

ISLAMIC IDEOLOGY AND INDIGENOUS THOUGHTS ON GENDER: INTERPRETATIONS BY TWO MALAY TEACHERS

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Islam is a religion that identifies males as leaders and protectors of females. In many Islamic countries, females are taught to play a subordinate role at home, in public and at the mosque. What happens, then, in a cultural group that traditionally recognizes women as men's economic and domestic partners? Do they accept the teachings of Muhammad? How do religious leaders explain the discrepancy between cultural and religious tradition? This brief article will take up the issues of gender relations in a Muslim society focusing on different interpretations of Islamic teachings by two female teachers of religion, and examine the underlying traditional cultural themes and the impact of a contemporary religious movement in Kelantan, a state in Malaysia where there is a high concentration of Muslims.

I. *Islamic Tradition and Gender in Kelantan, Malaysia*

Kelantan, located in the northeast section of peninsular Malaysia, is referred to as the "Malay state" for its Malay population of over 90 percent. With the exceptions of towns where Chinese Malaysians engage in trade and northern villages near the Thai border where Buddhist Siamese descendants live, the rural villages of Kelantan exhibit a homogeneously Malay culture, an important feature when discussing Islam in Malaysia since all Malays are, by definition, Muslims.¹

The state of Kelantan has been known for its tradition of Islamic conservatism. One Kelantanese proudly informed me that the state used to be called "*serambi Mekah*" (eaves of Mecca), meaning the eastern front for Islamic ideology. Nineteen-century Kelantan fostered a number of Islamic scholars, *ulama*, who came to be widely known within the Islamic world. Islamic conservatism and scholarship became a tradition of the state and was continued into the twentieth century. (Roff 1974)

Unlike other world religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism, Islam neither recognizes a central authority nor any ordained priesthood. As a result, the rise of indigenous scholars and leaders is one of the defining characteristics of Islam. (Gellner 1981) Islam was originally brought to Malacca by Arabic merchants in the thirteenth century,

¹ Malaysia consists of three major ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indians) and indigenous ethnic minorities. A citizen of Malaysia, regardless of religion and ethnicity, can be referred as "Malaysian." In the Constitution of Malaysia, "Malay" is defined as a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom.

but was gradually disseminated over the Malay Peninsula by local Malays who had managed to pilgrimage to Mecca and learn the language of the holy Quran (Koran). The returnees, without any official status or power accorded by Mecca, opened private classes at their homes to teach what they had learned. Willing students from remote distances built around a teacher's house small huts (called *pondok* in Malay) to live in. *Pondok* became the pronoun for this type of informal schooling; and contributed to the spread of Islam in Kelantan and other Malay states. By the nineteenth century Kelantan in particular was known for its concentration of *pondok* schools. (Awang Had 1977; Nash 1977: 104-108)

Islam is a religion that does not prescribe a church or a priestly class. Further, Islam which was largely spread throughout Malaysia by local people well aware of local life (*adat*) does not provide for a strict centralized system to check the quality of teaching by these local scholars. These conditions lay the foundation upon which Malays could interpret, adjust and modify Islam in ways best acceptable to their local following.

In most of Southeast Asia, gender has been traditionally underplayed. Women have enjoyed relative autonomy, near equal partnership in marriage, comparatively high economic power and solidarity through social networks built around female kins. Penny van Esterik wrote in the introduction to a collection on women of Southeast Asia, "Southeast Asia has long been identified as an area where women enjoy high status. From Burma to the islands of Indonesia and the Philippines this alleged high status is accentuated by the contrasting male dominance characteristic of traditional Indian and Chinese societies," (Van Esterik 1982: 1) The wide range of anthropological ethnographies on Southeast Asian societies and the comparative studies of them with other societies also support her view. (Firth 1966; Geertz 1961; Goldschmidt & Kunkel 1971; Hanks & Hanks 1963; Michaelson & Goldschmidt 1971)

Kelantan is no exception to this Southeast Asian tradition. Islamic conservatism did not undermine Kelantan's female autonomy and economic power, an established tradition long before Islam was introduced into the area. Far from it, Kelantanese women have earned a nation-wide reputation as shrewd traders and entrepreneurs in local markets where they took advantage of the limited presence of Chinese merchants in contrast to the high density of Chinese traders in the west coast states of the Peninsula. Indeed, the women's situation in Kelantan manifests a stark contrast with the widely practiced segregation of women from almost all public scenes in other Muslim societies.

