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[Review of the book, Elite Malay Polygamy: Wives, Wealth and Woes in Malaysia by Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeiten

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Book Reviews

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Elite Malay Polygamy: Wives, Wealth and Woes in Malaysia. By Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen. New York: Berghahn Books, 2018. 268 pp.

Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen's richly detailed study of contemporary elite Malay polygamy in Malaysia is a welcome addition to scholarship on the country and beyond. Based on fieldwork stretching over twenty-five years, the book is organized thematically around narratives from seventeen key female informants drawn from elite circles in Kuala Lumpur (KL). These narratives provide comprehensive accounts of women's and men's complex and diverse motivations for entering polygamous marriages, especially financial and status concerns, the relationship of the informants to their Islamic faith against a background of growing Islamization, the issues of secrecy and blame often surrounding polygamy, the role of sexuality and desires, the relationships among co-wives, the experiences of children in polygamous families, kinship relations, the role of magic and, finally, divorce among Zeitzen's informants. It should be noted that for convenience she adopts the term polygamy rather than the more correct term polygyny. The book concludes with a discussion of the ways in which polygamy is represented in modern Malay culture and its links to Malay identity, Islamization and Arabization.

Zeitzen admits that the last thing she had expected to find in KL was polygamy (p. 3). But its supposed growing incidence and importance soon presented itself to her. Like myself and other observers, she was struck by the volume of gossip in KL about celebrity and elite marriages and the claims that polygamy was

increasing among the very groups designated as the most 'modern'. Indeed, she notes that the model for a successful 'modern' man in urban Malaysia may involve expectations that he takes a second wife (p. 39). Definitive national figures are hard to come by, but most studies suggest polygamy rates of between 2 and 6 per cent of all marriages. The volume of gossip attests to the profound social and cultural ambiguity surrounding the practice of polygamy that Zeitzen highlights.

The narrative texts clearly demonstrate the ambivalences and 'woes' attached to the practice of polygamy, especially for many of the women involved, torn between personal and religious conviction. Despite its being allowed under Islamic law, polygamy was often effected with great secrecy, including concealment from the first wife, and regarded as a source of embarrassment, shame and blame. Thus, some first wife informants were coy about their husband's second wife, and social occasions often involved complex rules of etiquette about which wife could attend. Secrecy was all the greater due to the prominent position of many study informants, but it appears to have centred more on the difficulties for men in negotiating the second marriage with the first wife and her children than on religious grounds. Zeitzen also details how secrecy helped men circumvent legal requirements, by contracting a second marriage in a different state or country to avoid having two wives registered in their home state. Indeed, there are "polygamy packages" (pp. 67–68) for Thailand on sale, with the number of marriages being recorded in Songkhla province in Thailand, for example, having risen steadily in recent years. Other woes described include the pressures that kept women in unhappy polygamous marriages, the ways in which men's powerful families could disempower wives, sexual jealousies, and competition between some co-wives (who rarely lived together).

Zeitzen's findings usefully complicate any overly simple picture of male privilege and female disadvantage within polygamous unions, however. She describes the ways in which some women became willing second wives, in spite of the problems experienced

by many: these motivations included financial security, and feelings that, as polygamy is sanctioned within Islam, such a marriage marked one as a good Muslim. Moreover, some women with substantial achievements in their own right might seek a “trophy husband” (p. 43), and some even appreciated the relative freedom associated with being a part-time wife. Zeitzen also found that men mostly married as second wives women within their own circle and of a similar age, *contra* the common image of their seeking a younger “trophy wife” (p. 43); they tended to marry the second wife some time after the first (pp. 97–101). Zeitzen is anxious not to suggest that polygamy is inherently oppressive but that it only becomes oppressive through the actions and sentiments of its practitioners.

Overall, this book is to be strongly recommended for anyone interested in contemporary Malaysia, Malay gender relations and Islam. It provides a well-researched, theoretically sophisticated account—if a little repetitive in places—of a thoroughly modern polygamy. The author correctly in my view presents elite Malay polygamy as a reinvented/revamped practice that is very much part of the contemporary order. Thus, as she argues, polygamy magic—often said to lie behind harmonious relationships among co-wives—and other such “dark sides” (p. 250) of Malay modernity are not premodern survivals but correlates of modernity itself, albeit with a long local history. Polygamy has played a central role in the deployment of women’s issues and bodies as central sites within the cultural contests surrounding modernity and Malaysian Islamization in the last few decades: as the conclusion suggests, it occupies an awkward place within the Malaysian state’s drive to create, in Norani Othman’s words, “an authentic Muslim culture of modernity” (p. 251). “One might envision polygamy as a Malay Muslim cultural simulacrum”, Zeitzen proposes, speaking to recent debates about Malay identity (p. 250).

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