

BETTER TOGETHER

Female Alliance & Empowerment in Contemporary Malaysia

DATE: WEDNESDAY, 26 JULY 2023
TIME: 13:00H - 17:15H
VENUE: TŌNANTEI (201), 2ND FL, INAMORI,
CENTRE FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES,
KYOTO UNIVERSITY



This workshop draws on ethnographic data we have collected in contemporary Malaysia over the past three decades to explore Malay women’s empowerment in the home (marriage), at the workplace, and in higher education. We are interested in how women achieve empowerment through / with other women. To this end, we will examine the effects of patriarchy on intra-gender relations -- i.e., how patriarchy seeps into everyday relations between women. We want to know: What resources are needed for women's advancement, and what intersectional factors such as class, age, gender, and matrimonial rank affect their access to these resources? How do legal, educational, religious, and political institutions perpetuate patriarchal structures in society, and how can women overcome these? How do women contribute to each other's advancement and empowerment?

WORKSHOP PROGRAM

- 13:00 - 13:15: Opening remarks
- 13:15 - 13:45: Paper 1 - "Enemies from Within: Love Magic, Sorcery & Intra-female Violence in Malay Polygyny" - Nurul Huda Mohd. Razif (Kyoto University)
- 13:45 - 14:15: Q & A, discussion
- 14:15 - 14:30: Coffee break
- 14:30 - 15:00: Paper 2 - "Sexualized Joking in the Malay Corporate Workplace" - Professor Patricia Sloane-White (University of Delaware)
- 15:00 - 15:30: Q & A, discussion
- 15:30 - 15:45: Coffee break
- 15:45 - 16:30: Paper 3 - "Socio-cultural Contexts of Reverse Gender Gap in Higher Education in Malaysia" - Hiroko Kushimoto (Sophia University) & Azmira Amran (Tokyo Uni of Foreign Studies)
- 16:30 - 17:00: Q & A, discussion
- 17:00 - 17:15: General discussion & closing remarks



ABSTRACTS

Paper 1: "Enemies from Within: Love Magic, Sorcery & Intra-female Violence in Malay Polygyny"

Nurul Huda Mohd. Razif (CSEAS, Kyoto University)

Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted over a decade with two polygynous families in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, this presentation explores how insufficient, unequal, and inconsistent support from polygynous husbands compel co-wives to resort to supernatural means such as sorcery in an attempt to monopolize access to limited resources in the marriage. In particular, I focus on how the "multilocal" set-up of Malay polygyny, which considers each marriage as an independent household and economic unit, fosters an unhealthy environment of manipulation, deception, and secrecy. This not only exacerbates suspicions of sorcery among co-wives and children, but also breaks two core practices of what the anthropologist Janet Carsten calls "making kin" in Malay society: communal living and commensality. The rampant practice of sorcery among co-wives in Malay polygyny, I further argue, is a form of intra-female violence that is a direct consequence of the religious, legal, and sociocultural patriarchal structures that leave women in a more vulnerable position in an already precarious institution such as polygyny.

Paper 2: "Sexualized Joking in the Malay Corporate Workplace"

Patricia Sloane-White (University of Delaware)

Does "flirting," "heckling," and sexualized banter in public settings suspend gender and power asymmetry between Malay men and women or are these merely examples of how sexual and gender hierarchy is enforced? In the Malaysian corporations where I study the growing role of Islamic and shariah-based management policies, sexualized, ribald cross-gender joking--a common and familiar feature of traditional Malay life--persists, but with significant changes. In this paper, I argue that joking relations between adult Malay men and women prior to Islamization in Malaysia were symmetrical, and reflected an acknowledgement of women's sexual and marital powers. Such banter allowed women to publicly diminish male prowess and the male privilege of polygamy. As such, I demonstrate that in the past, prior to the present moment, cross-gender sexualized banter in public space provided adult Malay Muslim women with a context for negotiating and creating gender and sexual equality within Islam's asymmetrical gender norms. But gender and power relations and Islamic understanding of marital and sexual politics in Malaysian Islam have significantly changed in the past few decades. This paper demonstrates how these changes have registered in today's Islamic "public space"--that is, in office-based joking relations and in public life where sexualized banter (like polygamy itself) is accepted as a male privilege against which women can no longer talk back.

