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Book Review Essay: Elite Malay Polygamy: Wives, Wealth and Woes in Malaysia¹

By Syed Imad Alatas²

Polygamy in Islam is allowed, subject to the fulfillment of very strict conditions set by the Qur'an. Though not widely practiced in Muslim society today, polygamy nevertheless provokes fiery debates with regards to its feasibility and necessity. In *Elite Malay Polygamy: Wives, Wealth and Woes in Malaysia*, Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen immerses herself in these debates within the Malaysian context.

Zeitzen's ethnography on urban elite Malay women is serendipitous. Her initial research interests were on the lifeways of urban Malay women in Kuala Lumpur (3). Yet, her interlocutors made numerous references to polygamy and its presence in their lives, serving to correct her previous assumption that polygamy was not only rare, but quickly disappearing in the face of modernity. Building on her interlocutors, her underlying theoretical interest is in understanding how much of a cultural space polygamy occupies in contemporary Malaysia. Her interlocutors acknowledge that polygamy is allowed in Islam but personally find it difficult to believe that a man can treat multiple wives equally. Zeitzen's interlocutors are generally inclined towards the monogamous ideal of marriage. Still, she goes to great lengths to show that a few of the elite Malay women still consent to being a co-wife for various instrumental reasons. They may not be sympathetic towards polygamy itself but are aware of the benefits it can bring them, some of which include social status, companionship, and sex.

The accounts of polygamy that Zeitzen explores are both real (polygamous marriages that do happen) and imagined (anxieties women have about their husband potentially taking a second wife). She argues that the psychological impact of polygamy on the women far outweighs the statistical presence of such marriages in their personal lives. The psychological impact is all the more significant when actual statistics of polygamy are hard to obtain. She suggests the concept of 'polygamous anxieties' to encapsulate her main argument. To my mind, this concept is analytically useful in demonstrating the unending challenges of being in a polygamous marriage and the unending possibility that an elite woman's husband may marry again, with or without her knowledge. 'Polygamous anxieties' runs as a recurring theme throughout the fifteen chapters of her book as she looks at how class, religion, culture and gender intersect to study what polygamy means for her seventeen key female informants. Some of the issues pertinent to polygamous unions include piety, social status and financial well-being, secrecy, sexual desire and relationships among co-wives. 'Polygamous anxieties' also problematizes an oversimplified picture that men are the oppressors in polygamous marriages while women are the victims. Zeitzen's informants may be against polygamy when noting that most men cannot be fair to more than one wife, but also acknowledge the instrumental benefits of polygamy, as mentioned previously.

Zeitzen's methodology consists of multisite fieldwork, a way of maneuvering around obstacles when one seeks to converse with elites who are not very reachable. Straddling Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and London, Zeitzen's primary means of collecting data is through the life histories of the elite women who are her informants. These histories consist not just of their retrospective accounts of their own lives but everyday gossip. Referring to this gossip as a narrative device, Zeitzen shows us how the women articulate their own judgements and fears regarding polygamy. Gossip about an acquaintance or a friend who has become a second wife

¹ Zeitzen, M.K. (2018). *Elite Malay Polygamy: Wives, Wealth and Woes in Malaysia*. New York, New York: Berghahn.

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masks a deep-seated fear that their own husbands too could marry another woman in secrecy. In the discourses on polygamy, most of the emotions felt by her interlocutors include fear, betrayal, jealousy, and unfair competition between wives.

Zeitzen demonstrates great reflexivity, not just as an ethnographer, but a female ethnographer. First, she is aware that her ethnography on polygamy among elite Muslims is not complete without the voices of men. She admits that it is important to know both women's and men's motives for entering polygamous unions to have a complete picture of polygamy in Malaysia. Secondly, she demonstrates impartiality on a marital practice that negatively affects women disproportionately. From the beginning, she addresses the sensitivity and even divisiveness of the topic of polygamy by emphasizing that polygamy only becomes oppressive "through the actions and sentiments of its practitioners" (Zeitzen, 2018, 5).

The organization of the book has flaws which can be overlooked, such as her repetitive style of writing. For example, it is not clear why Chapter 7 ('Wives'), 9 ('Co-wives'), and 10 ('Sharing') are written as separate chapters when they can be combined into two or even one chapter. A more serious flaw can be found on page 106, where she says that "Trickery and secrecy in polygamy is fueled by a Malay propensity to avoid dealing head-on with delicate matters, even among close friends and family". It is not clear why she has this impression of the Malays; is this what her interlocutors told her? This question is crucial because her impression of the Malays as non-confrontational is used to explain, even if partly, the secrecy underpinning the dynamics of polygamous unions. She could at least explain why Malays avoid dealing head-on with delicate matters, or why she thinks so.

Nonetheless, in entirety, Zeitzen's book can be considered the first serious study on polygamy in Malaysia, even if it only focuses on a narrow subset of Malaysia's population. It adds to the literature on polygamous issues in Malaysia, which tends to focus on the legal history and legal sociology of polygamy without really taking into account the voices of women (and men) involved in polygamous unions. Despite the salience of polygamy in Malays' cultural and religious landscape, there is a dearth of anthropological literature of this controversial marital practice. One exception is Nurul Huda Binti Mohd Razif's PhD thesis (2017) which looked at the lives and marital strategies of Malays in the face of moral, religious and societal pressures. These strategies included polygamous cross-border marriages.

Zeitzen's rich ethnography focuses on the everyday lives of women involved or potentially involved in a polygamous union. However, readers should be cautioned against viewing this book solely as a commentary on polygamy in Malaysia. One could extrapolate several issues from the book, such as modernity and its relationship with the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia, contested gender relations in the Malay-Muslim community, notions of manhood and womanhood, and Malay cosmopolitanism. Zeitzen's book serves as a timely discussion on the meaning of a traditional Malay marital practice in modern Malaysia and how it intersects with other facets of life such as religion and the economy. I highly recommend this book to scholars and students in the sociology of religion, sociology of gender, anthropology of Islam, women's studies, and gender studies, more so for those specializing in the Malay and Muslim world at large.

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