pass'. Now you must also learn Sulu. It is more refined.

The litany goes on everyday. After a week, I have the answers all pat. I start out by explaining that I would live

in the kampung for eight months as this is one of the requirements for my postgraduate degree in Sociology. There is one girl here who knows about dissertations and fieldwork. The others remember having heard of an *Orang German* — their expression for any white man — he lived in Semporna, a town further east, among the Bajau Laut.

This might be understandable in a white man. In a Malaysian and a woman, it takes a little getting used to. So they keep on quizzing me, flattered that somebody should want to write them up, but still very curious.

They ask me again and receive the same answers. Still not satisfied, they ask Si Sai. 'Si' by the way is nearly always used before a name. It is as if without it, the name stands naked. The question which is always asked is: Can she eat with her hands? Does she eat rice? It is only when they hear it straight from Si Sai herself that I stop being the social equivalent of a visitor from outer space. To clinch the matter, she tells them I have even had their traditional steamed tapioca and coconut dish, *putu*. And with this they are eminently satisfied.

When I go to the neighbouring kampung for an engagement feast, I feel like a prize cow. The same kind of questions and answers fly over my head. The kampung women have a short precise answer to explain my presence. "It is a course," they say. And immediately all this seemingly inexplicable behaviour becomes legitimate.

If the course legitimises my presence in the village for the people, it also legitimises it for myself. The reason is true enough. I am here to do fieldwork for a postgraduate dissertation on "The Simunul Bajaus of Kampung Bokara", but it is more than that.

The degree itself is a way of escaping a disintegrating marriage and a means of getting to some kind of economic independence. But I am not going to tell the women any of this. So they keep wondering why my husband does not get angry and how I was able to persuade him to let me come and live here.

Escaping the marriage bit is important but it is not only that. There are times when I wonder whether this whole project is not just the romanticism of a confirmed urbanite

— the natural beauty, human goodness and warmth of the village stereotype.

Having grown up in Delhi, I am a city person. When I came to Malaysia after marriage, I imagined villages, especially Malaysian villages, in the image of the roadside paintings — houses on stilts, in silhouette with the setting sun and coconut palms behind them.

In Sandakan, the reality did not offer padi fields and coconut trees. I replaced it with a picture of houses over the sea, small boats bobbing on the waves, fishermen returning with the catch and moonlight glistening on the water.

It does not take long for the romanticism to disappear. The first day I stay in the kampung, I lose $100 and learn that in an open door house where many people and children come and go, you cannot leave valuables lying around.

Whatever other rosy preconceptions I had, vanish when I get nipped by a rat. At first I think that since the house is over the sea, it cannot be a rat. But it is the ideal environment from the rat's point of view. Rats live in the roof and eat on the sea bed for the tide brings up all the garbage of the sea and deposits it literally at the doorstep.

Every night when the lights go off, it is rat time. They perch on the skylights, on the partition between the rooms. They are sleek and fat. Their tails appear to have a life of their own. The shadow of these rats fall all over the room. All I can do is see that all the possible chinks in my room are boarded up. It doesn't help much but it makes me feel a little safer. Anyway, with my windows closed, I am like the rest of the kampung.

When Si Sai's family gets ready to sleep, all the windows are shut tight. Every single one. Her children say it is because spirits, *hantus*, roam in the night. Si Sai, herself says, it is just a safety measure to prevent robberies. This is especially after the refugees from the Southern Philippines came to the kampung and to Sandakan in the early seventies.

An important part of this venture is my desire to belong. I am tired of not belonging. It is eleven years since my marriage which brought me to Malaysia. The first three years were in Penang. Those are years I would much rather forget.

As a sociologist, I had looked forward to being part of a multiracial country with Malays, Chinese and Indians. But there was little of that multiracial character around me. There was the superficial aspect — the market scene where one could see different foods sold — the different costumes, the mingling of the sarung, the saree and the western dress and the Chinese *samfu*.

There were also the more exotic touches — the festivals celebrated at the Pulau Tikus market in Penang, the Thaipusam festival at the Gardens, the mooncake festival. But I had no Malay or Chinese friends. My husband had a few but we never seemed to become part of their lives. His Malay friends went back to the kampung for Hari Raya. I never got to see their kampungs. Even with his Chinese friends, there was a distance. When one of them got married, I had to ask specially that we be included in the tea ceremony.

I seemed to be on the fringes of their lives. We met at each others' homes or in the club. I never got to know anything but the Westernised veneer of their lives.

I thought that moving far away to Borneo would give me a chance to relate better to Malaysian society. It also might give my marriage another chance. Sandakan was where my husband was posted in 1971. And there I stayed till 1979.

Sandakan did work for me in the way I had hoped it would. Torn away from the circle of my husband's family and the community, I was thrown more into the society around. It is in Sandakan I made two Chinese friends and became part of family life in their households.

The walls were coming down. I did not feel so alien anymore. But still there was no sense of belonging. When people asked me: Where do you come from? I would hesitantly answer: Penang. As my husband's hometown, I guess I had some claim on it. But I had never felt it was my town. So when they probed some more, I would tell them I was from Delhi.

I wanted to feel part of the scene. I had not realised yet that I would never succeed at being anything but a girl from Delhi. I was still pretending to myself that one day I would merge. I visualised future question-answer scenes which would go:

"Where are you from?"

"Sabah," I would answer. It would be my reference point in the country.

The stay in Kampung Bokara does succeed in this, but in a different way. Every now and again, I find myself relating something I hear to these eight months of kampung living.

Talk of history and I relate it to the kampung, talk of houses and I think of it. It becomes important for me in a personal way, removed from the formal purpose of doing fieldwork.

I am not saying I have become one with the kampung people. I am always apart. That is the loneliness of doing fieldwork. I have to be outside to observe.

Nobody here ever forgets I am a doctor's wife. Nobody refers to me by name. I am always addressed as *Puan* — the formal address for a married woman. Once an *Imam* — a Muslim priest — tries calling me the kampung way. He calls me *Ina Si Otok*, that is the mother of a son, but even he gets embarrassed and passes it off as a joke.

There is a sense of difference which is strong. Being a doctor's wife gives me an elevated status in the community, for a doctor is honoured, addressed as *Tuan Doctor*, *Tuan* here having the implications of "Sir". Moreover, I have a family in Sandakan. This gives me a reference point outside the kampung.

The sense of apartness is heightened for I am a woman. No kampung woman would be doing what I am doing. Moreover, I am always seen as an Indian, that is Indian as in Hindi films. The category of Malaysian Indian does not register at all in this kampung, for they have met very few.

All this time, physically, the thing that has excited most comment is my nose. "You have such a sharp nose," the women tell me with a hint of admiration. This is how I learn that what is most noticeable about Indians is a sharp nose. I am told about my nose so often, there comes a point when I can see nothing but my nose when I look into a mirror.

For the younger girls and boys, their interest in Indians and things Indian, stems from Hindi films, or as they say here, Hindustan films. They exclaim over the beauty of the Indian girls, the handsome men, the decor of the houses.

India is a land always seen in colour — a land where everybody is nearly always rich and even the poor find something to sing about. They ask whether I have met Shashi Kapoor. It seems inconceivable to them that I grew up in India and have not met him. They talk of the relationship between him and Rishi Kapoor.

The first time I visit a house in Bokara, the four year old daughter of the house stares at me for what seems a very long time. Then she asks me: "Have you met Mala Sinha?"

They ask: Does it snow in Bombay? Since the dance and song sequences take you from Bombay to Kashmir without a change of pace, some find it difficult to believe they are not quite neighbouring districts. Then the final question: Did your husband also sing to you in the garden before you were married?

Young girls and boys in the kampung see my presence as a means of learning Hindustani. "Tell us how to say 'What is your name?' How do you say 'I love you.' "

For the older women in the kampung who have been on the Muslim pilgrimage, their first large scale meeting with Indians was in Mecca. They tell how they tried to communicate with each other — with smiles and gestures, neither knowing a common language. They noted the patterns of henna drawn skilfully with a matchstick and showed them their own hands which had also been coloured with the same henna to make their departure auspicious.

The questions they ask are different. They ask me of marriage customs. "Is it really true that in India the girl has to pay when she gets married?" This never fails to make everybody laugh, for here, it is the boy who pays. Immediate follow-up: What did you have to pay? I am glad I can answer truthfully in the negative.

Many months after I come to live in the kampung, Si Gaddung, the headman's sister tells me how people in Bokara used to be scared of *Bengalis*. This is the term commonly used for Sikhs. People thought they were headhunters out looking for heads. From a distance, the Bokara people would see them bathing in the sea with their hair coiled on top of their heads. While she says this, her daughter is visibly embarrassed, wondering

if her mother is hurting my feelings.

Later, Si Gaddung's sister, Hajjah Jariah — Hajjah is the address for a woman who has been on pilgrimage to Mecca — she tells how the visit of a Pakistani cloth peddlar would scare her youngest child. The man just had to appear with his bundle and the child would run home crying, "The nose! The nose!"

The questions go on. I get the feeling that now that they have me at such close quarters, they feel they may as well ask all the questions they want.

They ask about everyday life. Did I ever eat rice in India? What is a Sikh? Is it the same as Hindu? Where is my temple? And later, much later, hesitantly they ask, "Is it true you cremate your dead?" This to them is the ultimate difference between us.

Before I came to live in the kampung, I had often wondered how the difference of religion would affect my fieldwork. What should I do? Should I go to the mosque as well? If I didn't, would there be huge gaps in my data?

Arriving here, I find it is no problem for prayer is an intensely personal matter for the women. Only the older women go to mosque and that also only for the Friday noon prayer. Since Si Sai does not fall in this category, I do not have to make a decision on the matter.

In the kampung, they accept that my religion is different. Once, however, a woman in a gesture of acceptance tells me, "Now that you are one of us, why don't you become Muslim?" Seeing me smile, she continues, "Anyway, there is only one God." And with that statement, it rests.

The questions get alarmingly personal at times from my point of view. Sit with a group of women washing clothes at the public tap and I get asked, "What do you take?" meaning what kind of birth control measure I follow. There is no getting away with a vague answer.

Other times, when we are all sitting in a village shop, I can feel their close inspection of my person. Show us your legs, they say. How heavy are your bangles? Do you dream? Do you sleep in the same room as your husband? Tell me, among your kind, do you also fight with your husband? When you were a young girl, you must have been very

pretty. You are not young now, are you? You have lines on your forehead. Aren't you worried leaving your husband alone for so long? Do you think your husband will make out with the servant?

They seem to have no limits to their probing. There are times when I feel like telling them to let go, especially if the day has gone flat. I sit there and feel battered. It leaves me quivering to become so obviously public property for all to prod and question. And for a while, my room takes on the features of a retreat, a sanctuary. I go back to it and bawl silently, wondering what induced me to come here to be turned inside out by these women.

Other days, all this just flies over my head. Then I wonder why they ask me all these questions. In a society where technically, every man can marry four wives, no woman is stupid enough to leave her husband alone with a young servant. Si Ainon who lives two doors away from me — her father is now married to a girl who used to work on his cocoa estate.

Her uncle also ran away with his servant. Hence the questions.

No man here, it appears, consents to wearing a condom. Family planning is the responsibility of the woman. So the intense interest. Does the loop hurt? Are the family planning injections effective? Failing this, there remains the pill. "Forget the pill, you have a child. What can you do?" asks a woman at the common water tap.

As far as the questions are concerned, I guess I give as good as I get. The whole day is full of questions. Mundane ones such as: How many children do you have? How many people live in the house? Others are not so obvious. Sometimes the questions I ask seem perfectly natural to me but idiotic to them

Hajjah Ipoh, Si Ainon's aunt, sitting in the shop one day starts talking about figures. Hajjah Ipoh, is, to say the least, rather fat.

Since nobody hesitates telling me that I have put on some weight in the few weeks I have been here, when Hajjah Ipoh starts telling us how she used to be so slim before she married, I ask, "What was your weight then?"

She doesn't answer but laughingly remarks, "Next, Puan, you will be asking me how many times I go to the toilet." I don't ask her but she tells me that during the wedding ceremonies, a bride is given a constipating mixture so that she doesn't have to go to the toilet.

"It would look awkward, wouldn't it" she asks, "if the bride was sitting in state on the wedding dais and suddenly had to rush off to the toilet?"

In the house

From my window, I can see the road with the cars and buses going by. This is where the bus from town stops. The passengers get down. The bus backs into the bamboo grove on the hill, makes a U-turn and heads back to town.

When the bus is not blocking the view, I can see the bamboo grove. This must be pretty old for Si Ara who lives two catwalks away, says her grandfather on her mother's side planted it.

I try not to look nearer home. The disadvantage of being the first house on the landward side is that all the garbage gets washed up at the doorstep. There are empty sardine tins, orange bottles, plastic bags, paper, broken tricycles, half-rotting logs and all the other discards of modern living. So when it is low tide, it is better to look at the bamboo.

At high tide, everything looks clean again and children start swimming in the sea not remembering or caring what lay there just a few hours ago.

I am living in a house on the sea. I have to keep telling myself that. It is so unbelievable. A house not near the sea, not by the sea, but actually on the sea.

At night, when I switch off the light, I can hear the waves against the piling of the house. When there is a particularly strong wave, the house shakes beneath me. There is a tinkle as an empty tin knocks against the poles on which the house rests. Now and again a log thuds into it.

This cannot be safe, I fear. I mention it casually to Si Malcom, Si Sai's husband, not wanting to present myself as a total idiot. The house, he says, is built on *belian* splits. These are staked at least four feet deep in the seabed. And belian is hard wood, said to last for more than fifty years.

I don't ask any more questions, but still wonder to myself. When the wind blows hard and the waves lash against it, the house rocks. When somebody runs fast inside, the house shakes. But all is well and slowly I relax. Later, a friend who comes visiting me from Sandakan says, "Why doesn't the house float away?" By then, I have the answers all ready.

It doesn't take long to accept a house over the sea as an ordinary fact of life. Not every house is directly connected to land as ours is. The house I stay in is the first house by the road. Further out to sea are another eight houses in the same row, each house connected to another by a catwalk. These catwalks, built of planks placed horizontally over piling, serve as the streets and paths of the village.

Si Sai's house is convenient in that you step out of the house and can get into the car and go off to town. But the houses further out to sea have a better view. From the furthest house at sea, you can see the wide open sea and beautiful sunsets. I have seen them often enough to know what I am missing.

The wind is stronger, too. This is something to appreciate, for despite the fan, there are days when the air is absolutely still. The house with its zinc roof bakes in the sun. Then the only thing to do is to go out and sit under the bamboo.

For the first few days, just living over the sea is novelty enough. Life here has another dimension for there is a moving world beneath the house. At high tide, from the slats in the wooden floor, one can see the catfish. They swarm beneath the house in large shoals. They are the scavengers of the sea. Further out in deeper water, there are shoals of jelly fish. They look like spotted parachutes with pulsating tops. One day when I am sitting at a formal "do" in a house right out at sea — it is the sixth along the catwalk — I see a boatload of men rowing below. It is eerie.

Living over the sea is not without its hazards. Till a child gets old enough to play with the floating debris of the sea, the whole kin group looks after the child. You put up a barricade near the front door and ensure that the gate to your porch is closed. But as long as it is high tide, you have to keep the child within sight.

Accidents have happened and two children of the kampung drowned some years ago. This was before my time. But nobody here is in a state of constant panic. "Their time had come," they say. And that is it.

There are other aspects about living over the sea which can make for difficulties. While having an animated conversation with Si Asniya, the priest's wife, I take out my pen to note

down a point. One extravagant gesture on my part and the pen top slips on to the floor and rolls into the sea — and at high tide at that.

The only thing to do is to use the traditional method. Put a pinch of salt and rice at the spot where the pen top has dropped. This is what Hajjah Ipoh's sister did when her gold earring fell down while she was having a bath. She says that salt and rice would fix it at the spot. The old people say the fish won't eat it then. Anyway it makes you feel better that something has been done. It works too for I get back the pen top.

"Losing a pen top is not so bad," says Si Asniya. "One night I was feeling sick and came out to the verandah. A few moments later, my dentures fell into the sea. Luckily they were still there under the house in the morning. And I didn't use any salt or rice. That is just old talk."

To people here, living over the sea seems the most natural thing to do. Emmong, Si Ainon's grandmother, wonders out loud how anybody could possibly live in a house built on land.

"Sea water is warm," she says. "A house built on land is cold. It is as if the coldness of the earth travels right up into your bones. When I slept in a house on land, there was too much noise. The birds in the trees woke me up in the morning.

"There must be a lot of smell round a land house, don't you think?" she asks. "All that garbage collecting in dustbins with the dogs and the flies at it? Here we just throw it out the window or down a hole in the floor and the tide washes it away."

Si Sai's house is large by town standards. The town apartment where my family is staying would fit into her hall and still leave some space to spare. But her house is about average as far as kampung houses go. Si Malcom has the figures on tap for he rebuilt this house himself when Si Sai's parents were alive. It is 30 feet wide and 80 feet long. There is nothing particularly fixed about house measurements as long as they are not measured in odd numbers. "I don't know why this is," he says, "but it is."

One has to climb up the house using a plank. Si Malcom

is enlarging the porch. So during my stay we use the plank. This is the first step to enlarging the hall even further.

Tha hall at present is nothing much to look at. There is linoleum on the floor. It is a dull red with yellow flowers. It is obviously faded and is cracking in places. One has to be careful and it becomes a habit to skip a few places in the room.

The curtains on the windows are a nondescript colour, made of cheap netting. On the walls, there is a wedding photograph of Si Sai and Si Malcom, one of Mecca when Si Sai's uncle went on the pilgrimage, two shell pictures and a rather wishy washy kampung scene.

Near the door is a pedal sewing machine, for Si Sai takes in sewing. By it is a bed and a television set. Over the door is the customary quotation from the Koran. And smack in the centre of the room is a dull green vinyl sofa set.

This is where I sat when I first came to discuss the possibility of my moving in. The fact that I am living with Si Sai and Si Malcom is something I had not anticipated.

Even before I started on my fieldwork, I knew the village. Some years ago, I was interviewing Muslim women on interracial relations for a sociological survey and Bokara was one of the three areas I had chosen. In the course of this earlier survey, I had made friends here. They were mainly from Emmong's kin group.

Emmong and I got on well. Some of my first glimpses of kampung life were in her house. It was there I saw her daughter, Hajjah (Hjh) Habibah making the traditional Simunul dish of *putu*. It was in her house I first ate boiled sweet potato with sugar for breakfast and graduated from sitting in the formal living room to squatting on the floor in the kitchen.

Emmong must be in her late fifties, early sixties. She has five daughters, three sons, grandchildren and great grandchildren — 53 direct descendants. Her figure is a bit wizened and she always wears the traditional loose blouse with three quarter sleeves. This blouse is fastened by safety pins on ordinary days, but for special occasions she takes out her gold and mother of pearl brooches.

Her head is always covered with a white cloth — the covered head being a sign that she is a Hajjah and has been on the Haj, the pilgrimage to Mecça.

She is very proud of the fact she was married to a religious teacher. Her husband was much older than she was. He must have been more than 40 when he married her. She was 17 then. Emmong says he was of royal lineage and that his father was the Sultan of Bulongan in Indonesia. He came away from there because of a family feud. Losses at gambling had something to do with it, but this part of family history she would rather not discuss at length.

He had travelled extensively in Indonesia and Sulu and had wives in both places. When he came to Bokara, he saw Emmong and wanted her as his bride. According to Emmong, what attracted him was the mole below her breast. This is a sign of good luck.

Since Emmong is de facto head of a large kin group extending over 14 houses, I had thought finding a place in the kampung would be no problem.

The first step though was to go to the headman's house and formally ask permission. Once I had the official okay, I started looking around for a place. And here I came up against problems. In Emmong's house there were no spare rooms. There was just the large hall and one room where her daughter and son-in-law slept. Emmong herself slept in a little alcove-like part of the hall. There used to be another room where Emmong's son and his wife used to stay. But they moved away and the dividing plank wall was dismantled.

They needed a larger hall, for Emmong's grandson was to be married. "Empty rooms are no good, anyway," Emmong said. "In empty rooms hantus dance."

To emphasise the point, she said, "I do not even draw a curtain for privacy. Who knows, the devil may be hiding there." And then, she looked at me and said, "You are still young. There is a lot of coming and going in our house. Relatives come from Sulu, others come when they are off from the timber camps. Even if I sleep right beside you," she said, "I cannot always protect you." It all made sense, but the sense of rejection was strong. I felt like a sack of

pearls that somebody was going to make off with.

It was the same story in every related house. Emmong's daughter Si Mariam put it very clearly when she told me, "Everybody in the kampung wants as big a hall as possible. Whenever there is a function, the whole kampung is invited and that means you must have room to seat 200 to 300 people at a time. So that means no empty rooms."

This I had not expected. There were no rooms for rent in the kampung. There was an empty house whose owner was in Kota Kinabalu. I could rent that but it seemed forlorn and decrepit. There was a pile of rotting logs and tins by the side. In the neighbouring kampung, there was a house which had rooms for rent. But this was not recommended as the other rooms had been rented by refugee families and the man of the house was known as rather a third rate Lothario.

For a while it felt desolate to find there was no place for me to stay in the kampung though I was willing to pay for the privilege. The solution was provided by the headman, Si Matajang. He spoke to Si Malcom who used to rent the back portion of his house to some refugee families. They had left. Si Malcom told the headman he was willing to help out.

When I first went to Si Malcom's place, he showed me a room outside his house. It used to be a shop. He said he would fix it up for me. But it was outside his house and there was no kitchen or toilet. I didn't want to stay alone.

So I told Si Malcom I would prefer to stay with his family if it was possible. At this he looked embarrassed. He said, "There is this hall where we are sitting. In the bedroom, my wife and eight year old son, Si Wira sleep. On the bed in the living room, my eldest son Si Tony who is 14, sleeps. And in the curtained alcove beyond, my daughter Si Suraya who is 11, sleeps with her aunt Si Kitu." Si Kitu is Si Sai's sister, he explained.

"Behind the hall," he said, getting up to show it to me, "is the kitchen and then there is the back portion of the house which still has to be repaired. The floor needs to be done up and the roof leaks. All that is left is the little room where we cut fish," he said. "It is a very small room and perhaps Puan would not like it. But if Puan will buy the paint, Si Tony will paint it. But perhaps it won't do."

It is indeed a miserable looking room, small and narrow. It cannot be more than ten feet long for after I put in the divan bed and a small dressing table there is hardly any room left for the door to open. And perhaps it is seven feet wide for there is place to keep my card file cabinets and a few shelves for files. A feet or two of rug shows in between. But small and narrow as it is, the room Si Malcom is offering is more than welcome. It is the only one available.

When I ask him how much the rent will be, Si Malcom gets even more embarrassed and says he will ask the headman.

A few days later, when I go to visit again, with great embarrassment he hesitantly says that the headman says $200 but he himself thinks it is too much. "I am not clever at asking," he says. So we leave it open. I think later we fix it at $140 or $150, I do not remember.

I move into my room. It now smells of ice-blue paint. I move my things in and make thick green curtains for the windows and the door. The window has glass panes but it has to be propped open with a piece of firewood. The door leads out to the kitchen. Since the wall does not go all the way up, the sounds and smells of the house continuously waft in. The square hole in the floor where the tap used to be, I cover with a plank. Near the door to the kitchen, I place my table and chair.

This is how I come to be part of Si Sai's household.

The family

By kampung standards, Si Sai's household is a very simple one. "Lonesome," is how it is described in shop talk. There is just Si Sai, her husband, Si Malcom, their three children and her unmarried sister.

The house stands alone in that it is not connected by a catwalk to any other house in the row. The thing I like best about it is that it is nearly smack in the centre of the kampung and it neighbours the houses of Emmong's kin group.

Si Malcom and Si Sai are not people who make any great waves in the kampung. Si Malcom works in the engine room at the Sabah Electricity Board headquarters in Karamunting, a mile or so away. He does shift duty. When he is at home, he is busy working on the house extension or tinkering with the Vauxhall he bought from a returning expatriate many years ago.

He is an amiable person. He does not like to disagree with anything that is said to him. You say that prices have gone up, he agrees. You say there is no progress in the kampung, he agrees. You say that people spend their money unwisely, he agrees.

He does not argue back. He has the image of the kind of person you can depend upon. His life revolves round his work and family. He is good with his hands and can manage to repair nearly everything he wants.

Si Sai is quiet. She likes to stay home and doesn't do much visiting. Her maternal relatives have moved to Kampung Pukul about three miles away. She does tailoring and that keeps her very occupied. There is a pedal sewing machine in one corner of the living room, in front of the glass cupboard with the fluted glasses and jugs. She either sits there at her machine or on the floor with one leg stretched out, doing the buttons and the hemming.

In the village shops they tell that the household recently had a big explosion. One day when Si Malcom was sleeping in his room or seeing television, the Bisayan tenant from

Southern Philippines who lived with his family in the back portion of the house, tried to rape Si Suraya. She is 11. As the story goes, Si Malcom nearly killed the man, but he was restrained and the police called in.

Si Sai and I never discuss it and I have no intention of asking her for the details. But one of the women in a shop says of Si Sai, "Even when her daughter nearly got raped, she just kept pedalling her machine and didn't say anything."

Unruffled, that's the word to describe Si Sai. It is as if nothing can move her. Only once I saw her going after Si Tony and Si Suraya with a broom. They had been yelling at each other for a long time. Otherwise, she lets the rumble tumble of the house wash over her.

Si Sai is quite fat. Quite often in the village shops, they ask me if Si Sai is pregnant. I don't think they ask her face to face, though some of them might have done so. When I put on some weight, quite often women ask me, "Pregnant?" I know then that it is time to cut down on the food intake.

Actually, Si Malcom has a paunch too. So does the youngest boy, Si Wira. And he is only eight.

Si Wira is the most likeable of their children. There is something winsome about his smile. I think he sees me as somebody strange and different. He seems to be especially close to his mother. He still sleeps with Si Sai and will not sleep alone. Of all the children, he does not like to spend the nights away from home with his cousins in the neighbouring kampung.

Older than him is Si Suraya, who is eleven. Being the middle child, she is constantly at war. When I sit in my room doing my notes, I can hear her screaming. Either she is fighting with Si Wira or she is screaming at Si Tony.

Now and again, Si Tony chases Si Suraya and there is a loud to-do. Nobody seems to pay much notice to it and it dies down. I often think it is good Si Sai is so calm. Even though they are not my kids, I react to this noise very unkindly. But Si Sai's way seems to work. Her lack of reaction contains the incident.

With my kids I can't seem to display such detatchment. They are like a hurricane. And then I step in, and it becomes

worse. Sometimes, I can hear myself screaming at them to shut up and quit the clawing and fighting. It doesn't seem to help. So it is good to see the way Si Sai handles it. Not that it helps her children any. But she doesn't seem so wrought up about the issue. There they are chasing each other and she keeps sewing away.

Si Suraya is closest to her aunt, Si Kitu. Si Kitu is quite painfully thin. In the kampung, they say she had TB when she was younger, hence her slightly hollowed look.

They warn me that the TB might be lingering and it might not be safe to take anything she has cooked. But in casual conversation, Si Sai says that Si Kitu is quite cured now and that in order to open their sundry shop they have to have clean medical chits anyway. Not that there is anything I can do about it but I relax.

She is not unattractive. The fact she is not married, worries Si Sai who feels responsible for her after their parents died. But there is no prolonged discussion of it. They say there is no *jodoh* for her as yet, no match for her yet that is fated.

Si Kitu and I get on quite well on an everyday basis. I do not feel as close to her as I later feel to Si Sai. But she is a nice smiling person to have around. I sometimes wonder, for an unmarried girl, she lives a particularly uneventful life. She does not go out of the kampung much, as she has no close kin around her. There is no band of cousins with whom she can go to a movie. Since she cannot read effortlessly, that form of relaxation is also out. But she seems content enough.

Si Tony who is 14, is the eldest child in the house. He has quit school and now just hangs around the house. Like his father, he is good with his hands. Out of a piece of plywood he has hammered together a makeshift pingpong table at the back of the house.

He is the only one who has his own crowd of friends. They troop in and out regularly and we often have good games of table tennis. I think I started off with him on a good footing for he is surprised I can play a satisfactory game of table tennis on the table with his rough hewn bats.

He is more often out of the house than inside it. As a young boy, he has a lot of freedom, more than Si Suraya has.

In the evenings, he goes with his friends to play football or volleyball on the hill. The older boys play volleyball in the vacant space opposite the village mosque. But Si Tony and his gang do not yet feel confident enough to ask to be included there.

He is experimenting with smoking as are his followers. They sit at the back of the shops and practise holding cigarettes. Since he does not go to school, his time is unfocussed. This worries his father quite a bit though there are no outward eruptions.

Now and again, Si Malcom will look at Si Tony and say, "Stupid." It is an uneasy situation with the boy being so idle all day long. Si Malcom expects him to help with the extension of the house. But I think this very unspoken expectation is responsible for the fact that Si Tony can seldom be found when his father is working on the house.

As a family they are close knit. Si Sai often just sits in the porch with her husband when he is working on the house. She might hand him up a nail now and again. Round them is a circle of togetherness, that at times I envy. At times I feel by living there, I might be intruding on their family life, especially when I see them gathered round the television in the evening. It is so obviously family time.

But there really is no option. It is too lonely to sit cooped up in the room. Anyway I have to be with them if I am going to see anything. However, the hesitation remains for some time.

In the beginning, when Si Malcom sees me coming, he immediately scampers off to wear a shirt. Later, he doesn't bother and it stops feeling slightly indecent to see a man sitting in front with only his shorts on.

It is also difficult for me to define my own space in the house. In the kampung, where I seem to be such public property, my room is the only place I can be alone. However, everybody around me seems to feel that being alone even for a short time is something that should be avoided. More than once women ask me, "Who shares your room? You live alone? You have no friends with you. Poor thing." To be alone is to be without companionship.

Si Kitu often saunters into my room. She finds the

dressing table fascinating. She tries out the lipstick and then asks me about the foundation, the moisturiser, the blusher and the eye make up. Powder and lipstick, she uses when she goes to town, but eye make up to her is relatively new.

The kids want to try out my typewriter. That gets me closer to the bone. Si Tony borrows the flash when he needs it. It feels odd that somebody has been in my room when I was out. I cannot really do anything about it for there is no lock on my door on the outside. Even if there had been, locking it in a conspicuous manner might be taken as an insult.

The immediate difference though is the toilet. It is a little wooden cubicle outside the house with a hole in the floor. In one corner is a Milo tin for water. The water has to be taken from the kerosene drum placed outside in the corridor. It is eerie to go to a toilet over the sea. First of all it is a noisy business. Then there are the catfish. They swarm all over the area after you have finished. I soon find out that going to the toilet is relatively more pleasant at high tide. You just have to time it right.

The first day I am in the house, a problem arises over my wanting to have a bath. Si Sai and the family have a bath in the corridor next to the toilet. Si Sai hitches her sarung to her chest, uses the soap which is on the window sill and bathes herself with water out of the kerosene drum.

I am not prepared for this. It is one thing to be questioned about everything but to bathe in public with everybody looking on is going to be impossible. I am particularly convinced of this for I am quite certain a sarung tied that way would fall off sometime during the bath.

So the first day I cheat. I tell them I will have a bath at night. And at night, I take a bucket of water in the toilet and have a hasty bath. Highly unsatisfactory.

Seeing me so worried, Emmong asks, "Don't you always bathe with your sarung on? Doesn't everyone?" Noting my pause, she goes on to ask, "Then what do you wear when you have a bath? You mean you bathe naked?" Put like that, I hate to admit to the fact.

All of a sudden I find myself very interested in how people bathe. Hij Ipoh has a bathroom where she bathes. Her sister,

Hjh Habibah has a little lean-to to which serves as a bathroom, but she often bathes on the catwalk outside her kitchen. She likes to have a leisurely bath after washing the clothes. Most of the time is taken scrubbing the body with a small face cloth and her feet with a pumice stone. Emmong also bathes outside at times, but she prefers the kitchen. The men of the family are the ones who use the bathroom.

Anyway this hurdle is bypassed rather than crossed. Si Malcom fixes me a small bathroom next to the toilet. I can take a bucket in there and have my bath in peace. I have to be careful though when there is construction going on in the next house for the walls do not go all the way up.

Mealtimes are the big happenings of the day. They are silent. This is probably because my conversation in Simunul is limited. It is not that the people in the house do not know Malay but the language of the house is Simunul. So there is silence. And at the best of times, Si Sai is not what you would call talkative.

As a guest, I am given the honour of being invited to eat first. We eat on a table in the kitchen.

The kitchen is just outside my room. There is a gas stove — the table top kind, near the window. Opposite it is an old refrigerator. I never did determine how old it is, but the handle has to be tied down for the door to close properly.

Near the stove is a wooden table covered with linoleum. And next to it is an open wooden cupboard. This is where all the left over rice, fish and cakes are kept. Cooked food does not go into the frig. The frig is for uncooked food and water only.

The kitchen table at which we eat has two chairs by it. One is a bit wobbly. Si Sai sits with me. There is a bowl of water, a small plate with salt, a bottle of pounded chillies and a bottle of soya bean sauce.

I follow Si Sai. Before eating, she washes her hands in the bowl and then serves me with rice. Her first mouthful is always rice and salt. When I ask her why, she just says it is the done thing. When she finishes, she washes her hand in the same bowl of water or in her plate. She removes her plate and calls the next batch to come and eat.

After the first few days, Si Sai goes back to eating with

her husband. It appears to be part of husband wife relations. I then eat with Si Kitu.

The thing that strikes me is that while eating they appear to have no concept of purity and pollution. I notice it particularly for I come from a caste society where the concept of pollution is strong. You eat with the right hand and serve yourself with the left. The hand you eat with must not touch the dishes on the table. These are rules I have already taught my children.

Then you must not eat from another person's plate or use a spoon they have used. To do so, immediately says you are either husband and wife or parent and child. In no other context is it admissible for it is taken to be the most public demonstration of intimacy.

In Malaysia, these notions seem rather exaggerated. Even the Chinese use the same chopsticks for eating and serving. In a family type of set up, it is not uncommon for the family to have soup from a common bowl.

Here in the kampung, the rice is served separately. But as for the fish and vegetables, you take a little on your plate either with your hand or a spoon. When that is finished, you take some more, usually with the same hand. When the meal is over, sometimes more than one person washes the hands in one bowl of water.

Si Suraya would sometimes drink from a bottle of water and then put it back in the frig. Whenever I saw her doing this, I had to be careful not to take water from that bottle. At first I thought maybe she is particularly untutored but then I saw some women visitors calmly drinking from my glass.

So pronounced is the Indian reaction against this type of communal eating, that it was my husband's major objection to my staying in the kampung. Though I explained it very well in terms of sociological attitudes as far as he was concerned, I found I usually managed to serve myself once with what I wanted so that I did not have to serve myself again. And you can get away with washing your hands in the plate.

After a while, I train myself not to think about it too much. There is so much in the food that is new, that

I do not dwell on this difference.

Here in the kampung, I have had fish and fish and more fish. Within the first month, I count 26 types of fish that are cooked at home. There is fish at every meal, even at breakfast if you want some of yesterday's fish and rice with soya bean sauce. I had thought variety in fish meant steamed fish, fried fish, baked fish. Here it is not so much the style of cooking which varies but the fish that is cooked.

Because the people here used to be fishermen, they are very choosy about the fish they eat. It is a matter of pride to say, "My family eats nothing but *bongsud* fish," that is fish trapped in the bamboo fish traps. It is fresher than that caught in the deep sea nets and is sold alive. Also, it is believed to have more oil which makes it tastier.

Emmong's sister says, "I don't take meat. It doesn't agree with me. My skin becomes red with all that heaty food." Connecting it up with vegetarianism, I ask, "You don't take fish also?" Pat comes the answer in a tone which is a trifle condescending, "If you don't eat fish, what would you eat?" And that kind of sums up the situation.

The range of fish eaten would be wider if the people here did not have pronounced fish taboos. Nobody will eat catfish. This is absolutely forbidden, for it swarms under the houses and eats human faeces.

A common topic of conversation is how the *Orang Sungai* who live along the River Kinabatangan like the catfish. Sometimes a boy will hook these fish and present them to the Sungai guards at the Shell installation a mile down the road. "Maybe they don't know the fish's eating habits," says one. Another more charitably notes, "Maybe the catfish in their parts eat other things."