Paper 3: "Socio-cultural Contexts of Reverse Gender Gap in Higher Education in Malaysia"

Hiroko Kushimoto (Sophia University) & Azmira Amran (Tokyo Uni of Foreign Studies)

The purpose of this presentation is to identify what social and cultural factors need to be considered when analyzing the "reverse gender gap" in Malaysian higher education, i.e., the greater dominance of women in education. In Malaysian higher education, particularly in the public sector, female students clearly outnumber and outperform, while women are clearly underrepresented in the labor market and have fewer opportunities for leadership roles in the workplace. How do these contradictions arise in Malaysia's unique context? Based on observations and in-depth interviews with faculty members in Malaysian universities, this presentation will discuss how gender differences manifest themselves in the university setting, particularly among Malay students, and suggest some key perspectives in linking this to the broader Malay social and cultural context.

ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Nurul Huda Mohd. Razif is a social anthropologist working on the intersection between Islam, intimacy, and the state in Muslim-majority Southeast Asia. Since completing her PhD in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge in 2018, she has held research fellowships at Harvard Law School (Program on Law and Society in the Muslim World) and in centers for Southeast Asian studies in Leiden, Paris, and Kyoto, where she is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow for the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science at Kyoto University. Her work has been published in journals on gender, Islamic law, and Southeast Asian studies, including *HAWWA: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, *Asian Studies Review*, *Archipel*, and *Journal of Legal Anthropology*. In 2024, she will be joining the CanCode Project at the University of Bergen as a Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellow for a project called "MALAYMATRIMONEY", which will examine the codification of Malay adat in Malaysian Islamic family law in matters of matrimonial wealth.

Professor Patricia Sloane-White is a social anthropologist who earned her Bachelor's Degree in Anthropology at Amherst College, her M.A. in Anthropology at Princeton University, and her DPhil at University of Oxford. She is a professor of anthropology and chair of the Department of Women and Gender Studies with joint appointments in Asian Studies and Islamic Studies at the University of Delaware, USA. She has been teaching at the University of Delaware since 2002, and prior to that was teaching tutorials in Social Anthropology at Oxford University, served as a post-doctoral researcher at the National University of Malaysia (UKM), and is the recipient of two Fulbright Awards. She has researched Islam, Muslim entrepreneurship, and corporate business in Malaysia for nearly 30 years and has written numerous articles on the Malaysian Muslim middle class, gender, shariah, zakat, and the Muslim workplace. The author of *Islam, Modernity and Entrepreneurship among the Malays* (Palgrave/Macmillan 1998), her recent book, the winner of several awards in law and religion, is *Corporate Islam: Sharia and the Modern Workplace* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). The book was translated into Turkish in 2021. Patricia served as the Chair of the Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Studies group, a section of the Association for Asian Studies in the U.S. for four years until 2022 and currently serves as a member of its Executive Committee.

Dr. Hiroko Kushimoto is currently Associate professor in the Faculty of Global Studies at Sophia University (2019-current). Her specialty is cultural anthropology and Comparative Education with a special focus on Islam and Muslim society in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. She received her PhD from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (2012), and has conducted long-term field research in Malaysia (2005-2011). She previously worked as Assistant professor at Kulliyah of Languages and Management, International Islamic University Malaysia (2014-2019).

Noor Azmira Amran is a second year doctoral student at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies specialising in interlanguage pragmatics and cross-cultural communication. With experience in Malaysia as a Curriculum Officer at the Ministry of Education and as an In-service Teacher Trainer, her research focuses on understanding pragmatic competence in second language learners, considering cultural contexts and social norms. Azmira aims to develop pedagogical approaches and interventions to enhance learners' pragmatic skills and promote successful communication in diverse cultural settings. Currently, she is assisting Dr. Kushimoto on her research on Reversed Gender Gap phenomenon in Malaysian higher education settings.

THIS WORKSHOP IS SUPPORTED BY:

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