

'MALE' AND 'FEMALE' IN DEVELOPING SOUTHEAST ASIA



edited by
WAZIR JAHAN KARIM

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Foreword

This volume is a result of a Workshop organised by the Universiti Sains Malaysia-based KANITA Project (Women in Development) and UNESCO on 'Research Methodologies, Theoretical Perspectives and Directions for Policy in Gender Studies in Southeast Asia', held in December 1989, in Penang. It puts together a selection of the papers presented at the workshop and a few from invited contributors.

The chapters are organised into three parts, theoretical, ethnographic and methodological, and essentially express the viewpoints of Southeast Asianists concerned with the applicability of contemporary feminist theory in Southeast Asia. While a number of the writers attempt to form a critique of Western feminist theory, by demonstrating its inconsistency with cultural data, either ideologically or empirically, some appear sympathetic to the writings of feminist anthropology by elucidating the way in which Western knowledge through colonialism and modernisation has made men more 'public', and hence more important. Economic and development theory borrowed from the West emphasises male-female categories of work and production, according them a differential value that has engendered both economic remuneration and statistical and national accountability.

Many writers also show that religions which originated in patriarchal states outside Southeast Asia, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, have contributed significantly to gender differentiation and the formal dominance of men in public and political life. However, underlying most of these papers is the association of women's power with popular ideologies derived from folk traditions. Rather than seeing male-female relations as separate, distinct and hierarchical, writers show how interfused male-female relationships are and how domestic and public boundaries overlap in social systems which are ego-centred and non-corporate. Women fare better under systems which de-emphasise corporate forms of grouping and membership. If any kind of feminist perspective has to emerge, it is to show that Southeast Asian categorical distinctions of the public and private, formal and informal are not as important as they are made out to be in social theory, and that differences

in power between women and men suggest differences in domains of preference, perceived as complementary rather than hierarchical. In Southeast Asia, the history of inclusion of ideologies that formally preach patriarchy reflects a history of social tensions between popular bilaterality and religious orthodoxy. This introduces paradoxical statements and interpretations of gender relations within cultures.

Another point which is emphasised is the distinction between 'sameness' and 'equality', reflecting the Southeast Asian mode of thinking: that biology, physique and psychology are factors that make women different from men but in no way inferior to them. These factors have not reduced women's contributions to political, economic and social life, but, on the contrary, enable them to stabilise important institutions, which are being destabilised with economic development, modernisation and industrialisation. These pertain to the organisation of the family and household, the production and processing of food, the maintenance of health-care systems and the educational needs of children. The popular view that women are not the same as men and do different things does not generate a discourse that they are inferior or less important than men, at least not before they are told that they are by modernists, advocating Western models of change and development. Nevertheless, while tourism, prostitution, and production work in assembly lines, have placed a commercial value on women in ways more visible than before, there are signs and symptoms of resistance, a pull towards reducing hierarchies and differences through popular interpretations of gender relationships. In revivalist movements, for example, the external symbols of resistance seems to go contrary to notions of equality, yet the invisible message is anti-Western and anti-modern. Women became the ritual bearers of 'culture' emphasising a role more 'indigeneous' than 'commercial'. In modern economic activity, women are increasingly moving into the non-formal sector where they can continue with their entrepreneurial activities based in household production. This is a traditional way of recognising the household as 'public' and of linking the domestic with economic activity managed and controlled by women.

This volume will make an important contribution to the development of the theory and ethnography of Southeast Asia, particularly since publications on women and gender in this sub-region are still few to come by and, with the exception of one or two, continue to emulate predictions of Western theory that patterns of change and transformation are always hierarchical and irreversible, affecting women more adversely than men.

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PART I

Theoretical Overview

Prologue: A Woman Looks Back on the Anthropology of Women and Feminist Anthropology

Rosemary Firth

It is good to find the Women's Studies Unit at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang presenting a collection of papers on gender relations from so wide an area and with such diverse viewpoints in this challenging new field.

Over half a century ago, my own Malayan fieldwork was probably one of the first published studies of women in Southeast Asia. But it was a study of women's roles, not a gender study in the modern theoretical idiom. The same is true of the work by other women anthropologists of that time. It is natural that each generation should approach old subjects in a style which differs from that of their elders. In this paper I shall take a backward look at anthropological work on women and by women in the last sixty years or so, which laid the foundation on which younger writers have built today.

The term Gender Studies is a recent innovation in anthropological discourse, while sex roles and relationships were a traditional subject of investigation even before Malinowski's study of kinship and sex in the Trobriands (1929). Ten years later, Phyllis Kaberry published her *Australian Aboriginal Woman, Sacred and Profane*. The introduction to that work makes it clear that she was concerned with the anthropology of women rather than with feminist anthropology. While women were the focus of her attention, her theme, she said, was 'one that involved a contrast and comparison of their activities with those of men, their cooperation and their shared beliefs'. In 1952 she published *Women of the Grasslands*, an original and witty study of the contradictions and complexities of attitudes and behaviour between the sexes in the Cameroons. Those women had no doubt about their importance in that society, in child-bearing, agricultural work and certain ritual practices, and they expressed it to her with some acerbity (1952: 150)

A woman is an important thing . . . she bears a child, then takes a hoe, goes to the field and is working there; she feeds the child there . . . What work can a man do? A man can only buy palm oil. Men only build houses . . . Important things are women. Men are little. What are the things of men? Men are nothing, have you not seen?

And they reminded her of the four days of mourning for a woman, in contrast to only three for a man.

In 1937 Camilla Wedgwood published her studies of *Women in Manam*, New Guinea. In 1959 Audrey Richards published *Chisungu*, her study of girl's initiation ceremonies in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). In this she made clear that the rites were an initiation into womanhood and its responsibilities, since the girls were already sexually sophisticated. The rites were said to change the girls from 'an uncultivated weed', in the men's phrase, to 'women as we are', in their own terms. A study of the unusual familial and economic roles of women in Jamaica was Edith Clarke's book *My Mother Who Fathered Me* in 1957.