Then there are family taboos. Si Sai's family will not eat *lumahan* or *tenggiri*. Si Sai says this is because a shoal of lumahan brought her grandfather safely to shore, when he was in trouble one day.

From her mother's side she inherits the taboo against tenggiri. She has forgotten the reason for it but for seven generations, the family may not eat the fish.

Hjh Habibah's family does not eat *selungsung*. The story is that her father and his sister were going in a small paddle

boat. A huge shoal of selungsung fish came like a wave and jumped into the boat.

The boat sank, drowning her father's sister. So they cannot eat the fish. "Maybe my sister's son had it outside," says Hjh Habibah, "and that is why he is so unstable."

Hjh Natsi who lives at the other end of the kampung, her family does not eat lumahan because one of her ancestors saw it turning into a rat. It is because of these taboos that when Bokara people eat outside, they ask, "What fish is it?"

The fish that is safe to serve is *ikan putih* for it is not associated with any fish taboos. But in Si Sai's house it is *ikan merah* which is served often. When the money is good it is *bawis* and *bellong* which often cost $5 a kati. They have a particularly delicate flavour.

Then there is the *pahi* (skate) which is delicious, grilled over a wooden fire. Every day when fish is served, at least for the first month, I come face to face with my ignorance of their daily food. I have to ask for totally different reasons, "What fish is it?"

The method of preparation is not particularly varied. Generally there is fish soup and fried fish. Sometimes though, especially when there is *putu*, fish is grilled and served with lime and the small fierce chillies and soya bean sauce.

Three months after I move in, Si Sai and her husband open a shop where they sell iced drinks, delicacies and some sundry goods.

When they open the shop, I am surprised to find myself resenting it. The household routine changes and I lose Si Sai as my full time informant as it were. She becomes busy with the shop. Tailoring becomes relatively unimportant. She says, "It never brought in much money anyway. People do not pay up what they owe." The kitchen soon moves into the back portion of the shop. Si Malcom fixes up a tap. The frig was moved into the shop when it first opened. The food becomes better in that there is more money. Now Si Sai does not accept free fish from her cousin from across the bay who sells fish in the market. *Bawis* and *banak* are bought more often. And we have beef on days other than Sunday.

The problem for me is that I do not know where I stand.

Am I of the family or an outsider? Often I feel more like the latter. Do I pay for things in the shop as a customer or do I operate as a family member and take a biscuit or two when I want to for my tea? It is a small problem but it makes me feel like an outsider. For a while I ignore Si Sai's shop and sit in the other shops where my status as an outsider is accepted and cannot excite any negative comment or be interpreted as a slur.

Si Malcom every now and again asks me to have *sindol*, the green pea flour noodles in milk and ice. I tell him I am controlling my diet. I have put on weight. That is true. But what is really troubling me is that I do not know what my position is.

Then one day, I decide I am going to operate by kampung norms and be a member of the family. I have a huge bowl of sindol. It seems to be the best I have ever had.

Washing clothes

Living in the kampung, the daily sureties of my life are fast vanishing. They even wash clothes differently.

In the morning, after breakfast is done, Si Sai sits down to wash clothes. In front of her is a large aluminium basin full of clothes. Each garment is first thoroughly soaked, one by one, and kept aside. The basin is filled again. There is a short rubber hose connected to the tap near the drum. A small packet of washing soap is emptied into the basin.

Taking one garment at a time, Si Sai scrubs it on a wooden board which is placed across the basin. First she scrubs it in the foam of the washing powder. Then as if not trusting anything as ephemeral as foam, she uses a solid cake of soap.

Backwards and forwards goes the brush. Again and again. And yet again. By this time, I feel slightly apologetic about my method of washing clothes. I had soaked my clothes in a bucket of soapy water, earlier on. Then after what seemed to be a decent interval, I rinsed out the clothes, scrubbing only the parts which looked dirty. I am nearly finished and Si Sai is still on her first sarung.

She is too polite to say anything except, "Children's clothes get very dirty." By this time, I also start scrubbing my clothes with the required zeal just to save face.

After an interminable length of time, she throws out the soapy water. Perhaps the whole lengthy routine is about to end. But it is just the start of another phase. Now it is time to use the bathing soap. Two scrubbings for each garment are not enough. The bathing soap is rubbed in, the clothes scrubbed again and kept aside. Why the bathing soap? "This is optional," she says. "It gives the clothes an added fragrance."

Washing clothes becomes more interesting if you can do it with somebody else. There are some women who always wash their clothes at the common village tap. Usually it is because they do not have piped water at home. Piped water is not something you take for granted here, for it costs between $700 and $1,000 to have the metal pipe fixed.

If you buy the plastic hose, your capital expenditure is reduced and you don't have to pay the water bill which comes once every three months. So some of the houses buy a hundred yards of hose. Some don't even do that. It is enough to borrow the hose long enough to fill three large drums with water everyday.

There is always some action round the kampung tap. I can see it from my room. Women with their sarungs tied below the shoulder sit under the bamboo in a jumble of plastic hose, washing clothes. Men come to bathe with a towel tied round their waist. Children come to play and connect their hose to the tap.

Si Ping is at the tap every two or three days. She lives in the next house which also faces the road. Early on, I am warned to be careful with her for she is an exceptionally avid gossip. I suspect she sweeps her porch four times a day just so that she can keep an eye on the road and the goings on. This also makes her a good source for fieldwork data.

Si Ping comes in with loads of clothes and settles down to a long satisfying session. I time her one day and she is at the tap for nearly five hours. "I like washing clothes," she says in self defence. "Then with three children, there are so many clothes."

Her cake of soap goes swishing in and out of the water. Now and again it is left in the water to add to the mountain of soapy lather already in the basin. In between she is busy attaching or removing other people's hoses from the main tap. It is always a good leisurely time to chat about nothing in particular — who is getting married, who has sold land, who has bought a new car.

One day when she is washing clothes, she looks at me sitting on a dead branch under the bamboo and says, "Look at you. You do no work at all. All day long you roam around talking and visiting, then write. No washing, no cooking, no sweeping. No work at all. It is beautifully comfortable for you, isn't it?"

Seeing her pile of clothes, I can't help wonder if behind all the academic rigmarole, there is just this desire to run away from the washing. What she says does have a ring of truth. I am having a good time. It has satisfied a wander lust

in me. Moving just these four miles from town to the kampung has been more of a change than moving from one country to another. It has been like an identity change. It is a chance to see somebody else's life from the inside. However, it is playing havoc with the life I left behind in town.

When I go home to Sandakan town on a Sunday for the first time after a short spell in the kampung, I feel like a guest in my own house. The children make a fuss over me. Aman, my elder son who is nine goes into the kitchen to cut the cucumber to show me how well they have been managing. Sunil who is eight, goes into a little tantrum, probably a reaction to being well behaved with his father.

Then they go off. Aman and Sunil to swim, their father to the club to play mahjong. It is an anti-climax. I feel anchorless, wishing I could go back to the kampung and put in an afternoon of research. Only I would look too folish for I am not expected back till the next day.

Nobody at home particularly wants to hear about the kampung. They listen, at first politely, then you can see a dull glaze coming over their eyes. The kampung experience remains unshared.

This going to and fro from the home to the kampung no longer seems like a good idea. At first I had thought that doing research near the home base would add depth to my work for I would come to it with a background that was familiar. But I had not counted on the experience as something that would tear me apart.

When I come back home, the family expects me to take over the housekeeping for the evening. The children need a button fixed, a special dish prepared or just go to a film together. But in the kampung, I have had enough excitement. What I want to do is sit down and tell someone how I feel about it, not just what the kinship structure is, how many people, houses, households, but to rip the veil of sociological objectivity and tell them what my reactions are to the things I see.

I want to tell them how I find some things so incomprehensible; how good my progress has been with the Simunul language. What I want to do is luxuriate in my own familiar

world. Instead of listening, recording, probing, just to sit back and let go. Perhaps it is too selfish a need, for the pace of family life remains the same. The children still go to school, the Indonesian girl at home keeps house in a perfunctory manner. It is only I who have moved away.

Something will have to give. Later I find that this is going to be the town and my life there. More and more, I find companionship with the people in the kampung. Wearing a sarung seems almost as natural as wearing a saree. And there are times even in town when the Simunul expressions come to mind first rather than the Malay equivalent.

The distance from the kampung, however, makes me aware for the first time of some of the small things which are different. When I moved in, I took a waste paper basket along with me. A week later, I brought it back. There is no need for it in the kampung. Everything goes into the sea.

And then there is no newspaper. In the strangeness of things at first, I couldn't quite figure out what was missing. But when I got to see a newspaper in town, I became aware of the sense of isolation without one. There is the television and the radio, but they only give you the headline stuff. It's the sidelights you miss, the written word.

It is not that there are no newspapers at all in the kampung. It is just that few houses have them as one has to go to town to get them. Then at 60 to 75 cents a copy for the Kuala Lumpur papers, a magazine often seems a better investment. And these KL papers are not considered particularly relevant anyway.

The local papers are largely in English with only a page or two in Malay and are also not particularly riveting. So it is hardly worth the trouble and expense.

The only time I saw anybody excited over a newspaper was when the brother-in-law of one of the kampung people was involved in a stabbing case in Kota Kinabalu, the capital of the state of Sabah. The report in the local paper was read again and again by those who could read. All the relevant details were repeated for those around who could not read — the age of the boy, the age of the girl, the number of stab wounds, other possible injuries.

After the report had been read, the paper was passed

around and the photographs were scrutinised. Everything was noted — the height of the building, the position of the boy, how his eyes were open, his arm lying under the body, how there were cushions on the floor. Then the children looked at it. It was a neighbourhood happening.

What is relevant here is the price of timber, the amount of royalty to be paid, who has land and who is selling it, who ran away with whom, who is having a do in the near future, whose wife has run away — this is the news.

Another thing that is missing in the kampung is bread. That is not strictly true for there is some bread on sale in the village shops. But it is not a daily item for breakfast. For breakfast, you do not have bread and eggs but cakes, either home made or bought from the children who come around morning and evening selling what their mothers have made.

There is a rich variety of cakes made from glutinous rice, tapioca or flour. They are usually served with a sprinkling of scraped coconut and brown sugar. At home, Si Sai likes to make a banana pancake, thick and sweet.

Bread here is more of a delicacy than a routine item. It is often served in little squares with a coconut jam spread on it, so it appears more like a cake than plain bread. At times bread is eaten with condensed milk. Si Suraya always eats it like this, squatting on the floor, while watching television at night.

Coming to town also makes me realise how imperceptibly the atmosphere in the kampung is different from that in the town. Some of it is obvious, the community and kinship linkages, the difference in the way the day goes. But even taking the bus is a different experience in the kampung than it is in the town.

The attitude of the bus driver and the passengers changes as the bus nears the kampungs. The bus stops every hundred yards or so to let the passengers off, irrespective of the actual location of the bus stop. It does not stop at regular places. A woman will just show by her stance — no hand signal even — that she wants to board the bus, and it stops. Once a woman got on the bus to get change for ten dollars. She got it and then got off the bus. As soon as the bus nears town, the conductress becomes brisk, the bus has fixed stops

and everybody toes the line again.

Other than this act of distancing myself from the kampung for a while, coming to town is necessary for the Indonesian girl at home checks my hair for lice. The thought of catching lice scares me silly.

It is an everyday sight in the kampung to see women looking for lice in each other's hair. Even children when they play house enact this daily ritual.

In Si Sai's house, Si Kitu is considered adept at the art of looking for lice. She takes a special bamboo spatula which is used only for lice-hunting. Sitting on the porch, with Si Sai or one of her neighbours squatting in front of her for hours, this combined lice-hunting and gossip session goes on.

She parts the hair, rubbing the edge of the spatula in the parting. When she finds a louse or a nit, she presses it against the bamboo with her thumb with a satisfying click. It is an essential part of life. Emmong asks me, "Don't you know how to look for lice?" She has a way of asking which makes me feel I have failed an elementary test.

I remember a Brunei woman I interviewed in my earlier survey of Muslim women in Sandakan. She related with great relish how in her time, prospective mothers-in-law would ask the girl to look for lice. If the girl could go on for hours, it showed she had patience and the makings of a good wife.

For me the whole scene brings back the school hostel in Delhi where every week an old woman would come to check our heads for lice. She would part the hair delicately, then part it again. If she paused a while you waited in dread. Could it be a nit or was it mere dandruff?

In that moment, you went through all the pangs of mortification. You thought, now you would have to report to the dormitory every evening, while the others played. Even after you were declared "clean" you dared not put your hand near your hair for fear the others might think you had something in your hair.

But there is no escaping it in the kampung. The inevitable happens. My hair begins to itch. The fine-toothed comb becomes part of my daily ritual. It is no longer enough to

wait for the visit to town to have my hair examined. I ask Si Kitu to look at it. When I sit there on the floor I tell myself I am not embarrassed. She gives up after a few minutes and says she can find nothing.

But I am developing a phobia about it. So it is back to the fine-toothed comb, anti-louse shampoo, then the fine-toothed comb again.

During the rest of my kampung stay, I could never scratch my hair, without the question springing in my mind, "Do I have lice? Do I not?" And the prevention ritual would start all over again.

In this I am not alone in the kampung. Si Latipa, Si Mariam's 17 year old daughter is sensitive about the subject too. One day Si Mariam tells me how she would make up stories of *hantus* just to make her sit quietly while she checked her hair. Si Latipa glowers at her from behind the counter for even suggesting her hair was not always clean and shining bright as it is now.

When a wife looks at her husband's hair for lice, it even becomes a sign of intimacy. One day when I came back unexpectedly on a Sunday afternoon, Si Sai was doing precisely that. Si Malcom was visibly embarrassed.

When I think I have heard everything on the subject, Si Ara, one of Emmong's kin group, muses, "I wish I had lice. Then I could sit in front of the television and have my daughter look for them.

"Now she won't. She says not finding any makes her tired. I love the feel of the bamboo scratching my scalp, the hair being parted gently. When looking for lice, you also pluck out the white hair which is coarse and stands up straight. It comes out easily and is called the devil's hair for it really itches. But just to have somebody looking for lice — there is nothing as soothing as that. You can go to sleep immediately. It is so relaxing."

Learning the language

Before things can get moving with my fieldwork, I have to learn the language. Living in Si Sai's house is a stroke of luck for they speak Simunul at home all the time, unlike some of the other houses. Anyway to manage in the kampung, I can't do without Simunul, for that is the language of the kampung.

The first day when I sit in Si Mariam's shop and tell Emmong's kin group I want to learn Simunul, the idea itself is seen as astonishing. It is something strange, for a few years ago when I started visiting in relation to my survey, I was learning Malay. They have seen me going from halting pedantic Malay to at least a workable level. Having suffered with me through that, the idea of my learning Simunul seems a bit far fetched.

But then there is an incipient flattery in the notion that somebody wants to learn your language. Emmong takes me in hand and makes it a point to speak to me in nothing but Simunul. I say my first Simunul word *Aho* which means "Yes" and they can't stop laughing.

It is difficult to get off the ground and convince the others that I really prefer to go haltingly in Simunul rather than rattle on in Malay. Later I find myself smiling a lot, and saying *Aho* to a lot of things I have only imperfectly understood.

The first useful phrase I learn is, "I do not understand." In the first few weeks I use it a lot. Emmong goes over the basic words. Sitting on a bag of coconuts, she says, "This is a chair. This is a table," and I feel like a performing clown.

Soon there is not one teacher, but a whole crowd of them. Earlier I had wondered whether I could get somebody to sit and patiently teach me the language. Now the problem is there are too many teachers and they are all most enthusiastic. It is I who am satiated.

While teaching me the language, they themselves get into arguments. One man suggests I learn from him because in the Philippines, he was a recognised teacher of the language.

Hearing this, Hjh Habibah says, "Puan, the language they speak on Simunul Island is different now. Take the word for onion. We say *bawang*. They don't. They use a Tagalog word. And then they use all this English. We say *tuala* for towel, they say *tawell*. Our language here is Simunul as it was really spoken."

The refugees from Simunul Island who arrived here after the Moro conflict in the early 70s don't always take this lying down. They say the language spoken in Bokara has borrowed a lot from Malay. And the discussion goes on to the difference in the Simunul spoken in Semporna where there is also a large Simunul Bajau settlement and Bokara.

"There they speak it like the song of a bird," says one. Another says, "You know, Puan, they say *heh* at the end of every sentence. It's always *heh* this and *heh* that."

Finally they come back to me and try and teach me a few more words, while people come in and out of Si Mariam's shop, buying ten cents of this and ten cents of that.

I try hard to get the 'ng' sound in the word *ngajal* which means to cook. Just when I think I am getting it the cock crows loudly in the middle of the afternoon. Finally I think I have an approximation of the sound. When I say it again, the children who have gathered around burst out laughing.

I think for them, my trying to learn Simunul is better than a circus. It is not often they get a chance at such regular amusement.

After a few days, this initial amusement gives way to a delightful willingness to teach. With a total lack of self consciousness, the kids stop and talk to me only in Simunul. When I can't get the sound right, they give the approximate Malay sounds as a guide.

While learning the language, I am also learning the manners of the place and how to be polite. There is no Simunul equivalent to "Hello" or "Good morning." There is the Muslim greeting *assalamu'alaikum* which means "Peace be with you." To this the response is *waalaikumu'salam*, "Peace be with you, too".

This though is a formal greeting used by the older women when they are visiting houses. The more informal greeting used everyday is different.

If you are passing by and want to be very polite, you say, "I am passing." More usually the people you meet will ask, "Where are you going?" You can either tell your exact destination or say something vague as "There." The next question which invariably follows is, "Why are you going there?" You reply again. This is not being nosey, just polite.

Similarly after a visit when you are leaving, you must say, "I am returning," and they will say in turn, "Go well." The ritual grows on you. Everyday you are acknowledged by those who see you and you acknowledge them in return.

It extends to driving in a car. Whenever a car, that is a kampung car passes the shop, the driver always toots his horn. This is so even in town when you pass somebody from the kampung. When a kampung man does not do this, Si Mariam notes, "He is getting proud, now that he is being sent on a course to England."

This greeting and acknowledgement ritual has become like a game now. Everyday as I go from one side of the kampung to the other, the same phrases are repeated. "Where are you going? Where are you going?" they ask. And I keep saying, "There. There."

The words still run together. When people make a special effort and go slow, it isn't that bad. But when they are telling a complicated story, after a while it is only stray words that sound familiar. Out of sheer fatigue I block out the conversation. And then suddenly someone turns to me and asks, "What is the time?" and even that I cannot understand.

It's the possessive pronouns which play havoc in the beginning. Having to go by the sound of it all, I cannot tell where the basic word stops and where the suffix begins. For a long time I think the word for husband is *hellana*, as every-time somebody speaks to me, they always use *hellana*. So when they ask me if my husband is home, I reply, *"Hellana merom lumaku."* I think I have said my husband is home. Only when they stop laughing, I find I have actually said, "Your husband is in my house," for the *na* at the end of the word makes it mean "your husband."

What really helps in the long run is talking to Si Sai at home. Mealtimes after the first few weeks are no longer as

silent. She assumes I am proficient and I feel I have to keep up my side. So slowly, very slowly, I get on in Simunul. Towards the end of my stay in the kampung, I find myself talking in Simunul first and only then adding a Malay word where I don't know the Simunul equivalent.

I know I will make it when my Malay acquires a Simunul lilt. In town when someone speaks Malay to me, unconsciously it is the Simunul *Aho* which comes as a response.

What is most flattering though is that when I meet a kampung person in town, it is always Simunul that is spoken. This marks me out as one of them. If people stop to listen, as they usually do, with a flourish, it is explained, "See, she has 'passed' in Simunul. She is one of us."

Asking the basic questions

The days fall into a pattern. After breakfast, I do the round of houses in the kampung taking a census. Since I know my side of the kampung better than the other, I start from the other.

This census is good for introducing myself to the people in the kampung. Not only do I get to know them, but they also get to ask me the questions they have till now only asked others about me.

But as for the census, instead of making the situation clearer, it is all a muddle. It is the simplest things which are the most confusing. Names for instance. Take Emmong. Her formal name is Hjh Padma. Only no one calls her that. Everybody, and this includes her children, calls her Emmong.

Her daughter, Si Sophia is called Iak, Hjh Habibah is commonly called Hjh Kecil and Si Mariam is often just called Iam.

The other sister, Hjh Halipah is called Hjh Ipoh. This is because when Emmong was pregnant with her, she longed to eat the Chinese dumplings called 'pao'. When Hjh Halipah was born, she was fat and had a round face. People started calling her '*Pao, pao*'. So she is stuck with the name Hjh Ipoh.

Some people have more than one nickname. Si Patimah who is of Emmong's kin group — she is called Si Timah, Si Hitam and Si Katherine. The first is a shortened version of her name. That is quite popular. The second refers to her dark complexion for she is part Timorese. The third though refers to a game she and Hjh Halipah used to play when they were girls. Si Patimah pretended to be Katherine — don't know exactly which, though have always assumed it to be Katherine Hepburn. Hjh Halipah took the name, Helen.

These are just the nicknames. There are other traditional ways of address that people use instead of the name. For instance Si Sai — that in itself is a shortened version of her formal name — she is also called Indah. Indah is commonly

used to address the daughter of the house. The term for a son is Otok. So in Si Sai's house, Si Suraya also becomes Indah and Si Tony is generally called Si Otok. That makes Si Sai, *Ina Si Otok*, that is mother of Si Otok.

These nicknames help sidestep some of the taboos associated with taking the name of a person. Si Ara once told me that it would be considered rude for people to call her by her real name which is Si Maheswara. And if she called Emmong by Emmong's real name, she would suffer ill consequences for breaking a taboo.

This goes further between husbands and wives. A wife is never supposed to take her husband's name. Si Sai for instance never calls her husband by name. She never uses his nickname which is Si Moallum. She always calls him *Ema Si Tony*, which means the father of Si Tony. If she took his name, she says, the marriage would break. She also never refers to him as "my husband", though he often refers to her as his wife. He calls her Indah, the way she was called by her parents. But Hjh Halipah's husband calls her *ning* which means 'darling'.

All the women are very surprised when they hear I call my husband by name. This is never done. It makes things simple if the husband has a title like Haji. Then you call him Haji. Sometimes a woman will just get the husband's attention by saying "Hei".

If this is not complicated enough, sometimes men and women change their names when they return from Mecca. For instance after the Haj, Si Mujina, the headman's sister became Hjh Jariah. The 'Si' is then dropped. So just getting the names right takes quite a while.

Only then can I start figuring out who is related to whom and how. And nearly everybody is related in some way to everybody else. Or at least connected to them through marriage. Take Si Sophia's case. Her husband's sister is married to the brother of Sophia's brother's dead wife. Since Sophia stays in the house cluster of her husband's kin group, she sees her husband's sister often. And the fact of this connection is important in their relationship.

Each person by relationship fits into more than one slot. Unless one knows the slots well, the pattern does not

emerge. Anyway, they are all so interested in tracing patterns of kinship, that they tell me again and again the relationship involved.

I usually get lost after the first one or two steps and have to figure the whole thing out with kinship charts. Without this kind of mental acrobatics, there is no making sense of the kampung.

Whenever I talk to Si Mariam, I am aware that the other people in her shop are her sisters, or her mother's sisters or her mother's sister's daughters or her mother's brother's daughters. This is important for it is most likely that if they were not related, they would not be in the shop at all.

It is easier to catch the relationship if they are staying next to each other. Then the whole structure of the houses and the connecting catwalks looks like a kinship chart in itself.

When one catwalk leads to another related house, women come in and out of the houses without bothering to dress up as they would if they were going across the kampung. In Emmong's house cluster for instance, there is Hjh Habibah's house where she stays. This is the middle house. On the landward side is Emmong's son's house where Si Ainon, her granddaughter stays. On the seaward side is another daughter. To the left is Si Mariam's house and further left is Hjh Ipoh's house. To the right of Emmong's house are the houses of her sisters and their children. Further on is the house of her husband's son by his Sulu wife. Further right is Emmong's son's house, that of Haji Kassim.

So here you have a solid chunk of kin identifiable as such. Only Si Sophia, Emmong's daughter, lives away with her husband's kin group. Emmong visits her often, but it is Si Sophia who comes to the house cluster for informal coffee sessions. Her sisters go to her house only when something is happening there. "It is not good to go often," says Si Mariam, "for maybe her husband's kin will think we have come to borrow money or something like that."

Compared to such a large kin cluster, Si Sai's house looks rather forlorn standing alone, connected to no other house. It stands alone for Si Sai's kin don't live in the kampung any more. Her parents died a few years ago. She has a brother but he lives with his wife in her kin cluster. And other than

that there is just the unmarried sister, Si Kitu, who lives with her.

Si Malcom's parents are also dead. He was brought up by his aunt who stays on the other side of the kampung. His sister stays with her and his brothers live outside the kampung. Si Malcom visits his aunt and his sister often, helping his sister build her house. But he often goes alone, for Si Sai goes only when there is some work to be done or someone is ill.

What this does mean is that Si Sai's kinship patterns do not give me much of a base as far as introductions go. I have to venture out and the census is a good way of doing this.

I find I have to take the census twice. The first time I take it, I am left confused. Earlier on, a census seemed the best way to get the basic facts of the kampung — how many people, houses, occupation, educational levels, composition of the household, marriage patterns. But I am having so many problems with a simple household census that I am getting very sceptical of all the neat charts I see in sociology books. I wonder how others manage to get really foolproof data on such a large variety of items.

A simple question like: How old are you? has people stumped. When I ask a woman how old she is, she says, "Look at me. How old do you think I am? What is so great about age anyway? My boy is grown. He is a young man already, ready for marriage." It makes for great sociological copy, but how do I fit her into my five year age groups?

It is all approximate at best, especially with women above 35. The reference point is the eldest child. Assume she got married at 17. Figure out her approximate age, and then fit in the older and younger siblings.

Ask the next question: How many children do you have? Often the woman starts counting. She says eight. You write down eight. Then you find that one was a miscarriage, one died. So actually she has six living children. Cancel out the eight, write down six. Then you find that one of her children has been adopted by a relative. Write down five and hope that is the right count.

Once a woman counted her grandchildren as her children

because she had been looking after them for so long. Another time one woman called me back for she had failed to count her adopted daughter.

Then there are complications of whose children. I have been visiting Hjh Siti Rahkmah's house for quite a while. She is the kampung's ritual specialist and the Number one midwife. I used to think hers was a simple household. Later, when I know her better, I find there are actually five categories of children in the house. There are the daughters of her husband and his first wife, the son he had adopted then, the daughter Hajjah had adopted when she was married to her first husband, the son she had with her first husband and the daughter she had with her present husband.

Sometimes just counting the people living in a house poses problems. This is understandable when you find that at times in one house there are as many as seven households, that is seven kitchens. In one house, I finally toted up a total of 45 people.

It is interesting to note the kind of questions the women cannot answer. For instance they often do not know the extent of their husband's education. They do not know whether he had three years in school or five. Some do not know in what grade their children are studying.

The real clincher though is community. This is the real eye opener. It is one of the reasons I became interested in the kampung in the first place. In Peninsular Malaysia, where I lived for three years before moving to Sabah, ask a person his community and you generally get one of three answers — Malay, Chinese, Indian. Sure there are a lot of subcategories but community is seen as a tripartite division.

In Sabah the situation is immeasurably more complex. There are over 30 communities listed in the Population and Housing Census of 1970 including 14 Muslim communities. In the field, what you have to appreciate are the different levels at which the term *bangsa*, that is the term for community, operates. You ask: What is your *bangsa*? This can be interpreted to mean: What is your religion? What is your language? What is your rank? What is your place of birth? What is your community by descent? So you get five different answers to the same question.

To make matters more complicated, the community by descent is an open ended question. Their kinship system is a cognatic one, in that the father's side and the mother's side are both important. Technically, they say the father's side is more important. But as they often live with the mother's kin group, it is the mother's side which at times becomes more important.

So here it is not always the father's community which is given as their community. To give matters an added twist, the father might not have followed his father's community classification anyway. It is like a multiple-choice question. You can stress any one of the answers. It is an unusual family which cannot claim more than two community classifications. For instance, in Hjh Habibah's case, her mother is Simunul, her father is Indonesian. She calls herself Simunul. Her husband is Sulu. So her children can call themselves Simunul, Sulu or Indonesian.

It makes my back ache from bending over the tables or the attempt at the tables. I feel dizzy when I stand up and then find that all this is preliminary stuff anyway. Two hours of solid work and only one house done. Sixty-six still to go.

This is the formal part of the work. To relax and just pass the time I sit in the shops. It is more productive, for I just let kampung life wash over me, soaking in the different topics of conversation.

When I sit in the shops I am sitting in neutral territory. I don't feel I am being such a nuisance. When I visit a person's house, I am served with coffee — kampung style which means sweetened black local coffee — and some kind of cakes or biscuits. I don't want to impose on their hospitality too much for they don't come to my place in return.

As I stay with Si Sai, visiting me would mean they are visiting Si Sai. So that is out. This is why I find myself in the village shops everyday. Since there is one which approximates to nearly every important kinship cluster, it is as good a way as any to study the kampung.

I go back to my room when it is time for the evening prayer. When the call for Maghrib, the evening prayer, sounds, a sudden hush descends on the kampung. The children are called in from play. The housewives start the

evening meal. Men stroll towards the mosque. Even the ordinary sounds of the kampung seem to die away. Children seem not to cry, the cows do not moo. Nor do the cocks crow. This time between evening and night always seems a special time.

The village shop

I am most at home in Si Mariam's shop. This is the one which serves Emmong's kinship cluster. Here they all gather in the morning for what we call the daily 'forum'. One day the talk is about going to Mecca, another day about the difficulties of indebtedness and the next day the story of the film in town.

There is nothing fancy about the shop. It is a wooden shed built by the road. There are rough wooden open shelves on the sides with tomato ketchup, soya bean sauce, shampoo, soap and oil. There is a table and a drawer which works as the cash box. A tin hangs from the roof. This is for small change.

On a table in the centre are the ten cent snacks that the children go for. Outside, there is a bench at one side, a table with two benches on the other. Here the 'beehoon', a kind of Chinese noodles and the orange drink are kept. If anybody wants to eat, they sit here.

On the floor are piled the coconuts, and sometimes baskets of dried fish. If Si Mariam's husband has bought bananas, they hang from the roof. Some shops are better equipped than this, but generally they follow the same pattern.

After this is Si Sai's shop. Since this is relatively new, it still has to acquire a character of its own. The attraction here are the drinks served. It attracts people from the two catwalks behind it.

Next on the road is Hjh Jariah's shop. This one is associated with the headman's kin group. Here Si Gaddung, Hjh Jariah's sister also sells mutton soup in the evenings. Her aunt comes on Fridays to sell putu and fish. The place attracts a lot of young girls and boys. This is where I usually land up giving Hindi lessons.

At first Hjh Jariah thinks I am a nuisance. When I sit there, I attract a lot of people. This does not mean good business for they don't often buy anything and just give her extra work for she has to be on the look out that nobody walks away with things without paying.

Now, I think she likes me better. I always listen to her talking of old times. This is her favourite subject of conversation. She goes on about the British period and how good everything was then. Things were cheap. A dollar would not finish for ten days. Everybody in the kampung worked on the *attap*, the palm roofing. The men collected it from the islands, the women stitched it. It was then sold — ten dollars for a thousand pieces.

As a postscript she adds it was difficult too. Her hands became numb and shook when she had to pound five sacks of rice and two sacks of sugar for a kampung function.

Then she has another dig at me. "True, we don't have any schooling. But we know how to work, how to trade. You all who have education, if you don't get a wage, it is difficult for you."

Further on, across the road are two shops. I go to one of these often for it is the one with a pay phone. Si Tun works with the Telecoms, so probably his contacts helped him get one installed. Then at the other side of the kampung is Hjh Natsi's shop. The attraction here is her daughters.

One of her daughters, Hjh Norizam has just returned from Tawau, a large town to the south, after doing her Form Six. I like talking to her. There is often a newspaper in her house and she has a prized collection of *Wanita* magazines. She speaks English fluently and sometimes when I want to revert back to original status as it were, I go and visit.

At the furthest end is Hjh Siti Rahkmah's shop. She is the one with the different categories of children. However this is not her main distinction. She is the *Mak Andam*, the one who helps dress the bride. She is not only a good contact, but I like her too. Like Emmong, she has a huge kin group and they take over three catwalks.

It is a different atmosphere here. There is more a mixture of Simunul and Malay spoken here. Hjh Siti Rahkmah's grandchildren are also more into education, so the topics don't only concentrate on kampung affairs. Most evenings though, the men are busy washing their cars for her kin group has many cars.

Si Mariam has had her shop for ten years. "When my girls were small," she says while sweeping the floor, "they very

much wanted to have a frig at home. So when we bought a frig, I made ice cream and had cold drinks for sale. I found they sold well. There were days I could make $5 to $7 a day. I thought, why not have a shop? For a year, I had it in the kitchen and sold rice and a few eats for the kids.

"Then we moved it outside the house. For five years we carried on like that. Then five years ago, we built this shop. At first, it was just a shed. Slowly we added the benches and tables. Slowly, slowly, it became bigger. What to do Puan? We are poor, and everybody has to find food in some way.

"I don't know how much goes out, how much comes in. The agent from Sandakan comes to sell. I cannot write so I don't keep accounts. There is a little profit, not much. After all, it is mostly family who comes to buy.

"My children alone eat up a lot. And then sometimes the others also buy and don't pay."

Si Mariam's accounting methods are concentrated on the tin that is dangling from the roof. Somebody gives ten cents, it goes in there, somebody needs to be paid, the money comes from there. At the end of the day, the money is kept in a drawer.

It is not as if there have not been attempts to introduce modern methods of accounting. Her nephew gives her a long lecture on the subject. She patiently listens to it. He says the reason kampung shops remain small is that there is no accounting. You don't know how much money is coming in, how much is going out, what things move fast, what things don't.

It sounds quite impressive, till Si Latipa, Mariam's daughter says, "It is rather difficult to write down 5 cents worth of salt. And it is the melon seed packets and orange drinks which sell best anyway."

There have been more organised government efforts which did not have much effect either. The first time two men came from Kojasa, the institution organising this, they were treated with great caution. Nobody knew why they were asking all these questions about the shops. Could they be from the Income Tax department?

Si Mariam asks them this particular question. "I was quite short with them for I had a fight with my children's father.

And they had to choose that very day to come," she says. But when they asked me my difficulties, I told them how my children take a lot from the shop. Then there is the debt. If a person owes $50, he pays $30 only. And if a person dies, who is going to collect the debt? Then, I told him there are too many shops in the kampung.

"Before, every day we would clear a profit of $70 to $80. Now there are eight shops and we make only $30. Maybe $40.

"In the beginning, Puan, I would keep accounts. But it is difficult for I am 'ignorant'. I kept the accounts for a long time. Then I thought, why should I? It is not as if I owe anybody anything. The capital is mine alone. Anyway all those bills attracted cockroaches. So I threw them all out."

Hjh Jariah's reaction is even more negative to the Kojasa people. "I asked them first whether they were involved with the government. When they said they were, I was sure the information would lead to income tax. See, if I keep the accounts like they say I should, I will have to write down how much I buy every day. Then they can say, 'See she bought $70 worth of stuff. She must be having the capital. The money must be coming in.' "

After she took steps to avoid telling them anything, she told them to sit there and see for themselves. "Look for yourselves," I told them. "One person comes, buys ten cents worth of stuff. Then two hours later, another will come and buy another ten cents worth. It is not like the Chinese shops where people come one after another. And they count every ten cents. Even with their children. Here, just count the number of grandchildren I have. Sometimes they bring ten cents with them, sometimes they don't. But they are my grandchildren."

Sitting in Si Mariam's shop, a child comes in to buy some sweets. Another comes for an orange drink. Si Latipa mixes some more orange. Si Mariam's eldest daughter Si Fatimah who got married a year ago and has a baby boy, is at the back of the shop cooking. She helps too when she is not looking after the baby.

The baby sleeps in a sarung hammock at the back of the shop. When he is not sleeping, he is passed round from hand

to hand — from the grandmother to the great grandmother and the grand aunts. After he has had his bath, each person in turn inhales his baby fragrance.

People come and go. Si Sophia comes from across the kampung to have her talk session.

Emmong's niece passes by with two plastic containers to fill with drinking water at the spring. Since this water is free from chlorine, it is preferred to the regular tap water. Si Mariam also has some of this in the frig for family consumption.