II. *Background of Two Female Religious Teachers*

Ustazah Fatima (pseudonym) and Ustazah Zainab (pseudonym), religious teachers of Islam, were born and raised in Kelantan. (In Malaysia, elementary and middle school teachers of religion are addressed with the title *ustazah* for female or *ustaz* for male). They are both from a large family with eight brothers and sisters. Their families have lived in the state for generations.

Ustazah Fatima's grandfather was also a religious teacher and established a *pondok* school on his ten-acre land. A *pondok* teacher is usually addressed as *guru*, but her father

used to be respectfully called by the people as *Tuan Guru*, a rank higher than simple *guru* (*tuan* itself means 'master'). After her father's death the school was continued by her older sister's husband until his death in 1978. However, her parents, as all religious Malay parents of the time, had the choice of sending their children to *pondok* schools or Arabic schools (*madrrasah* schools) which were established by the Council of Religion and Malay Custom of Kelantan in 1917. Unlike the individualistic style of education at the *pondok* schools, the Arabic schools had a set curriculum and an organizational structure. Arabic was the medium of instruction, yet they also taught secular subjects such as mathematics, science and English. (Andaya & Andaya 1982; 234-235)

Ustazah Fatima's religious education started at her father's *pondok* school when she was around eight years old. When she was considered old enough—approximately twelve years old—she was sent to another *pondok* school in a local town. She completed her education with three years at an Arabic school in Kota Bharu, the capital of Kelantan, when she was eighteen. Her ambition was to study further at the University of Azhar in Cairo, but was discouraged from doing so, for it was regarded as unrealistic for an unmarried young woman at the time. She took the standard examination for teaching credentials in religion and started teaching at an elementary school. She has continued her chosen career as a teacher of religion since 1959.

Ustazah Zainab, approximately ten years younger than Ustazah Fatima, is also from a religious family; her grandfather was a *pondok* teacher and her father became a religious teacher for the army. Her father sent her to the Arabic school in Kota Bharu for elementary education, then to another Arabic school in the State of Perak, a more prestigious one, for a five-year intermediate course. She returned to Kota Bharu and continued to study at the Arabic school for another year. After the completion of her education, also at around eighteen, Ustazah Zainab took up her career as religious teacher at an elementary school.

Noticeable differences in their educational backgrounds can be identified: first, Ustazah Fatima received a major part of her education at *pondok* schools, while Ustazah Zainab received all of her education at Arabic schools; second, while Ustazah Fatima had been confined to Kelantan, Ustazah Zainab studied in another state away from home.

The family lives of the two teachers are strikingly similar. They both married right after school in their late teens to well-educated officers of the state government, gave birth to five children and live in a modern house in the suburbs of Kota Bharu. Both of them including their spouses have no history of divorce. An upper-middle class family with stable jobs based on education and salaried incomes is no doubt the object of respect and admiration by the majority of Malay peasants whose lives are often marked by economic and marital instability.

Besides their regular teaching load, Ustazah Fatima and Ustazah Zainab give lectures and speeches at political assemblies of various types within the state. Occasions that attract large audiences are normally organized by the Kelantan branch of United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the leading political party in Malaysia. The two religious teachers are both registered members of the Kelantan branch of the Wanita UMNO, the women's division of UMNO. Major political/religious assemblies are normally open to audiences of both sexes, though separately seated. Considering the importance of female voters, female speakers are often invited to give speeches on such occasions usually on the topic of the special roles of Muslim women. Many of the events are held exclusively with female

speakers for a female audience. With such high demand for female speakers, the two teachers are kept busy. Ustazah Fatima leaves Wednesday, Friday and Saturday open for public lectures and she will go anywhere in the state with three days advance notice.

