

KOMUNIKASI/COMMUNICATIONS

THE PANGS OF GENDER POLITICS: A REPLY TO KHOO'S REFLECTIONS

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I feel quite honoured that my paper "The Pangs and Pitfalls of Development for Malay Women: From the Rule of the Domestic Sphere to Its Downfall," (*Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, June 1990) has received so much attention from a fellow anthropologist. Let us admit it, such a meticulous analysis of every single line of one's article is a rare event. With almost twenty pages of comments one should hope so much effort would lead to "scientific" progress (see Khoo Khay Jin, "Some Reflections on Couillard's "The Pangs and Pitfalls of Development of Malay Women, *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. VIII, No. 2, Dec. 1990).

Under the appearance of correcting inaccuracies, incoherences and assumptions, Khoo uses my paper as an excuse to put forward another reading of Malay women's life. He also uses this occasion to make a political statement: Malay women were and still are subordinated and only modernity will free them from their shackles.

In my paper, I indeed, propose a "dissident" interpretation of men-women relations among rural Malays of the past (dissident with regard to a certain type of feminist analysis *presuming* the universality of patriarchy). This interpretation is then used to offer an alternative view of their role in current development. I clearly state that my interpretation is based on hypotheses and theoretical propositions and not deduced from observed facts (Couillard 1990:72) or unstated assumptions. I refer to "facts", both ethnographic and historical, to illustrate my hypothesis not to confirm it, as this can only be done through systemic research taking them as a starting point. Hence their value is to be judged when measured by the results of further research or when shown to be relevant to understanding current processes.

The notion of relative autonomy is a conceptual tool I use to account for a number of practices both in today's setting and in what we know of historical process. An hypothesis is not a fact, a way of questioning data, of making sense of processes and practices. I try to show how through "modernisation" Malay women are led to believe that they are the guardians of Malay identity while in fact they have become the vehicles for deep-seated transformations.

I have done extensive field work with rural Malay women and shared their lives. My sympathy is clearly with them and I would wish to translate for others their point of view, even if it does not please fellow feminists who take my arguments as threats to their *vision* of the world. My comprehension of rural Malay women and their changing lives is *a priori* as worthy as any and no argument of authority will convince me to the contrary.

I might be wrong in my formulation. I might have to adjust a number of statements. I might have to revise my methodology, my hypothesis, all this would lead to improvement. But I cannot be ruled out as irrelevant only on the basis of someone else's frame of reference which is presumably "more right".

Fellow feminists have already reacted strongly to my proposition concerning relative autonomy as structuring social relations among rural Malays, even when knowing nothing whatsoever about the Malay situation. Clearly, it is not facts they want to rectify, but the political line. I do not deny that my claim is in itself quite daring, but it does not make me less of a feminist. The usual political strategy is to decry the oppression of women so as to justify universal solidarity and concerted action. But this is only one strategy.

Another is to find in women's own cultural elements something which can become a lever in the interpretation of today's situation to help negotiate interpersonal relations including those of gender. This second option is the advantage of allowing for more coherence in one's socio-cultural identity, and of reducing the dislocating impact of "modernisation".

In some contexts, it is the only possible alternative, as women resist readings of their reality which they interpret as "foreign". More and more feminists working in applied work with women come to this conclusion. Hence, I might be an iconoclast, but I am not alone. The fact is that the "political line" is under attack. This results in groping, searching and at times making mistakes. But the kind of attack constructed by Khoo can hardly serve towards a better understanding of what is going on as it is built on arguments of authority.

Khoo's review aims at denouncing questionable assumptions and matters of facts (:104) and he attacks first on the question of representation. Khoo mentions rightly that "there is a problem with a formulation that seeks to distinguish between something called "reality" and our representation of it" (104). He goes on to point out that the observer's representations can be cast as "reality". Hence the "logic presiding to practices" is said to belong to the observer's representation. With this tool, the observer selects those statements that accord with his/her representation and its logic setting aside those that are incompatible with it. This is what I presumably did in my analysis and Khoo corrects me by providing his representation of reality,

presumably more complex hence closer to social processes (according to whose logic one is not told).