It is quite some time before I try it. When I do, I find it delicious. I did not know that water could be tasty.

Si Ping passes by to buy raw jackfruit from the neighbouring kampung. A cousin comes in and some time later, another cousin's husband and uncle walk in. Si Latipa serves everyone with orange. I wonder where the shopkeeping bit stops and the visiting aspect of it takes off.

Children keep coming and buying ten cents of this and ten cents of that. They are very good customers for parents here indulge their children as far as money is concerned. They get anything from $2 to $5 a day as spending money, if their parents can afford it. Even if the parents are short of money, some spending money is considered necessary for the children.

I am struck with this, for my children only get 20 cents a day and this is adequate. I wonder whether the children here get so much money because there are so many shops or there are so many shops because they get so much money.

Hjh Ipoh's mother-in-law passes by to look after her cow who is about to deliver in the stockade on the hill. She lights a fire near the cow, to keep the cow warm. Seeing her, I shiver slightly for she is part of one of my most frightening moments in the kampung.

People say she is in touch with the devil and at night she roams the hills. They say she visits a large cave in the neighbouring kampung where the devil comes to see her. Others say she keeps a *jinn* and so cannot pray. It is believed that if a *bomoh*, that is a medicine man or woman, uses spirits to help cure the sick, the bomoh will not be acceptable to God. She will not be allowed in the mosque

and cannot pray at home either.

People are careful of her. But then most rationalise the whole thing by saying that Hjh Ipoh's mother-in-law does not use her magic for ill purposes but only to cure those who are ill.

She is a thin, shrunken woman and they say that since her husband died she has given up all the medicine sessions to cure the possessed. According to hearsay again, she had to throw out the devil when her husband died, for otherwise the devil would not have permitted her to sit by the body. The devil and the *jinn* do not like to be in a house where there has been a death. But still she cannot pray, they say.

I saw her in action about a year ago before I came to live in the kampung. I was then only on visiting terms with some of Hjh Ipoh's family. One day when we were sitting in Hjh Habibah's house in the morning having coffee and just plain gossiping, Si Sophia came in with news that a girl from the other side of the kampung had taken ill. She was possessed.

The girl and her mother were then in Hjh Ipoh's mother-in-law's place, for they are distantly related to her.

The 18 year old girl, unmarried, was sitting on the catwalk in front of the house. Her eyes were glazed and a continuous low moan came from her. All the time, she kept rubbing her body compulsively, as though it was itching all over. Her mother had tied up her sarung and blouse with a long piece of cloth so she could not take off her clothes and jump naked into the sea.

The mother was distraught. "My daughter, look at her. She sleeps only an hour or two every night and refuses to eat," she said. "Now at least she does not scream and dance around all the time. I don't know what happened. Ten days ago, when my daughter was standing outside on the bridge, she saw a very bright 'red lamp'. When she came back and told us about it, we told her not to look. But she did not listen.

"She went back and looked, thinking it was a fisherman with a lamp. But of course it was no fisherman. It was the sea devil.

"By midnight, my daughter started screaming and wanted to jump into the sea. I don't know what to do. Why did it

happen? Maybe somebody put some magic on her. Maybe people have done something to her."

The family had taken the girl to the hospital. The doctors said they could do nothing about it, except put her in the mental hospital. So in sheer desperation, they tried one bomoh after another from Sandakan and Kota Kinabalu. But nobody's medicine had taken and her ailment remained undiagnosed.

That night they were to have a medicine session, the second of three in a row. I went with Si Mariam to see it after asking permission. Hjh Ipoh's mother-in-law said I could come but to bring no cameras or tape recorders for the devil might be caught in the image or the recording.

The scene was set. There was a yellow and green cloth spread in the middle of the large hall. On it was a bunch of green bananas with eggs on top.

There was a tray with traditional Simunul cakes made of flour and bananas fried in batter. Nearby was a plate with seven candles, four white new bowls — one with an egg on it, one with water, one with a candle and the last one was empty. On one side was a string of beads, yellow and black glutinous rice, a bottle of Alboa oil and an incense burner with *kemenyan*, that is, benzoin. From the roof hung a bunch of betelnut flowers, covered in yellow cloth.

The girl sat against the wall with her mother, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles. For the most part, it was a family group. The girl was still, though she continued moaning.

When Hjh Ipoh's mother-in-law came in, the light in the hall was switched off. It was dark except for a naked lighted bulb outside the room. She changed her clothes and wore a green sarung and yellow blouse. After this, she lighted a candle, then covered her head with a brown veil and started inhaling the incense.

In her hands were two black fans which kept fluttering spasmodically under her veil. She started chanting. As the chanting continued partly in Malay and partly in a special spirit language calling on the spirits for help, the girl went wild. Her relatives tried to lead her to the mattress near the bomoh, but she kept trying to run away. She clutched at her

cousin's sarung and tried to run, this side and that. It took four women to hold this frail girl in place.

The atmosphere became charged. I was terrified and quickly said my prayers to keep me safe from whatever was at large. This girl seemed to have something demoniacal in her. My flesh went cold.

All this time the bomoh was chanting. Two or three times the girl shouted and this in itself was strange, as before she couldn't talk at all. At times, her moaning rose to a crescendo turning into a wild shriek.

At different stages of the ritual, the bomoh held her hand out and chanted. Three times, she took a knife and pointed it towards the girl. Three times also, one of the women present, drummed a beat on the wooden floor with two pieces of firewood.

Then holding the fans in her hands, her head covered by the veil, the bomoh, a fifty-five year old grandmother, danced gracefully in a trance. As she danced, she hit the girl soundly with a fan and twice again just touched her with it. When the dance was over, the bomoh threw water on the girl.

At this point, the girl was taken outside and Hjh Ipoh's mother-in-law bathed her. While the girl was changing out of her wet clothes, the bomoh came back and again started chanting with the fans moving convulsively in her hands.

When the girl returned she went quietly to sit by the mattress which was near the bomoh. After a short while the quiet moaning began again. The bomoh held a string of beads over a bowl of water, which in turn was held over the benzoin. She dropped the beads in the water and gave the water to the girl to drink.

She then held an egg over the benzoin.

The final part of the ritual was when the bomoh turned away from the girl and faced the wall opposite us. She took the benzoin there and pointed the knife towards the wall.

The session ended after an hour and a half. The candle was extinguished and Hjh Ipoh's mother-in-law changed back to her ordinary sarung and blouse. The girl was given the egg to rub over her body so that the egg would absorb her illness.

The lights came on and things changed back from the supernatural to the social. Cakes and coffee were served.

After three sessions, the girl did not recover completely. But she was much improved. The family consulted others including Bajaus from Semporna and Sungais from the Kinabatangan. In two weeks she could eat and sleep again.

When I saw her a year later, she had become very plump and her mother was looking around for a suitable young man as the girl was now of marriageable age.

The magic scene

I never saw anything quite as dramatic again. Hjh Ipoh's mother-in-law is the only one who is known to call on spirits in her medicine sessions. But there is no lack of practitioners claiming special powers and knowledge.

Si Mariam's neighbour Haji (Hj) Anjou is one of them. He has built up a reputation for bringing husbands and wives together. Every now and again, when sitting at Si Mariam's shop, I see taxis stopping opposite his house and girls going in.

Hj Anjou is married to a Bokara girl so stays here, though originally he is from Semporna. "When I was 14, and that was back in 1935, I travelled from Semporna to Nunukan in Indonesia," he says. "Then I went on to Terakan, Bulongan, Perahu, Samarinda, Papan, Banjermassin and then Batavia, Bandung, Surubaya and Jambi. It was at Jambi that I heard of a special guru. When I went to the guru's house, he asked, 'Child, where are you from?'"

"North Borneo," I replied.

" 'Where are you staying?' the guru asked. When I told him I was staying at the mosque, he invited me to stay with him. There I helped him with the work, the digging, carrying water and wood.

"Only after six years of living with him, did the guru give me the *ilmu*, the knowledge."

"This knowledge is to be used only for the good. I have been twice to Mecca and there I took an oath that I would never ask for any return for this knowledge. If anybody gives something, I will accept it, but I will not ask.

"Also I will not choose whom to help. Whoever needs my help, I will help. Till now I have helped 167 women. Chinese and Kadazan women too I have helped. All I ask for is pepper and a needle, something hot and something sharp. When people come to me for help, I don't say I am clever. We only pray to Tuan Allah for His help. This is the important point."

This evening, one of his former clients brought a friend.

The former client is a refugee from Jolo in Sulu. She came here in 1976 and soon after, her husband left for Libya. After Hj Anjou ritually bathed her, her husband came back to Sabah longing for her. So now she has brought her friend who has the same problem.

This is the second time they have come. The first time, they did not bring the sea horses with them. These dried sea horses are to be burnt and pounded into a powder before the session can begin.

Now the woman who needs help puts on rubber slippers and ties her sarung below the shoulders as she would for a bath. Hj Anjou holds part of her hair and pours ordinary water with his right hand. It is not all in a torrent, but a bit slow, sprinkler like at first and then stronger. He pours water four times in all, but after the first time, he does not hold her hair.

At the end, he puts his left hand on the woman's head, and his right hand on top of the left. He hits it thrice. The operational part in all this is the charm that he mutters under his breath.

The ritual is over. After a cup of coffee, the girl brings out a tin of biscuits she has brought. After much remonstration on Hj Anjou's part, that there is no need for all this trouble, the girls leave. Then Hj Anjou turns round and says, "With the power of Tuan Allah, this bathing is usually effective in bringing husband and wife together. If you want it, I will bathe you too."

This is getting too close for comfort, so I make a hasty retreat. In Si Sai's house also there are preparations for a ritual bath. This is to be a multi-purpose affair. A neighbour on the next catwalk has a visiting son-in-law who has a reputation for *ilmu*, that is, special powers. So Si Malcom wants him to come and help 'cool' the house down. He believes the house may be ritually 'hot'.

First his mother-in-law died and eight months later, his father-in-law died in his sleep. He might have had a heart attack, Si Malcom says, but people said the house was 'hot' and advised Si Sai to place her parents' beautifully carved bed on the grave. She did.

Si Tony who is 14 dropped out of school after Form One

and is now just hanging around. Si Suraya nearly got raped. And Si Kitu is thirty and thereabouts and still unmarried. So he feels they can use some help.

The ritual bath is preceded by a purely social visit. Si Sai has gone to a lot of trouble in setting up a mini feast. There are three types of cakes with coffee before the meal. The meal is served in a tray with two special beef dishes, prawns and cucumber salad.

Before getting to business, the guru tells how he found a glistening stone. Could it be a diamond? Si Malcom says he does not know how to identify diamonds. Despite this, the guru takes it out to show it to us with a magnifying glass. So Si Malcom tells him it is definitely a diamond.

Later, Guru Zainal, for that is his name, tells his story, not unlike a salesman selling his wares.

"I am a specialist in *tenaga batin* — that is the art which fortifies a person against attack," he says. "Bullets won't hurt a person, neither will a parang. I inherited it from my father's father. I spent six months and 15 days deep in the forest near Kota Kinabalu, sleeping against trees, eating roots and leaves and depending on the mercy of God.

"Once a huge snake, about a foot in circumference coiled itself round my leg. But I did not move. I just prayed and the snake went away without biting me. Now I teach people, anyone over the age of eleven. I have 800 students in Bokara itself. In the country, I have 47,000 students. Many soldiers come to me for instruction.

"I don't ask them for money. They give what they can. One dollar, two dollars, five dollars. That also I give to the poor.

"I have a seeing power in my left eye. I can see the character of a person, can know from the armpits of a girl whether she is a virgin or not. My father by his power could make a young coconut fall from the tree without climbing it. But my power is greater, because of my stay in the forest.

"See my fingers," he says. "My index finger and the pointer are of different lengths. Now see. I say "Allah" and they are both of the same length. See each part corresponds to the other. It is just the power of Allah.

"My power was strong enough to overcome the spell laid

on my wife. A Bugis had come to ask for her hand but when she refused, he worked a spell on her shoe. So when she walked, she would suddenly faint and fall down. She was engaged 11 times, but 11 times her engagement broke. When I got engaged to her, others tried to tell me she was a much engaged girl. But I knew she was pure.

"There are people," he admits, "who think this is against religion. But these are people of little faith."

While he is on his monologue, all the people in the house respectfully listen. Though he is young, his position as a guru entitles him to that respect. He leaves saying he will come again on Thursday night for it is the holy night of the week — that is Thursday according to the English system but Friday according to the Muslim reckoning.

When he comes on Thursday evening, he turns to me and asks, "Do you want to be cut with a knife?" The knife in his hand glistens. Seeing me recoil instinctively, he hits the knife on his arm twice and puts his arm forward, saying, "See, there is no blood. Just two marks."

Then he calls upon Si Wira who is eight, to put his arm forward. He seems to hit the arm hard. Again no blood. Just two marks. Later, he hits the knife three times on Si Tony's stomach. There are three weals. At that he says, "This boy does not always do what his parents say." Si Sai agrees. "Yes, he always needs to be told twice," she says.

Everything is ready for the ritual bath. There is benzoin and coal. The guru takes the boys to the back of the house where the drum is kept and cuts a lime in half. He asks the boys to sit on their haunches facing east. With his hands on their backs, he bows his head and prays. Then he takes the knife and puts the blade into the fire. He puts the benzoin on the lighted coals and asks each boy to place his right hand over the fire. At this point he hits the boys with the knife three times on the stomach. Then he squeezes the lemon into the water, gives half the lemon to each boy to hold in his hand and puts the water with the mug a few times over each boy's head. This is it.

Earlier, his wife had bathed the girls. He asks them to bring water from the tap in three identical bottles. One bottle has clear water, one has cloudy water, and in one the

water has turned blue. It is a sign of illness, he says.

After this, the children ask forgiveness of the guru and his wife and their parents. They then sit down and listen to the guru give advice. "In three months you will get married," he tells Si Kitu. Then he has the coffee and cakes.

Si Kitu remains unmarried eight months after the ritual bath.

For every different ailment, there seems to be a ritual specialist available. Hjh Ipoh has long complained of a headache on one side of the head. A Bajau bomoh from Kudat, a town to the west of Sandakan is in town so he is called in for consultation.

He is a slight man and says he got his powers from a guru in Sarawak who is reputed to be able to see the seven layers of the universe. "I wanted to marry the guru's daughter," he says, "but instead, the teacher recognised me as a son and bequeathed his knowledge to me."

The session begins. He holds an egg and rubs it with a special vegetable oil. The children around are playing with guns, reenacting a scene from *Combat*, the popular TV show. The bomoh is doing his thing, and chants slowly over the egg. He gives it to Hajjah who rolls the egg over her head and chest. After a few minutes, the bomoh takes the egg and breaks it very gently with the back of a spoon.

At this point, everybody gathers round him. When the egg is put into a small, white bowl, the yolk breaks. So Hajjah has to repeat the whole process with another egg.

When the second egg is opened, the bomoh looks at it, then moves it with the spoon. The yolk breaks again, so the whole thing has to be done once more. With the third egg, the yolk does not break. All of us gather round to see what he sees. It still looks like an ordinary egg but appears to be now invested with the illness.

He now takes a page from a school exercise book. With a piece of wood, he draws a geometric figure of a woman and writes in Jawi on it. This paper is given to Hajjah to be folded into a pellet and put in a plastic bag and then tied round the waist.

After this, Hajjah lies down on the mat with her head on a pillow. The bomoh holds her forehead with his fingers and

blows on it and softly prays. Then Hajjah turns round and he holds the nape of her neck and repeats the prayer.

He then proceeds to sprinkle water on her. When Hajjah gets up, the bomoh asks for a bottle of ordinary water. He prays and blows on the water and gives it back to Hajjah.

As Hajjah still complains of a tenseness, the bomoh rolls the egg on her again. This time he holds the egg himself. When the egg is on the centre of her forehead, he murmurs and makes a sucking movement. He does this thrice and then gives the egg to Hajjah to hold.

She now says her feet are cold so he has her lie down. Then he holds her feet between the big toe and the others. He chants, then with one jerk, pulls her foot outward. He does this thrice for each foot.

The session is over. Hajjah gives him $10 for his fare back. Within five minutes of his leaving, Hajjah considers going to see a doctor. She has been to the doctor before. When her headaches did not stop, she tried the Chinese patent oils. And there has been this egg rolling session with other bomohs before. She herself sees her headaches as a sign that maybe her late father is trying to make contact and tell her something.

Another explanation she offers is that perhaps it is all due to the contraceptive pills she has been taking or maybe it is just that she has poor eyesight. She has spectacles but is scared of wearing them. "People say," she tells, "that if you wear glasses all the time, you go blind. Also the pupils of your eyes come out." Moreover, when she wears glasses, she gets a headache and feels as if she is taller. So she doesn't wear them.

More often than not, in the kampung, traditional and modern medicine are tried side by side. It is not at all unusual for a woman to go to a doctor in the morning then prepare a traditional poultice of ground coconut, turmeric and other herbs and put it directly on the waist with a cloth holding it in place.

The idea behind this is that it will not hurt and probably will help. Sometimes though, this alternating between the doctor and kampung medicine is objected to by both sides, for the complete course of medicine is not followed.

However, few if any would categorically refuse to try the doctor or the traditional system in some form at one time or another.

The traditional system of medicine is so rooted in custom that some of it is handed down from mother to daughter and becomes part of herbal lore.

The difference between the systems of modern and traditional medicine is not only in the treatment offered. The explanation of the illness is worlds apart. When Hjh Habibah fell ill, her doctor told her this was because she had mixed medicines. She accepted that but also felt that part of it was caused by a great fear and magic.

She had gone into town the previous day. Four boys followed her. She got really frightened and started shaking. She dashed into a shop to wait for them to go away. When she came home, she felt ill.

Immediately, somebody is sent to Mile 2½ to get one of the older refugee women from the waterfront settlement. She comes and hangs two bunches of leaves on the doorway.

In many ways, accepting the doctor's explanation and that of the bomoh requires an act of faith for the layman. But one of the great attractions of kampung medicine is that it gives you a personalised reason for your illness.

I had a stomach upset after I spent a day swimming at a nearby island. It had been diagnosed as a case of overeating and too much sun. But when Emmong heard, she said I must have bumped into the spirits of dead people while walking on the beach. It explained why only I had come down with a stomach upset when everybody else had the same food and the same amount of sun.

Though many people in the kampung say they do not believe in spirits, such beliefs are evident from casual conversation. "It's not so bad now," says Emmong. "Now that there is electricity and much of the forest has been cleared, there are not so many ghosts and evil spirits around. Before, when there were big trees and it was dark, they would come out in force."

Even now she takes no chances. When she sees children playing in the rain on a sunny day, she calls them in, saying that the devil is abroad at this time. If a person is exposed

to this kind of "hot rain", he can die straight away.

Si Sai does not want to walk past the graveyard. It is alright if you are in a bus. But if you walk by it, you may suffer from a headache and vomiting — a sure sign that the spirits have got you.

With all these forces on the loose, Si Mariam has her grandson well protected. On top of his sarung hammock are attached writings from the Koran wrapped in a green cloth. Then there is an Iban charm made of two pieces of wood, which Hjh Habibah's husband had brought from Sarawak. There is also the sharp, spiked jawbone of a fish. Even the devil is said to be afraid of it.

"I have another one like it," she says. She goes to her house and brings the upper jaw of a fish measuring approximately two feet long and six inches wide. "Here, take this," she tells me. "You stay in the room all alone. It will protect you against the devil."

Kampung history

The biggest scoop so far is being able to talk to Sarif Abdullah. He lives on the next catwalk. I am glad I got to him before he got senile. A few months later, when I went to check on a few details, his standard response had become, "I have forgotten. It was so long ago."

He says he remembers his people, the Sulus and Simunuls moving from Tronglit in Sandakan Bay to open the kampung. Since that according to historical record was in 1880, it makes Sarif Abdullah in 1979, at least 105 years old.

The reason for that move was that the European settlement, Kampung German on the same island in Sandakan Bay, had accidentally burnt down in 1879. Then William Pryer who later founded Sandakan, decided that the time was ripe for the settlement to move to the mainland. So in a story full of pirates and native chiefs, Pryer moved to the mainland. This left Tronglit which was close to Kampung German, high and dry without its main trading centre.

Si Hitam's grandfather, Pa Butu adds another interesting detail. What really decided the people on the move, he said, was the distance between Tronglit and the new settlement of Sandakan. He said that if a man died in Tronglit, by the time a person went to Sandakan and came back with the necessary things for burial, even the body would have rotted.

So the people met with Pryer. He offered them other islands — two to be precise. They refused them for they wanted to be on the mainland. In the end, they settled on Bokara for it was near the new settlement and in time a road could be built giving access via land to it.

The older people came to inspect the place and found hills covered with bamboo and the shores lined with mangrove. On the hills were monkeys covered with red fur. In the evening, they could see hundreds of them. So they called the village, Bokara, *bokara* being the Simunul word for that type of monkey. They cleared the mangrove and built their first sheds of palm leaves by the sea.

The one thing that happened while I was trying to patch together even this little fragment of early history is that now I do not believe that an old man sits by the fire in the evening and gives the anthropologist a story complete in its details.

This story came in bits and pieces. Sarif Abdullah says he remembers the move. Pa Butu probably heard some of the details. Some of it finds a mention in the diary kept by William Pryer. But with every telling of the story something gets added on.

When Sarif Abdullah was telling his story, his son had to interpret all the time. This was partly because my Simunul at the time was far from fluent. It was partly because Sarif Abdullah is hard of hearing. He is not quite deaf but getting there. And after all the stages through which a question had to go, he would mumble, "I have forgotten."

When I went to see Pa Butu, he was surrounded by his grandchildren and great grandchildren. Neighbours dropped in for a free story. A child was learning how to walk. And in the process, he knocked over the coffee.

On one side a group had gathered to see the Sunday English film on television with the sound turned off. Everybody added their piece. The story became far from clear as other 'authorities' gave their version.

This is what happened when they talked of Andeguru Matajang, the person who led the migration from Simunul Island to Tronglit in 1878. This much is mentioned in historical records. What is not mentioned is all the accretions of legend with which it is surrounded.

According to one version recounted in Pa Butu's house, Andeguru Matajang was from Indonesia. He brought with him two baby elephants, one male, one female. Both were white. He let these elephants loose on the north eastern coast of Sabah. That is why there are so many elephants here when before, there were none.

After releasing the elephants, he rowed all along the coast, exploring. Sometime after this, he went to Simunul Island, got married, then with a large boat which could hold up to 200 people, he came to Bokara. Here, the narrator completely ignored the Tronglit episode in the migration. And it is known from record that Andeguru Matajang

landed in Tronglit with a number of Simunuls in 1878 to settle under the flag of the then unchartered British North Borneo Company.

Hjh Jariah who is a direct descendant of Andeguru Matajang tells of his magic kris. One day as he was sailing along the coast of Tawau, his ship was attacked by pirates. He fought bravely and everybody except Andeguru Matajang was killed. The boats and everything on the boats sank except his kris which remained afloat.

According to her this kris is still with the Brunei branch of the family. You can see it only once a year on a special occasion.

History is extremely important to the people in the kampung. At least the idea of history is. Since there is little reference to the kampung in written records, the time sequence is vague. Their genealogical reckoning seldom goes beyond two generations. So there are times when a person will go back two generations and telescope the rest. What is valued though are the heirlooms which have been passed down — usually a kris, some brass, even clothes.

Details get stronger though on the pattern of life and occupation in the early years of the twentieth century. Then a number of men would band together, get some rice and trading goods on credit from a shop in Sandakan and row up the Kinabatangan. They traded the goods bought in Sandakan for the forest produce of the river — rattan, birds' nests and *damar*, a brownish resin from a tree.

The trip would last three to four months. After the debt was repaid to the shops, the profit was distributed among the partners. The more everyday activities were the collection of *attap* and *anggeriting*, a hard wood, from the islands near Bokara. And then there was fishing. But the Simunul Bajaus never solely concentrated on fishing. The fishing would most often involve the use of bamboo fish traps by the shore.

It is only in the early sixties, after Sabah became independent and joined the Federation of Malaysia, that Bokara changed from a village where the main occupations were fishing, trading and collecting, to a village where most of the people were involved in timber and government service.

"Be careful of the barbel eels"

"Be careful. Careful of the *sembailang*, the barbel eels," says Si Indah's father as we wade through the water to see what fish have been caught in the fish trap that evening. Si Indah is Emmong's niece and lives within her kin cluster.

The *bongsud* — that is what the fish trap is called — is about a mile away from the kampung near the Shell oil installations. Si Indah's father, mother and son are there to check it at low tide. Twice, everyday, someone has to make the trip. So for them, the day takes its rhythm from the tide.

Today low tide in the evening is at four so we come here in Si Indah's father's old rattling car. On the way, we stop for cigarettes for him and ice cream for his wife and me.

Hitching up my sarung, I follow his wife over wobbly logs and then wade in the water. I realise this is the first time I have actually waded in the sea though the house is over the sea. Only the children swim in the sea. Adults do not. Perhaps they are too conscious of the waste that goes into it.

"Be careful. Be careful," everybody repeats again, for I have gone in with bare feet and the barbels can be very painful. This is why Si Indah's father wears gum boots.

His grandson goes to the deep end of the fishtrap and scoops out the fish with a long handled net. There are only a few *banak* (grey mullet). Si Indah's father is very upset that the first time I come, the catch should be so meagre. "Yesterday, there were a lot of fish. When there are a lot, it is more fun.

"In ordinary months," he says, "if I get a 15 kati catch, I think it is good. The best time of course is in the three or four months of the north-east monsoon, from October to January. Then there are days when you even find 100 katis of fish in the bongsud. That is the real bonanza time for us.

"The other fishermen don't go out to sea so much because the wind is strong. So there is less fish in the market and the price is high. But those very winds drive the fish into the traps. So there are days when one day's catch comes to

$1,000. In six months, you can easily make $10,000. That is a good time.

"The rest of the year, it does not come to anywhere near that. But then there is usually enough fish for the house and sometimes a bit to spare. That alone is a help if you think of the price of fish these days."

It is a clever way of catching fish. Just set up the fish trap and then all you have to do is to check it at low tide. The fish are there waiting for you.

"I have been doing this since I was a little boy," says Si Indah's father. "Now I am 60 years old. The fish is less nowadays. During the monsoon season, we would get as much as 400 to 500 katis a day. Other times, I would not go to the trap. That was the time to collect *attap* and *kadjang* — the palm fronds for the walls of the house. I would also collect *anggeriting* wood from across the Bay.

"The young men today don't want to do the bongsud, even though they can make a fair living from it," he says. "The fish come every day unlike their pay. But the young men, they have schooling nowadays, they like to work in the offices. To go to the bongsud, they feel ashamed.

"Before, nearly everybody worked at the bongsud some of the time. Today," he says, "count the number of people. How many people are there in the kampung — nearly a thousand, isn't that so? And there are only five of us who work the bongsud."

When I first see the bongsud, it seems to be just a complicated mass of bamboo stakes. Now it connects up to what I saw Si Indah's father doing two weeks ago. Every day he would sit outside the house on the catwalk working on split bamboo. He had arranged the bamboo horizontally and was weaving lantana vines through it vertically to hold it together. When it was finished, it looked like a large bamboo blind used to keep out the sun.

Every day for at least a week, he sat there. As one section of bamboo finished, he rolled it up and stacked it on one side of the catwalk. "This is difficult work," he said. "My fingers hurt with all the tight knotting." After the bamboo was done, he had to wait for a lorry load of wooden poles to arrive. Then he and his grandson went

to fix the new trap. This is the one we are at.

"Just see it as a man with a head, chest and stomach," says Si Indah's father. "What you have here is three pear shaped caverns opening into each other. The one furthest out to sea is the smallest. That represents the head. The second one is the chest and third which is the largest and towards the shore is the stomach.

"Then there is a long row of bamboo stakes leading from the third cavern. On either side of this row at different angles, like two wings, are two shorter rows of bamboo."

The question I put to him is: Why don't the fish go out of the bongsud? Why do they collect in the deepest and smallest chamber?

Here lies the ingenuity of the traditional design, he says. Each chamber opens up into the next by an opening which is large at the shallow end and small at the deep end. So while it is easy for the fish to go in, it is difficult for them to come out.

"It's simple," he says. "The fish like to play where there is water. They are led along the wings of the bongsud into the first chamber. They play there. When the tide begins to go out, they move to the second chamber, for there is more water there. And when it is low tide, the fish move to the last chamber where they continue to play until somebody comes and takes them."

It is interesting how Si Indah's father talks of fish in such a human idiom. The fish don't swim, they play. The bongsud is not just a fish trap, it is a man with a head, chest and stomach.

Not having grown up by the sea, it all seems far from simple. Why do fish come so near the shore in the first place? One would assume they would keep to the deeper waters. "Tuan Allah only knows," Si Indah's father says with a smile.

Other than the bongsuds which line the shore a mile or so away from the kampung, there is little to show that Bokara was a fishing village not so many years ago. The village from which they migrated, Tronglit, still remains a fishing village with some houses of attap and bongsuds all along the shore and little boats moored to the side of the houses.

The only other indication of its tradition of fishing is an old Sulu grandfather who knots his own scoop nets. In itself, this is a most unusual scene in the village. He sits on one of those small chairs woven with coloured nylon wire. The net he is weaving is the kind used for scooping the fish out of the bongsud.

He uses an army green nylon twine and a bamboo shuttle like instrument. He loops the twine round another flat bamboo to get the loops of the required size and each loop is knotted with the shuttle weaving in and out.

"Now in the kampung, even some of the old fishermen don't know how to weave the nets," he says. And looking at him moving his bamboo shuttle in and out, tightening the knots, straightening the nylon twine, the whole thing still remains a mystery.

It is more a labour of love than thrift, for the finished product if bought in the shop would cost him $5. This way he buys twine for $2, spends two days on it and has some twine left over for another scoop net.

Though some fishing is done in the kampung, there is no fish for sale, except for the monsoon season. When there is not enough fish, it is used in the house or distributed to some relative's house. Seldom is cash exchanged, but it is on account nevertheless as the reciprocity patterns demand that. When there is a lot of fish, the fish dealers come to the bongsud and buy the fish on the spot.

Si Mariam's shop sometimes has fish for sale. That is when her husband has bought fish wholesale in Lahad Datu, a town to the east, and has been unable to sell it in the Sandakan market. All the fish that is left over is brought to the kampung to be disposed off cheaply. The rest is salted and dried. Then for days, Si Mariam and her daughters will be cleaning and drying the fish. "Just hope it does not rain," she says, "otherwise it will all go to waste." Soon after, dried fish makes its appearance in the shop. Some is dumped in baskets. The rest is hung by a hook in the centre.

Fishing is no longer a valued occupation because the money is better elsewhere, especially in timber. Those who had fishing boats have mostly converted them for hauling timber. With timber, you can net nearly ten times as much

money as for fishing. Now only the older men are still at the bongsud. The middle aged men are moving or have moved to timber. The younger men are attracted to the offices. I only know of one young man who goes to the bongsud. He is very defensive about it for he feels he lacks style even though he has his own pick-up.

This is why even though the houses are over the sea, people in the village make the daily trip to the Sandakan market to buy fish. This used to be a fisherman's village. Now it is known as the "timber rich" village, characterised more by its Mercedes cars and lavishly proportioned houses, expensive marriage payments, ostentatious clothes and jewellery, rather than its boats and fishing nets and the bamboo stakes of the fish traps lining the shore.

The timber story

"Do you see that man who is holding a plastic sheet over his head in the rain?" says Si Ara. "He used to be the richest man in the kampung. He had his own timber land. He had money. More money than anybody else in the kampung. But he threw it away on women and gambling. Now he holds a plastic sheet over his head. His wife, the second one, he divorced her. She now works as an amah at the port. Her stepsons help support her."

When people talk of Bokara as a timber village, they refer to its wealth derived from timber. They point to the cars which stand in front of renovated houses, large halls, porches, extravagant meals with ten dishes at a time and wardrobes bursting with clothes.

They talk of land received from the government and sold, then applied for again. They talk of political influence. Bokara is the most politicised kampung in the area. When the United Sabah National Organisation (Usno) ruled the state from 1963 to 1976, a lot of timber concessions were granted to the kampung people.

Since 1976 another political party, Berjaya, rules the state. Now too, this village has its people in the forefront. Here the connection between political influence and timber land is immediate and evident.

What is missing is wealth in the urban sense — in terms of property and invested capital. Only one man who is still living in the kampung has bought property for investment and the rental it can bring. Some still keep their money in cash and gold. Keep it in the bank and the income tax people will get at you. That is the argument. The timber is there. Use it up, use the money and then get some more land. "We do not know how to make our money go round," is the disgruntled comment of an angry young man.

How much money can you make from timber?

In 1979, if you had 300 acres of timber land, it could mean a profit of $100,000 or more. And this is probably underestimating it. This is if you worked it yourself. But in the

kampung, there are only two men who do work the timber themselves.

The most common and easiest way out is to sell the timber rights on your land. Again the price differs with the amount and quality of the timber on the land and its distance from the nearest shipping point. But it would not be far off the mark to say that in Sandakan, in 1979, the average price is $100 an acre. This is for the timber rights alone. So a person who has 300 acres stands to immediately gain $30,000 without having moved from his house.

For most, this ready money proves tempting enough. The fact that by selling it, they stand to lose a $100,000 or more, does not apparently figure in the deal. The profit is in the vague future. And between this future profit and the present, lie months of waiting in offices for the timber extraction licence to materialise and then the organisation of the actual working of the timber. And even then, who knows the price may fall.

The memory of the 1974–1975 slump is still fresh. A timber contractor who got caught in 1974, says, "Even if the price for timber does not fall disastrously, it's not easy. Once you have the land, you have to go take a 'round' of your area. You take five men and hire a motorboat for six days. And each man, you pay him $10 a day plus food. For the motorboat you pay — and I'm talking of a few years ago — you pay $80 a day. Add it up.

"Once you reach the place, you walk your area. If you are not experienced in jungle ways, you can easily get lost. This is not counting the pint of blood you lose to leeches and mosquitoes.

"Not only this, you must know how to dance in Kota Kinabalu. You have to go there to get the Timber Extraction Licence. Sometimes, you have to go as many as four times. And then too, it is not every person who knows how to get things done. One doesn't want to say much but it is common knowledge you have to pay for the approval by the acre. In 1977, I hear the rate was $15 an acre.

"Once the licence is approved it might still take as long as three months for the licence to be issued by the Forest Department in Sandakan. The land has to be surveyed.

"You hire a surveyor. First he goes to estimate the timber possibilities and for that you pay him $500 a day plus expenses. When you have a proper survey done, you pay — at least ten years ago — I paid $9,500 for 300 acres.

"When you do get the licence, it might start raining and your capital is all tied up. Or the tractor you have hired, breaks down. Or you happen to go beyond your survey boundary and get caught at it. And even if none of this happens, the price may fall."

This happened to Hjh Habibah and Hjh Ipoh. Their husbands had gone into partnership for the extraction of timber. Hjh Habibah says they lost $100,000 in their last camp. "Maybe somebody was proud," she says. "He reported that we had gone beyond the survey line. It was only a little bit off. But the camp was closed. All the money spent on making the roads, the petrol, the tractor, the wages — all was lost. And the logs were left there just to rot. Maybe somebody heard Hajjah and myself dreaming that we wanted to open a shop in town. It was not to be."

For most, these difficulties prove forbidding enough. But then it is not only this that hinders people from venturing in. "Many people have land," one young man declares. "But they sell it so that they can have a good time, enjoy themselves. Have a bit of money in their pockets and they go off to Kuala Lumpur. There, they stay in a hotel, go shopping. Everything is new. They come back with loaded suitcases. Some go to the extent of paying a deposit on a shophouse. But they see a pretty dancing girl and all is lost.

"The government helps," he says. "But how long can people be helped? You must have an aim. You can be helped once, you can be helped twice, but you cannot be helped all the time." Predictably, this young man is making his career in politics.

The talk is of timber. Go to the village shops and women are as often talking of the duties on timber as the price of gold. Talk to the men and it is timber again. When Hj Anjou bought a new car, people talked of his car. And nearly in the same breath they talked of the amount of land he had sold.

A house gets extended, a new porch comes up and

immediately the question that is asked is: When did they sell their timber land?