The two women speak eloquently, as demonstrated by their ability to keep an audience enthralled for hours at a time. This not only allows them to convey their message effectively, but it also heightens their demand, thereby allowing them to disseminate Islamic teaching—as they see it—to a wider audience. They also influence local people's decisions on personal matters through private consultations at their homes. Malay villagers, both men and women, come from far away seeking their advice on marriage, divorce, inheritance, family disputes, business and other personal problems.

As the above illustrates, Ustazah Fatima and Ustazah Zainab are well-known, well-respected and influential female teachers of religion in the state of Kelantan. Both are from respected pious families in Kelantan, have received quality Islamic education for women of their generation, enjoy stable marriages with children, hold respectable jobs and are capable of delivering eloquent speeches. Their personal and family lives are models in the eyes of Malay Muslims.

III. *Interpretations of Islamic Teachings on Gender: Interviews*

The following is a summary of their responses to my interviews conducted separately at their homes. The questions addressed to them include: 1) How do you describe the male-female relationship in Islam? 2) Except for the biological difference regarding reproductive functions, are men and women considered different by birth, and if so, in what respects are they different? 3) What are the reasons for the rule that women are not allowed to practice Muslim duties during menstruation or postpartum period? 4) How do you explain why Muslim men are allowed to marry up to four women at a time? and 5) Do you see any inconsistency between what is taught in Islam and what is practiced in Kelantan in terms of how men and women should relate with each other, and if so, how do you describe and explain it?

On Male Leadership and Female Roles

It is stated in the Quran that, "Men are in charge of women because Allah hath made one of them to excel the other." (Chapter IV, Verse 34) This well-known verse is normally taken as grounds to define basic role differences between men and women in the family and society. Thus, it is understandable for the two teachers to start with the same point in response to my request to describe gender relations in Islam in general.

Ustazah Fatima begins her explanation of the male and female relationship in Islam by emphasizing that their roles are distinctly divided. She points out that the primary role of the woman lies in the family: taking care of the children, the husband and the household. She may be engaged in a job outside the home to the extent that her household duties are not neglected. The man is the head of the family. The woman may voice her ideas and opinions, but the final decision must be made by the man.

Ustazah Fatima continues that the relationship between a husband and wife should

reflect the difference in their basic roles. The wife must speak to her husband with respect. She cannot oppose him or get angry with him. She should be faithful, patient and tolerant with him, and should not try to attract other men by adorning fine clothes and jewelry in public places. According to Ustazah Fatima, the reason for this seemingly one-sided devotion is partly because the man is loaded with heavier responsibilities than the woman. He is to provide his wife, children and other relatives, if necessary, with their basic needs and protect them from external dangers. He is also responsible for their moral and spiritual well-being. Compared to the man, the woman has an easier role because of his leadership and protection. Therefore, the woman should reciprocate with her husband by obeying, assisting and pleasing her husband. She concludes that the relationship between man and woman is not equal, but essentially hierarchical.

Ustazah Zainab also admits that men are the leaders of women and that the family is headed by the husband. Further, a man becomes the head of a group, a village, a district and a country. A woman cannot be a prime minister. Because of the male leadership role established by Allah, men are given more rights than women in certain areas of life. According to Islamic inheritance laws, a parent's property is divided among all the siblings at a ratio of two to one in favor of brothers. The bridegroom can sign his own marriage contract, but the bride must be represented by a male family member, normally her father or older brother (*wali*). Married women must obtain permission from their husbands to leave the vicinity of the house. Ustazah Zainab explains that all these differences in basic rights are not meant to humiliate women. Rather, they are derived from men's leadership and their responsibility to support women.

To this extent, the two teachers share the same stance since there is very little room for interpretation on what is clearly stated in the Quran. However, when it comes to the question on whether the differential roles between the sexes derive from differences in innate qualities of men and women, a discrepancy between their views appears.

On Male Supremacy

Ustazah Fatima believes that in general terms men are superior to women on several counts: Men are more far-sighted than women (*lelaki lebih panjang fikirannya*) and they can think deeper than women. For example, women look at something for its beauty, but men do not look at it just for its beauty. They also look at its quality, durability, usefulness, price and any other necessary consideration. Women evaluate things superficially, but men can evaluate things deeper.