Who sees what and whose reality are we talking about? I did simplify a complex social process. But then my point was not to contribute to the literature on representation. It was not meant either to deal with the construction of meaning through social practices. More important, I was explicit about my premises, which is not always the case in "readings" of ethnography or history. It may be that these premises were not formulated elegantly (I have not mastered the language of *our* colonisers yet), but with a minimum of goodwill one could see where I stood.

Hence, when the author declares: "when observers characterize this (a series of behavior) as subordination, they are engaged not merely in objective description, but in an attempt to substitute a different structure of meanings, which if successful results in a different valuation of these relationships and a consequent attempt to re-cast them in accord with new structure of meaning (105)," we are not told what is this new structure of meaning nor why it should be worth recasting according to its rules. Granted representations can be powerful, but whose? Surely, they are not all equal in the process of development?

Khoo enriches our collection of glimpses concerning Malay women and Islam and declares that I am in error in my interpretation of Malay women students' statements concerning Islam and Adat (106). It is illustrative of his style that he simply declares me wrong and proceeds with an alternative reading of the same information. His authoritative tone implies that his reading is better than mine, his representation of Malay women's reality more accurate.

Khoo proceeds with a section on history in which he accuses me of being too vague. I disagree with some of his readings - concerning the prevalence of wet rice agriculture for instance - but it is not useful to get into an argument here as he does not invite debate. Of course I am vague. I am not writing a historical reconstruction of pre-colonial Malaya. I am formulating a series of hypotheses which I use as a first approximation to understand practices I was confronted with.

Again on page 108, when discussing the place of individuals within the household, Khoo uses an argument of authority. He simply declares the centrality of the household adding, "Men and women do not individually enter into production" and later, "The appropriation is immediately by the household" thereby dismissing my argument concerning individual appropriation. I am not the only one to question this kind of reification of the household as a unit (McGee 1989; Muhammad 1985; Wong 1982, 1987)

and I firmly maintain my position on this point. Once more it's one reading against another's.

So desperate is Khoo's strategy to make the point about Malay women's subordination that he attacks in all directions taking statements out of context to prove them wrong. Hence his phrase concerning "the association of women with the sacred does not mean that women are not subordinate" makes a big thing about something which I never asserted. My point is not that women are living within social relations characterised by relative autonomy because they are tied to a sacralisation of rice, neither did I imply that commodity production is the anathithesis of "sacralised" production as he claims (109). What I refer to is that Malay women played a central role in the construction of meaning in the practice of rice cultivation and this changed with technological transfer and commoditisation of the crop. Hence women are not only excluded from economic production but as well from an "ideological" production in which they played a central role.

Similarly, Khoo accuses me of inconsistency in my discussion of commoditisation and its impact of women. What I say is that with rubber both men and women get involved and this is different from the introduction of new cash crops elsewhere (in Africa for instance). This relatively unsupervised small production does not have the same impact on the condition of women as the Green revolution which has modified not only the process of production but the relations under which it is carried out. One has to be really ill-intentioned to accuse me of inconsistency while I am trying to distinguish between two different contexts.

In any case, Khoo proceeds to accuse me of being simplistic, taking my concept of individual appropriation and showing that it cannot correspond to "reality". Yet I have data showing how women have gained access to rubber land, how they tap rubber even far away from their home and how they keep the money they earn. Whose reading is "true"?

Again, on page 111, Khoo denounces my "fiction that until colonialism came along a sort of paradise reigned in which cultivators "enjoyed free access to land". Yet according to informants from the foothills, they had free access to land to slash and burn until the Second World War and I was witness to people opening up land illegally, as if they had free access to it, up till the 1980s. Is their reading of their reality to be disqualified to suit the needs of a framework that wants them to be poor, oppressed subjects of tyrants.

Moreover, it must be stressed once again that the distinction between the wet rice areas and the foothills has to be made, otherwise a statement about "Kedah" might be as misleading as one about the "past".

Some researchers, among whom Khoo counts as one, are highly irritated by essays aiming at providing broad parameters to interpret social relations which are both complex and changing. But it is not as if such a broad analysis denied the need for detailed ethnographic and historical studies. One has to simply realise and acknowledge that these are not of the same nature and that they cannot be judged according to the same rules. Hypotheses was what my paper was about, and Khoo's political statement has not managed to convince me that these hypotheses are useless to approach rural Malay women's ordering of the world.

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