It is the easy way to the road paved with gold. But despite the three Mercedes cars in the kampung and women with thick gold chains, timber still remains something distant. About the only evident signs that timber provides the major occupation of the kampung people are the log ponds about two miles from the kampung.

There the logs are chained one to the other, waiting for inspection, grading and delivery. Then there are a few timber hauling boats moored to the houses, where fishing boats used to stand not too long ago.

But in the eight months, I never visited a timber camp. Some women go there to trade or work. But it is more often the men who go and the women who stay behind. There is a superstition that if a woman goes to a timber camp, there will be an accident. It could not be universally followed as many widows make their living trading in these camps, but it does succeed in giving the impression that as far as women are concerned, timber camps are off limits.

What is exciting about timber in Bokara is how it has changed the lives of people. It is not just the wealth that has accrued from timber, but the different lifestyle that has come about because of it.

Here were men who were fishermen before. They would scrounge for cash by collecting attap and anggeriting from the neighbouring islands. Now the same men think in terms of bank loans, of buying tractors, of the production cost per cubic foot of timber, of international markets. Their houses have video sets and colour television. It is a remarkable change in the course of one generation.

Hj Ahmad, Hjh Siti Rahkmah's son-in-law's story is one such story. He is one of those who has made it. He is in his fifties. As far as his background goes, he has a few years of primary schooling behind him.

After leaving school, he did some fishing with his brother-in-law; then a stint in the Forest Department at measuring timber; back to fishing; then to building houses; trading along the Kinabatangan and also a bit of quarrying.

It was while he was heaping one stone on another, he

thought to himself, "This is no life." So he left quarrying and tendered for his own building contract. All this was before 1963. He continued as a contractor for 15 years. Then in 1973, he made his move. He worked in a Chinese firm for a year to gain the timber know-how.

So in 1974, he moved to timber with a capital of $50,000. As he puts it, "It was not so much a move from contracting to timber. It was more a change of attitude. Before, with my money, I used to buy clothes, furniture, things I could do without. My capital died. So, I thought, I must work it out so that my money moves. Let the money from one project be used for another.

"In 1974, I bought 120 acres of land at $100 an acre. But the timber price fell. So I waited. I invested part of my capital in a building, bought some shares and let the money work for me.

"It was in 1975 I started my timber camp. But to safeguard myself, it was a two pronged involvement. There was my timber camp on one side and stevedoring on the other. I used to stay awake all night with my estimates, thinking of what was needed, thinking of the spare parts I had to buy and how to organise the business.

"I found it essential to meet people, to mix around. You have to go from one office to another. If you recognise a friend in the place, he can at least tell you whether the officer is expected back that day."

Hj Ahmad started out with 120 acres of land. In 1975, he worked another 300 acres. Later, another 400 acres. In the process of working these areas, he has reinvested his money in two tractors and a lorry.

Going over his involvement in timber he says, "Something I was told in 1975 stuck. I was told that the bumiputras, the indigenous people, must think in terms of long range profit, think in terms of 20 to 30 years from today. That impressed me. Then there was also the question: Why is it that the others can do it and we cannot? So I decided to plunge in."

Hj Aliong, Hjh Habibah's husband has also made it in timber. The change in his life has also been tremendous. His first job was that of a daily labourer with the Shell

Company. Now he has his own Mercedes and a $11,000 Rolex watch.

He started in timber in 1976 when he was still in his late 20s. He also, like Hj Ahmad had only a few years of primary schooling. After working as a labourer for 20 days, his father bought a motor boat. Hj Aliong used this to find stray logs. For each log, the timber company whose log it was, would pay him $15. The monsoon season was the most profitable. Then for a while they would be well-off.

After this for a short while he traded along the Kinabatangan — a modern version of a traditional occupation. He barely recovered his capital, he says. Then he applied for timber land. A hundred acres was approved.

This he immediately sold. With the money he received from the sale, he built and furnished his house, bought a car and went on the Haj. When he came back, he followed the example of some of his kin and tendered for a building contract. In 1976, under the state government's Green Book Policy, where those who did not have land were given land for cultivation, he and his relatives banded together and got a 300 acre piece of land. As an added bonus, there was timber on it. As Hj Aliong tells it, "When I got the land, I told myself that this is my chance. I can try. Others have done it. And they do not seem to be any smarter than I."

Now Hj Aliong is operating his third timber camp. With timber comes the Mercedes, a car for his wife, a colour television set in 1979 and a video recorder. They don't have the ultimate status symbol yet and that is a house in town. Hjh Halipah says, "We will have that only when we can pay cash for it. But if we pay cash then we don't have the cash flow required for business. Get a mortgage," she says, "and you are stuck. Future income is by no means assured. If the house is repossessed, the shame of it will be great."

So in the meantime, there are repeated trips to Mecca and other trips to Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong. Hong Kong, though was a disappointment, says Hjh Halipah. She spent four days there and spent $15,000. When she came back, she talked in terms of Hong Kong dollars and confused everyone by saying they paid $1,000 a day for the room alone.

There she bought a white gold bracelet. In Si Mariam's

shop she repeatedly tells everyone it is gold, real gold. The other purchases include a watch and a movie projector.

"The major problem in Hong Kong is food," she tells us. "The first two days Haji and I had rice and prawns. But Haji felt like vomitting for there was the smell of pork.

"There is pork everywhere. Pork, prawns and chicken — they are grilled on the same fire. Finally we were not able to stand it so we ate bread and sardines in the room and ordered hot drinks only."

Compared to Hong Kong, her earlier visit to Kuala Lumpur had been a real delight. For $11 they had a good meal. There were lots of things to buy for she came back with all the brass ware and paraphenalia needed for weddings and the functions of her kin group. There were sarungs and jewellery.

Now she is planning to go to Singapore, though she doesn't like Singapore half as much. "I saw a watch in one of the shops," she says. "It was over $1,000. When I asked the girl whether there were diamonds around it, she did not even reply. Speak Malay there and they only speak English in return. That is if they answer at all."

When I ask her if the $30,000 they spent on the Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong trips would not have been better used for a down payment on the shop they wanted to buy, she says, "But then I wouldn't have seen all this."

Part two

A wedding

Si Ainon is Emmong's first grandchild to wed. She is getting married to a boy who lives on the next catwalk. One wouldn't say he is related, but there is a distant connection through Emmong's husband's Sulu wife. Rather complicated, but in the context of kampung life, still relevant.

He is a Sulu and comes from a line of Sulu chiefs entitling him to use the hereditary title of *Datu*. She comes from a line of Simunul headmen from her mother's side and Tidong chiefs from her father's side.

The reason Si Ainon's wedding stands out so clearly is that it is my first Simunul wedding. While in Penang, I had been to a few *bersandings* where the couple sit in state on a wedding dais. It left me with a sense of the incompleteness of things, for the actual wedding had taken place and I saw the trimmings alone. Now, for the first time, I was going to be a part of it.

Si Ainon does not look her best. It must be the tension, for her face has broken out in pimples. So much for the traditional glow of a bride.

It's sad because Si Ainon has been having a special concoction of 44 herbs and spices for the last month. "If done right," says Hjh Siti Rahkmah who is acting as Mak Andam, that is the person who is in charge of dressing the bride and seeing that the marriage rituals are followed, "if done right, even the girl's urine smells sweet."

The morning before the crucial wedding ceremony, the *Akad Nikah*, Si Ainon has her hair washed with roasted grated coconut and a 'marriage spice' one can buy in the shops. This morning she has also been sitting with benzoin burning in an incense burner under her sarung to let her body soak up the incense.

Add to this the *berinai* ceremony the night before which left her hands and feet auspiciously decorated with henna. And there is the ritual bath where she is bathed in water with fragrant flowers and perfume, water over which prayers have been chanted.

Hjh Siti Rahkmah oversees all this with apparent relish. "Most of the brides today," she says, "take a short cut. They have their hair done at the beauty parlour," she says in disgust.

All this seems to me to be rather a complicated beauty routine for a bride. But Hjh Habibah, Si Ainon's aunt says, "She had it easy. When I got married about 12 years ago, I didn't get any sleep the night after the berinai ceremony. All night I had to sit with my hands and feet outstretched.

"Then pandan leaves were pounded and applied all over my body. They say it leaves the body perfumed for a month. After this, pounded glutinous rice which had been roasted black was applied. I had to have it on for five hours to smoothen the body. Si Ainon hasn't had any of this."

These beautification rituals are over when Si Ainon gets dressed for her Akad Nikah, the crucial religious part of the ceremony.

First Hjh Siti Rahkmah shaves Si Ainon's forehead with a razor and trims her eyebrows. Her hair is done in a little sausage roll along the top of the head. Two diadems are placed in position. Behind them are a row of tactile siver pins with beaded tassels of gold hanging on both sides. Behind these, the veil is pinned. I think this is a typical Simunul wedding till I see them consulting a postcard depicting an Acheh bride from Sumatra.

Si Ainon wears purple *kain songket* — cloth of woven gold specially bought in Kuala Lumpur. She has a golden belt and lots of heavy gold chains and rings. The rings are especially important. Nearly every finger has a ring, for the bride and groom sit with their hands in front of them, palms down when they are on the marriage dais. So it is important their hands be jewelled. And powdered.

From the next catwalk where the boy lives, we can hear the sound of the *rebana*, a tambourine. Hearing the sound, Hjh Habibah puts her hand to Si Ainon's breast and says, "When the bride hears the sound of the rebana, her heart goes thump."

Now the Imam is at the door of the house with the groom. Prayers are said in the hall. After this, the Imam and the groom come to the room where Si Ainon sits. When

they arrive, the women around hurriedly hold up a sarung to shield the bride.

The Imam formally asks Si Ainon if she is willing to marry the boy. Though the question is so exactly put, custom forbids Si Ainon from replying. As a token of consent, she gives the Imam a flower elaborately worked in silver.

Now the nikah takes place. The groom puts his right thumb on the upper palette of his mouth and then in a decided gesture, places the thumb on Si Ainon's forehead. This is his mark of possession. She is now his. He then waves a white handkerchief round her head. Three times. They are married.

They go out together, walking on a velvet cloth specially laid on the ground for them to walk on. They reach the wedding dais and sit in state.

The Mak Andam keeps fussing over them. She adjusts Si Ainon's veil, straightens her clothes. The bride and groom have an attendant each, sitting and fanning them. The photographs are taken. These will later hang on the wall of their living room.

People gawk at them. There is no special ceremony of blessing the couple or sprinkling them with rose water. People leave. This part of the wedding is over.

Si Ainon's wedding is not only special for it is my first kampung wedding but it is also my first *kenduri*, the feast which accompanies it. It is like standing at the gateway of their world of tradition, for every important event in a person's life is celebrated with a kenduri.

The men and women sit in separate rooms or at least in different portions of the room. First, the glasses of strong local coffee come with eight to ten different kinds of cakes. After a suitable interval, the food is served. The water for washing the hands is brought, then the big round tray which has on it eight to ten small plates containing different dishes.

By this time, the whole gathering has arranged itself in little clusters of four or five, around each tray. Then in a relay system, the individual plates of rice are passed down. It's a culinary feast, usually with three types of curries, fried fish, prawns, cuttle fish, vegetables, pickles and fruit.

The women wear the traditional or modern version of the sarung kebaya teamed with a generous amount of traditional gold jewellery. The solid link chain type of necklace and bracelet is the kind often worn. Even the small girls seem to have them.

Some wear the old type of coin brooches. These are specially popular with the elderly ladies. Hjh Siti Rahkmah shows me hers and they are heavy. There is no hedging as to how much a piece is worth. It is automatically valued in terms of dollars and cents both by the wearer and the others.

At this stage, I can only absorb the externals. But now I understand why every house aspires to have a large hall. If you have to seat five hundred people at a time, it becomes a necessity.

After this feast is over and we go home, it is not the end of the wedding festivities. Nowadays, every respectable wedding in the kampung has to have a party. It gives the bride a chance to get out of her traditional finery and get dressed in the style of the Western bride, all in white, complete with veil, gloves and bouquet. The women too, the same ones who had come with complete traditional gear in the afternoon for the bersanding, now come in maxis or pant suits and sport modern hair-dos.

The style is totally different. The food is laid on the table, buffet style and served on plates with forks and spoons. A band is in attendance. It is as if it is a whole new scene in a play.

Hjh Habibah says it is only nine years ago that the first party was held in the kampung. And the first time there was a wedding cake was when a kampung boy returned from England and got married five years ago. Now the cutting of the wedding cake is one of the most important moments of the wedding. This photograph often takes precedence over those of the bersanding.

The crowd too is different. There is a sprinkling of guests from outside the kampung, usually office and school acquaintances of the family. This is the only part of the wedding they attend. Then at the party, the young unmarried girls and boys are very much in evidence. At the bersanding, they are strictly confined to the kitchen, for only

the married women attend the traditional ceremonies.

So a party is one of the occasions which qualifies as a romantic one or with potential for romance. The girls come up one by one to wish the bride well. It is the farewell to her age group which leaves Si Ainon quietly sobbing.

The party begins in the true sense only when most of the guests go home. First those not of the kampung leave. Then those distantly related. When the tables are cleared and the floor is mopped to remove all the spilt drink, the scene is set for dancing.

The bride and groom change into something more comfortable. Then the boys and girls take to the floor. Only the sisters and first cousins of the bride will dance. But as for the boys, they take their turn with anybody on the floor.

The band plays on. After the traditional homage to the *joget*, the popular Malay dance, they start on the Travolta. This is the rage. A boy of the kampung who is known as the local Travolta has the hairstyle, locket on the chest and hand gestures all pat. The mood takes over. Travolta comes to the kampung.

Slowly some girls take the floor. Then the action happens wave upon wave, for the girls remain and different boys dance opposite them. There is nothing even slightly illicit about all this. Though parents are not present and the older folk are very aware that this is not their time, they enjoy the scene from the windows.

By eleven at night, the house convulses with motion. You can't hear the waves anymore. The Travolta steps are getting mixed up with the joget. Heads down, arms flying, bodies twisting, shaking, it is just gyrating motion getting more and more frenzied. Hope the house is built strongly.

Hjh Maimunah, another aunt of Si Ainon seeing all this rollicking at the party talks of her wedding nearly thirty years ago when none of this took place. Then it used to be a month of dancing with the traditional gong and the Sulu xylophone. The gong would play and there would be music and dancing.

Her wedding, she says was revolutionary in its own way. Then the joget was considered not very proper for it is a Malay dance and a departure from the traditional Sulu dance

the *dahling-dahling*. Her father, to make her wedding a memorable one had got some dancing girls from town to do the joget for the guests.

Hjh Maimunah recalls that the women of the kampung got very angry. There was a big fracas. Everybody got very upset that the traditional values were no more.

The bride does not cry

The bride does not cry. I noticed it particularly for it is different from the Punjabi experience.

I cried at my wedding. Part of it must have been the fear of going with a stranger, even though I had assented to it. In my case, it also meant leaving my country. But it was not a vocalised fear, not something which was foremost in my consciousness.

It is the institutional set up which makes a Punjabi bride cry. The air is heavy and poignant. It is a moment of leave taking and farewell. The daughter is leaving her house, her parents, her friends. She is marrying a stranger, for traditionally the groom cannot be related for five generations on the mother's side and seven generations on the father's side. He cannot be of the same village. So she leaves for an unknown place with a stranger to live in a house where her position as daughter-in-law is far from privileged. When the song of farewell is sung and the bride tells her parents she is going, even bystanders cry.

There is no such feeling of aloneness in a Simunul wedding. If anybody cries it is the mother of the groom. When Emmong's grandson Si Tahil got married next door, his mother, Si Aida, cried in the bedroom. When she saw her son on the wedding dais with his bride, she knew she had lost a son.

"He won't be living here any more," she said. "Now when he comes, he will be visiting for a while and then will go away."

Emmong says when her first son got married, she was desolate for a month. "I couldn't eat and became very thin."

The bride and her family have little reason for sorrow for the bride is most likely to continue staying with her parents. It is her husband who will move in. The only difference will be that she will now be a married girl and in a year or two will be expected to be present at kampung functions and participate in the give and take of kampung life.

The Simunul girl does not marry a stranger. The preferred

marriage is with someone distantly related or connected with the girl, a Simunul boy from the kampung. But if the girl marries a non-Simunul, there is no sense of impending doom associated with it.

I keep asking about this aspect for I come from a caste society. There marrying out of caste and community can make parents threaten suicide. The fact that the field of marriage here, is so wide open continues to amaze me.

There is a fatalistic attitude to marriage. It is *jodoh* they say, fate that she is to be married to such and such a person. So why fight it? A Simunul girl though is not allowed to marry her first cousin or a non-Muslim. But in some cases, even this is legitimised.

Si Mariam's daughter Si Fatimah married her first cousin. The reason they could, is that her husband's mother and her mother are not real sisters but step sisters — one father, different mothers. Then as Si Fatimah points out it was possible only because her husband's mother is older than her mother. But a few old women still shook their heads, saying the alliance was ritually 'hot'. Even Si Fatimah first thought it was not possible.

She says, "I first saw him when he used to come to the shop to buy cigarettes. When I went to Hjh Kecil's house, he was also there. He came over to help me. There I asked him who he was and found he was my first cousin from the Philippines.

"He told me he liked a girl. Then he said I was the girl. But I told him — cannot — since we are first cousins."

Four years later, they got married.

A marriage between a Muslim and non-Muslim is also not possible. The non-Muslim partner has to become Muslim. Even then, it is difficult to accept a convert as a marriage partner.

Hjh Natsi who keeps shop at the other end of the kampung — her son Si Anding, married a Kadazan girl from Kuala Penyu on the west coast. At first, Hjh Natsi would not hear of it. Her husband was adamant too, saying, "I am an Imam and my two boys will both be married to non-Muslims. One married a Visaya and now you want to marry a Kadazan."

It took Hjh Natsi's brother to point out to them that being a convert is not such a big thing after all. Even their parents were Chinese converts and so were some of their grandparents.

But the feeling remains that marrying a convert is somehow second class. "Who knows whether their intentions to convert are pure or not?" is the fear. Little things are held against them. For instance of another Kadazan girl who lives in the kampung, it is said, "She polishes her nails every day and uses nail polish. She could not be praying, could she?" Of an Iban who has married a kampung girl, the comment is his tattoos are un-Islamic.

Given these reservations and a few other inter-generational ones, the field of marriage is wide open. This is why in the kampung one finds a large mixture of communities covering the whole spectrum of Muslim communities of the region and some non-Muslim as well.

Marriage is the one topic which interests everybody in the kampung deeply. You just have the hint of a coming marriage, for people to start talking of their marriages and how they met their husbands or did not meet them.

Whenever the topic of marriage comes up, Hjh Siti Rahkmah says, "Nowadays girls are so free. In my days, forty fifty years ago, if we so much as showed our faces in front of the window, it was considered sinful. And when girls went out, they covered their heads and had long sleeved blouses and sarungs that revealed nothing. Now it is different. The girls talk to the boys and go out together."

Other older women go even further, saying that the girls and boys today are all wicked. They see a rapid degeneration of morals. Si Ara says in the old days if a girl was found to be pregnant before marriage they would put her in a basket, load it with stones and sink her into the sea. "But the girls in the olden days were stupid," she says. "Nowadays if a girl finds she has missed a period, she goes to a doctor for an abortion."

Though the older women think the girls and boys today have a lot of freedom, most of the girls feel they are hedged in with restrictions.

Si Latipa for instance does not feel free to walk to the other

side of the kampung — it takes ten minutes — unless she has been specifically invited to help at a house of close kin.

If she wants some special eats from Hjh Jariah's shop which is in the middle of the kampung, she sends her younger brother for it.

She saw her fiance while she was walking across the kampung to religious school. Her cousin met her fiance the same way. The romance carries on through letters on perfumed paper, which younger brothers deliver. For a fee. If Si Latipa is going to town for a film, she makes sure her younger brother goes and tells her fiance just so that he will not be angry.

About the most 'scandalous' thing I witnessed was a boy and girl sitting together in relative seclusion. In Si Mariam's shop, a boy told me to see who was at the back of the shop. When I did, I came across a very embarrassed couple. Then the boy, I think it was one of her cousins, asked me, "Are you sporting?" He wanted to know whether I would tell.

In a way, the kitchen portion of Si Sai's shop is developing into a potential dating centre. A girl about 14, together with a boy, probably also 14, both school dropouts, often sit together there. This is such a new thing that the children gather near the door. The older ones push the younger ones forward to spy on the couple. Si Kitu seeing the girl and boy sitting together says, "They are daring." Daring she uses in the sense of being foolhardy and inviting disaster.

Now that a pay phone has been installed in Si Tun's shop, the whole game of romance has taken a new turn. Every time I want to use the phone to ring home, there is a long line of boys waiting to romance their girls over the phone. Since there is no face to face contact and the telephone does not need a literary turn of phrase, this is the perfect modern medium.

In the traditional set up also there were opportunities to see and to be seen. The festival of Moolud Nabi, the Prophet's birthday is one such. The ritual part of it turns round cutting the hair of a new baby. But the social part which preoccupies everybody for weeks before, is that the unmarried girls are invited to the house of a baby girl and the unmarried boys are invited to that of a baby boy.

The girls especially, take great pains over their dress for they have to accompany the baby in procession from the house to the mosque. The older women sit at vantage points along the route, evaluating the possibilities of these marriageable girls. And so do the boys as the processions often dovetail into each other.

Helping at a kin's do is also a good opportunity for this is one time the unmarried girls are allowed to spend some time in a place where there are other girls and boys around.

The boys though, have more opportunities. The library is a good place to view girls. So is the bus stop. But the great thing is to get a girl to go with them to a coffee shop.

It is highly unlikely that a kampung girl would do this. Talk has it that a girl once went with her fiance to a coffee shop accompanied by her younger sister. They were shopping in town and her fiance saw them and invited them both for a cold drink. When her uncle heard of it, he beat her, saying she had shamed the whole family.

Romance in the kampung is far removed from the Mills and Boon stereotype. A girl is wooed and won while she is cutting onions or walking to religious school.

In Si Tina's case — she lives two catwalks away from Si Sai's house — her husband saw her driving past his office. He took down her car number and found her address. He telephoned her asking her to meet him. She took three other girls with her and told him, "Don't play around with me. If you like me, ask my parents."

He did and they agreed even though he is not Simunul and does not have a stupendous job. It is jodoh, Si Tina says. Probably, what spurred their agreement is that that she would soon be 30 and she wanted to get married.

Hjh Natsi's daughter, Hjh Norizam and her fiance were classmates in Std 4. A few years later, she met him again in Kota Kinabalu when she went to receive her father from Mecca.

He wrote her in the kampung, saying he wants to know her better. "The letters came for three months," Hjh Norizam says, "but when they became more serious, I stopped writing."

The next year, she heard people in the house talking of

her engagement. Her father accepted the boy's suit without asking her. "At first, I was upset," she says. "Then I thought it was my jodoh. It would have happened anyway."

Even after her engagement she was not allowed to go out with her fiance alone. He came to attend her brother's marriage and wanted to take her to a film in town. Her father agreed only if her two nieces would accompany them. When the day arrived, he asked Hjh Norizam's elder sister to go along also. "My sister was sporting," Hjh Norizam says. "She let us talk."

The reason for these restrictions is that an engagement is not a binding arrangement. It is not something very casual either for a broken engagement will often leave relations between the two families very soured. But an engagement broken here or there is nothing much to worry about.

Hjh Tinya who lives on the other side of the kampung and teaches in religious school tells me how she was engaged four times. Only the fifth time did she get married.

"The first time it was to a relative from the Philippines. It was just a spoken agreement, but my mother did not really want me to marry a man from the Philippines," she says. "So the engagement was broken and I was engaged to another relative.

"As it turned out, he was always in and out of jail. So my family found an excuse to break that engagement.

"Then the third time, I was engaged to a relative from Kota Kinabalu. He had become involved with another girl and got her pregnant. So her parents got him into a forced marriage with the girl.

"The fourth time I got engaged to a kampung boy. By this time I was 16 or 17. It broke up because he wanted to control me before marriage. At the time, I used to wear mini skirts and jeans. He did not like it. So through his cousin, he told me he did not like jeans. I told him, 'You are not my husband yet. You have no right to tell me what I should wear and what I shouldn't.' So that was the end of that.

"After this, two Malays wanted to marry me. They approached me through my teacher. I told them to approach my parents. But my parents did not want me to marry anyone but a Simunul from Bokara. They were insistent on

that. And so I married my present husband. He is from Bokara and is a Simunul and comes from a highly connected family. It is jodoh."

Though there are courting restrictions, a girl today would most likely have seen the boy and would have indicated that she liked him or at least that she did not dislike him.

This was not always the case before. Si Kabilla of Emmong's kin group and truly elephantine in proportion says, "I was married at 14. My husband was ten years older than me. I made a big fuss but was forced into it. When he brought water from the spring, I would throw it away. Even after we were married, for over a month, I did not sleep with him. I scratched him all over with a razor."

Hjh Halipah got married at 15. "My parents chose him. There was no question of asking me. When we sat together on the wedding dais for our bersanding, I lost consciousness. They had to bring a bomoh to revive me."

Even today, it is not always that a girl's marriage is arranged with the boy of her choice. It happened to Si Welma's sister. Si Welma is the headman's wife. Her sister lives in Semporna.

Si Welma's sister disappeared. The police came to the kampung to investigate. Apparently she had run off with a Bokara boy because of 'love'. Interestingly, the word *cinta* which translates as 'love', is always used in connection with illicit love. Approved love is *kasih* which means to love and care for the other.

The news of her disappearance spreads fast. "A great shame," everybody says. Hjh Jariah is aghast that such a thing could happen in her sister-in-law's family. It must be partly Si Welma's fault. She should have guided her sister better, is the comment.

The other side of the argument is that the parents should not have forced the girl to marry a boy she did not like. Si Welma, in the meantime is reported to be so ashamed that she has not eaten in two days.

For nearly a month, Si Welma's sister lives at the Imam's house in town. Her parents demand an extremely high marriage payment — $13,000 and a cow. The girl's mother is reported to have said that the boy ran away with her

daughter. To which, according to the talk in the shop, the girl replied that it was not the boy who abducted her, but she who had written him to come get her.

In the event, the nikah takes place. This makes it legal in the eyes of the law, but the marriage payments are required to make it socially acceptable. The boy has $2,000 and so that is what he pays.

The bersanding and the party together are held in the house of the boy's aunt. A few months later, things still have to be patched up between the girl and her parents. When Si Sai and I go to their house to invite them for a function in the kampung, Si Sai says, "The girl has become thin with sorrow."

Elopement is always a possibility for the girl and boy, so much so there are ritual methods of reconciling the parents with the couple. This is what happened recently in the kampung. A boy and girl from the kampung had eloped and got married in Kota Kinabalu. This was before I came to stay here.

When Pa Abdullah — at present he is one of the distantly related people who stays in the kitchen portion of Si Mariam's house — and his family came from the Philippines in the early 70s, they went to stay with a first cousin of his wife.

There his daughter fell in love with the son of the house. They ran off to Kota Kinabalu. Either she got pregnant and eloped or they eloped and she got pregnant. In Kota Kinabalu, they were married by an Imam. They sent the important marriage payments to the parents.

The girl's parents here were very angry. They disowned the girl completely. This was a few years ago. Now, Pa Abdullah is seriously ill. One side is paralysed. The mother rang up the daughter to come as her father is very ill.

She comes on a Sunday but they cannot get the people together on that day as there is another wedding party. So the reunion is on Monday night.

A group of people from the boy's place escort the couple to her parent's house. When she sees her parents, she wails in an unreal manner. She bends down and cries, her husband holding her from the back. Then the mother also falls down

crying. She beats the groom and says, "Why did you bring this shame on us? You are a second cousin." And the father lies there paralysed.

The men outside make comforting noises, saying, "Your child remains your child. Great was her sin. Great is the forgiveness." Then a distantly related older man takes out a wad of notes from his pocket. Si Sai says it is $1,000. "This the groom gives for his father-in-law's illness," he says.

The rift is healed. The groom greets his in-laws ritually by bending down and kissing each person's hand. The coals and benzoin are brought out. The appropriate ritual is performed. All is well. Two days later, the daughter who had been estranged, casually walks into Si Mariam's shop to buy some washing powder.

The forced wedding

It is the season of weddings. Just as we are at the tail end of the wedding of Si Aida's son, Si Mariam tells me there is going to be a forced wedding this afternoon.

It is Si Naida, Si Aida's second cousin. Si Naida's mother brought her to Si Aida's house to get married, for their place in the longhouse two miles away from the kampung is too small.

Si Naida does not want to get married. She has run away from Si Aida's house to that of another second cousin who lives in the kitchen portion of Si Mariam's house. Si Mariam and I go there and find their whole kin group assembled. The girl is kicking and screaming. The mother is trying to beat her. The mother's brother is calling her names and kicking her. And yet Si Naida keeps on screaming and shrieking that she is not afraid. She keeps trying to get loose and run off.

At this stage, I don't quite know what the problem is. What I can gather is that the boy is over 20 while she is just 14. Perhaps she thinks the boy is too old for her. Or as somebody in the crowd theorises she probably likes another boy, but that boy is already engaged now.

Another theory is that she is possessed.

Another person who speaks as if she may know the inside story says that the girl's mother and relatives liked the boy all along, though Si Naida did not like the boy at all. But the boy has obliged them greatly. He buys them fish and vegetables and apparently works on the same boat as Si Naida's brother. He has paid the marriage payment of $2,000. The mother has accepted it and since they are poor, it has already been spent.

Once the question of the marriage payment comes up, the whole issue becomes one of how to get out of the deal at this stage. If they want to do that, they will have to return the marriage payment of $2,000 twice over. That is impossible for Si Naida's mother. And none of her mother's moneyed relatives are offering to do so. Moreover, it is

argued that even if the money is returned, the shame of the whole affair might result in a killing. Maybe by saying this, they hope it will scare the girl into agreeing to the marriage.

While all the ramifications of the situation are being discussed, now and again, the women try to get Si Naida to change her clothes. No result. Now the atmosphere in the room is nearly jocular. The women start talking of other women who behaved like this before their wedding.

They talk of a woman who lives on the other side of the kampung. One woman says, "She also did not want to get married. She even hit him on the head till he had a large bump. Now look at her. She has children and lives in a 'palace of concrete' (referring to her house in town)."

"Even your mother," says another to Si Naida, "had to be dragged to the nikah. Even your cousin Si Aida."

When this does not work, they offer the girl other alternatives. "You can always divorce him. If you do it after three months, his side cannot demand anything from us."

Another woman suggests she use a knife on her husband, but that suggestion is quelled as too extreme. Once the nikah is performed, the obligations of Si Naida's kin are over. Then it is securely in the hands of the boy. "If he is clever, he will bring her around," says one.

The girl does not listen to any of this. They tell her how her relatives will be shamed, how she must honour them and the boy's side by changing her clothes. When she doesn't listen, one even suggests they should give her an injection to make her sleepy for an hour or so, obviously something borrowed from television.

Si Mariam gets up and brings her daughter's light songket set. But the girl refuses to change. Every now and again, the women try and persuade the girl. Then they go back to talking of similar cases. Si Naida starts to run for the bathroom. They hold her back. She has to be guarded for she might jump into the sea.

By this time the groom's party arrives by chartered bus to Si Aida's house. When there is no action at all, a few of the groom's female relatives come along to see what is happening. They sit down. Then the Imam comes and says, "You should control this animal. She is not ashamed."

The women there tell the Imam not to ask the girl whether she agrees to the nikah or not. He hesitates saying it is against the law. But one of the women gives him a hairpin from the girl's hair. Since he has the traditional token of consent, he takes it as such.

After a few minutes, he comes back with the groom. The girl is still shouting and screaming in a dishevelled state. She is wearing her everyday batik sarung with the blouse tucked in. The groom on seeing this looks completely bewildered.

I feel sorry for the boy. He must have felt totally dishonoured to have his bride reject him so publicly. He is all dressed up in a red songket and has his headgear in the herioc style of Hang Tuah. He even has an attendant with him.

The Imam ushers him in, makes him quickly wave a handkerchief — it is not white — round her head. One, two, three. Then the critical thumb on the forehead sign. That is it. Quickly, the Imam says, greet your in-laws. He bows down and kisses the hand of his mother-in-law. They are married.

The groom looks vulnerable. He hands his spectacles to his brother-in-law and sits on the bed. Then everybody leaves for Si Aida's house. What makes it so poignant is that in Si Aida's house, her son and his bride are sitting all prettied up so that they can be accompanied back with style to the girl's house. Their visit to the groom's house is over.

In the shop, the men say that strictly speaking, it is against the law to have a forced marriage. But what to do? What was the alternative? Si Naida could have run off to the headman's house if she had gotten away from her relatives. There she would have had sanctuary, but she left it too late.

This is what one girl did, though she does not like anybody to talk of it. She had been engaged to her husband for a long time. The families were taking their own time over it. So she went to the headman's house and the wedding had to take place. But there is shame attached to a girl for wanting to hasten her marriage so. Her father was very angry. It is said, he threw her out of the house and tore up her clothes.

The men wonder whether Si Naida really wanted to marry somebody else. From there the talk goes on to elopements.

The classic case in this connection is a couple who eloped from Simunul Island many years ago. The girl was being forced to marry a boy she did not like. The evening of the nikah, the boy she did like, let loose the cow meant for slaughter. While everybody was chasing the cow, the boy ran away with the girl in a small boat for Bokara. They escaped, arriving here only in the clothes they were wearing.

The story of one elopement leads to another. Eloping is quite the done thing when everything else fails. It is not seen as the dramatic end to a great love story but a source of great shame. So I am warned by the people in the shop not to ask the people involved, about their elopement.

By evening, the groom's relatives have left. Si Naida has run off to another cousin's house.

Si Mariam's theory is that the whole affair was mismanaged. "It is not our custom," she says, "to force a wedding. They could have returned the money. But the trouble was that Si Naida's relatives had eaten up all the money. It was finished. They did not even give the groom's side anything to eat or drink. Shameful. They did not buy her clothes. I was ashamed seeing it. That is why I brought out the songket. But Si Naida was too ashamed to wear those clothes."

Si Mariam found out that the uncle who had beaten Si Naida felt bad about it. He took his wife's bangles and chain and tried to pawn them with relatives for $1,500. Nobody gave him the money. He came back and told Si Naida, "The only thing for you to do is to stab yourself. They have eaten up all the money."

The whole thing made my stomach churn to hear Si Naida cry and shriek like that and have everybody around her see it as a social problem. I made myself note all the details of the occasion so that I didn't let my emotional reaction overtake the sequence of events. It left me with a lump in my throat. I imagined all sorts of horrors for this girl.

Then six days after this, the couple, that is Si Naida and her Hang Tuah groom come by on the customary ritual visit to Si Aida's house. Everything appears fine. Si Naida is wearing a thin gold chain and a gold bracelet. It is hard to believe this is the same girl who was writhing

on the floor six days ago.

There is a *doa selamat*, a prayer of thanksgiving and safe-keeping. "These things happen," says Hj Kassim, Si Aida's husband. "See, in my case also, it was I who was strong, who was persistent. And now my son is married."

The affair left me shaken. Who is to say who is right and what is right?

After the wedding

Once a couple is married, everybody starts waiting. Traditionally, the man is not allowed to step out of the house or take off his cap till the marriage is consummated. So everyone knows whether they have or haven't.

Even if the boy is not particular in this respect, another sign is still followed or said to be followed. After the bride and groom have slept together for the first time, the boy takes the white handherchief he waved round her head at the time of marriage — and wipes the vaginal blood. This handkerchief is then ceremonially presented to his mother as proof of the bride's virginity.

If his mother is suspicious, she tries to wash it with lime. It is believed that the vaginal blood of a virgin will not wash away, while blood say, from a chicken or a prick in the finger, will. Once it is proven to everybody's satisfaction that the goods are as paid for, the Imam reads the prayer of thanksgiving and safe keeping.

Si Ainon says she showed proof of her virginity. After her husband had presented the white handkerchief to his mother, she gave Si Ainon a gold chain and a sarung. Then she gave back the handkerchief.

"I was scared that night," she says. "Under the bed was a parang. If I had not been a virgin, the parang would be used to tear the mosquito net. What would have happened if my hymen had not been intact?

"I stayed in my mother-in-law's house for seven days. It was difficult for we could not talk too much," she says. "We could not laugh loudly."