It is a popular saying in Islam, according to Ustazah Fatima, that generally speaking men are more mature (*matang*) than women. Women have a weaker character; they are more apt to cry; they are more emotional than men. Thus, if men and women study together, men will achieve more than women do even if they share the same IQ scores. In summary, she points out that superficial and narrow thinking, immaturity and emotionality, which result in her limited intellectual achievement, comprise the characteristic female personality.

Ustazah Fatima further attributes overall female inferiority to child bearing. She contends that women are always inferior (*kurang*) to men because women bear children. When they bear children, they cannot pray, cannot fast, cannot read the Quran. They

cannot pray during menstrual periods, either. This makes women religiously inferior to men. Does “religious” inferiority affect the woman’s position or rights in other areas? Yes, according to her. For example, the power to witness in the Islamic court reflects the view that women are inferior: the acceptance of testimony of two female witnesses is equal to one male. To be convicted, a thief must be witnessed either by two men, by a man and two women or by four women. In Islam, the value of a man is clearly higher than that of a woman.

In contrast, Ustazah Zainab minimizes gender differences and denies that women are undervalued in Islam. She emphasizes that the gender differences in Islam are limited to certain areas such as inheritance rights compensating men’s heavier social responsibilities.

Dealing with the question in a historical perspective, Ustazah Zainab refutes the idea that Islam undervalues women: Before the establishment of Islam, women in Arabia were victims of discrimination until Islamic teachings clearly defined men’s responsibility to protect women and to treat them with respect. Therefore, Islam, as Ustazah Zainab views it, does not devalue women at all, but rather raises them from a position of humiliation.

Further, she stresses that men and women are intellectually equal. Intelligence is not predetermined by birth; rather, intellectual capacity is determined by how they are raised and trained. She admits that women are more emotional than men. Yet, she contends that emotionality is an individual character and is unrelated to intellectual ability. The authority to divorce one’s spouse (*talak*) is granted to men not because they are more intelligent but because they have more emotional stability or strength (*keteguhan*). There is no mention in the Quran that a man’s intellectual capacity is greater than a woman’s. Thus, she concludes, women should not consider themselves inferior.

On Menstrual and Postpartum Blood

In many cultures, women in menstrual or postpartum periods are viewed as polluted and are physically segregated from society or customarily restricted from certain activities. Also, in Islam, women do not practice religious activities during these periods. The question is whether such restrictions are connected with the devaluation of women in society.

Ustazah Fatima gives the following two reasons why women cannot perform Muslim duties during these periods. First, praying means meeting with God, putting yourself in front of God, and talking to God. Therefore, you must be clean. The blood that comes out of a woman’s body during these periods is filthy, although other types of hemorrhaging caused by injury or surgery is not considered so. A woman during these periods cannot pray, enter a mosque nor read the Quran. She cannot even touch the Quran. The second reason is that a bleeding woman is considered physically weak. Therefore, she is exempt from the duties that are normally required of all Muslims. In any case, the fact that women stay away from Muslim duties for longer periods than men place them as a whole at a lower position than men in Islam.

Ustazah Zainab shares the same view as Ustazah Fatima to the extent that menstrual and postpartum blood is considered filthy (*najis*). She is quick to add that this does not mean that women themselves are polluted because of the blood. Women simply cannot bring filth to holy places or to holy activities. In Islam, even ordinary blood is called filth; everything that comes out one’s body except tears, saliva and semen is considered filth.

Therefore, she emphasizes, men also have to cleanse their body thoroughly before they perform their Islamic duties. Ustazah Zainab dismisses the question why menstrual and postpartum blood is considered filth as it is none of our business. According to her, it is God's business (*urusan Tuhan*). There are things that we, human beings, should mind and there are things that we should not. When Allah makes a decision, it must be meaningful, even though we may not always understand it. She further points out that women cannot become religious leaders (*imam*), not because they menstruate but because it is written in the Quran that men are the leaders of women.