For these four women, all unmarried and collecting their material alone in the field, it must have seemed the most simple and natural thing to do, to study women: a man would have found it a more difficult task. Successful women in those days often did remain unmarried, but we cannot know if this was a deliberate choice or the unexpected result of the way their emotional energies were directed.

About 1958 the wind began to change a little. UNESCO convened a meeting in Calcutta in January of that year to discuss the contribution which the social sciences could make towards better mutual appreciation of Eastern and Western cultural values. Special emphasis was to be laid on the 'revolutionary changes in the status of women politically, legally, economically and educationally . . . in country after country in the last fifty years'. The preface boldly declared (1963: 13): 'In this book, UNESCO is daring to ask for trouble- to study the roles of the two sexes is to do just that. Probably no other topic excites more argument and less agreement and probably on no other topic is the argument more heated and the disagreement more profound.'

The book was edited by Barbara Ward, who contributed a clear introductory preface for lay readers. The articles covered Burma, Ceylon (as it then was), India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaya, East Pakistan, the Philippines, China, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. They were written by anthropologists, sociologists, educationists and political scientists of note, as well as by some 'ordinary housewives'; in some of these papers the sharp note of perceived injustice and inequality first began to appear.

In 1968 Edwin Ardener wrote a paper on 'Belief and the Problems of Women'. First delivered in Phyllis Kaberry's seminar in London, it was appropriately published in a *Festschrift* for Audrey Richards in 1972, edited in turn by Jean La Fontaine. Commenting on a later reprint, Ardener noted (1975: 20) that 'of that galaxy of female talent, none of the women were of a particularly feminist turn of mind'. It so happened, however, that when in 1964 I consulted Audrey Richards on how I might present the result of my second visit to Malaysia, she wrote to me: 'Women are News! as Rose Macaulay says; so you might write a selling book on the position of house-keepers the world over.' I did not do quite that in the 1966 edition of my book, except in so far as I outlined some of the technological developments which had altered the way of life of those peasant fisherman and their wives, and to which they had to learn to adapt.

In 1970 I was invited to give a paper on 'The Social Images of Men and Women' at a symposium on 'Biosocial Aspects of Sex'. Stressing the influence of upbringing and social expectations on the different behaviour of men and women in such matters as dress, hair style, bodily movement in sitting and carrying and using implements, I suggested that a world in which the sexes were not so differentiated, but regarded as similar and equal would lack the variety of much in art, myth and religious expressions. As Marilyn Strathern succinctly put it later, 'In many cultures notions about difference and similarities between the sexes are put to use . . . as a kind of language for talking about other things . . . as a source of symbolism' (1976: 49).

Issues such as these were not brought to the fore at the time Raymond and I first went into the field. A husband-and-wife team was indeed so unusual that there was a little precedent for any division of labour in field enquiry. If I had any model, it was that of Audrey Richards. I had met her in London at the London School of Economics and read her first book. It was a research study published before she was in the field among the Bemba. In the opening paragraph she boldly stated (1932: 1) 'Nutrition as a biological process is more fundamental than sex. In the life of the individual it is a primary and recurrent physical want, while in the wider sphere of society it determines the nature of social groupings and the form their activities take.'

In 1939-40 and again in 1963 I studied the position of women in Kelantan and their relation to men; since Raymond was recording fish catches on the beach every day it seemed logical that I should find out how fish are cooked and eaten within each household. From there on followed much else about the domestic life of women. Audrey's model, however, did perhaps deflect me from immediate concern with women's

roles and women's self-perception, although I was indirectly concerned with this.

In my own professional gender relations, my studies and those of Raymond were complementary. They were of equal value, and seen so by us, fitting in to each other both factually and theoretically, as my book has shown.

Our joint work might have been regarded as parallel to the gender relations among our Malay friends. In many ways we conformed to their gender patterns as time went on. But our aims and resources were very different, and in some spheres I occupied a special category, in which I was allowed to behave outside a Malay woman's normal gender role. At festivals of marriage or religious celebrations men did a great deal of the cooking. Notably, in the domestic finances of these peasants, it was the married woman who had charge of the family cash, and had a distinct voice in the family expenditure, including capital expenditures by the man, as for a boat or net. It is notable, too, that in Kelantan peasant women were much freer socially than their sisters in western Malaysia — particularly in that early period, except perhaps in Negeri Sembilan.

In 1972 I published a personal description of what it was like to do fieldwork overseas for the first time, and what sort of relations developed between the two of us as we worked. After the war, many married couples went into the field together, and divided their work in different ways, as must have seemed appropriate at the time. Sometimes this meant working in adjacent areas, sometimes on adjacent problems in one area: for example, the Freedmans in Singapore, the Berndts in Australia, the Stratherns in New Guinea, and the Ardeners in Nigeria. The intellectual climate in which they worked differed from that of the pre-war group, when the profession was still very small, and women were not expected to combine marriage and family life with a profession of their own. But when these couples returned home they often found that both partners could not easily get academic jobs. The earlier friend in feminist anthropology to see universals of gender inequality in every culture studied was possibly a reflection of this Western experience of discrimination. I have been made aware of some personal strains myself, where there were tensions between private and public obligations or conflicts of loyalty in the family. On the whole I would hazard a guess that cooperation rather than conflict becomes the rule for anthropologists in marriage partnership. In some instances wives did better than husbands. Anthropologists learn flexibility and adaptability in the field, where they observe different codes of behaviour in all aspects of domestic life, so that it is easier for them, perhaps, than for some others to make personal adjustment within the