After they had slept together, Si Ainon says, her mother-in-law got a midwife to bathe them both so that she would not hate her husband too soon. "It works," says Si Ainon, "for even if I get angry with him, I soon get over it."

She did not know what to do with the handkerchief. "I tried to wash it for I was worried it might attract ants or be eaten up by rats. But the blood stain would not go."

Si Fatimah, Si Mariam's daughter, who got married a year

ago, also had to show the chastity cloth to her mother-in-law. But she keeps it. "Just so that if in the future, my husband ever accuses me of not being a virgin, I will have it with me as proof," she says.

Emmong though, remains sceptical whether this custom is really followed or not. "Now that girls are being educated, who can tell?" she asks.

Though no mosquito nets have been torn in the kampung, people have their own theories of who was a virgin and who wasn't. No allegations are made openly for this can spark a fight between the families.

Virginity is important here. You don't get anybody saying that being a virign when you get married doesn't count or that the hymen can tear while playing sports. Si Fatimah says that even when she was being made up for the wedding, the Mak Andam felt her stomach to make sure she was not pregnant. Perhaps that is one reason that it is a midwife who is always the Mak Andam.

Everybody in the kampung knows how long it took so and so to sleep with her husband because of the public doa selamat. Si Kabilla still proudly tells how she did not sleep with her husband for a month. Si Sophia recalls that it took her father's threat to slash her with a knife to make her sleep with her husband. It is a sign of easy virture if the bride sleeps with the groom the night of the wedding. Si Kabilla says, "I am not like someone I know. Married today, sleep with him tomorrow."

Emmong's comments are harder. "If a man and woman have sexual intercourse on the first night of their first marriage without the preliminary rituals, it is as if they were pigs, dogs — just animals."

A week is a respectable period to wait. The first time should preferably be on a Thursday night for it is auspicious. Two weeks is really stretching it, as happened in the case of one girl. She ran away after the first week. The midwife gave her a good talking to. So when after a fortnight the doa selamat was read and the couple was ritually bathed, everybody heaved a sigh of relief.

Si Fatimah says she slept with her husband after the party. Before that, about three days after the nikah, her 'guru' came

to talk to her. She gave her in writing the crucial rituals involved.

The essential thing is for the bride to say a certain prayer while she bathes, to say the prayer when she goes to urinate and to say it when she drinks water.

Si Fatimah says that when your husband sleeps with you, that is with a virgin for the first time, he must hold your feet and belly button and say, "Assalamu'alaikum" and something else. She has forgotten for it was more than a year ago. The bride must reply, "Waalaikumu'salam" and something else. The other thing they must do is bathe in the morning after having intercourse.

Another thing to keep in mind is that after having intercourse the first night, the husband and wife must not sleep early. If the husband sleeps early, he dies early. If the wife sleeps early, she dies early. They must talk till it is dawn, talk of their lives before. Then they must not wake up late. "See that girl," says Si Fatimah, "she got up only at 11 o'clock. Shameful."

The social round

When I attended Si Ainon's wedding, I thought I could not have enough of it. But now that I am living in the kampung and am obligated both by my fieldwork and residence to go when invited, I think you can have too much of a good thing.

Some months, especially those which are considered 'good' months, there is a function every other day. Some days I have to go to three functions.

The same tray of seven to nine types of cakes which used to make me lyrical, I now look at with dismay. After the sweetened black coffee and the cakes comes the main meal of rice and eight to ten dishes. There are times when I cannot look at another tray of food. All I want is a simple meal of rice and fried fish with soya bean sauce and some chillies.

There is a feast for every stage of life. As Hjh Siti Rahkmah puts it, "Every person has five major events in his life — birth, circumcision, *Hatam Koran* (the ceremony which celebrates a person's ability to read the Koran), marriage and death. Each of these has to be observed according to one's means."

Since the ties of kinship and reciprocity extend through the whole village, every household is invited to a feast or a series of feasts for each of the above events. You have to go to all of them or people will say that you choose your people. And that in the kampung context is the worst they can say about you. It means they think of you as proud and when you have a function you won't be sure of a "full house."

The usual count for a full scale do is 100 trays. And that means 500 people. So you keep going to everyone's events. Attending a wedding especially leaves me limp. Most often the family combines it with the Hatam or a circumcision. So that means yet another feast. As it is, the eating and drinking starts at the time when the boy's side goes and asks for the girl's hand. These are small scale affairs. Then there are at least two other mini-feasts before the wedding proper.

The kampung scene from the hill

Si Sai at the porch of her house

Emmong

Si Mariam holding her grandson in her shop. Si Kabilla is on the right

Hajjah Jariah in her shop

The old women inspecting the wedding payment

Hajjah Siti Rahkmah, the Mak Andam dressing up Si Tina as a bride

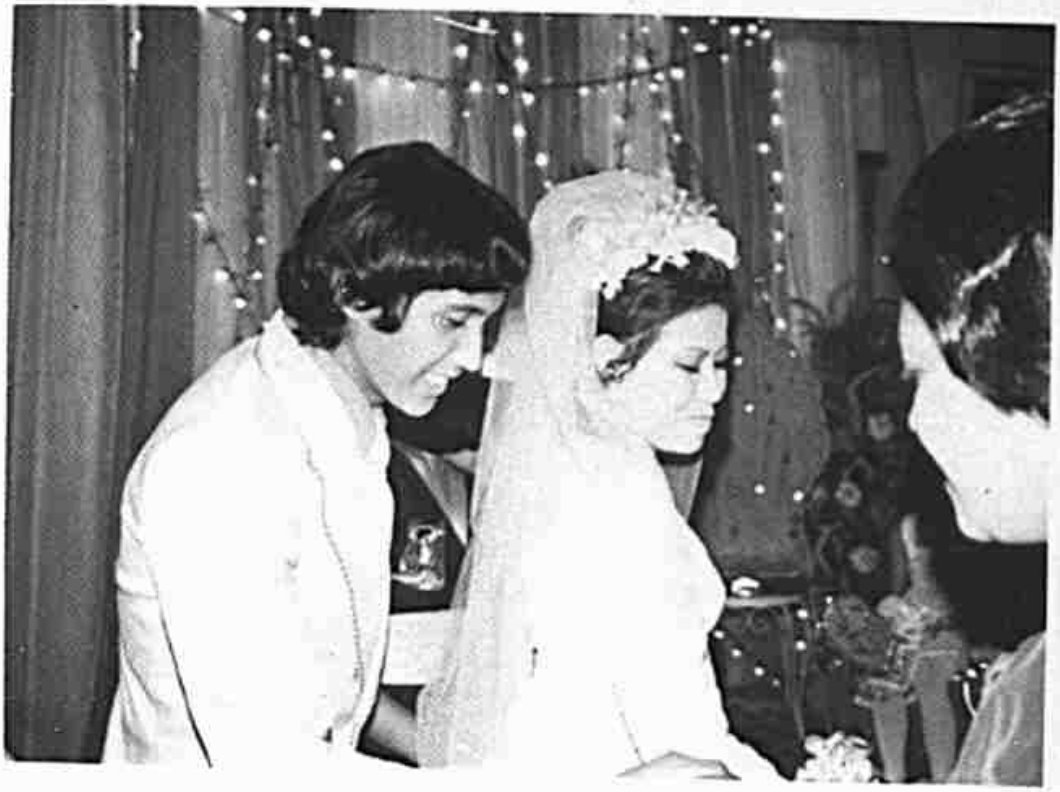
A kompang group

Before the kenduri

Si Mariam serving at a kenduri

Waving the handkerchief round the bride at the Akad Nikah

The bersanding



Si Ainon and her husband at their party

The kampung midwives

Hajjah Halipah's daughter ready for her Hatam

Hajjah Habibah helping before a Hatam. The castle of cakes to be presented to the guru is on the side

The wedding has usually three full scale gatherings. Sometimes four. Add to it the side lights like going to get the attendants of the bride and groom. And after the bersanding one has to accompany the bride and groom to the groom's house. Then back again to her house.

If both of them come from the kampung, as far as I am concerned, multiply it all by two. No wonder I am gaining weight. One more function and I think I will burst.

Now that I am a veteran at it, I have arrived at certain dos and don'ts. First, don't arrive on time. When people ask you to come at eight o'clock, or most often after the late evening prayer, it is in the nature of a minor crisis if you do arrive at eight.

I arrived once at 8.30 when they had asked me to come at eight. Even the hostess was not dressed yet. The bride was still in her slip. The only plus point here was that the Mak Andam while dressing her was very concerned that the bride's false eyelashes might come unstuck. So the bersanding acquired a special flavour and every flutter of the eyes meant possible disaster.

The thing to do is to arrive sometime between 9 and 9.30. That is about right for the hall will not be too empty and in fifteen minutes or so, it will be time for the coffee and cakes to be served.

The next thing to remember is to keep your shoes carefully. Before going into the house, put them in the kitchen or place them securely on the side. I once lost one sandal for somebody had accidently kicked it into the sea. And as it was high tide, that was the end of that pair.

Every function, three to four pairs of shoes are lost. Hj Aliong, Hjh Halipah's husband once could not find his shoes after a wedding. He was very upset for he had bought them in Kota Kinabalu for $18.80. And Hjh Jariah's aunt, the one who sells putu in the shop, she is usually heard screaming for her shoes after every do.

Be careful while walking on the catwalk. If it looks shaky and swings a lot, treat it with care for 500 people trooping across it might just do it in.

An old midwife once held my hand tight and refused to go on the catwalk till the others had passed by. "Don't

laugh," she said. "Thirty years ago, I came to a wedding. As the people rushed into the house, the central pole sank further into the sea and the wedding dais with the bride and groom on it, collapsed."

It nearly happened when I attended a wedding here. The wedding was not very high powered. The only thing marking it was that a 28 year old spinster was marrying a widower whose children were nearly of marriageable age themselves. Even in his youth, he probably was not much to look at, so the older women were making ribald comments of the groom's sexual potential.

Then Si Badul and Param, two TV stars walked in for a spot appearance. They were in Sandakan and had been invited. All the younger people surged forward screaming in the best pop tradition. The older people were trying to get away so that there would not be a repeat of the sinking wedding. Fortunately Badul and Param could only stay a minute or two and calm was restored.

Don't walk in alone, for then you risk getting stuck with a completely uncongenial group. For the next two hours you will sit there like a dumbbell, looking at everybody having a good time. So take a tip from the people around. Go with neighbours and kin.

Actually going in alone did not work out too badly one day for me. I got attached to an older group of women who were not very communicative. Some were smoking and the others chewing *sirih*, the betel leaf. I got a chance to look inside an old sirih box. It belonged to this woman's grandmother. Since she herself was in her sixties, it was considerably old. Made of brass, it was rectangular in shape and etched with a flower like design.

Inside it, in a brass compartment on one side, there was tobacco. By it was an oil used for toothache. No connection with the betel leaf. Outside the compartment was *gambir*, a brown substance to be eaten with the betel leaf. This was kept in a Vicks Vapour Rub bottle. There was also some lime to be chewed with the betel-quid. This was in a cream bottle. One and a half betel nuts and a betel nut cracker. Also a hollow rod-like brass pounder. I didn't find out what connection it had with betel chewing, probably something

to do with the tobacco or the gambir. And then there was a plastic milk spoon — no connection with the betel.

Since there are only five women in the kampung who chew betel regularly, this was interesing in itself. But I learnt not to go alone, for how long can you look at a sirih box?

Choose your place with care. The first choice of a seating place is under the fan. It can get miserably hot in a hall with 500 people and one ceiling fan far away. A hand fan is not only an elegant accessory here, it is essential survival kit. Everytime I go to one of these functions, I look at Hjh Habibah's Kelantan fan of red velvet trimmed with gold. The more I look at it the more attractive it seems. I usually make do with one of my data cards folded in two. Before the end of the affair, I find myself distributing a few of these around.

If you can manage to sit near a fan and also sit against a wall, then you are in for a comfortable time. Two to three hours is a long time to sit on the floor with no back rest.

Once you have attached yourself to a congenial group, and have arrived early enough to get a good place but late enough not to have to wait for the coffee too long, make sure there are not too many children in the group. A feast is not the best place to see them for they consider it a free for all and put their hands into every plate and then some.

Anything is good conversation. One woman slips in a remark revealing her improved economic status by saying, "We always buy the large packet of washing soap. It is more convenient." For added emphasis she says, "My children like chicken every day, chicken and fresh tomatoes."

Another woman not to be outdone says with equal casualness, "My children always have orange squash with their meals."

A lull in the conversation can always be handled by asking about clothes. How much did the sarung cost? Where did you buy it? If you come well prepared, you might be able to sell a few sarungs or scarves. But this is essentially a news gathering session. Si Sai generally comes home knowing the latest, who has fought with whom, who has sold land and for how much.

It is talk and yet more talk. Sometimes, I just let it sweep

over me, knowing I am saturated and can take no more. Then I look at the decor, see the decorations on the bridal dais, the fancy mosquito net which is no longer functional but still symbolically essential for wedding decor. Often there is a complete bedroom suite which is made ready for the couple and there is always something to look at.

There are some constants in all these functions. Six types of cakes are fixed. There is one type of *agar-agar*, one type of biscuit, another baked cake — usually beehive; *kuih pasung* and *kuih hapit-hapit* — two banana leaf wrapped cakes and *kuih makmor* (made from sugar, flour and peanuts). So that leaves two or three to experiment with. You can either duplicate the categories or try and make a splash by ordering some of the more traditional types. Or even get something specially from Kuala Lumpur like the Malacca *dodol*. What you cannot serve is shop bought biscuits or ordinary everyday breakfast cakes or even the more traditional cakes which are ritually associated with birth, sickness and death.

After people have had the cakes, it is quite the accepted thing to take out a scarf or a handkerchief and empty out all the plates so that you can take them home for the children or the older people who have not come.

Then food is served. There has to be beef, at least two dishes. Usually one is with soya bean sauce and the other is with satay sauce. There is fried fish. There must be prawns or cuttle fish and one chicken dish usually prepared *korma* style.

One dish that is served at most events is about the most delicious thing I have had. It is brinjals fried with turmeric and then stuffed with a paste of roasted coconut, prawns and onions, smothered with satay sauce. There is also pickle or salad and bananas for desert.

Most times the drink is plain water or a syrup. Sometimes it is more elaborate. A milk drink flavoured with pandan and coloured red is the most memorable one I have had.

When the eating and drinking is over and you have washed your hand, not in the common bowl which is dirty by now, but in your plate, you wait for the *bunga telor* and the *sedekah*. The *bunga telor* is an egg attached to a paper flower. If you can, get one for yourself and a few extra for

your children at home. This is why there is always a rush for it. Stampede is perhaps the better word. At one such do, a person remarked in disgust, "When I have a do, I'll order 5,000 of them."

The *sedekah* is the money in the envelopes. It is offered to everybody but unless you are a widow or don't particularly care about your economic status, you are to touch it and say, "I have received it." By this time, you should have given the lady of the house your cash contribution in a sealed envelope with your name written on it. She usually stops a while with each group. But if you have missed that, you give it at the door before you leave. This is the expensive part of the whole deal but generally for one event, you pay only once even though there might be many functions connected with it. You have to put at least $5 in your envelope, preferably $10.

Before you leave, a woman also comes round distributing finely cut pandan leaves. Rub these in your hands and leave the place smelling fragrant.

What is common in all these feasts is that in nearly every detail, they are different from the pattern of everyday life.

The dress is different. Everyday, the women wear a batik sarung with the blouse tucked in. For the older women it is a batik sarung with the loose kebaya style blouse secured with safety pins. But at these functions, the younger women change dress altogether. It is either the baju kurung, the sarung kebaya or the stitched long skirt and blouse. The older women keep to the same style of clothes but they are finer and the blouse is pinned by gold and mother of pearl pins and the hair is done up with special pearl and gold combs.

It all depends on what is in fashion that particular week. A whole kin cluster will come dressed more or less in the same style. If embroidered Bugis sarungs are favoured, then it is going to be Bugis sarungs all the way. Or it will be the Indian sarungs made from sarees, the Filipino embroidered sets or the Thai striped sarungs.

Most important, the clothes should be new. They see the same people at every function so dress here becomes an important indicator of social status. This is why women who

can afford it have glass cupboards full of sets of clothes, neatly folded or hung. Often these cupboards are in the living room so all the visitors can see how many clothes there are.

New clothes are important enough for women to say they don't want to go to a function if they don't have a new set. One woman even went to the extent of pawning a gold chain for a hundred dollars to get a new dress for an important function.

This emphasis on new clothes means good business for Si Sai. Before a kampung event, there is a rush to have the clothes ready on time. Those who can afford it, go to the tailors in town who charge $22 a set. Si Sai charges from $6 to $10.

This also means that I have to opt out of the dress race. The best thing I own is a sarung of Indonesian batik — or one which is supposedly so. Often when I am at a loss, for these functions I go in a saree. It is obviously the right thing to do for it is different from my everyday attire.

With jewellery, the rule is you wear as much as you can. The emphasis is on heavy and expensive jewellery. It took me quite a while to strike the right note. The first time I wore a simple gold chain. It was too simple. It could possibly be construed as an insult to the occasion.

The second time, I wore a string of pearls. That was wrong too. What I should have worn was something gold and heavy. If not heavy, then it should be something which is weighty in another direction, something like diamonds.

As for make-up, also it is the full works — foundation, blusher, eye make-up, lipstick. The same women who come dressed as if they have followed the instructions in a cosmetic manual come the next day to the village shop with no lipstick and their faces as white masks, because they have applied the traditional beauty powders made of pounded rice.

The food too is different. Si Sai, anticipating a feast says, "Tomorrow we will have meat." What is important in all these occasions is that it gives a chance to the family to play the gracious host, standing at the door and saying, "You are welcome." It is also their turn at getting some return for all

the money they have been paying out at other people's dos all these years.

The rules for surviving a party are slightly different from those that apply to a traditional feast. If the invitation is for seven, come at 7.45. Don't arrive too early for you will have to wait, usually in silence. And if you arrive later than that, you will have to stand around and wait for a chair to be found and get squeezed into a corner.

When the food is served, rush up and fill your plate. Especially if turtles eggs are served, don't be shy. This is a delicacy and finishes first.

Do not come in a sarung to a party. Don't wear floor length dresses and high heeled shoes either, for nothing is as slippery as wet linoleum. After all this, tell yourself to last out the two hours before the real party starts. That will always be after ten.

There is a lot of time, money and energy spent on trying to make each occasion special in some way, memorable enough so that people can talk about it. The most startling way, if you can afford it is to give an unusual amount of sedekah to the older women. At one circumcision, instead of the two or three dollars in the envelopes that are distributed at the end of the ceremony, the widows were given $10 and a sarung.

The food has to be special. You try and order cakes that nobody else has had for a long time. Generally magazines like *Wanita* are combed for new ideas. The bunga telor which is distributed to guests at marriage, circumcision and Hatam — this is made with great care. If you buy the small plastic cases for 20 cents each or plastic ducks, it will bring down the class of the occasion. So, much ingenuity is spent on fashioning the shape of the egg holder from wire, then decorating it with paper flowers. These flowers follow patterns in Japanese books.

For a wedding and the Hatam, the dais is important as it is going to be the focus of attention. Anything serves as a model — television, magazines or just the skill of the local designer. Free use is made of cloth, tinsel, lights and other trimmings.

Si Aida's daughter-in-law spent months embroidering a

blue velvet backdrop for her wedding dais, embroidering peacocks and flowers. When I saw it, I felt it had been hidden nearly wholly by the high-backed chairs on the dais. But it had not gone unnoticed. The older women especially admired it and the words from the Koran embroidered on it.

Paper flowers for decorating the dais are essential. You can have fresh ones if you like, but you cannot do without the paper ones. Si Sophia spent months collecting egg shells for the flowers she was fashioning for the dais for her daughter's Hatam.

More than all these touches, you have to follow tradition. There was an occasion where everything was done well — the cakes were many in number and unusual, the food well cooked, the bunga telor specially bought in Kuala Lumpur. But at the end of the Hatam ceremony, the women murmured there was no sedekah. Nobody had gone around with the envelopes of money.

Everything at a function comes up for critical scrutiny. At a wedding where two cows have been slaughtered, there is plenty of meat, but it is not tasty and is not hot. The comment is unstintingly harsh. "It tastes like the cat's vomit," says a woman.

But the same house scores points by importing a dahling-dahling dance troupe from Semporna. There is no dancing at first. When we go in for the bersanding, a girl is playing the Sulu xylophone and a man is playing the violin to accompany the traditional Sulu songs.

Later, the music begins for the dahling-dahling. As the beat becomes louder and more inviting, one of the older relatives of the bride comes on the floor and dances.

Then a man from the Semporna troupe starts dancing. He looks very professional even though he is in his everyday clothes — trousers and a deep pink T-shirt with a watch on his hand.

This is the first time I am seeing the dahling-dahling. It is a dance of controlled action, where the whole body is poised to express itself in the movements of the arms and the hands.

Each separate part of the hand moves, while the face is set in an expression of rapt concentration. The toes tap the

ground ever so slightly and the arms weave this way and that. As the beat goes faster, the movements of the hand seem to get more minutely differentiated and even slower.

It conveys a sense of explosive energy controlled to the point of tautness. It is this that finally has the men clapping and jumping with the sheer artistry of it all.

People are sucked into the atmosphere by the dancer's concentration. Then the woman dancer takes the floor. She also wears ordinary clothes, just a sarung and blouse. But she has the special iron finger nails to enhance each movement of the hand. And her hair is done in the traditional style with a pin stuck on top.

As she dances, women from the bride's family come and stick $10 and $50 notes on this pin or tuck them in her blouse. And through it all the woman keeps on dancing without a change of expression.

As each person comes to give her the money or throw it round her, the people get more and more excited. One dancer replaces another and the tempo of the music rises till another girl, this time from the kampung, rises to dance.

The way she dances, you can see why the dance is potentially so provocative. Though she is wearing an A-line skirt and a tight long-sleeved blouse, you can see the movements of her breast. All that can be seen of the leg movements are ripples on her skirt.

The house has scored and it soon sets a trend which others will follow.

The work behind it

I am glad I like fish. It has made things easier for me here. When I think of food in the kampung, I think of fried fish. Hardly ever any vegetables or fruit. Whenever I picture Si Sai cooking, she is always standing over a kuali of oil, frying fish. Or at other times she lights the wooden fire and grills the *pahi*, the skate.

Now, I also like salt fish. I have learnt to appreciate the fragrance of salt fish being fried. Break a little bit off, have some sambal with it and a lot of rice — there seems to be nothing that can match it. By kampung standards then, I have made it. One day, a person in Si Sai's shop talking of the European wife of a kampung man, says, "She is one of us. She can even eat salt fish and sambal."

Si Sai does her household chores with a minimum of hassle. Sometimes she does them, sometimes, her sister, Si Kitu does them. I must confess I never help. In the beginning I make the gesture. When they make special cakes, I sit by the blazing logs and help roll the paper-thin pancakes using lengths of bamboo. Half an hour of that, and it is easy to convince myself that it is enough to observe how it is done, rather than do it myself.

At the kampung dos, in the beginning I try to be companionable and help with the onions. As soon as I start peeling an onion, the group stops work and stares at me.

"What is so strange in the way I peel onions?" I ask. "See how you hold your knife," says one of the women. "You hold it with the sharp edge facing inwards, the way they do it in Hindustan films. We do it with the sharp edge facing outwards. That way the children running around do not get hurt even accidentally."

It makes sense, but I put the onion down for my eyes are streaming. "Why don't you try and put a small onion on the tip of your knife, while you peel the onions," says an older relative. "That way your eyes will not stream so much."

It may work. But there is nothing quite so disconcerting as finding out you can't even peel onions right. So I decide

I better stick to my role, observe, converse, have the cakes and depart.

Considering such a preliminary thing has fazed me, the organisation of one of the kampung dos leaves me cheering on the sidelines.

It is like a concerted army in action. The whole kin group gets galvanised. Since there are so many functions and they are so essential to kampung life, the women are either talking of the function the week before or the one which is to come. It means a lot of plain hard work and a great deal of organisation. This is why the common term for all the functions is *meghinang* which means "to work".

When Si Sophia's daughter's Hatam approaches, you can see she is all in a flurry. There are two more weeks to go. She has already dished out the making of the bunga telor to her sisters and her niece Si Latipa.

Hjh Ipoh makes them in the shape of the traditional boats. She has thought up the design herself and is very pleased with the effect.

Si Latipa's are more traditional, a flower with a case fashioned so that it can hold a boiled egg. Si Sophia herself is concentrating on the flowers for the dais, the ones which incorporate the egg shells. These have a tiny hole on the top to extract the egg white and the yolk. The shells are then painted and glitter dust is stuck on them. These are just little ways to make the occasion more memorable.

This is also the time to do the paper napkins. Si Sophia wants them just right. So her daughters shape them into fans and stick the ends together with cellotape. At this point only Si Sophia's sisters and their families are involved.

The house is getting set up for the occasion. The catwalk is being repaired. The house is being painted. The kitchen is being extended so that the elaborate cooking can be done. This involves making a further extension over the sea for which belian poles have to be sunk in the sea.

Soon it is time for the cakes to be made. This also is being farmed out to her sisters and aunts. There is much discussion about this. At first, Si Sophia wants 11 different kinds. Afterwards, she settles for nine. The speciality of the day is to be the pumpkin dodol, that is a sweetmeat made of

pumpkin, brown sugar and coconut milk.

Three days before the Sunday morning when the Hatam is to be held, Si Sophia's house fills with helpers. The people who are to help have been invited by her. Nobody just goes in like that. I go on Friday with Si Latipa. Si Sophia had said 7.30 in the evening, so we time it well and arrive at 8.30.

Si Sophia's nephew is doing up the dais. It is in red and silver, the plywood arch painted silver with red curtains falling over it. The platform is covered in a red fur like covering. The bottom step is covered with matching red cloth embroidered with flowers and sequins. All this is to be smothered in paper flowers. But now it glitters in the centre of the room.

After the coffee and cakes, all the girls move to the kitchen extension. It was meant to be a full fledged kitchen, but it is still unfinished as the walls and ceiling have not yet been done. So at present it looks like a porch over the sea that houses used to have twenty, thirty years ago.

Si Latipa tells how she heard that her uncle used to serenade her aunt before marriage on moonlit nights. Her aunt would be sitting on the porch and her uncle would strum the guitar and sing P. Ramlee's songs to her. It is easy to detect a tinge of missed opportunities here.

Si Sophia has bought a new bed which has a cushioned head rest. This is covered with a green fur like bedcover. She seems to like the fur effect. This cost her $600 but since everybody will see it and no doubt comment on its modern style, it is worth the expense.

A day before the Hatam, two of Si Sophia's nieces go around to every house in the kampung inviting them to come to Si Sophia's house for the Hatam. They go dressed formally as if to a function, complete with songket and gold jewellery. They deliver the invitation which comes in a fixed formula saying, "We represent Si Sophia and her mother-in-law, Hjh Jariah and her mother 'Mong. Women, men, children, big and small, tomorrow from 9 to 10."

The one time I drove Si Sai around to deliver such an invitation in town, the thing which remained with me was that I have never been so sick of orange squash in my life.

At every house, they served us with orange squash and we had to have it.

The day before the Hatam, Si Latipa goes to Si Sophia's house at 11 in the morning. The plates have been borrowed already. In the morning, Si Sophia's in-laws are there in full strength peeling onions, ginger, potatoes and garlic.

Outside on the porch, the young girls shell the prawns. One girl stands on a plank over a bundle of sliced cucumber. She sea-saws on it so that the juice is squeezed out of the cucumber as it is for the pickles.

Nescafe, biscuits and cakes are brought out to the porch by a young niece of Si Sophia. As she balances the large tray, her sarung falls down. Not completely, but it comes unravelled. "I'm not clever at wearing the sarung," she says in her embarrassment, while everybody is still laughing. A bit later, she takes her turn at the plank and topples over backwards. Her older sister is now angry with her and tells her, "You don't know how to carry yourself."

At this stage only three girls are visibly working at something, while six others are just sitting. We talk of pop stars and the latest films.

After all the cucumber is done, the boys of the kin cluster come to the porch to hang up chunks of beef so that the blood can drip down.

Lunch is late. The helpers get restive. The children become even noisier than usual. Si Sophia starts frying the fish. The Chinese workmen from town come to fix the lamps on the porch.

After lunch, everybody except the core kin group leave to return again at night. I accompany Si Mariam. The Hatam is tomorrow. Tonight is the gala climax to the kin part of the whole affair. Tonight, not only will the women and the younger people of the kin cluster come, but all those who are closely related enough to help with cash contributions.

Two groups of unmarried girls are busy shaving the pandan leaf finely for distribution with the bunga telor. There is nothing hurried about their movements. No panic. The atmosphere today is one of total festivity.

Si Sophia is in the bedroom arranging the flowers for the dais on gold and silver coloured stands. Her brother's wife

is sitting on the side putting two dollars in each envelope for distribution.

Children are running everywhere playing hide and seek. The girls are busy playing beauty queen. One child falls into the sea. No problem for he is soon picked up. Everything continues without a perceptible change in atmosphere.

Outside on the porch, two girls boil the eggs for the bunga telor, adding red colour and vinegar. The eggs are kept aside. They will be put into their cases only after the children are asleep.

Though everybody here is related to Si Sophia or her husband, there are a lot of girls and boys here who are unrelated to each other. The evening is full of possibilities. That is one reason the girls look forward to helping with these occasions. For instance, there is a boy here who used to be engaged to a girl. She is present. But also present is a girl he hopes to get engaged to in the near future, if his parents will agree. The undertones are apparent. And cutting the pandan leaves or boiling the eggs does not seem so humdrum any more.

The women are cutting the beef on the porch. There is an unpleasant smell of raw beef and cuttle fish. They talk of their visits to Mecca and how there were so many black men there.

The actual cooking will be done at night by a distant relative. She is to mix the spices and is in charge of the final product. The fixed payment for this is $150.

After all these weeks of preparation, it is the actual day. People gather as usual. Si Sophia's daughter is dressed in a long white gown embroidered with green and white sequins. She wears a veil on top of which is a tiara. There are gloves on her hands together with bangles and rings.

The six Imams of the kampung sit in front. The benzoin burns in the incense burner. Si Sophia's daughter starts reciting the Koran. There is a small sphere of solemnity around the dais. The children push forward noisily. They do not listen to an older woman who at one time even threatens them with a stick. A disaster is averted, when a woman holds on to the egg shell flowers for in all this jostling, the banana stem holding them had nearly toppled over.

The women a little distance away from the dais continue with their conversation. This time, every other woman seems to be wearing a striped Thai sarung with a line of gold.

Before the food is served, one of Si Sophia's relatives surveys the crowd. "It is full house," she says with great satisfaction. The trays of cakes and coffee are handed down in a human chain. Si Sophia's sisters and sisters-in-law are in charge of the serving. Her nieces — the unmarried ones are inside in the kitchen setting the trays and washing up. Si Sophia just stands to the side looking confused and worried.

Everybody present is aware of her upmanship in offering unusual cakes and three kinds of fish dishes instead of the usual two. Instead of having prawns or cuttle fish, she has both.

The bunga telor cases are noted and commented on. And as we leave, the house has the concentrated smell of pandan mixed with the burning of benzoin. This for me is always going to be associated with a Hatam.

The dollars and cents

After the do is over, people very quickly start adding up how much was spent, how much came in, who gave what and who did not give what.

Si Sophia estimates that in all, she spent $9,000 on the Hatam. No accounts were kept but she figures the food cost $4,000. Doing up the house another $4,000. The bed and accessories cost $1,000. In return, she received $1,000 from relatives and $3,000 in contributions from the kampung people who came. So in all, her expenditure was the $5,000 she spent on the house and the accessories. The food was taken care of by the return on all the money she herself had contributed at one time or another.

The money and presents received are often noted in a small notebook for future reference, as one has to give slightly more to appear gracious about this meticulous reciprocity.

This is why women in the kampung can tell you how much it cost them to get married ten, fifteen years later. Hjh Jariah, one day when she is on her favourite topic about how cheap things were in the good old days, turns to weddings. "Everything has gone up in price," she says. "Even the wedding payments."

When her sister, Si Gaddung got married in 1951, the boy paid $700 only. People helped with money to the extent of $1,000. But the total expenses of the wedding were $3,000 and this was because there was no party.

Of course spending more and spending it ostentatiously is in itself a mark of status. When Si Tina, Hjh Jariah's niece got married, there were two things special about it. One, she got a tiara of real gold instead of having the usual costume stuff. And two, in addition to the party in the kampung, they had a party at Sabah Hotel, one of the leading hotels in town. This was possible, for her sister's husband is one of the leading men in a political party — now in opposition.

The thing that was special about this party was not the food. In fact the food was quite third rate and according to

town standards the reception was lacking in finesse. The fruit was stale, there were no plates for the cake and the Malay food they served was not as impressive as the course by course Chinese dinner. But nobody paid heed to that. What was remarked on was how much it cost. It was common knowledge that the hotel reception cost $1,000 to $4,000 for the drinks and $6,000 for the food. This was quite the ultimate in receptions as far as the kampung was concerned.

Deciding how much to spend at a wedding is in itself not tension free. I found this out when I walked into a family quarrel. Emmong's grandson was getting married. Emmong was visiting his parents. Seeing her there, I also joined them in the kitchen.

The *belanja* ceremony where the groom gives the marriage payment to the bride's family, had just taken place. It was a full scale celebration. They had paid $3,000 and had presented it, arranged in the form of the National Mosque and a basket. This together with a cow and a bale of white cloth was the marriage payment. The white cloth was slated for the bride's grandmother's funeral.

Once the ceremony was over, Emmong's son Hj Kassim invited Emmong to discuss the estimates for the wedding. He was very worked up over the fact that $7,000 had already been spent and the wedding was still ahead of them.

His wife, Si Aida had gone and bought a bed. He said, "She doesn't stop and think. What is important is that we have enough to feed all the people. The house is not important. Why buy a bed? The bride's side will do that. The house too — it is old. There is not much we can do to pretty it up."

What he wanted to do with Emmong was to estimate how much coffee they would need, how much sugar. But Si Aida was furious. She shouted curses on her husband and his kin for she saw him looking to his mother for advice, preferring his mother's management to hers.

Emmong's sister did not make matters any better by saying, "You can borrow the plates. You can borrow a fan. You can borrow the trays. But you cannot borrow the food or curses will fall on you."

Emmong also, sensing a slight in Si Aida's behaviour,

said, "I know how to manage these things. I have organised nine marriages. I know how much to estimate for 500, how much for 300, for one month, for seven days, or for a light coffee and cakes affair."

Si Aida stormed off into the bedroom. We heard the sound of a bed being dismantled and thrown down. All her daughters went into the room. When they came out, they were puffy-eyed. At this point I felt terribly embarrassed having walked into the house at such a time. But there was no way I could slink out. Anyway it was good sociological copy.

In the end, what did happen was that the house was done up. An awning was put up. The kitchen was considerably enlarged. The house was painted. The bed that Si Aida had bought for her son remained. In addition to this, there was an elaborate mosquito net on the bed, together with a dressing table on the side. This in fact was duplication as the bride's side had provided the bedroom set. Si Aida also bought, rather than rented, two wrought iron chairs for the bersanding. Everyone knew that the chairs cost $700 a piece.

The formal wedding payments are heavier on the boy's side for he has to pay certain categories of payments for the marriage to be legitimised. These payments start when the boy's side goes to the girl's house to ask for her hand.

When the boy who is the Travolta champion of the kampung gets engaged, five trays with money, a towel, make-up and clothes are prepared. These are taken to the girl's house. After coffee and cakes, the business of receiving the money begins.

The Imams of the kampung act as witnesses to the transaction. One announces, "Received the engagement payment, $200, the betel leaf payment, $100." Then he announces the conditions of the wedding payment. "Two thousand, five hundred dollars for the wedding expenditure. Of this $100 has been given earlier as a token engagement payment. One cow. One big sack of rice. One bale of white cloth. One castle of cakes."

After announcing this, he says, "Okay. Business is over." Then Hjh Siti Rahkmah is called over both in her capacity as a close relative of the girl and the chief midwife of the kampung. She counts the money received for this is not only

business but the legitimisation of a marriage.

The boy got an expensive deal. This is the general opinion. The marriage payments will come up to $4,000. The rate is $3,000. And how will the boy come up with so much money? His mother is only a bus conductress.