On Polygyny

The provision under Islamic law that a man can marry four wives at a time has often created tension and stress in Malay communities. No Malay woman has ever convinced me that she could be absolutely happy and composed if she were placed in a situation where she would have to share her husband with another woman. Many of them, particularly young, unmarried women, reject the idea out of hand. Today, polygynous unions are rare, particularly stable ones that last for years. Yet, it is not rare to hear in a Malay community a rumor of an attempt by a well-to-do man to acquire a second wife.

Ustazah Fatima explains why men are allowed to have up to four wives, while women can marry only one man at a time: This is because some men are sexually strong. These men cannot be satisfied with one woman. Since it is not good for them to satisfy their sexual urges through extramarital liaisons, they are permitted to have more than one wife if they can financially afford it. However, those who desire to have two wives or more are not truly religious people. It is permissible, but not recommended.

Ustazah Zainab begins her explanation of the origin of Islamic polygyny with a historical account. During the life of the Prophet Muhammad, the prophet and his followers were often engaged in war. Many men died leaving widows and orphans behind. In order to support them the men who survived the wars were encouraged to marry them. Secondly, before the introduction of Islam, there were men who had many wives, sometimes several dozens. Islam limited the number of wives that men could have at a time from unlimited to four. Further, since it is written in the Quran, as she points out, men even today are entitled to have a maximum of four wives, provided he treats them absolutely equally in terms of financial matters and of the time spent with each one. It is a man's divine right. Therefore, polygynous men cannot be demeaned as less religious.

On Local Practice

Islamic ideology defines men as leaders of women, positioning the husband as the final decision-maker of the family and requiring women to seek their husbands' permission when she leaves the immediate vicinity of the house. This does not reflect the reality of Malay village life. Observations of Kelantanese women reveal that they are far more decisive and out-going in family life; they do not conform to the submissive woman ideal. Nonetheless, Ustazah Fatima is tolerant of this incongruity between ideology and practice: She evaluates the local practice positively, emphasizing that it is their unique 'culture' (*kebudayaan*). According to her, Kelantanese women are trained to be hardworking to

support the family, while men are often pampered. Further, trade has been established as a woman's job probably even before Islam was introduced to the area. Economically capable women learn to make their own decisions on business matters and are accustomed to decision-making in general, to the extent that their opinions and decisions are practically expected by their husbands. This should not be understood as a negative aspect of local culture, she asserts, since Islam encourages women to engage in income-generating work as long as they do not neglect their household duties.

On the other hand, Ustazah Zainab views negatively the discrepancy between the ideal and reality. She attributes the problem to a general lack of piety found everywhere in the Islamic world. She simply hopes that religious awareness will draw upon her people and that they will try to make compensation through more learning and devotion to Muslim duties.

IV. *Discussion*

The above summary of the two teachers' responses reveals that their interpretations and understandings are distinctly different in several aspects. The following will examine their differences in view of Islamic fundamentalist thought and a Southeast Asian cultural theme, apparently two major elements that helped shape their respective interpretations.

The Quran and Hadith are the two holy texts on which Islam is based. Muslims believe that these texts include strict guidelines on every aspect of Muslim life, and so they do not need, in principle, to provide personal interpretations or to depend on any other source for guidance. However, the books do not always provide specific descriptions on what to do in situations that apply directly to contemporary life. The resulting vacuum invites a wide range of interpretations. This characteristic of Islam is one reason why it spread worldwide, beyond ethnic, cultural and national boundaries. Indeed, 'fundamentalism,' which has arisen a number of times in Islamic history, has always been a movement to return to the original texts of the Quran when personal interpretations threatened the perceived basis of Islam. The Islamic revival movement which began in the 1970's in Malaysia can also be seen as one such trend. (Kessler 1980; Nagata 1981) The two female religious teachers in this article are, of course, aware of the movement.

If we compare the two, Ustazah Zainab is obviously more fundamentalistic in that she is more sensitive to the precise wording of the holy texts and tries to avoid a personal interpretation. Ustazah Fatima tends to provide an interpretation beyond the expressions in the Quran to accommodate the feelings and experience of the local women. Full of her personality, her lectures often feature anecdotes and humor. Compared to Ustazah Fatima, Ustazah Zainab cannot help but give an impression of being dogmatic and strict.

The contrast between the two is most clearly defined on the issue of male supremacy. Ustazah Zainab denies sexual difference in intellectual ability on the grounds that it is not written in the Quran. She does not admit to any religious/spiritual superiority of men over women. In contrast, Ustazah Fatima deduces male supremacy from every aspect of role differences and restrictions, such as male leadership, female domestication, prohibition of women from performing Muslim duties during menstrual or postpartum periods, minimized inheritance rights of women, and women's devalued reliability as witnesses in court.

The question is why Ustazah Fatima, who earnestly supports the local custom condoning near-equality between men and women, asserts in the same breath male supremacy beyond that which is overtly stated in the holy books. Her devotion and foundation in the local culture are also manifested in the fact that she cares and comforts the feelings of local women against polygyny by telling them that polygynous men are less pious than those satisfied with one wife. The answer to this question lies in the nature of gender roles in Kelantan and, more generally, in most parts of Southeast Asia.

The strong position of women in social life and their dominance in the household as reported by many observers of Southeast Asian societies are manifested in several aspects: 1) Customs on kinship, inheritance and property ownership imply gender equality, i.e., descent is bilaterally recognized; all siblings, regardless of sex, birth order or marital status, have equal inheritance rights; and women may own and administer property in their own right; 2) Marriage is viewed as a partnership between the husband and wife and they are expected to cooperate in earning a living and raising a family; 3) Women observably control household finances, make all day-to-day decisions, and maintain the role as the center of family life; 4) Women actively participate in economic activities and predominate in market trade; and 5) networks of kinswomen in the community form an informal but significant base for solidarity and exchange of resources.

Nonetheless, these actual roles coexist with ideological images that picture them as neither equal nor dominant. Barbara Hatley describes the case in Indonesia as follows:

Women are ascribed characteristics judged as essentially inferior to those of men and are thus assigned subordinate status. . . . The traditionally dominant ideal of womanhood, cultivated in the noble courts and seen as characteristic of the social elite . . . [are] grace, modesty, and refinement, but also of fragility and dependence. . . . [L]acking spiritual power . . . they are rendered dependent on their husbands for protection and guidance. (Hatley 1990: 181)

What is presented here is that the practically based, apparently egalitarian conceptions of gender relations in fact embody assumptions that are far from egalitarian in nature. The separate spheres of men and women, though complementary, are by no means equal in terms of social prestige and importance. Men are identified with the sphere of formal gatherings, political and ritual activities. Women, however, remain constrained to the less prestigious domestic domain of child-raising, food preparation, and household management. Ward Keeler (1990) also explores how Javanese women can manage economic resources and social relations yet achieve less prestige than men. Cultural valuations of prestige simply do not reflect economic relations.

In view of these two seemingly conflicting aspects in gender relations, we now need to examine the basis of men's prestige if indeed it is not based on economic power. Keeler differentiates two kinds of power as conceived by Southeast Asian people: A coercive authority and a more subtle, immaterial authority. The former includes economic power and is culturally devalued. Possessors of the latter, which is more accurately termed 'potency,' are believed to be able to control their own impulses and desires, and to exert an influence over people and events without resorting to instrumental means.

Theoretical distinctions per se between these two kinds of power—one more instrumental and coercive, the other more spiritual—usually does not present a difficulty to the

western mind. Yet, the fact that the spiritual power, or potency, can actually exert considerable influence over people and play more significant roles in determining human relations than instrumental power does. Shelly Errington points out that the recognition of power in the western world leans heavily toward instrumental power:

We tend to assume that "power" and "status" are cross-culturally recognizable. We . . . tend to identify power with economic control and coercive force: any status or prestige not linked to it we tend to conceptualize as empty prestige, mere symbolism. We also tend to identify "power" with activity, forcefulness, getting things done, instrumentality, and effectiveness brought about through calculation of means to achieve goals. The prevalent view in many parts of island Southeast Asia, however, is that to exert force, to make explicit commands, or to engage in direct activity—in other words, to exert "power" in a Western sense—reveals a lack of spiritual power and effective potency, and consequently diminishes prestige. (Errington 1990: 5)