The money transactions are important in a wedding. The Simunul way is that money should be seen and counted as money. This is why the form of Si Tina's marriage payment was noted with such interest. The groom, being Malay, had followed the Malay pattern of arranging the gifts artistically.

Instead of setting out the different ritual items of presentation baldly on silver plated trays, they had arranged the songket in the shape of a peacock, the beak holding the ring. The money was arranged in a flowerlike pattern, the red of the ten dollar notes and the green of the fifty dollar notes being skilfully matched.

This was so well received that in weddings after that, the style was copied with variation. This is why when Si Aida's son got married, they went one step further and arranged the money in the shape of the National Mosque and a basket.

But when Si Ping's brother gets engaged to a girl from the Philippines, one of the refugees living in a neighbouring kampung, this new arrangement backfires. When the girl's side sees the money arranged in floral designs, they are flummoxed. They were expecting the money to come as it usually does, wrapped in a handkerchief on a tray.

They undo the arrangement, heaping the green and red 'flowers' separately and also undoing the mixed ones. It is essential they count the money. So they do.

How much does your husband make?

"How much does your husband make?" I get asked frequently. "Does he give you all the money?" I hum and haw over the first question. To the second, I can say a definite "No".

This never fails to excite surprise. How could a husband not give all the money to his wife? Why do I allow such an attitude?

Here, in the kampung, the norm at least is that the man gives the money to the wife to keep. She then uses what she needs for the household expenses and gives her husband money every day for petrol and cigarettes. "How else do you think I could have saved money for the Haj?" asks Hjh Habibah's cousin, Si Suka. And surprisingly enough, her husband agrees with her.

"It is better this way," he tells me. "When men go to town, if they have a lot of money on them, they are easily tempted to treat all their friends to coffee. And that is the end of the money."

This attitude gives the woman in Simunul society a position of strength. She does the give and take in the kampung for weddings and other social occasions. That is why it is the woman's generosity or lack of it which is remarked on by her husband's relatives.

If a husband does not give the money to his wife, traditionally this would be seen as a good reason for divorce. But people say this does not happen for a man would be ashamed not to give the money to his wife.

This remains true as long as the money is kept at home in the wife's possession. The women keep it hidden together with all the jewellery. This is why they do not want to leave the house unattended. One person always has to stay behind. And one of the great fears is fire.

Keeping the money in the bank means that the income tax people will come after you. Moreover bank dealings are still alien to the women. Hjh Habibah once said she would rather pawn her jewellery if she needed money than go to the bank

and withdraw money from her account. The latter was shameful. I never did gather what was shameful about it — going to the bank or it being revealed that she could not sign her name.

This role of the woman as manager of the money is put succintly by Si Latipa's fiance in a letter he writes her. "When we get married," he writes, "you will be the Treasurer and I will be the Chairman." It is because of this involvement with the management of money that women talk as knowledgeably of the price of timber, the scale of royalties as the price of gold.

Even when the money is put in the bank, a wife knows how much it is — that is if the relationship itself is not defunct. The women would ask me again and again, "How is it you don't know how much your husband makes? Don't you just lie down and talk in bed at night?"

The attitude to money distinctly changes when large sums are involved. When it is a question of salary, it is not considered a personal question to find out how much a person makes.

A girl once stopped at Si Mariam's shop. She was not of the kampung and worked in a timber camp. The quizzing began.

"How much is your salary?" Si Sophia asked.

"Not much," she said.

"But how much is it?"

"Not much."

"How much is it though? Tell!"

"$260 only."

"True, true," said Si Sophia. "Your work is heavy. But you eat there, also, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the girl.

"It's good you have a job. Nowadays it is so difficult to find money."

As long as the sums are $100, $400, there is openness about it. But when it comes to larger sums of money, more than $100,000 as for timber or the construction of a house, figures become vaguer. There is a general disinclination to talk loud and clear about it. Even when sisters discuss it, their voices are low and they huddle over it.

Male and female roles in the kampung impress me in another direction also, for they allow for male tenderness. Between husband and wife, the relationship is seen more in terms of caring than in terms of dominance. A woman is supposed to serve the husband his meals otherwise he will think she does not care for him. When the wife is tired, the husband helps with the cooking, washing and sweeping if there are no other women in the house. It shows he cares for her and it does not make him appear less of a man.

Hjh Habibah says when she is angry with her husband, her husband cries. It is not the first time I have heard of a man who cries openly when sad at heart. Even a king in their folk stories, cries.

The only sphere in which a woman gets a raw deal is divorce. The man can divorce her, but strictly speaking, the woman cannot divorce him. In the context of kampung life, however, I have yet to hear of a man who refused to divorce a woman when she wanted it. Refusing to divorce would be shameful. And since the couple generally live with her kin or near them, there are countless opportunities for them to impress him with the shame of keeping a marriage going under such conditions. The idea is that the man must show there are many women available for him. Why should he want to hold on to one who doesn't want him?

The most common reason for divorce is that the man has married again. Or wants to do so. It is uncommon for a man in the kampung to have two wives living in the kampung itself though some — at the last count, three of them — are said to have wives elsewhere.

This is always seen as a great misfortune. Si Ainon's father had two at the same time some years ago. In the shop, they attribute the death of Si Ainon's mother — medically I think it was kidney trouble — to her sorrow at her husband having another wife. "She became thinner and thinner and then she wasted away and died," is the comment.

Hjh Norizam's elder sister divorced her husband because he married again. There is not much made of divorce. It is not considered desirable but is accepted in the same way as marriage is accepted. It is fate. "*Katis na jodoh*," that is how they put it. Your time together has ended. There is none of

the soul wrenching guilt of having failed as a wife. Your time together has ended. That is the total explanation.

There is also no preoccupation about the fate of the children. The questions: What will happen to the children? How will they grow up? — these questions are not asked. This is because the woman often remains in her parents' house. Either she has not moved in the first place or she comes back. The husband is only supposed to maintain his wife for three months. After that, his responsibility is to maintain the children. The quantum of maintenance set is seldom sufficient for them.

When Si Sophia was divorced from her husband for seven years, he paid her $40 a month. "It was not enough," says Si Sophia, "but I was shy to ask for more. My relatives helped me out. I took in sewing — would sew pillow cases and blouses to sell in the timber camps. I would make $200 to $300 a month. My father was alive then. He used to help me."

Hjh Norizam's sister — her husband no longer pays any maintenance for his children. He married another woman and according to report is married to yet another. He started out by paying maintenance — paid as much as he could. But for the last two years he has not paid anything. She talks of it with little rancour. "According to the law," she says, "the children can demand maintenance. But then if he pays, he will still have some right on them. Now my father and younger brothers help support me and my children.

"If they couldn't, then I would go out and work, wash dishes, work in the hospital." This is said without a trace of self pity.

Another woman whose newly timber rich husband divorced her says, "For five years, I supported myself and my four children by driving children to school. He gave nothing."

In one way the Simunul woman is secure for she has the support and emotional security of her kin. In another, in the financial sense, she is completely adrift. She looks to kin for support. When that is not available, then the option is to marry again to secure a meal ticket. But this is considered a great misfortune. The Travolta champion's mother is one

who has remarried three times. "That is because she has no kin. Her mother died and her father married again. So she has to marry," says one of her cousins.

Hjh Norizam's sister says she doesn't know what is in her jodoh, but in her heart she does not want to remarry. "My children are grown up already. Perhaps they will not like a step father. And if I have other children, it will create more problems. Furthermore, there is nobody who has asked for me."

Her mother interrupts here and says, "You never know. You might still have jodoh. Before, the Sulu girls would not step out of the house, yet there were people who came to ask for them."

The chickens

It has been one flat day. It is a blank. Somehow, it seems as if every day should have something significant about it. Here I am in the kampung ostensibly to observe what is happening. And nothing is happening.

All I do is sit in the village shop, seeing people passing by and women washing at the tap. It is the same desultory conversation again and again. How much gold did she buy? How much did they spend on the do? Where did you buy the sarung? How much did it cost? Nothing else.

This is a day when the most interesting thing around is the chickens. These chickens are unlike any I have seen. This doesn't say much for I haven't seen many. The only time I experimented keeping chickens, of the six only one laid an egg and then stopped.

They were no good at laying and the stringiest, toughest chickens we ever ate. So I am no expert. But these kampung chickens are free spirits. They don't belong to any chicken coop. They strut and hop around pecking at the sacks of rice, taking a quick swipe off the glutinous rice which is cooling in the corner.

When they feel like it, they play dead while sunning themselves on the road. You move for them. They don't move for you. I wonder whether the five mile per hour speed limit on the kampung road is meant for the safety of the children or that of the chickens.

The other day a bus driver stopped in shock with his brakes squealing when a loud uproar went up from Si Mariam's shop. A week old chicken had chosen just that moment to cross the road. It was a tense moment until the chick emerged from under the bus.

The chickens are everywhere. I find myself ducking as they fly over my head to settle precariously near a row of coconut oil bottles. It is then best to leave them alone. Shoo them away and the bottles may fall. Don't move them and the bottles may yet fall.

They are above you. they are below you. Look down

casually through the slats in the floor and there is a chicken sitting on a pipe half way between the floor and the sea.

About the weirdest place for a chicken is on top of the bathroom door at eleven at night. It is strange to have a hen peer down, fixing its beady eyes on you while you are urinating in the sea. Sometimes at midnight, hens start clucking and the cocks crowing. "Two people are making illicit love," says Si Mariam.

The chickens round Si Mariam's shop belong to her youngest son who is eleven. "He started off with only two chickens," she says. "Those two black ones over there. Now he has 21.

"Yesterday a Chinese man offered me $30 for that white cockerel over there," she says pointing to a handsome specimen, his majesty a bit bedraggled in the rain as he works away at yesterday's rice. "I told him I had got him from the Philippines for $25. Maybe he will also want to buy another two for $15 each. But my son, he does not want to sell them. Since they belong to him, I can't do anything about it. He won't let us eat the chickens, unless they have been injured in a fight. But he did give five chickens when his sister had a baby."

Each chicken has an individuality. There is the little white hen who hung round her mother long after the others. Now she has taken over another hen's chickens. "She is just the maternal type," says Si Mariam.

If Si Mariam's son is anything like Si Tony, he won't let anybody eat the eggs too. It is seldom that a boy can bear to part with his chickens, present or future. An egg is a future chick. What a boy wants is to rear a fighting cock, to be the conquering hero of the legends and old tales.

Often the boys meet on the hill where the cows are penned at night. Two of them bring their cocks with them. The others are there to watch. The first time Si Mariam's son tries cock fighting, his cock runs away. The second time he gets as far as getting the cock's feathers ruffled. But after a moment he takes his cock away. He is afraid it might get hurt.

It's not just chickens which hang round the place. The goats are just as much a part of the landscape. Like the

chickens, they look after themselves. One large goat here is worth more then $200. "It's money multiplying for the owner and a nuisance for the others," remarks Hjh Jariah.

She runs a constant battle with the goats for they come into her shop every chance they get. They go after packets of mee, rice, cakes. Leave the gate of your house open and they are inside. They are about the biggest nuisance there is in the kampung. Look up and there is a goat staring back at you. Shoo it away and the goat manages to look dignified while you make a fool of yourself.

They are not kept for everyday consumption, as mutton is not an everyday meat in the kampung. About the only time you stand to sell a goat is for the doa selamat at the opening of a timber camp.

Keeping cows is more profitable for they figure in the wedding payments. They are left to graze where they will. Some evenings the cows come home and some evenings they don't. Si Mariam just hopes her cows have the sense to graze round the kampung areas and not go towards the town.

She has already had a summons from the Town Board for her cows were found wandering around the Community Centre, four miles away. She paid the fine and loudly told the cows they should have known better.

For a day they were tethered to a post near the graveyard where the grass is especially green. She again reminds her youngest son that the cows are his responsibility and then mutters they are a lot of trouble. But each cow is worth $850 so she bears with them, hoping the fine will not increase substantially the second time round.

If nothing else is happening, there are always the children's games. Every week there is a new enthusiasm. This week all the girls are playing with a rope made of rubber bands. It is called zero point and I still don't know how it is done.

It is the latest craze among the six to ten year old girls. In every shady nook and corner, I can see them playing. A favourite spot is opposite the mosque, but any area big enough for it will do.

It is a bit like the skipping game, in that two girls hold the chain, but it involves some high jump as well. The most complicated part of it is the stage they call joget. Here they

have to wind and unwind the chain round their legs as they dance over the chain.

Though the zero point enthusiasm is new, what is not new about it is the ritual of choosing your team mates. From far, I see them standing in concentrated silence, moving their right hands in rapid, quick-fire succession.

Either it starts with "One, two, *cham*," or they beat their chests saying "*Ai, ai*" and then an explosive "*Thai*". Often they say nothing at all, just moving their hands fast one after the other.

The idea is to get the winning symbol. For paper, the hand is stretched out in front, palm sideways. For a stone, it is a clenched fist, for scissors, two fingers apart. So if one girl has paper and the other has scissors, the scissors wins for it cuts through paper.

If one has paper and the other stone, the paper wins for it can wrap itself round the stone. If one has stone and the other has scissors, nobody wins. They have to do it again. There are as many variations of this as there are groups who use it. The only thing that is common is the earnestness with which it is done.

When I was a child in Delhi, we had our own choosing rituals. Most of them were Western, like, "Eeny, meeny, minah mow." And we said it with the word 'nigger' in it. Then there was the other one where we sang "Oranges and lemons." When the ditty ended, the girl who had come under the outstretched hands of the two captains, would be asked to choose. You want mangoes or melons, or something like that. Depending on what she chose, she would be assigned to a team.

The only Punjabi one we used was *Akkar, bakkar, bhamba bhou*. It was a nonsensical rhyme. When it finished, the person at the point was 'It'. Even as children we did not have much respect for it, for any clever child could figure out where to start so that you knew where it would finish.

So here in the kampung, it was *Ai, ai, thai*.

Once the order of play is decided, then each team of girls jumps the rope. The rope goes higher and higher, from the level of the feet to that of the head.

This is just to warm up for there is no high jump involved

as they can bring it down to their level as long as it is crossed. The succeeding rounds get more complicated as the girls joget.

I find *sundang* better, for I learnt how to play it. It is a variation of *congkak* played in Peninsular Malaysia associated more with leisured ladies in a palace than children playing in mud. But that's the way we play it here — in the mud.

One of Si Tony's gang and part of my ping-pong crowd taught me. He has a devastating spin for a 12 year old. "It is easy," he says. "Girls about eight years old play it, but I will teach you if you like."

We start making depressions in the mud, outside Si Sai's shop, but unfortunately have chosen rocky ground. We make four holes on one side, four opposite them and one large hole at either end. It looks like a dining table arrangement of chairs.

Then we have to find the stones. We cannot find enough so decide we will fill up one of the depressions and play with only three holes on each side. Ten stones go into each hole on the side. The end holes are empty. These are banks. So each person has three holes with ten stones each.

"You start from your side," my partner explains. "Start from whichever hole you like. Pick up the stones and put one each in every hole on your side, then the bank, then the holes on my side. Skip my bank and continue."

That seems easy enough. When the stones finish in my bank, it means I am 'out' and it is my partner's turn.

As the stones accumulate in my bank and fewer remain in the holes, the game becomes more exciting and not quite so languorous. For if my pile of stones finishes at an empty hole on my side, I can take all the stones from my partner's hole directly opposite. Then I have to shout "*sundang*" and gleefully sit back and see my bank visibly grow.

The game begins to get me after a while. My knees begin to ache and I find that the game is not just moving one pile of stones from one place to another as it seems at first. It needs a fair bit of mental arithmetic to avoid finishing up in the bank or in an empty hole on your partner's side.

The first time I play it, I get beaten soundly at it. And the game is no good for one's nails.

When nothing else is happening, a visit to Pa Udin makes for a good break in the day. He is a gentle man about 60 and keeps the largest number of goats. However, it is not because of his goats that I like to visit him. He makes the most exquisite model boats. This is his hobby now, but boat making used to be his major occupation.

He says he has made 20 to 30 boats over 26 years. Now that boats are no longer used for collecting attap and trading, there is little demand for them. So he shifted to making model boats to sell as souveniers.

It has not been dramatically successful for there is no regular demand fror them. He sells them through a shop in town. They pay him $10 a boat and sell it for $25. He knows he can do better both at producing more and at marketing them better, but he says he wants to do as much as he enjoys and no more.

His workplace is a relaxed place. His tools lie in a wicker basket. There is always a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches by his side. Moreover, he always has time to talk while he shapes the belian for his boats. The belian wood comes out golden yellow inside, while on the outside it is brownish black.

Quite often, after this, I go back to my room, especially if the day is hot and stifling. Then I cheat. I sit in my room and read old issues of Reader's Digest. I have been quite scrupulous in not bringing any books with me, other than the ones related to my work. I know I cannot trust myself to do any field work if I have a book I like.

But old issues of Reader's Digest seemed to pose no threat. I picked these up from a friend's house and she had copies which went back ten years. So I read them all at once. Then there are some magazines, old ones too, I bought from the Red Cross sale. These too I devour. They all seem to tell me there is a world outside. But when I look out of my window, again there is the bamboo, the women washing at the tap, a bus stopping by, a woman going to a shop to buy some soap powder.

With an effort I go out again to sit by the bamboo. Then even the vendors who stop at the kampung help break the monotony of the day.

Often women come from neighbouring kampungs to sell a few sarungs and blouses. I do not buy from them for they sell them more expensive than you can get them in Sandakan.

The transactions are often long winded. The haggling is always there. Often a sarung is $18 if you pay cash, $20 if you want three months credit. The fact that it sells for $13 in the Sandakan market does not figure at all.

If a woman does not want to give credit, the deal is off immediately. Once such a woman comes to the kampung. When Si Sai hears that there is no credit, she asks the woman why she bothered to come at all.

One thing I learn though. If you want to look professional about buying batik, you must rub the cloth in your hands and smell it. A good batik sarung from Indonesia is supposed to smell different.

The other regulars are the Pakistani men who come by selling cloth on credit. As a sideline they also sell costume jewellery. Si Sai and Si Kitu stop one of them. After much bargaining, they buy some bangles. "They look real, don't they, Puan?" they ask me. They think they have a good deal, but the Pakistani man does not look too worried either.

There are also the Chinese women who come by selling fish and vegetables. And there are two who come once a month to buy dried rice at 15 cents a kati. A kati is approximately 600 gms. At an average, they say they buy 50 katis of dried rice from Bokara every month.

When I note this down, it seems to be an interesting comment on kampung life. Mercedes cars standing outside and dried rice to sell. Well, it is not as dramatic as that, for the house with a Mercedes car will not be selling dried rice. But the mother of a woman who owns the car, does.

The pondans

Si Majid often sits in Si Mariam's shop. He is a *pondan*, a transvestite and prefers to be called Si Mary.

He is not much to look at. He is slight of build. His face is shrunken, his hair is long and lanky. I met him first when he used to work in Hjh Habibah's house, a few years ago. His duties included helping in the house, though he did it only when it suited him. Hajjah would not bully him too much in case he just up and left. Then she would have nobody to help her in the house.

Si Majid liked doing housework. He was especially adept at cutting and sewing. Often he would be present at the morning coffee sessions in Hjh Habibah's house preferring women's talk to any duties he might have.

Once the women were curious to see what makes a pondan. They asked him if all was normal with him down below. He asked them if they wanted to see for themselves. At least that is how the story is told. They did, and later told me his penis was unusually small.

Pondans make the safest servants for you don't have to worry about a husband's roving eyes. They pose no danger. So if you have a pondan to work in your house, you ignore some of his idiosyncracies and thank your good fortune.

True to the pondans' reputation of being rovers, Si Majid one day just disappeared. Apparently he did not even write to his mother in the Philippines. She sent desperate appeals to Bokara trying to locate her son. After a month, Si Majid reappeared. He said he had been upriver on the Kinabatangan. Now he no longer wanted to do housework. He was liberated.

"It's tough work washing clothes. Now I have become clever," he said. After this, he moved out of the kampung to the other transvestite bases in the neighbouring kampungs.

One day when he is visiting Bokara he stops to buy bananas in Si Mariam's shop. He sits down and tells his story.

He tells how he came from the Philippines in 1972. "I ran away from there because of the fighting," he says. "Killing every day. It was bad. When I came to Bokara, I worked in the kampung houses for six years in different houses.

"Then I spent some time doing the club rounds. This is how it worked. Of course you know that at night I call myself Si Mary. I am Si Majid by day and Si Mary at night. Together with another friend, Si Minah, I would dress up like a woman — wear a midi, shave my legs, pluck under the armpits and pluck out my beard and moustache. I would do my hair and wear a lot of perfume.

"After all this, I looked like a woman. My voice, I disguised to make it soft and low. Then all I had to do is sit in a club on a bench along the wall with the other women.

"When a man comes to take a girl dancing he has to pay the club $2.50 and tip us. It is $1 for ballroom dancing and 50 cents for the twist."

Pausing a moment, to see he has his audience with him, he continues, "Part of the make-up is false breasts. Dunlop of course. And round the hips is a towel to give extra padding and protection.

"When the man dances and feels the breast from the outside, it is fine. When his hand goes inside, I would say, 'It hurts,' act coy and prevent him. If his hand explores below, I'd say shyly, 'I do not want.' From one night's dancing I often made $30 to $40.

"Once two men wanted to take us to a hotel for the night after the dancing. The price was fixed at $80. I took my $80 before. Si Minah took only $50 first. It was when we reached the hotel that the problem started. I said I was shy and switched off the light. The man did not like that. I barely escaped with my life by banging on the iron grille. Si Minah nearly died."

After this experience, Si Majid says he is frank. "I tell them straight I am not a pure woman. You want? And there are many who do.

"Now I have stopped all this," he says. "It is a sin. I have started trading instead. I go to the timber camps and sell batik sarungs. I buy them here in Sandakan for $5. If the person is clever at bargaining, I sell a sarung for $10.

Otherwise for $20. Each trip nets a profit of $300 to $400. I go twice a month. It's enough.

"Why should I be ashamed of being a pondan? Look at me. I carry a handbag. I don't hide it. But I don't like people calling me Si Bentut. (Bentut is the Simunul word for transvestite). I would rather they call me Si Mary.

"I found out I was a pondan when I was 15. My penis was small and I was attracted to men. My mother cried. But what to do? Sometimes I wonder why I am made like this. Do you know if I can do something about it?"

While talking, his eyes have filled with tears.

The kampung is an accepting society. There is hardly any attempt to sweep things under the carpet as far as the transvestites are concerned. As Si Mariam says, "Why shouldn't we accept them? All of them are Muslim. Moreover they are kin."

She comments though, "I don't know why there are so many pondans in the Philippines. We never had so many pondans around here before the refugee rush started in 1972. Now there are 30 Bajau pondans in Sandakan alone. Maybe the water there is salty."

Si Katherine is another transvestite who hangs around Si Mariam's shop. His story is different. He is in great demand when there is a function in the kampung for he is an expert at making paper flowers and arranging the wedding dais.

He plays the Sulu xylophone and also does the dahling-dahling, converting the sensual dance into a riotous experience.

His regular trade is hair perming. He does it in the kampungs of Sandakan but says it is more lucrative to go across Sandakan Bay to villages where there are no beauty shops. "With the latest trends," he says, "I do as many men as women." With this he earns $500 to $600 a month.

Si Katherine also came to Sandakan in 1972 fleeing Simunul Island. Now he stays with his father, brothers and sisters in Kampung Pukul, nearby.

"I was 14 years old and married a Sulu girl," he says. "We were married for eight months and had a son. My parents did not like her for we had eloped together. What to do? I had to follow what my parents wanted, so I divorced her.

After that, there was no woman left for me.

"My parents still do not know I am a pondan. In front of my father, I behave like a man. I am hard and firm. But when I go outside, I go soft like a woman. I myself am surprised at this change. What to do? If our parents do not forgive us in this world, God will not forgive us in the next."

The self declared transvestites take great pleasure in denouncing others as transvestites too. They point to a man in the kampung and say, "He is one of us, only he won't acknowledge it. Look at him. He is clever at all the women's work. He can cook, sew clothes and mosquito nets, make flowers, dance the dahling-dahling. The only thing he does not do is wear women's clothes."

There is a girl in the kampung who is often referred to as a female transvestite. The thing which is supposed to give her away is her preference for the pant suit. Other girls wear tailored skirts and blouses to town, but she wears pant suits only.

"She likes to be friends with women alone," says her cousin. "She likes to be free. No work. All the time she is out. The only way she makes some money is by going shopping for her cousins. In spite of this, she is good at cooking. At kenduris, she can cook for up to 300 people. But she is a pondan nevertheless.

"Don't call her that," warns her cousin. "She won't like it."

Part three

Education

When I hear Si Wira reading after his mother in the standard rote fashion, it breaks through all ethnographic objectivity. Just one word after another, with no attention to punctuation or meaning. The boy does not know how to read.

How could he have gone through four years of primary school and be so completely illiterate? It agitates me to see it for he is nearly the same age as my eldest son. My son spends his leisure time reading Enid Blyton and here is a boy who is going through the same educational system and cannot read.

There is a difference of course. Si Wira did not go to kindergarten and his parents do not have more than five years of schooling between them. It is not that Si Sai and Si Malcom do not care. Both help him. Si Sai in this case is reading his Health Science to him and Si Wira is learning the sentences off by heart.

I am troubled enough to come out of my room to see what is happening. What I cannot understand is how his parents are so calm about their son's inability to read. They are doing nothing special about it. There is no attempt to get any outside help. Probably it will be of no use, for if the child is to get some outside tuition, he will have to go back to his school teachers. And from his own account, they are no great shakes anyway.

Si Wira says, "The teacher writes on the blackboard. She tells us how to form the words. That's it. After this, she goes out to have some soup and leaves us to do the writing."

For Si Sai's family the education system is not working. Si Tony dropped out of school after Form I. Si Suraya is now in Form I but only because the Std 6 exam was scrapped and there is automatic promotion. Otherwise she would not have been in Form I. She also cannot read. She finds it difficult to read the Malay and English subtitles on TV.

It is not that the parents are not supportive. There is the feeling that education is important. The fact that the parents

did not get an education because of parental prejudice is deeply resented. You just have to broach the subject and the flood gates open. Most often the women comment, "We in our time did not go to school. We are stupid."

Hjh Ipoh often says, "If only I could write. My father did not believe in school. When evening literacy classes were held in the kampung, I was pregnant. So I left. I can sign my name. That is all. Whenever I have to write the name of my kampung underneath it for my political activities, I cannot. I am so ashamed."

Lip service is paid to the importance of education. But most often this is all that happens. In Si Sai's house, there are no books. Even the school books are treated with disdain.

I see Si Tony and Si Wira kicking a book around like a ball. Unable to see it, I tell Si Wira that Indians believe the child who kicks a book will be stupid for the goddess of learning will not give him the gift of learning. This is something I should not have tried to intrude on to their culture. But here there is no tradition of treating books reverently. The only book that is sacred is the Koran. Books in general are not.

Reading and writing are uncommon activities here. Small children gather round me when I write my notes. They make bets as to how much of the page I will complete. Seeing me write fast, one girl asks, "Are you Jamie?" referring to the popular television serial, 'Bionic Woman.' They are amazed that my hands can move so fast.

Books are not part of the general decor. Children do not buy books with their pocket money. Parents do not buy children books on any occasion. There are at least three occasions in the year — Hari Raya Puasa, Hari Raya Haji, Moolud Nabi — when children get new clothes.

Magazines are popular often for their illustrations. And for all the wealth of the kampung and its political clout, there is no move to set up a kindergarten or a reading room so that the girls and boys of the kampung can have a good grounding in education. There has been no demand for one.

I think the trouble is that the parents and the children do not dream enough. Si Ping talks of her niece one day and

says, "She is clever. Every year, she passes." She passes. That is enough. This girl was bright enough to secure a Sabah Foundation Scholarship after Standard 6. But her mother said she would miss her and so she lost the opportunity of studying in a better school in Peninsular Malaysia.

Si Wira and Si Suraya stay away from school for all sorts of reasons. For a few days Si Suraya does not go to school pleading general discomfort and lassitude. It comes out later that she is scared of the English teacher. The teacher had scolded her.

Si Wira too stays home if he has a slight cold or if there is a function in the evening or if somebody is due at the house. And he is allowed to do so.

Talk to the teachers and they say, "The children of this kampung are stupid. They are spoilt. The parents give them too much money. They go mad together playing all the time and don't study."

There may be some truth in this for those who moved out of the kampung say their children do much better in their studies. But not all the children could be stupid. There must be something else at work, something which is part of the system. What is really scary about it is that here in the kampung you realise the educational system is capable of producing illiterates.

Nearly every house has someone who has dropped out or is a Form 3 fail. The girls find their solution in marriage. It is only when they try to find a job that it trips them up. But for boys like Si Tony and Si Janis, Si Mariam's son, the problem is much graver. They are too young for the labour market. They have left school already. So all day long, they hang around. Ask them what they do and they joyfully answer, "Relax only. Relax." And for greater effect, they sing the refrain for you.

Si Janis is one of Si Mariam's greatest worries. Rocking her grandchild, she says, "Two days ago, Si Janis took $20 of Si Latipa's money and her ring. He did not pawn the ring, but he has pawned his Rolex watch for the second time for $50. When I asked him about it, he said he had given it to the shop to be repaired. But his cousin told me Si Janis had pawned it.

"He spends heavily," she says. "I also found out from his friends that he cuts school. I told Si Latipa to ring up his teacher about it. His teacher said that in a week, Si Janis attends school two to three times. So then I told Si Latipa to tell the teacher to write a letter so that I could show it to Si Janis in black and white. But the teacher told us to come down instead. I was lazy and didn't go.

"Instead I told Si Janis's father to take him out of school. He said, 'Let him continue till Form 3. When he doesn't pass, he will have to leave. This way, we will not regret it later. When he is 20, 30 years old, he himself will regret not going to school. But his life is his own.'

"I don't know what to do about the boy," Si Mariam says. "I told him if you don't want to go to school, go out to work. You are a man. You can earn three dollars a day by lifting and carrying. But all he does is take money and spend it."

Si Janis is 15 years old and has dropped out of Form 2. He already smokes and according to his sister has visited some sleazy hotels. Si Tony has probably not been so adventurous. But now he does not try and hide his smoking from his father as he did earlier on.

The boys roam around in a big group in the kampung and town. When there is nothing to do, they play volleyball and football in the evenings. Often it is the movies. And sometimes there is trouble.

Chinese New Year, a group of such boys got into trouble. The way one version of the story goes is they were trying to extort money from the lion dancers. A fight erupted after the lion dance performance ended in the town padang. Si Tony ran all the way home — four miles. He was sent off to Kampung Pukul for a week or two till the fuss died down. Si Janis was packed off to a timber camp. Si Ping's son was shaved bald and so confined to the home effectively.

One thing that goes against education in the kampung is that people here are doing quite well without it. It is not the most educated ones who are rich. It is those who have the political connections to get timber land who have the Mercedes. Money comes without any direct correlation to education. A boy drops out of school. He knows and so does

everybody else in the kampung that he can work in his father's cocoa farm or timber camp as soon as he wants. He will not do without.

However the situation is not all dismal. Education has at least in principle become something desirable. This year, two boys and a girl have made it to Malaysian tertiary institutions.

The girl is Hjh Norizam, Hjh Natsi's daughter. She did her Form 6 in Tawau. When her results are announced she is really down for she did not get the full Higher School Certificate, only a General Certificate of Education. She says the General Paper was difficult. Moreover, they never had a teacher for geography. So now she is worried whether she will be able to continue her studies or not.

She is quite determined to do so. She has told her fiance they will have to wait for her to complete her studies. Since he only has a Form 5, the possibility of the engagement lasting seems remote even now.

So it is with great joy, when rather late, she is told that she has a place in ITM (Institute Technology Malaysia) to do Library Science.

The news comes when she had quite given up hope. Her family quickly organises a doa selamat to wish her well in this new phase of her life.

For a kampung that used to hide its girls in the toilet when the education officers came around, this is progress indeed. There has been a historical distrust of education in the kampung. Early in this century, the Simunuls came in a great wave from Simunul Island to settle in Bokara for they wanted to escape the compulsory education the Americans had instituted. They felt it would threaten their religion and morals.

So they fled their island and came to North Borneo where there was freedom from education. If they were looking for a place where their children would not have to go to school, British North Borneo as Sabah was then known, fitted the requirements. The first Malay school here was only established in 1940. Boys from Bokara were among its first batch of students. But even they did not stay to complete primary school. As Hj Ahmad, the timber contractor, says, "When

a boy reached Standard 3, his parents would say, 'He is big enough to work now.' So he would get out of school and go to work."

Today nearly all the children go to school, even though few will complete school or go any further. But even in the case of sheer numbers it is not an unqualified success story. There is a boy in the kampung who does not go to school for he kept running away from his Standard I class. So he was allowed to stay home.

There is another girl who is 17 now who did not go to school because her parents had lost her birth certificate and did not get a copy. Another girl was kept at home because she was needed to help at home. She is twelve now. For her, the system has not worked at all.

The headhunter scare

Si Wira comes home from school one day with a list of car registration numbers. He says his teachers told all the children to be careful of these cars for they belong to the headhunters.

When I hear this, I note it down for it involves headhunters. Here is something with the expected Borneo flavour about it. Soon, it is to develop into a full scale panic.

It starts with the denial of headhunter rumours in Kota Kinabalu by the Police Commissioner. There are rumours in Kota Kinabalu that headhunters have been roaming the streets hunting the heads of young children, especially girls.

To discount the rumours, the Police Commissioner says that the police have investigated a report of headless bodies in sacks. The sacks were found but when the police opened them, they found chicken legs in one and buffalo skin in the other.

The denial of the presence of headhunters in Kota Kinabalu only seems to convince everybody here that the headhunters are now travelling down to Sandakan. People in the kampung start talking of headhunters.

The Chinese agent who comes to sell goods to the village shops tells some women that a story of headhunters has appeared in the Chinese newspaper.

Si Sai hears it and says that according to the story, a man and his wife were on their way to the hospital at Beloran, a small township west of Sandakan, as she was about to deliver. The drive there was for some reason very difficult.

The husband left his wife by a tree and went on to get the ambulance. In the meantime a white car passed by. Then the story gets vague. But the important point is that when the husband came back, he saw his headless wife walking towards him. The headhunters had taken the baby and the wife's head.

Si Sai says they use human heads to strengthen the foundation of multi-storey buildings. Otherwise, they would fall down. Now that these multi-storey buildings are becoming

common, the demand for heads has gone up. It is said they offer as much as $1,000 a head.

"The heads they prefer," she says, "are the Muslim ones. This is because Muslims have a lot of oil and their blood is sweet. Pregnant Muslim women, especially at six months are the best, the tastiest, for their skin exudes the most oil. They don't take Chinese heads for everybody knows the Chinese have bitter blood."

Looking at me, she adds, "Indian ones can do."

A headhunter according to tradition can belong to any community. "He can even be a European," says Si Sai. "Nobody from Bokara has ever been a victim of a headhunter, but 50 years ago," she says, "my mother said there was a man from Bokara who used to organise the taking of heads. He did not take heads himself.

"It happened when my mother was a maiden. There was a Sulu man, called Tangkuyong. He lived here. He would tell all the village people, 'Keep your children indoors after 6 pm. We are going to walk tonight.'

"One day there was a person from Simunul Island selling sugarcane, tapioca and bananas. Tangkuyong's wife wanted to buy something and went to get the money. She had kept it in the mat.

"When she unrolled the mat, instead of money, there were blood clots. 'Where is the money?' she asked her husband. 'In the matress,' he replied. But in the mattress also there was only blood.

" 'See in the chest,' he said. She opened it and there was no money. Only blood.

"This was God's sign that Tangkuyong was doing something wrong. Everybody in Bokara came to see the blood. He cried and cried. He repented having taken many lives and swore that he would never do it again."

After telling the story, Si Sai says the main difference between the older headhunters and the present ones is that today they use gas to disable the person before taking the head. For a man, it is just the head that is taken. For a woman, the head and a diagonal section across one breast is taken.

In the 1950's there was a similar headhunter scare. It was

responsible for Si Sai being taken out of school after only two years of schooling. To go to school, the children had to cross an empty stretch of track. Her parents were afraid of headhunters so preferred to take her out of school.

Listening to Si Sai speak of headhunters, I have to shake myself to remind myself we are not in the early years of Sandakan's history. Then the heads were supposedly used to strengthen bridges. Now it is high rise buildings.