If we can presume that people who are recognized as possessing 'potency' can be bestowed with prestige and thus be considered superior to those who lack it, then what is it that makes women almost always perceived as the gender with less, or even no, potency? One significant point is that this potency is primarily understood as an ability for self-control. A person with great potency is supposed to behave with composure and grace and never to show uncontrolled, direct bursts of extreme emotions such as anger. On the other hand, women are always characterized as more emotional than men as the two religious teachers did when they discussed their respective views on gender differences.

Further, women in many Southeast Asian societies are presumed to be more calculating, instrumental, and direct than men. Their very control of practical matters and money, their economic "power," is the opposite of the kind of "power" or spiritual potency that brings the greatest prestige. Thus, the more powerful and effective women are perceived as in economic matters, the less prestige they earn. But, this situation is not amendable. A woman's position cannot improve by reducing, or even eliminating, her economic activities.

Potency to Southeast Asians is an innate human quality, directly invisible and unmeasurable. It is believed that men are born with more of it than women. In Thailand, the spiritual power is believed to dwell in one's head; thus patting a child on the head (as Japanese visitors inadvertently do) is not welcomed. The Burmese also have a name for the special spiritual quality: *hpon*. (Mi Mi Khaing 1963: 114) They, too, believe that it is inherent in men and thus places them above women in religious order. This idea of innate potency inexplicable and unmeasurable, widely identified throughout Southeast Asia, neatly meshes with the Islamic teaching that men are superior to women—a teaching that is not given any explanation, but is simply the word of Allah.

The proximity between male potency in indigenous Southeast Asian thought and male leadership in the Quran is suggestive of the relative ease with which Malay accept gender roles in Islamic teachings. For Ustazah Fatima, male supremacy may have been a natural conclusion founded on her upbringing and life in Kelantan. An important aspect in her interpretation is that her stance was induced by indigenous thought and practice rather than from the Quran which, as Ustazah Zainab pointed out, does not clearly define female inferiority. The role played by Islam here is not to grant absolute rules incontestable for

indigenous ideology, but to give shape to a latent folk thought.

Ustazah Zainab seems to have acquired a wider perspective than that limited to Kelantan as indicated in her historical knowledge of Islam and her attitude as reflected in her generalization of local people's behavior as common to the Islamic world. She may be conscious of the criticism and misunderstanding voiced by the western world on the segregation of women in Islamic societies when she emphasizes that women are not inferior to men. She singles out intelligence as the deciding factor: Men and women are equal in terms of intellectual ability. Male leadership and *talak* (the right to divorce one's spouse) are not based on intelligence but on the Quran. Yet, she does not question why Allah granted them to men only. That men are leaders of women signifies that women cannot lead men, or themselves for that matter. The unspoken implication is that men are superior to women. Her argument focusing on intelligence seem to be a diversion to direct the listeners' attention away from this essential question.

As a fundamentalist, her major concern is to be conscientious with regard to the written word in the Quran and Hadith. However, this leaves her with the problems of how to bridge the gaps between Islamic teachings and reality, and of how to reason certain subjects left unexplained in the holy texts. She is not as enthusiastic about this kind of responsibility as Ustazah Fatima. Rather, she waves away such discussions by classifying certain subjects into the category of 'Allah's business.' When she teaches in her confident manner, she is unlikely to evoke open objections or further questions from the unlearned Malay village women. Yet, in my observation, it is almost certain that some of the questions will stay unanswered in the minds of these women. One question, and perhaps the most critical one for Malay women, is the question of polygyny.

Although it is legal under Islamic law, a Muslim man usually takes every precaution to conceal from his first wife his intention to take another wife until the polygynous marriage is materialized. When the facts are known, he must be prepared to face a tremendous amount of pressure from his first wife, her family and sympathetic neighbors. Heather Strange describes one such case in which the first wife successfully pressured her husband out of his second marriage (1981: 144-6).

When Ustazah Fatima states that, "Polygynous men are not truly religious," she reflects the strong emotion of Malay women against polygyny. She can relate to wives of polygynous marriages and provide them with comfort and understanding. On the other hand, while polygyny is a subject which might arouse endless controversy in Malay society, people are reluctant to discuss it in public, for any opposition to it may be construed as anti-Islamic. Consequently, no one would dare refute Ustazah Zainab, whose contention that men are entitled to four wives is absolutely correct in accordance with Islamic law. Nonetheless, she would fail to convince many Malay women.

In an atmosphere of Islamic revivalism, however, Ustazah Zainab receives a more favorable evaluation from other teachers and politicians. Her reputation is based on her excellent command of Arabic and familiarity with almost every verse of the Quran, able to quote immediately a passage relevant to a given topic. Conversely, Ustazah Fatima is considered lacking in the Islamic knowledge required of a religious leader in this fundamentalist era, a criticism of which she seems aware. It may not be feasible for her to supplement her deficiency in this respect, yet she strives in her own way in order to adapt to the new religious trend: One such effort by Ustazah Fatima is detectable in the modification of her daughter's

wedding ceremony.

Radical Malay fundamentalists attack various Malay customs stating that they should be eliminated from a pure Muslim life on the grounds that these customs originate in animism or pagan religious customs. The Malay wedding ceremony, known as *majlis bersanding*, is one of them. This ceremony is, from a fundamentalist viewpoint, irrelevant since a marriage is sufficiently effectuated by the Islamic ceremony, *akhad nikah*, a marriage contract mandatory for legitimate Islamic marriages. Yet, most Malay people would not give up easily *bersanding* because this is the ritual that brings glamour and joy to a wedding. *Majlis bersanding* features a procession of men and women in fine clothes, decorated trays of gifts and ceremonial food; it reaches to a climax when the wedded couple in the traditional royal costumes of the Malay court sit side by side on special chairs in front of mostly female guests. In terms of its colorful setting, truly festive atmosphere, and most strikingly the full participation of women, this ceremony stands in stark contrast to *akhad nikah*, which is carried out solely by men in a religious atmosphere *without* the presence of the bride.

When Ustazah Fatima's daughter married, instead of wearing the traditional Malay bridal attire, she donned a *baju kurung*, a combination of a full-length skirt and a long-sleeve tunic with matching head dress, the standard uniform for urban Malay women who conform to the views of Islamic revivalism.

Ustazah Fatima and her daughter are both faithful Muslims, yet have chosen to follow the Malay tradition, knowing Kelantanese women would not passively surrender their female position to male-dominated Islamic *akhad nikah*. The slight modification of the ceremony was their way of showing their Islamic faith in response to radical fundamentalists.

In sum, the two Malay religious teachers present different interpretations on gender relations in Islam. Ustazah Fatima, locally educated in a Malay environment, is strongly affected by traditional Southeast Asian values which includes spiritual male potency. Although this concept is analogous to the attitudes toward gender in Islamic teaching—a teaching she admittedly accepts—she cannot help but reflect the disposition of independent Malay women with statements such as those concerning the religiosity of men with many wives. On the other hand, Ustazah Zainab identifies herself with a wider Islamic world that transcends local values; her assertion that men and women are intellectually equal is perhaps the most telling example. However, she accepts the dictates of Allah without question, including men's superior role over women. In doing so, she fails to provide her Malay sisters with any consistent explanation of their social position.

Interestingly, what is common to the two teachers is that they are not openly against the male-dominated society in which they live; rather they fully support the new religious movement and play active roles to integrate women into it. From the male point of view, the priority clearly must be placed on the development of Malaysia based on Islam, in the full knowledge that its strict application may create tension and conflict in certain sectors of the society. Women are considered significant participants in this developmental movement, but they must accept their prescribed roles. In such an environment, the two teachers, as local female leaders accredited by the dominant male authority, will have to continue to divert their attention, in their respective ways, away from pursuing the root causes of the conflict faced by women in this society.

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