This panic is infectious. The kampung road is nearly deserted at night. Kampung shops close early. The usual farewell greeting "Go well," has changed to "Be careful of the headhunters." Nobody is laughing it off any more.

"It is headhunter season," they say.

A woman in the neighbouring kampung, people say, was bruised when she threw herself out of a moving taxi. She thought the taxi driver was about to gas her prior to taking her head. Taxi drivers are prime suspects. Emmong tells me not to take taxis alone any more.

Could there be headhunters in the kampung itself? People have started wondering. A teacher who was suspended has been acting strangely of late, some note. And what about the man who lives three catwalks down?

At a doa selamat there is a big commotion for someone said that one woman's son-in-law walked in the evening looking for heads.

Nothing comes of this but for some time two policemen patrol the area. They in turn are suspected of being headhunters.

Then people start "sighting" headhunters in different parts of the kampung. Si Hitam of Emmong's kin group says she saw them walking under the house. "They were bald, masked and had the long knives, the Sulu ones called *barung*," she says.

Not everybody believes in the existence of headhunters. Hjh Siti Rahkmah says, "The families at the back, one day shouted, 'Headhunters, headhunters.' It was probably only a dog."

Si Ainon says, "I don't know if there are any headhunters or not. I haven't seen any as yet. But I am afraid they might be under my bed."

When word gets around that headhunters have been possibly sighted, young bachelors prepare sharpened bamboo stakes and take up position in front of the houses of the girls who matter to them.

This works out well for the girls keep awake serving them coffee and cakes. Si Latipa's fiance stands guard till 5 in the morning. Women around comment, "It is a new type of dating."

Si Malcom now has a six foot long spear made specially so that he can defend his family against any possible threat from below the floor. Seeing it in the house prompts me to move my heavy index card file over the plank that covers the hole in the floor of my room.

The fish jaw in the corner, the one Si Mariam gave me, suddenly has become quite a comfortable thing to have around. When I go home, I find myself telling my children to be extra careful of any strangers and not to get into anybody's car.

It is silly to admit that the headhunter panic has got to me. But living over the sea, it is as if you are vulnerable both from below and above. If somebody wants to attack, it would be just as easy to do so through the slats in the floor as from the open skylights above.

The situation is serious enough for an official meeting to take place between the headmen of the kampungs of Sandakan and the Officer Commanding Police Division, Sandakan (OCPD).

A notice goes up on all the shops saying that the OCPD has said there are no headhunters. What is more effective is that it also says that strong action will be taken against anybody spreading rumours and disturbing the peace.

And so the headhunter scare fades away. It lasted nearly five weeks.

A folk tale

One thing an anthropologist does is collect folk tales and legends, supposedly as he sits with the people in the evening. In Bokara, there was a time when people in the kampung would gather round in the evening for a session of music or storytelling. Now if the family comes together in the evening, it is for television.

The story they follow is that of *Peyton Place*. Si Ara stops me in the middle of the road and asks me, "Whose baby is it?" Then we are in the middle of the incredible twists and turns of the story.

Nobody really knows whose baby it is anyway for sometime. The story of Si Betty, as she is called in the kampung, is fascinating, though for Si Ara it is no more than a series of moving pictures.

She interrupts her niece occasionally to ask what is happening. "I like stories of families," she says, "but half the time, I don't know what is happening. It is at times like this, I wish I had gone to school."

Si Ara is in the minority in that she does not like *Combat*. "All this bang bang, I find most dull. I always fall asleep," she says. But of all the English programmes, it is *Combat* which is the overall favourite. It has fixed forever the image of America.

Any reference to America and the people say "*Combat*". When I tell Si Tina's mother that one of my sisters is in New York, she says, "Yes, Combat."

The word has become part of the Simunul vocabulary. If you want to say that a husband and wife are fighting, the really pithy way to say it is that they *megcombat*. It has acquired some other connotations along the way which are not so openly expressed, such as heavy petting.

After this series is taken off the air, it is Steve and Jamie of the *Six Million Dollar Man* who are the most popular. Watching this programme is particularly riotous with the audience shrieking as danger threatens Jamie. They more or less run with her.

For a while Mark of *Man from Atlantis* takes over, but he soon fizzles out. Detective programmes like *Rockford Files* and *Barnaby Jones* are a total loss. And *Family* is not faring any better. Too much talk.

The high point of the week is the Friday night movie. Before the movie starts, preparations are made. Dinner is finished well in time. Then coffee is made and bread and coconut jam put on the table.

Si Malcom sits on the chair. Si Wira, Si Suraya and Si Tony squat on the floor. It is Si Tony's job to work the tape recorder especially when there is a Malay historical film on. Si Malcolm is particularly partial to them. So when one is on, on Friday, the next week, we hear its dialogue and songs in the house, over and over again.

Next in popularity and equally a family occasion are the Malay entertainment shows with the pop stars. Even when the star is still a tiny blob on the screen, the children scream out the name. Pictures of them adorn the walls. That is one reason why magazines like Varia Pop are popular for they give double page pictures of these stars. It is because of them that Kuala Lumpur acquires an added fascination for it is the home of popular TV stars. A girl asks me, "When you go to Kuala Lumpur, will you be seeing Sharifah Aini?"

These song programmes are also taped. Only when a Tamil or Chinese song comes on, does the tape recorder get switched off with ill-masked disgust. A total waste of time, from the kampung point of view. These song programmes are important also for the dresses the stars wear. This is why at the parties in the kampung, some of the girls come dressed in garish outfits complete with headbands, rose on the shoulder and laced up stilleto heel boots.

When the first colour television broadcast takes place towards the end of December '78, Si Sai broaches the topic of a colour television set. One can be got in Sandakan for nearly $4,000. Hjh Habibah already has one, the largest that could be got. Another house has a portable set.

Si Sai says that the shops are offering them on instalments. Si Malcom hears the price and says, "Expensive." The matter is closed.

Si Sai in fact is not particularly enamoured of television.

She has no great favourites other than the ones the whole family likes. Since most of them are in English, they don't make sense to her. And she doesn't keep on asking her children to interpret them.

When Peyton Place was on, she watched a few of the segments. Then she gave up. But she often watches the programme in the evening, not because she wants to watch, but because this is TV time. Often she does the hemming or sews the buttons on something she is stitching.

I often sit with her. We don't talk much, but it is a nice companionable time. I find I am missing my children more than I want to admit. It must be this which is driving me to start collecting patches for their patchwork sheets.

Both my sons have patchwork sheets of their own. I made them when they were three and four years old. Now they are outgrowing them, but will not sleep without them. So when I look at Si Sai's box of scraps, it is natural to think of making new sheets.

I do it methodically this time, cutting the cloth with a cardboard square underneath. It is interesting to see the kind of scraps there are. Some of them are richly embroidered. Others are threaded with gold. The scraps from the men's shirts are plain and silky. Those from the women's clothes tend to be a bit loud and ostentatious. But the colours are bright and mix well together. And it is a nice way of being with the family.

When Si Sai and her family want to do something special, they go to a film in town. It is a particularly exciting time for Si Kitu, as this is the one time she goes to town. When she dresses up, she looks quite charming. I don't go to the films with them. It would be too much of an intrusion. And how would I be able to manage the question of the tickets and the dinner afterwards in the Muslim restaurant. So I generally stay back.

There are two cinema theatres in town. One shows more Hindi and Malay films than the other. The first choice in the kampung is a Hindi film, next the Indonesian and then the Malay. Since a film lasts a day or two at the theatres, the choice during the week is great.

It is the music they love in the Hindi films. You hear it

all over the kampung in the mornings, in the afternoons, at night. It is played on ordinary days and on days of celebration.

If the songs are good and there is a lot of dancing and fighting, it is common for people in the kampung to see the same film, two days running. Emmong still remembers that when she had to spend a few nights in Karachi on her way back from Mecca, she was delighted to hear Hindi songs all day on the radio.

Hindi films are popular for they conform to the Simunul idea of beauty. Girls should be fair, tall, have sharp features, long hair and a sharp nose. Men should be tall, broad, fair and with curly hair.

They also like the films for the clothes and decor. "The houses are beautiful," says Si Mariam's husband. "Spiral staircases, big carpets, chandeliers. They know how to decorate the houses."

A film like *Julie* which centres round caste and religious difficulties seems too foreign for it deals with social institutions they know nothing about. Hjh Habibah complains, "There is too much kissing in the film. I was embarrassed seeing it with my husband."

For Si Sophia, it is a total flop as her husband went to sleep. So there was nobody to read her the subtitles.

Indian film stars are household words in the kampung. Talk of Shashi Kapoor, Hema Malini, Rishi Kapoor and Helen, and everybody knows what you are talking about. Every house has one of the calendars that Indian Muslim shops here distribute to their customers. When Si Sai brings home one such calendar depicting Helen in a seductive pose, Si Wira fairly jumps with joy.

Despite the fact that it is television and films that provide the evening entertainment, I do not think my fieldwork is complete till I have a few folk tales. The problem is nobody seems to know any.

The first time I ask around, there is a boatmaker, a refugee from the Philippines, who says he will tell me a folk tale if I will pay him for it. The thought of paying him to tell it makes it seem second rate, apart from the fact that it would set an expensive precedent. What kind of a folk tale will it

be if I have to pay for it?

Finally Hjh Habibah says she remembers a folk tale her grandmother used to tell her. So we sit on the catwalk. I put my tape recorder on in a professional way. She tells me the story of a king who had seven wives.

It is a nice story, a mixture of Sleeping Beauty, King Arthur and quite a bit else.

The thing about these folk tales is often they go on and on. Si Malcom later tells me two of his favourites. When he is telling me the stories, everybody else in the house listens with great interest for they are obviously new to them. They had heard them when they were small but had forgotten.

Each story we hear twice. For when Si Malcom says, "This is the end," the tape has to be played again so we can listen to him telling it once again.

A house of merbau

Panglima Matajang, the village headman has built himself a house to outshine all the other houses in the kampung. Here, if you dream of a beautiful house, you dream of a house of *merbau*.

Merbau is a wood you want to touch and savour. It has a fine grain and takes a high polish. It is also one of the longest lasting woods. And one of the most expensive. When people in the kampung speak of it, their voices go reverent. They tell you that the first mosque built in the Southern Philippines on Simunul Island in 1380, is made of merbau. And it still stands, so the refugees from the Philippines say.

In all ways this house is exceptional. First the very decision to build in the kampung when he wanted to spend over $100,000, is one which is avidly discussed. Why did he not build in town? A concrete house in town is the ultimate status symbol. It announces to the whole world that you have made it.

The houses of those who have moved out of the kampung are therefore ostentatious to the extreme. They have to be big enough to hold the regular functions without which the Simunul identity is difficult to hold on to. And they have to be spectacular enough to impress.

So it is that one of the kampung houses in town has a wall of fancy Italian tiles and chandeliers. Another has a goldfish pool, even though it is still empty.

The theory put forward as to why Panglima Matajang did not build in town is that by virtue of his position as headman of the kampung, he has to stay in the kampung. And then there is some wry comment that building a big house in town will invite the attention of the Income Tax men.

But for the sheer extravagance and luxury of it, the house is difficult to match. There are 138 lights. Si Sai's house has a tube light in the living room and a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling of the kitchen. This house has shell chandeliers, brass lamps, crystal goblets, lamps inset in the

ceiling, lamps hanging from formica canopies in the ceiling.

Even more spectacular than all these lamps is the bathroom. Here there is no drum in the verandah or a hole in the floor of a lean-to. This house has patterned tiles on the walls of the bathroom, a coloured tub complete with a shower and a modern flush toilet. The toilet still leads directly to the sea, but the trimmings are all there. Some in the kampung believe there is a telephone in the bathroom. There isn't, but it fits in with the fantasy like image that the house creates.

Whereas my room has a window that has to be propped open, this house has huge landscape windows of tinted glass. And protecting each window are elaborate wrought iron grilles. Each grille has the name of the lady of the house, "Welma" with an "M" (for Matajang) underneath it.

The decor of the house strains at modernity. Si Welma ordered the wall paper specially from Hong Kong. She wanted it to approximate that of a popular Japanese restaurant in town. No ice-blue paint here.

Where there is no wall paper, there is teak and *damar minyak* panelling. Both are lovely woods, the damar minyak especially which has a golden translucence about it.

The curtains, or in this case, you should call them the drapes, are the kind you have in hotels. You pull one pair of strings and the transparent white curtains come out. You pull another and the heavier drapes screen the house. All this is most unusual for the kampung, where most often the curtaining is net and is changed every year for Hari Raya.

The living room set comes complete with a black glass coffee table. A colour television and hi-fi set are almost overlooked in the richness of the decor.

This house has gone so modern that it can afford to go traditional. There is a sideboard displaying brass vases and plates. The oval dining table is of merbau and carved.

The merbau doors are carved in the traditional floral and geometric patterns by craftsmen from Zamboanga and Simunul Island. There are strips of gilded carving running along the length of the walls. An antique carved bed

belonging to Si Welma's grandfather has been restored and is in the bedroom.

But the one fact that supersedes all this luxury and glutted ostentation, is that the house is made of merbau. The floors shine and the walls stand solid in the sun over the water.

What is so amazing about the modernity of this house is that just thirty years ago, most of the houses in this kampung were made of nipah palm. The young leaves of the nipah palm were sewn together to form the walls of the house. The older leaves of the nipah palm formed the roof. The floor and the connecting catwalks were of split *nibong*, another kind of palm.

A bare sixteen years ago, the kampung got electricity. And now there is a house with 138 lights. Glass on the windows only appeared in 1971. Now we have sliding tinted glass windows with personalised window grilles. It is as if the house of merbau in itself stands for the changes that have taken place in the kampung.

I used to go and see the house while it was being built. The work was being supervised by a refugee cousin of Panglima Matajang. The house was a long time in the making.

When I first went to see the headman about coming to live in the kampung, he saw me in his new house. We had to bend down to avoid the scaffolding, for the house was then just a floor and some walls. But the headman's family liked to spend their evenings there for the house was very windy. Being far out to sea, it enjoyed both the view and the breeze.

However, nobody from the kampung would go and see the house being built. They talked of it avidly in the village shops. But to go and look at it uninvited would be uncouth.

The talk was not only how grand and ostentatious the house is going to be, how big, but the different way in which this house is being built. Pa Udin is particularly involved in these innovations so he takes me to the site to show me what he has done.

In his time Pa Udin was quite a builder. He built the first two storey house in the kampung. "The second storey used to shake a lot in the wind," he says. But when the mosque

moved down from the hill to its present site, he could not have the two storey house any more as no house can stand higher than the mosque.

The problem, he tells me, with the houses in the kampung is that after some time, you need to change the piling. This is because a borer called *tembelluk* eats up the wood, leaving it pock marked. After five years, there are more holes than wood. Then the only way out is to put in another pole to bolster the older one.

So what Pa Udin has done for Panglima Matajang's house is to enclose the belian piling of the house with cement up to a distance of five feet. He argues that the borers do not usually go more than two feet above the water. So since the cement covering is above that level, there is no reason why the house should not last forever.

Nobody contradicts him. But nobody has followed him either. Wait ten years and see if it really works.

To keep with the high status implications of the house, all the parts of the house have been completed at once. This in kampung terms is like paying for a house completely in cash. Houses here are built on the instalment plan. Instead of paying for the house slowly, you build it slowly.

When there is money, you buy the belian logs. Pile them up by the road. Then the wood for the framework of the house is bought. The house next door, that of Sarif Abdullah has the *kapur* wood for the framework arranged so that the wood is continually aired. Then you buy the metal for the roof. At this stage you can start building.

Sometimes people move in when the house is roofed, even though the walls only have single panelling and the panelling inside has not been completed. As the money comes, other parts of the house are added on. This is why a house may have a well finished living room, while the kitchen is still not complete. But Panglima Matajang's house, when they move in, is complete not only structurally but in terms of decor.

Si Welma has to wait a few weeks after the house is complete, to move in. The month is not good. Finally before Raya they move in and throw the house open for public inspection by having a circumcision. Turtle eggs are served

and the widows get $10 each and a sarung.

People have talked so long about the house that when they finally see it from the inside, the very richness of it smothers comment. And nobody asks Panglima Matajang, "How much did it cost?"

The fights

When I first arrived in Bokara, I envied the women their closeness with their families. They only had to go to the next house to find their support systems in their mothers, sisters and daughters.

I envied them that, for even after 11 years in Malaysia, I missed my family so. I missed being able to share the small ordinary things of my life. And any deeper unhappiness, I would hesitate to communicate to them. Maybe, I would tell myself, it is just a phase. It will pass. A letter would make it real for them for a long time. And so out of caring I would not share and was alone.

The same thing went for my greatest joys. When Aman my first son, was born, it was like an ache within to want to show my mother my first born, to see her eyes glow in a shared happiness. And because I longed for it, I saw the mother-daughter togetherness of the Simunuls as particularly heart warming.

Sometimes when I visit Emmong's kin group, I feel their lives are emotionally secure in a way that mine is not. Because of this, it is inviting to submerge myself into kampung life. No talk of the nature of the cognatic kinship system, the composition of the kinship cluster, can convey this sense of closeness.

One day this sense of caring particularly impresses me. In the morning, I visit Si Hitam who has just had a child. She has come back from hospital and everybody from her kin cluster goes to see her child and wish them well. As another person comes in, more coffee and biscuits are served.

After this, I go to see Emmong's stepmother. She must be over 90 and is ill of old age. Round her are her granddaughters and great granddaughters. Si Sophia has prepared a fish soup. Her grandmother cannot have more than a spoonful. Every now and then, somebody presses her limbs. Then the conversation continues along familiar lines — land, timber, gold, weddings.

That day, I feel there is a protective circle of kinship round

everybody here, one that sees them through all stages of life from birth to death. This perception remains true even after having lived for months in the kampung. But what also is as real are the fights that this closeness engenders.

While having coffee in Emmong's house, suddenly there is an eruption of noise from Si Hitam's house. There is screaming and banging. Children crying. "A fight," says Emmong. "Come, come, there is a fight."

In an instant all of us run across the wooden catwalk to Si Hitam's house which is the last house over the sea.

Children are crying and sobbing in a pathetic little group outside the house. Inside, in the kitchen, there are people shouting, weeping and gesturing. Emmong goes right into the middle of it all. She leads Si Hitam's father to the next room. Smoothening his shoulders, she calms him down. Having deposited him safely away, she goes back to break up the little knot of people in the centre.

With her headdress on, she stands in an authoritative stance, listening first to one, then another. The fight is about land. Only this can be gathered for the moment. Everybody talks all at once. Loud voices go back and forth. Each participant has her say.

Si Hitam's father comes out of his room and gives his version. He is again led away. Slowly the men withdraw to the outskirts of the scene. It leaves the women still emotionally worked up with other kinsfolk sympathetically listening on and the two older aunts of the kin cluster cooling things down.

The feeling of sudden catastrophe has gone. As if sensing the lightening of tension, the children have a field day. The crying and the wailing has stopped. For them, it is a gala get together as all the immediate cousins are there. They run in and out of the house, through the kitchen and the living room.

The argument is now taking place against a background of children shouting. Two are playing the harmonica, one is banging marbles on the floor. At one point Emmong has to run after them with a broom. They know they can outrun her and just move a little distance away.

In the kitchen, emotions have cooled down a bit. Not that

anything has been settled, but the people in the household are emotionally spent. The elders have left. Only the very closely related women remain.

Again and again the events leading up to the fight are recounted, first to one cousin then another. When Si Sophia arrives from her house, the whole story is told again.

At least one version of the story is that Si Hitam's family had together applied for land from the government under the smallholders' scheme. Her brother was the chairman as it were, and had applied for a block of land with each of his relatives entitled to 15 acres each.

When this land was sold, they got something like $20,000 for it. Now the problem was that the sister and the step-mother were accusing him of spending that money on himself for a trip to Indonesia. So the outcry. The brother of course did not accept this version of the story. He in an angry gesture thrusts a letter at me. I don't know what to do with it. Already embarrassed at having to witness a family fight, I shrink away from closer involvement. Hjh Halipah takes the letter, looks it over and gives it back.

The people who came running to Si Hitam's house are close kin. The rest of the kampung stayed away. It is not that the news has not spread. Si Sophia came from four catwalks away. The others will get the details later at their houses and village shops.

The atmosphere lightens. It has become more like a social gathering. The older children play a game to see who can overturn the cards on the floor by clapping near them. The younger ones throw a piece of mat around and roll on the floor.

The mood has changed. The same women who were crying and shouting in anger half an hour ago, now act out a charade of how the fight started. They imitate the different participants and the group bursts out laughing.

By this time, coffee and bread and jam are served. There is still an undercurrent of resentment. But the conversation turns to other things. Hjh Habibah tells how you can get fresh sugarcane juice in Kota Kinabalu. Another wonders whether the pressing of the sugarcane introduces a trace of

bitterness in the juice. As fresh sugarcane juice has not reached Sandakan, this is something to be thoroughly discussed.

It is getting to be time for the evening prayer. Pa Butu, Si Hitam's grandfather rolls out his mat for prayer. The group disperses.

Si Hitam's is not the only fight which involves land. It figures in a direct or indirect way in a number of them. The background to this is that under the smallholders' scheme where the state government gives land to the landless, any person in the state who does not own land is entitled to apply for 15 acres of land for agricultural development. Since 15 acres is not considered much, there is a way you can legitimately apply for a large block of land.

The usual method is to get your relatives together, say 20 of them and ask them to apply for land with you as the chairman of the group. Then you stand to get 300 acres of land.

The common practice then is to sell the land. The chairman operates as if he alone owns the land. The others just go along and put their thumbprints on the document in the lawyer's office.

I once see a whole kin cluster collect by the road, waiting to go to the lawyer's office. Everyone appears quite delighted for the chairman will give each person who signs, $200. When I ask one of the older women whether she is happy with this or not, she says, "Sure I am. Here is $200 for nothing." She is not figuring on how much her 15 acres will bring for the chairman.

A younger woman though is aware of the illegality of it. "What can you do?" she shrugs. "He is my brother. If I report him, he gets caught, then all of us suffer. Land and money will go. Relationship remains."

The less philosophical approach to the question is that when this woman's husband wants to apply for land, all her relatives, including her brother, will sign. So it is really a question of 'You sign for me and I will sign for you.' It evens out in the long run. The conflict arises when the signatories get nothing as a consolation prize when the land is sold.

This is what happens when Si Suka, Emmong's sister's daughter, sells her land. She is to get $5,000 for it. Si Ainon who is Si Suka's niece once removed had gone along with her and signed. Now she is asking Si Suka for her consolation money.

Si Suka tells Si Ainon that when she had signed for Si Ainon's father (Si Suka's first cousin), he had not given her a cent. So now she does not have to give Si Ainon any money either.

It starts a slanging match. One thing leads to another. The next day Si Suka and Si Ainon's father have a fight. Si Suka says he beat her. Her side calls the police. Si Suka faints and lands up in my husband's place in town. It is there I catch up with the action, for I had gone back to see my boys that Sunday afternoon.

One version of the fight is that it all started after Hjh Ipoh's son's birthday party on Sunday. Si Mariam's son, the one who has been adopted by Si Sophia, was bathing at the spring. There, he fought with Si Ahmad. Si Ahmad is a Sulu and a cousin of Si Ainon's husband.

Si Ahmad apparently held the boy by the neck. Si Mariam's son, that is the one who has been adopted, came running to wake up Si Mariam's older son, Si Janis. Si Janis then went up to Si Ahmad, saying that if he wants to fight he should fight with someone his own size.

By this time, Si Mariam who was in her shop, shouted for people to come break up the fight. Si Janis fell down. He took off his belt and hit Si Ahmad with it, leaving a mark round his chest.

By this time, Si Ahmad's clan arrived. Si Mariam says, at that moment, her main concern was to make the boys shake hands and make up. The Sulu thirst for vengeance is well known. But Si Ahmad's mother did not want the boys to reconcile. So Si Mariam's husband said if they don't want to shake hands, let them both fight till one of them dies.

By this time, Si Ainon's husband arrived on the scene. He asked if anybody had helped the boys. Si Suka who happened to be passing by, said, "Both boys are of the same age. They fought it out."

Si Ainon's husband then threatened Si Suka saying that she

should not interfere for if she were a man, he would slap her and strangle her.

Si Ainon's father then appeared and slapped Si Suka. Si Suka's side called the police. The police arrived, found it was a family quarrel and went away. Then Si Suka fainted.

Si Sai who was watching all this from the porch of her house says that the fighting went on for some time outside their houses. According to her, the thing which made Si Ainon's father beat Si Suka was that in all the accusations that were flying, Si Suka said that Si Ainon's younger sister was too forward.

As far as Si Suka is concerned, she is enraged that her first cousin should take his son-in-law's side. "How could he beat me?" she asks. "I am of an age to have grandchildren." And among all the abuse that was hurled, the most biting was that if Si Suka dies, they won't even wrap her body in white cloth.

It doesn't stop there. The next day Si Ainon lets drop the bombshell that Si Suka had told Hjh Magha (Si Ainon's late mother's aunt) that Hj Kassim (Si Ainon's father's brother and first cousin of Si Suka) had killed nine people in the kampung with poison — including her mother.

Hjh Magha wisely, could not be found anywhere.

The immediate effect of all this is that Si Suka has blocked off the portion of the catwalk which leads to Si Ainon's house. She says she will sell the house and move away. Then she stops and says, "Why should I? I don't live in their house. I don't eat their food. So I am going to stay here till I die and my body is taken away."

The discord is spreading elsewhere. Si Mariam mutters that if it weren't for the shop, she would buy a farm in Lahad Datu, far to the east of Sandakan and live there.

The fight is by no means over. About six in the evening, there are sounds of banging chairs and shouts coming from Hj Kassim's house. Apparently, Hj Kassim's wife, Si Aida is fighting with Si Suka.

The fight has become very serious with allegations of poisoning and immorality. Now the kinsfolk are keeping away. They don't want to get sucked into the feuding. Even Emmong sits quietly at the back of Si Mariam's shop.

Every now and again, Si Suka is seen to be heading in the direction of the headman's house, carrying an umbrella. Finally in the evening, Si Suka, Hj Kassim and Si Ainon go to the headman's house. Hjh Magha is not to be found. People start talking that there are certain families who have a reputation for fighting.

On the other side of the kampung, they disparagingly say, "When we fight, we fight behind closed doors. On that side, when they fight, they fight out on the street and call the police."

Nobody accompanies the three to the headman's house. There is a quiet in the kampung after all that shouting and screaming. The general reaction is to stay out of it all. Hjh Ipoh and Si Mariam, both sisters of Hj Kassim, first cousins to Si Suka and aunts of Si Ainon — they do not go to the headman's house. Si Mariam stands behind Hjh Jariah's shop in the dark to see if there is any action. Everbody feels they must not get involved. They are afraid there will be a fight.

Though Si Ainon has involved her mother's kin group, they consistently refuse to allow themselves to be dragged into it. Even Emmong who perhaps has the most authority to go and see the dispute settled, does not go. All she says is that this is bad trouble and Si Ainon is right in the centre of it.

I on my part am quite willing to follow Emmong. But when she retires from the scene, I am not brave enough to go through it alone, especially when even Si Mariam is nowhere near the headman's house.

Later, I wonder whether I have been careless in my field-work. For when the fight is being settled, I am seeing *Doctor's Hospital* on TV and Si Sai is stitching clothes. Only when Si Malcom comes and tells us it is all settled do we know what happened.

He is in a good position to know for it was after the late evening prayer and the men were still around the mosque. Nothing was settled in the headman's house. They came to the mosque where Hj Kassim took an oath that he had nothing to do with Si Ainon's mother's death. But Si Suka and Si Ainon have still not made up. Si Ainon would not ask for forgiveness. She is probably still angry over

Si Suka's allegations against her sister.

It is not quite the best way for things to have been worked out is the general comment. Take an oath like this and the atmosphere becomes ritually hot. It can result in misfortune in more than one way.

The day after the fight in Si Mariam's shop, the mood is relaxed. Hjh Ipoh relates with relish previous fights she saw as a child. There was the time Pa Udin and Si Tina's father fought over bamboos, she says.

Getting up from the wooden bench, she takes up the stance of *silat*, the Malay art of self defence. With one prance, she says, "Be prepared." With another she shouts in the silat style, "The first step."

While everybody is laughing over this, she tells how her husband Hj Aliong had a fight with Hjh Jariah's husband. This was before she was married to him. Hjh Jariah's husband was angry with him for he thought Hj Aliong was playing around with his daughter.

So one day he confronted Hj Aliong. As Hjh Jariah's husband readied himself to fight, his teeth fell down. He picked them up and found his mouth was full of mud. He could not speak properly. So he said, "Wait."

By this time everyone was laughing so much, there was no fight.

No doubt the Si Suka – Si Ainon fight will also get its comic epilogue. Four days after the slapping incident, Si Suka's board which was blocking off her catwalk, comes off.

The adoption

One thing a fight does is to spill a family's secrets out in the open. Among the things that Si Ainon shouted at Si Suka during their fight is that Si Suka's daughter is Chinese and adopted.

Though Si Suka's daughter's features are distinctively Chinese and the fact of her adoption is an open secret, Si Suka has been very particular about never telling her daughter that.

Adoption, in one way or another, figures in a number of fights. Si Mariam and Si Sophia fought over Si Mariam's son who is adopted by Si Sophia. Si Mariam thought her sister ignored the boy and that his adopted sisters ill treated him. One day, Si Sophia hit the boy in front of Si Mariam's husband.

Si Mariam's husband was very angry and the boy stayed with them for a long time. The sisters did not speak to each other. Si Mariam had the boy circumcised quietly in her house. Finally, the boy went back to Si Sophia's house, but now he calls Si Mariam, 'Mama' and calls Si Sophia, 'Iak', her kampung nickname.

"When I was pregnant," say Si Mariam, "Si Sophia was a divorcee. She had only two girls. I had two girls and a boy. I was feeling ill during my pregnancy. Just in fun I told her that if it is a boy, I will give him to her. I thought it was just a joke, so I did not tell my husband.

"When I delivered, it was a boy. The next day, Si Sophia and my mother came for the baby. But my husband did not want to give him, so they went away. The next day my mother came again and I did not want to hurt her for I love her very much. So I told her to take the baby.

"When my husband came back, he cried. But he was also afraid of me. My daughters came back and cried. They wanted to take back the baby. But I had given him to her. It would be bad for the baby to take him back.

"The boy grew up with Si Sophia. Then she married her husband again after seven years. Now they have a son. My

son, the one she adopted, was then told by Si Sophia's daughters that he is adopted, and that I am his real mother.

"So now whenever Si Sophia scolds him, he comes here. Before that, he did not know why I used to be so good to him. It is not that she does not love him. But she does not care too much about him. If he is out, she does not ask him whether he has eaten or not. I give him food everyday.

"Now he calls me Mama. Before, he used to call me 'Eh'. Then my children told him to call me 'Mama'. But Sophia does not like it and is angry with him. But I must say, I like it and try and influence him my way."

Si Sophia's version of the adoption is different. She says, "I adopted the boy when I was divorced. Si Mariam is busy with her shop and her husband did not want the child. So when the child's cord was cut, I took him. An agreement had been made between us. The child had to be given, or they say the child will die, get ill or go mad.

"The only difference between this child and my own, is that if I beat my own, they stay at home. If I beat my adopted child, he runs off sobbing to Si Mariam. He likes to stay there and comes back only when fetched. When I tell Si Mariam to send him back, she says, sure she will send him back for she has read the doa selamat marking the adoption.

"My husband admittedly does not like him very much. When we were reconciled, he said since I had adopted him, it was okay. But then we had a son of our own. So now if my adopted son does something wrong, I try and cover up for him. But the other children tell."

Where this boy will ultimately stay will depend on him. Si Mariam says she is not going to take him back. But she has not handed over his birth certificate to Si Sophia either. So for him it is a mid-way existence.

It is not uncommon for this to happen to children who have been adopted from kin, either because the woman did not have a girl or boy or no children at all. Then after the adoption if the woman has a child of her own and the lack which the adopted child was to fill is no longer there, the adopted child becomes less valued.

There is little chance of the child not finding out that he is adopted and that his real mother is nearby, in such cases.

Si Ping also has an adopted boy, the son of her uncle. When she adopted him, she did not have any children. Now that she has two children of her own, the adopted son alternates between his adopted home and the real one.

Si Mariam's sister, Hjh Maimunah also has adopted a girl, Si Fauziah. For long, Hjh Maimunah did not have a daughter, so she adopted the daughter of a cousin. In Si Fauziah's case, I don't know whether she knows who her real mother is, but her real mother has enough problems of her own, and does not want Si Fauziah back. Or so it is said in the village shop.

In the meantime, Hjh Maimunah had daughters of her own. There is a distinct difference in the way Si Fauziah is treated and her other children.

It is a bit of the Cinderella situation. If there is water to be brought from the spring, Si Fauziah brings it. If there are clothes to be washed, she washes them. Hjh Maimunah does not send her to school, for she says she needs someone to help in the house.

One day Si Fauziah runs away. She goes to Si Bunga's house. This is her adopted brother's wife's mother's house. She stays there for four days. On the third day, Si Ara goes to Si Bunga's house to invite Si Bunga to a function.

As soon as Si Fauziah sees her coming, she runs away. On the fourth night, Si Ara goes back to Si Bunga's house through the kitchen. Si Fauziah locks herself in her room. Si Bunga tells Si Ara, "Never mind. It is not as if we are strangers. We are related."

Si Ara tells Si Fauziah if she doesn't come home, she will come back with six boys. They will tie her and drag her away. People from the shops will see her and Si Fauziah will be ashamed. When she hears this, Si Fauziah tells Si Ara to go on ahead and she will follow.

So Si Ara walks ahead and Si Fauziah follows three minutes after. She goes in through the kitchen door and starts washing the clothes.

Before one jumps to the conclusion that running away is a reaction to a situation of extreme cruelty, it is useful to note that it is not unusual for a child to run away. It is quite the done thing and there are ways to handle it.

Hj Maimunah's elder son ran away to Hjh Habibah's house next door for quite a long time. In Si Sai's house for over a month, there is a boy of 14 or so. He is the son of her first cousin and has run away from his home in a village, across the Bay. He says his father is always after him for not going to school. It is no big problem. The boy will stay in Si Sai's place till someone from home comes and gets him.

Adoption is an accepted part of Simunul society. There is no big fuss made over it. When Hjh Habibah went for the Haj, she left her youngest daughter with Si Suka. Si Suka now treats the girl as if she has semi-adopted her. And even the girl sees Si Suka's house as a second home.

Si Kitu has a similar relationship with an aunt in Pukul, a kampung nearby. It is as if looking after a child gives you some de facto rights on the child at least on a temporary basis.

What I find difficult to understand is how a woman can so easily part with her child. There are cases in the kampung where like Si Mariam, a sister has given her child to another sister, an aunt has given a child to a niece. I myself could never contemplate doing this. How could they?

Si Asniya, the Imam's wife has a daughter who is adopted by her husband's sister. Si Asniya says, "When I was in hospital giving birth to my daughter, my mother-in-law asked my husband for the child. He kept quiet and did not say anything.

"When I came home the next morning, my husband's sister came and took the child away. She did not say anything. I did not like it at all. But my mother-in-law said, 'They are kin, not strangers.' My eldest son was very upset about it all. But my sister-in-law who had taken the child, took her away to Tawau. They came back only when the child was able to crawl.

"Anyway, the girl's birth certificate says she is the daughter of my husband. He was not willing for the name on the birth certificate to be changed. So when she grows big, she will 'naturally' return to her own house."

Si Asniya's daughter, the one who has been adopted, lives on the next catwalk. She comes with her bicycle to play in

the house. When I ask Si Asniya why she allowed her daughter to be taken, she says it was pity for her sister-in-law as she had no children. Si Asniya has many. And then it is kinship too.

Perhaps what helps is that Si Asniya was adopted too. Her adoptive mother took her, for before that, 13 of her natural born children died. So she adopted Si Asniya. After that the rest of her children lived. It seemed to break the cycle of misfortune.

When a woman wants to adopt a child and there are no children of kin available, then the usual method is to adopt a Chinese girl. Never a Chinese boy. This Chinese girl is then brought up as a Muslim and a Simunul and finds no difficulty getting married into Simunul society. Her Chinese origin is not held against her.

If the women here seem to give up their children with greater generosity than is noted elsewhere, they also take in children with the same apparent ease.

Children who have lost their parents are assimilated in the house of kin. They are practically adopted and continue the relationship the rest of their lives. It extends to non-kin also. During the Japanese Occupation, six Chinese girls were adopted because they were found abandoned.

Hjh Siti Rahkmah adopted one such girl. She is Hjh Afsa, now married to Hj Ahmad, the timber contractor. With her the problem was that when she was adopted, she was ten years old. Hjh Siti Rahkmah at the time had no children.

Hjh Afsa says, "I had a sister too. She was adopted by Hjh Magha (Si Ainon's aunt). But my sister, she was younger than me. She died later. There were a lot of spirits in Bokara before.

"People in the kampung would never let the two of us meet in case we spoke Hokkien with each other and planned to run away. It was a few years before I felt free enough to speak Simunul.

"My people as far as I know are all dead. I hear that they had to run for their lives during the Japanese Occupation. I still remember some Hokkien though I cannot speak it.

"There was no problem my being Chinese as far as marriage was concerned. I was 21 or 22 when I got married.

As long as you are Muslim, the community does not matter."

Panglima Matajang has three adopted children. They belong to his wife's kin group. Hjh Jariah who is Panglima Matajang's sister, does not approve. The basic concern here is that now all the wealth will go outside the family. She says he should have talked it over with his brothers and sisters.

"If a person does not have wealth, it does not matter," she says. "But if he has property and keeps on adopting, it is no good. An adopted child can cheat you. He can run away. You look after him, see him grow up. When he grows up, he runs away."

Sanya

Sanya (Sabah National Youth Association) has been inactive for more than two years. Nobody anticipated it would lead to the biggest fight of the year in the village. Whenever people in the village talk of Sanya, it is because of an empty chicken coop on the hill.

Sanya was given a few hundred chicks to raise. The sale of eggs and multiplying chickens was going to spell prosperity for its members. It would also help achieve the aims of the organization — the moral upliftment of the youth and raising their standard of living. Instead, all the chickens died and the project remained an embarrassment.

Now two and a half years later, Sanya is holding its annual meeting to elect the office bearers. Matters are tense for there are two candidates for the post of President. One is Si Nahallan. He is married to Si Malcom's first cousin, though his political qualification is that his step-brother is active in Berjaya politics. He is being opposed by Si Hamdan who is Hjh Jariah's son and the nephew of the member of Parliament for Labuk and Sugut — an Usno man.

Sanya ostensibly is a non-political association. But the contest for President is important for it is seen as a foothold on the political ladder. And interestingly enough, the two candidates are through kinship, associated with the two major political parties — Berjaya and Usno.

Si Nahallan is the incumbent President. He has managed to get the State Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports to come and open the meeting. No doubt, he counts that the political prestige of the Minister's visit and spot grants will act favourably for him. Just to even things out, for the afternoon session, the MP for Labuk and Sugut, is invited to chair the meeting.

The meeting is a non-starter from the beginning. The morning is devoted to the welcoming and feeding of the Minister. There are some long political speeches where the addressing of each category of the audience takes nearly as long as the speech itself. The Minister comes through by

promising a *kompang*, that is a Malay tambourine set to the village and saying that preparations will be made for a sepak takraw court.

The afternoon session starts late. It is scheduled for 2 pm, but it is already 3 pm and there is no sign of the MP. When he finally arrives, people make as if to stand, decide against it and clap while remaining seated.

There are speeches again. Si Nahallan converts his speech introducing the MP into a canvassing speech. The MP does not need much of an introduction for he is a kampung man though he lives in town now. Then the MP starts. Every cliche gets loud applause.

"The youth are the future leaders of society," he says. Loud clapping.

Interestingly, all the Berjaya leaders of the kampung are sitting at the long table in front, including Hj Jifli, the President of the Kampung Bokara branch of Berjaya. The headman is not present.

The meeting is evidently divided into two groups, that of Si Hamdan more popularly known as Si Abu, being more vocal. The first problem that comes up is the legality of the proceedings. Should the old committee be dissolved before the elections can proceed?

Then there is the issue of membership. According to the rules, in order to be a voting member, you have to pay $1 and fill in the required forms. This has not been done by some of the new members. Can they vote?

The two camps thrash out these questions. The crowd in the mosque courtyard swells. One hundred and eighty-six of a total of 216 members are now present. And a few bystanders.

The MP adjourns the meeting for the afternoon prayers. The second session centres round the use of English in the accounts. Why should we use English? Si Abu's group asks. "We are Malays."

This is interesting for in any context other than the political, the Simunuls stress their differences from the Malays rather than want to merge with them. While the MP is expounding on the merits of learning many languages, it is again time for the evening prayer.

This turns out to be a long break for the MP goes to town for his Maghrib prayers. When he comes back, the crowd swells even further. Now there are 224 of a total of 232 members. Some have just joined obviously. As the method of voting is being discussed, it is again time for prayer.

After this last break, the number of voters has risen again. Now there are 247. Should there be voting today? That is the question that the two camps are debating. The MP tries to cool things down by giving a long speech about the maturity and responsibility of youth. He talks of Sukarno and Indonesia while everybody is waiting for the voting to start.

The crowd is getting to the point where they are beginning to show disrespect. A person from the audience wants to speak. The MP is still standing. Another question is asked. There is loud hooting and clapping.

It is 9.30 at night now. The Sanya meeting started in the morning at 9.30. There is a suggestion that the elections be postponed. Children have to go to school the next day. It is late.

Finally this is the decision the MP makes. He keeps on qualifying it by saying this is the advice of the people present. The upshot of it all is that after 12 hours of meeting, there is no voting. The office bearers have not been elected.

There is a vague sense of unease at this unfinished business. A large group of friends and kin disperse to Si Abu's mother's house for coffee and biscuits. This was probably slated as a victory party.

While we are there, there is a commotion on the road opposite the mosque. "Knives have come out," is the shout. "The two groups are fighting."

Everybody runs out of the house. I can see nothing. There are people standing there tense, in a mood of confrontation. People are spread all over the road with some rolling up their sleeves. People say that Si Abu's cousin that is Si Ainon's brother and Hjh Natsi's son, Si Anding may be involved.

Then from inside the house, that is Si Abu's house, comes a scream accusing somebody of being a cheat. This accusation is now being thrown around. By this time the crowd

from both sides of the kampung is gathered in front of the mosque.

Hjh Jariah is shouting at the top of her voice. The headman comes out. He is Hjh Jariah's brother. He says, "I thought the kampung was burning. There was so much noise." Si Malcom mutters under his breath, "Maybe the jails do not have enough people in them. Send them all to jail."

A few minutes later, a police car comes with three plain clothes policemen. One of them speaks Simunul. Everybody assumes the headman called in the police.

Seeing the police, Hj Jifli steps in saying agitatedly, "The matter should be settled in the kampung. We should not take the parties to the police station. It would be bad publicity for it involves the honour of the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports who declared the meeting open. So as the head of the party in power, that is as the head of the Berjaya branch in the kampung, I am requesting that no official action be taken."

All this time, the road in front of the mosque is milling with people. Where there had been the ceremonial reception in the morning, now there are tense groups of people facing each other.

I still do not know who fought whom.

The headman leads the one Simunul-speaking police officer to the front of the mosque near a table and chairs. The headman asks some of the older people what happened. Then he asks for the people of the old Sanya committee to come.

Nothing happens. I follow the headman to the table not wanting to miss the proceedings this time. The policeman seeing me there asks the headman about me. He tells him I am studying the Simunul language. With this he is satisfied.

Nobody is coming forward. Finally, the headman sends Hj Aliong to get Hjh Natsi's son, Si Anding. This is because Hj Aliong is first cousin to Si Anding and is also related to Si Ainon's brother through his wife, Hjh Ipoh.

The Imam, Si Asniya's husband is called. When he comes, he appeals to kinship saying, "See. On this side your grand-

father was Panglima Adam. On the other, your grandfather was Panglima Asmaiullah. They were real brothers. Why do you fight?" Here he is referring to the fact that Si Nahallan and Si Abu are second cousins.

Hj Ismail, whose son is involved in this, says, "Let us settle this by swearing on the Koran." The headman says, "I thought the youth would be able to handle things better than the elders. But it has ended like this. Never before has any meeting ended this way. And everybody in the kampung is related. A fight like this divides up the kampung. Kin fight against kin, husband against wife."

By this time three people from Si Nahallan's group and three from Si Abu's group have come. Their fathers are present too. All of them guarantee that this kind of thing will not be repeated. The Imam reads the doa selamat.

Then Hj Aliong gets up. He tries to make the three on one side shake hands with the three on the other. When one of the boys tries to explain, the headman says, "Enough."

So they shake hands, Hj Aliong taking one boy's hands and putting it in the other boy's hands. Then he takes Si Anding's hand and puts it in Si Abu's hand. He says, "Look at Si Anding. He is my brother. And look at Si Abu. He is my nephew. You two fight, I get caught in between."

Si Anding and Si Abu embrace each other. The Imam is very relieved and says, "Good. We are all kin again."

The police leave. But Hjh Jariah is still at it. The headman is angry with her for she won't keep quiet. People are still clustered together in little groups in front of their catwalks. Si Sai, Si Malcom and I, we sit in front of ours, discussing the events of the day. None of us know what really happened. Then we have our dinner. It is late and the rest of the night is quiet.

The fight is not over. The next day, there is a fracas at the Community Centre in town when the chairs are being returned. The two groups confront each other again. The police come to the kampung. They call for the people who were involved in the evening's disturbance. Nobody comes out. They warn that if anybody starts a fight, man or woman, they will be arrested and taken to the police station.

The affair is spilling over in bitterness. Si Anding's sister,

the one who is divorced, says, "We are Sulus. We cannot stand people accusing us of this and that. They are clever at speaking only. When we fight, we don't fight with our mouths. We fight with knives and blades. We are not afraid. Why should we be afraid? It is not we who are wrong."

There is a growing feeling that the affair has been mismanaged. Si Nahallan's mother-in-law, who is Si Malcom's aunt is reported to have gone right up to the headman and told him, "Why don't you manage it? You are the headman and you don't know how to manage it. If I could fix a penis to myself, I would be headman and would be able to deal with it all." To this, the headman reportedly said nothing.

The headman's position is sullied also in that he is Si Abu's uncle. So people assume his judgement is weighted in favour of one side. Hj Jifli is also said to have asked the headman, "Where were you when the Minister came?"

The Sanya fight is hotting up. People are afraid now of taking sides for they are related to both sides. Si Sophia's husband for instance is a third cousin to both Si Abu and Si Nahallan. Hjh Ipoh too. On one side is the first cousin of her husband, on the other is her nephew. "If you take sides," she says, "then you get boycotted. When you have a function, people won't come."

The voting for President of Sanya finally takes place nearly four weeks later. In the meantime, Si Abu and his group of close kin — about 20 of them, join the town branch of Sanya which is headed by one of their kin.

The meeting is tame. Compared with the overflowing attendance of the earlier meeting, not even 30 people attend this one. The membership forms have been completed according to the rules.

Now that Si Abu is not there, the election is unanimous. This is the consensus way of the kampung. Hjh Jariah's shop which is right opposite the mosque is deliberately closed.

The indirect result of this Sanya fight is that it leads to a change of the headman. This happens without any fanfare. The change of headman from Si Matajang to Hj Jifli is assumed in a circular. This announces the annual meeting of the Kampung Bokara branch of the Berjaya party where Hj

Jifli's name is preceded by the rank of '*Ketua Kampung*', that is 'headman'.

There is a lot of discussion of it in the shops. But nobody wants to come out for or against it for again kinship cuts both ways. And then if the headman has really changed, they do not want to be seen to be patently on the wrong side.

The immediate consequence of this is that Hj Jifli's prestige has gone sky high. Before, he was seen in rather vague terms. He is unemployed, or if you want to be kind — in the contracting business without contracts in hand. He takes his political prestige from his son by his first wife. Apart from this he enjoys the rather dubious distinction of having at least another wife in town.

But now that he is the village headman, he has bought a new car and is often seen driving through the kampung in it. When he attends wedding and engagement ceremonies — something that Si Matajang seldom did — pride of place is given to him.

The change of headmanship is now being justified in terms of kinship. Both Si Matajang and Hj Jifli can trace relationship to two brothers who were headmen. Despite this white washing of the change, everybody knows that the change in the political leadership of the kampung is an attempt to bring it in line with the leadership of Berjaya in the state. Since Hj Jifli is the chairman of the Kampung Bokara branch of the Berjaya party, it nicely dovetails with the position of the headman of the village.

The official explanation is that Si Matajang was never formally appointed headman, though he had been recognised as acting headman for the last five years. He was formally given the choice of being headman of the kampung at a stipend of $100 a month and resigning his job with the Forest Department or stepping down from his acting position of village headman.

In the village shops, the talk is that the problem between Si Matajang and Hj Jifli started when Si Welma, Si Matajang's wife, first joined Berjaya, then quit it. Moreover, Si Matajang's sister, Hjh Jariah had called off the engagement between her son, Si Abu and Hj Jifli's daughter. There was also the matter of the car park. Si Matajang was allegedly

parking his car in a garage on Hj Jifli's land.

The first public encounter, between Hj Jifli and Si Matajang takes place nearly a month after the change, at a meeting of the mosque committee. Hj Jifli is obviously untutored in the art of directing a meeting and has to be visibly prompted. He cuts a sorry figure. But he does resolve the crisis in a master stroke of diplomacy by proposing that Si Matajang remain the chairman of the Executive Committee of the mosque while he himself becomes the patron.

The values of kinship are again stressed. Coffee and cakes are served after the meeting. Everybody leaves satisfied.

The pre-Puasa rush

Puasa, the fasting month for Muslims, is approaching. With that is the realisation that there is just a month and a half left of my stay in the kampung. I am getting satiated. Sometimes, there is the feeling I cannot absorb one more thing, not one more note can be taken.

Then I go to Si Mariam's shop just to have fun. But even eating *Sambal Java* or making *dodol*, I know has to be recorded. It seems as if even in my dreams I am writing, recording, observing. I feel as if the kampung has swallowed me up.

The escape route to town, when I am satiated here, is no longer available. One thing the kampung does show me is that my marriage is over. All it needed was moral courage to accept it. My small ice-blue room made me feel I had it.

I tell myself I must remember to write down some of the smells which are going to be associated with kampung life; the finely cut pandan leaves when you roll them in your hands; the overpowering smell of *kapur* wood, which is called a bastard camphor, as it lies by the roadside waiting to be used in the building of a house; the smell of benzoin burning on a Thursday night.

These are kampung smells. There is also the fragrance of dried salted fish being fried crisp.

When it is not the kampung which keeps me occupied, my mind goes forward. Will I be able to manage for money? Will my children get the care they need? Will I be able to get a job? Where will I stay when I go to Kuala Lumpur?

There is not much time to think of these things, for here in the kampung, we are in the midst of a pre-Puasa rush.

Everybody who wants to get married suddenly remembers that Puasa, the fasting month of Ramadan is coming. Puasa means there can be no weddings, no circumcisions, no Hatams. It is to be a total cessation of all social functions.

It has come to the point that not only are the weekends booked, but some events of lesser importance are even sneaked in during the week. Counting the functions that

have taken place this month is daunting enough. Then when I consider that every wedding means going to the wedding house no less than six times, I stop.

The sheer gluttony of these last few days has left me breathless. If I see another tray full of cakes, another array of delicious meat and fish preparations, I don't think I could bear it. I look at the plates heaped with rice, at the trays full of dishes, and I cannot wait to get away. But a few hours later, it is the same scene, the same people only at a different house.

Si Mariam sits in her shop mopping her forehead. "A few days left for Puasa," she says, "and I haven't even started preparing for it. Going out every day, every day. The money is all flying. Ten dollars, twenty dollars each time. Chicken everyday. Meat, meat, meat. How can anybody have so much meat? Eating all this 'hot' stuff, my body is breaking out in a rash."

There is a knowing nod of agreement from all quarters. Having one function follow the other in such close succession has made them everyday affairs. Everyone feels cheated at this for the common element in all the village celebrations is that in nearly every detail they seek to be different from everyday life.

Other than this, I am involved in a special project in the kampung. The Sabah Museum is to have an exhibition at the Community Centre just after Hari Raya to commemorate the first centenary of Sandakan town. The Kampung Bokara exhibit is to have pride of place, not only because the village is the oldest in Sandakan, but also because it will represent the Sulu-Bajau culture of the indigenous people. We are putting up an exhibit of the old style marriage celebration.

The Curator, Mr McCredie becomes a familiar figure in the kampung. He is what they call 'big size' and strides along in shorts and knee length socks. In the beginning when he sits in my car, they tease me, saying the tyres will go flat. I don't think, McCredie enjoyed the joke too well.

Hj Mohammad, who lives on the next catwalk is organising the exhibit. He is interested in traditional dance forms and has formed a group for performing the dahling-dahling

at cultural functions. In 1978, his group went to Kuala Lumpur and performed eight times before visiting dignitaries in Sandakan.

The process of tracing the changes which took place in the marriage style turns out to be an adventure. In Hjh Siti Rahkmah's house, I discover they still have the old style patchwork canopy which went under the roof of the house. This was important when the roof was made of palm leaves. She also has the patchwork panels to go along the walls of the house.

An old Mak Andam, the one who dressed Si Tina's mother as a bride becomes our consultant for dress and make-up. We trace a set of genuine old clothes in Si Kabilla's house. They belonged to her grandfather and are still being lent out for weddings in villages across the Bay.

The old Mak Andam also has the old poster bed that was used in the 30s. This is quite an achievement for the plain four poster bed has since been replaced by the carved bed, the iron four poster and now the modern padded creations. Si Sai has preserved the ornaments and panels which hung from the sides of the four poster bed.

Some of the things we have to make. The painted rotan mat which went as a backdrop to the wedding can no longer be found. So the Museum brings a plain one from Kota Kinabalu and one of the refugees who lives behind Hjh Afsa's house, paints it in the traditional style.

The wooden chests and brass items for decoration we borrow from Hjh Magha. The mattress covers, the pillows and cushions for the wedding mattress, the curtains and the canopy right over the mattresses, the triangular flags which decorate the catwalk leading to the house, Hj Mohammad makes.

As I delve into the changes in the style of marriage celebrations, new items keep coming up. I am breathless trying to fill up the gaps in my data. It now seems as if I hardly know anything of the kampung. How can I possibly write it up? So I freeze. I don't know enough. There is no way I can put it together into a sociological analysis. It is a jigsaw puzzle and detective work combined together. Time is running out and everything is coming to a head.

Puasa

The first day of Puasa is still. Even the buses seem to be running with a muffled sound. Nobody walks the streets. No women at the water tap. No women in the shop. A small cluster of children make noise outside, but this just accentuates the emptiness of the scene.

Some of the shops remain closed all morning. Si Sai's is among them. The act of not eating and drinking is at centre stage. In the living room, people lie around on the mats, on mattresses, on sofa sets. Some sit listlessly. Others read. And through all of this, you can hear the clock ticking.

The scene livens up by three in the afternoon. In Si Mariam's shop, her younger son is breaking coconuts. A van came around the kampung the day before selling coconuts. Si Sai also bought ten coconuts.

Women go to the market. There is better fish in the afternoon. Si Mariam's opening fast meal is going to be at the back of the shop. It is set ceremonially. The kitchen table has a sheet on it. The party dishes are taken out of their display cupboards in the living room. Orange is poured in the embossed jug of clear blue.

By five in the evening, the table is set. There are dates fried in batter. A special green pea and sago gruel is on the side. There are noodles with prawns, cakes, orange and hot coffee. A tray of noodles, gruel and sago cakes is ready to be sent to Hjh Ipoh's house.

In Si Sai's house preparations start late. By five, only the coffee, orange, the cakes and kaya sandwiches are ready. The special rice cakes and the macaroni and sago gruel are still on the stove.

What surprises me is that after a whole day of not eating, they would want a collection of dainty hors-d'oeuvres. I would have thought they would want a full meal.

"It's difficult to eat immediately," says Si Mariam. "What I really want to do is drink. I feel I could just drink and drink. It is the not drinking which is the worst part. My throat is dry and aching. It seems as if my head is going

round and round. At times it feels as if the bottom of my throat is making a sound and everything might just possibly explode."

Our conversation is constantly interrupted by her having to spit. She belongs to the school which believes that during Puasa, you must not swallow anything and that includes your own sputum. "If your sputum comes up to your mouth, then you must spit it out. But if it is only in your throat, then it is alright."

One of the younger girls in the shop thinks this is being too extreme. "How can you bear it when your throat is so unnaturally dry?"

Si Suka wanders into the shop. Her lips are not red today for she has not had her betel leaves all day. "That for me is the worst part," she says. "I am so addicted that on the average I have betel leaves at least 18 times a day."

For Hjh Maimunah's son, the worst bit is not being able to smoke. "Look at him," says Si Latipa. "He keeps asking the time, wanting the watch to go faster. When it's time, it's going to be one cigarette after another."

The time for breaking the fast is getting closer. The television is on in every house so that the exact time is known. When it is time, Si Sai and her husband sit at the kitchen table. He is wearing the songkok so that the Puasa is religiously recognised.

The rest of us sit outside, having the cakes and sipping the drinks. Another illusion shatters that the whole family gathers round food set on a mat. There is a nice kampung touch about it. But here we are having cakes and coffee, buffet style for there is not enough place at the kitchen table. The last straw is breaking fast and watching *Lost in Space* at the same time.

At night, from 7.30 to 8.30, the mosque overflows for the special Terawih prayers. There are more than 30 women in the mosque. During Puasa, the Terawih prayers are a constant and are well attended. "This is the overtime," says Si Malcom, refering to the fact that this is additional to the required five times of prayer.

By the third day of Puasa, a relaxed rhythm has set in. The village has come back to normal. There are women in the

shop, walking around, cleaning their houses, children playing. Si Ping is out sweeping her porch. Women have started washing their clothes at the public tap again. Si Mariam sits with her grandson on the logs near the road.

Children play pranks on Emmong. She playfully threatens them with a branch but they keep their distance. Finally one of them gets a touch of it and they run away.

The initial fervour of Puasa is becoming routinised. The younger children try less and less to keep the fast. They last out till noon, then shamefacedly suck on some jackfruit or open a bottle of orange. The men no longer lie on the mats in the living room. They are back doing their houses, making them ready for Hari Raya.

People ask leading question trying to find who keeps the fast and who does not. It is important to give equally vague answers.

Puasa is hardly a week old and it is already pre-Hari Raya. I wake to the thud-thud of the kampung bamboo bombs. It has swept the village like a fever. One moment there is nothing special. The next, an army of six to ten year old boys are on the hill cutting down old thick yellowish bamboos. Dividing them up, each gets his own cannon ready to blast off.

The hill has become a combat station. The bamboos are made ready. An iron pipe is used to hammer in the intervening nodes. Then a small hole is scooped out near the blocked end and you are ready to put in the kerosene. Add a bit of salt and the cannon blasts off with a louder bang.

Some children are more sophisticated about it. They heat the bamboo first. Then with a lighted taper they set it alight through the hole and the cannon shudders satisfactorily. After that, they blow out the smoke which comes out of the mouth of the cannon. They dip the taper in kerosene, set it alight with a candle and everything is set to go again.

Some of the little ones can't quite get it right. One small boy pokes and prods. Blows and huffs. Nothing happens. Then his sister shows him how to do it and continues showing him gladly all afternoon.

I appear to be the only one terrified at the possibilities of

putting kerosene and fire together. The mothers seem resigned to it. "It is dangerous," says Si Ping. "Of course it is. But how to tell the children not to do it. Anyway, they won't listen. They do it every Hari Raya. Their fathers did it too."

The noise of hammering is everywhere, as houses are being readied. Hjh Habibah has had her house renovated. Si Malcom is at the tail end of the house extensions. The living room has been extended. It is now separated from the older part by a double arch. The newer portion has double walling of a shiny plywood.

The style of the iron grilles has also changed. Now there is a large expanse of window. The bamboos on the hill opposite have never looked so green. The new door is being made by a Chinese shop in town.

The porch is edged by flat tin. Inside, it is lined by thin lengths of wood.

Hjh Ipoh's house is also being painted. She has bought three Macrame pot hangers with pots for $150. They are the centre of attention. There are also two Philippine baskets with artificial flowers. There are paper flowers everywhere.

Si Sai has been busy for the last two weeks stitching clothes for the extended family. She has moved the kitchen back to the house, saying one cannot cook effectively in the small kitchen at the back of the shop. The curtains are being made.

Tomorrow might or might not be Hari Raya. There is no sense of panic about it. I had always wondered what would happen if I didn't know whether I was going to have 30 or 50 people for brunch the next morning or not. But in Si Sai's house, they are not planning to serve curry and food. It is going to be biscuits and cakes.

Even with this, they are running late. A few types are made in the aunt's house in Pukul. The rest they have to make the night before Raya. It is just that the rest of the day has been taken up with washing the chairs and putting up the curtains.

The night before Raya, the kampung takes on a festive air. Benzoin is burned. Some houses have coloured lights. There are fireworks on the street. Two groups of boys are

throwing them at each other. Si Ping is angry for one firecracker has gone inside her house.

It is also my last night in the kampung. I don't feel very much. This is in itself surprising. I had thought about it, how I would be heartbroken to leave the kampung. But by now I am emotionally drained. And I am thinking ahead. The future is too uncertain for me to sentimentalise the past.

Tomorrow is Hari Raya and I will be saying my formal goodbyes. We have been talking of it. The thing that has touched me greatly is that Pa Udin has been working on a model boat of belian wood to give me.

Si Ara and I sit on a log near the tap one afternoon. She tells me, "You have done a lot for the kampung." This of course refers to the money given at weddings and other occasions. Now they feel they must return it somehow. It leaves me feeling warm.

With Si Sai and the rest of the family — there are no dramatics about it. I feel I belong. Somehow nobody, myself included, seems to realise that I will be leaving Sandakan also.

How far will you go? they ask. And even if I do go, surely I will come back. My husband and children are in Sandakan. So the assumption is that I will always be around.

This is what Emmong says. But the air ticket to Kuala Lumpur has been bought. On Hari Raya day, I leave the kampung. After spending two days at the Museum exhibition for which I am acting as consultant, it will be on to Kuala Lumpur.

Our kampung exhibits are ready. When we set the scene up in a trial run at Hj Mohammad's house, it is nearly perfect. The old women come to see it and stay for a while. One tells me, "The scene has a glow about it. It makes you want to stand at the door and tell the guests, 'Welcome, welcome.' "

Si Sai sees it and says how stupid we are to have given up some of our beautiful traditions for the modern stuff. Her bed ornaments hang there and she laments the fact she left her parents' bed on the grave to rot just because some women told her it was 'hot'.

Si Kitu and Si Sai do not sleep all night. They are busy making cakes for in all the rush, the *kuih makmor* the delicious ones with the peanuts, flour and sugar, still have not been made.

Departure on Raya

On Raya day, I wake up to the indistinct sound of the tape recordings of yesterday's Friday film. And the smell of paint. Somehow I had thought the morning would have been different.

Everybody but Si Suraya and Si Kitu from the family go to the mosque for the morning prayers. Probably they are having their monthly periods. I do not ask them about it for they tell me vaguely, they are staying back to look after the house.

The mosque is full. It has been recently enlarged for Raya. Even the new portion is full. The prayers finish by 8.30. The new element is the speech by the new headman. It is interpreted as a bit of showing off. He invites everyone to his house. That is traditional.

The men go to his house to call, the women return home. In Hj Jifli's house there is food laid out buffet style in the open house tradition. It includes fried chicken, beef curry, chicken curry, yellow rice, plain rice. This is a different set up from Si Sai's house where there are seven types of biscuits and cakes served with orange.

The thing I am curious about is how the children ask the traditional forgiveness of their parents on Raya morning. Si Tony comes back from the mosque and kisses his mother's hand then his father's. Si Suraya does not do it at the same time, for she is not yet ready. Maybe she did it later.

The boys then go in a gang to other houses. The street scene is resplendent with the men dressed colourfully in their formal clothes. It is a most becoming dress and makes the men look like princes. Everyone meeting in the street, wishes each other a happy Hari Raya. There is joy around.

The young people make their way to the cinema houses. In the kampung, there is more formal visiting as younger folk go and pay their respect to their older relatives. There is food and more food. For me the Hari Raya visits are also my farewell visits.

Nothing special happens to mark my departure from the

kampung. One night I was there and the next I am not. Si Mariam's pickup helps take my furniture back to the town house. It is as if a line has been drawn — my life in the kampung and my life outside it.

As soon as I come away, I feel totally removed from it. It is unnerving to feel so detached from a place I lived in for eight months. I wonder if it is a reaction to over-saturation. What looms large in my mind is the uncertainty of the future. I feel I have to get away from Sandakan to be able to resolve some of it.

Only later when I look at the lack lustre way I left the village, do the questions arise. Somehow no fieldwork is complete or at least no fieldwork receives the badge of excellence unless there is a tearful farewell.

There has to be a feast in honour of the departing anthropologist. He is to be led garlanded to the jetty for a final wave to the village and the people he leaves behind. The anthropologist also usually says he feels he has left a part of himself behind.

Why didn't this happen to me?

When I am being desperately honest, I question whether my fieldwork was lacking in a sense of total involvement. Without this kind of involvement, maybe the poignancy of farewell cannot be.

If I am in a mood to be kind, I tell myself they know me as a person living in Sandakan. What is the big deal of returning four miles away when they think they will bump into me in the market or at the cinema. There is no need then for a song and dance about it.

My timing is also partially responsible for the lack of a sense of occasion. During Puasa, everybody is involved in religion. There is no place for anything other than that. After Puasa is Hari Raya, the big family festival of the year. I left on that day. It was a joyous day to leave and marks a stage in kampung life. But from the point of view of my departure, it got mixed up with the festivities of Hari Raya.

Even leaving Si Sai's house is without its solemnity. She and her husband are half asleep when we wish each other goodbye in the afternoon.

For a long time this rankles. I had imagined my departure

many times, but it had never been like this. And I am surprised by my feeling of total non-involvement.

It is only months after I leave the kampung, get settled in a job as a journalist that the kampung again becomes alive for me. In the course of my journalistic assignments I go back to the kampung twice for short day visits.

The first time, I just arrive in Sandakan and am in the market before visiting the kampung, that Si Ara and her aunt see me. After loud excited greetings in Simunul, they tell me of all the events that have taken place. As a member of the kampung, I have to be informed. I am touched that they use that formal phrase.

They tell me Hjh Jariah died of cancer. Si Mariam is now Hjh Mariam. Her daughter, Si Latipa is married. Emmong is ill and bed ridden. She had a fall and has not fully recovered.

Hj Kassim's daughter is married to Si Abu. Pa Udin is now Hj Udin. So that afternoon, when I visit the kampung, after the initial stop at Si Sai's place, I make the required condolence and congratulatory calls. Everybody wants to know about Kuala Lumpur, how much my salary is, where I live.

The next time it is the same thing. This time there is more sad news. Si Mariam's daughter, Si Fatimah has lost her husband. He died in a timber camp. They suspect he was poisoned. She looks like a wraith.

Hjh Siti Rahkmah's daughter, Si Robin has lost her only child of 12. A car accident. Her husband had died a few years earlier. Now her child. She is inconsolable. What is there to say?

I call on Hjh Natsi telling her I have met Hjh Norizam who is now studying in Kuala Lumpur. They send some cakes back for her.

I go back to Si Sai's place. The shop is still open but it is being run by Si Malcom's sister. Si Tony is now going to religious school.

It is getting to be time for the evening prayer. A hush descends on the kampung. Si Sai is making me fried fish and rice at my special request.

The house has been visibly improved. The living room

looks larger. Si Tony has moved into my room. The green curtains are still up. The window still has to be wedged open by a piece of wood.

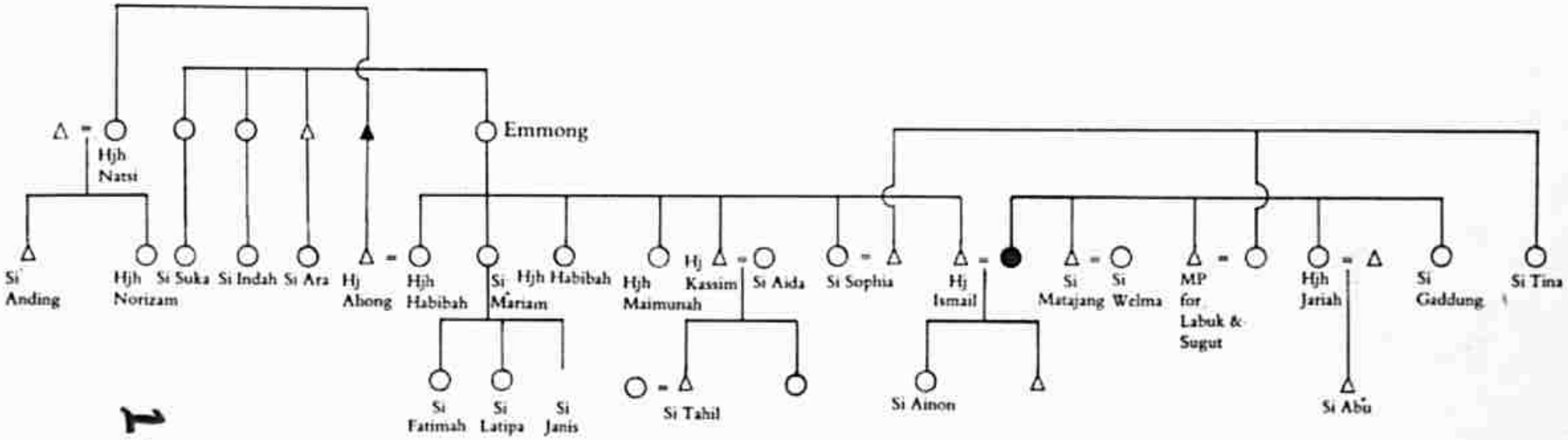
Again I sit with Si Sai at the kitchen table. I see her taking her first mouthful of rice and salt. I have my fish with a liberal dose of soya been sauce and chillies. We rattle away in Simunul. I feel totally at home.

Glossary

Akad Nikah	the Muslim ceremony marking the marriage
attap	palm roofing
belanja	wedding payment
belian	a hard wood
berinai	the henna applying ceremony before the wedding
bersanding	the couple sit in state
bomoh	the medicine man or woman
bunga telor	a boiled egg usually in a paper flower for distribution after a feast
cinta	love
dahling-dahling	a Sulu dance
Datu	a Sulu title signifying high birth
doa selamat	prayer of thanksgiving and safekeeping
dodol	a sweetmeat
gambir	a brown substance to be had with the betel leaf
hantu	spirit
Hatam Koran	the ceremony which celebrates a person's ability to read the Koran
imam	a Muslim priest
jodoh	the marriage is fated
joget	a Malay dance
kampung	village
kasih	love and caring
kemenyan	benzoin
kenduri	feast
kompang	tambourine
Mak Andam	the person in charge of dressing the bride and seeing that the marriage rituals are followed
nibong	a palm
pahi	skate
pondan	transvestite
Puan	the address for a married woman

putu	a Simunul and Sulu dish of steamed tapioca and coconut
rebana	tambourine
sedekah	money distributed to widows
silat	the Malay art of self defence
sirih	betel leaf
songket	a cloth with woven gold
sundang	a Simunul game like the Malay game congkak
tenggiri	large mackerels

Kinship connections



Supriya Singh was born in India and grew up in Delhi. She did her M.A. in Sociology from the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. She was awarded the first Jawaharlal Nehru gold medal for the best all round student of the School.

In 1967, she went on to do another M.A. in Political Science from Drew University, New Jersey. In the same year, she came to Penang, after marriage. Shortly thereafter, she adopted Malaysian citizenship.

After three years in Penang, she moved with her family to Sandakan in East Malaysia. There they stayed for eight years. In 1978, she moved to Kampung Bokara, a village four miles from Sandakan town. She stayed there for eight months to do fieldwork among the Simunul Bajaus.

In 1979, she moved to Kuala Lumpur and joined the *New Straits Times* as a journalist. She was awarded the Malaysian Press Institute's Journalist of the Year award for 1980. Her other books include a short history of Sandakan entitled, *Sandakan: One hundred years, 1879–1979* (1979) and a history of the Central Bank of Malaysia, *Bank Negara Malaysia: The first 25 years, 1959–1984* (1984).