

Making Sense of Malay Sexuality: An Exploration

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ABSTRAK

Rencana ini yang terbahagi kepada tiga bahagian menyorot seksualiti Melayu. Bahagian pertama mendedahkan pemahaman seksualiti dan gender dari sudut epistemologi dan ontology; bahagian kedua memberi contoh kes Anwar Ibrahim yang memperlihatkan bagaimana masyarakat Melayu menangani isu seks dan moraliti dan bahagian ketiga mentafsir kes Anwar Ibrahim dengan menggunakan teori kerangka yang digarap dalam bahagian pertama. Kes Anwar Ibrahim menggegarkan Malaysia dan turut mendapat perhatian meluas dari negara luar kerana ia melibatkan seorang ahli politik yang dianggap sebagai pengambilalih kepimpinan negara. Oleh kerana tuduhan yang dijatuhkan kepada pemimpin tersebut melibatkan perbuatan seks luar tabii yang menyalahi aqidah agama Islam, sedangkan beliau beridentitikan seorang pemimpin Islam yang disegani, kes Anwar Ibrahim membuka peluang untuk melihat pembikinan seksualiti dan moraliti Melayu.

Kata kunci: Seksualiti Melayu, gender, Islam, homoseksualiti, moraliti Melayu

ABSTRACT

This article is a three-part exploratory study of Malay sexuality. Part one provides an insight into the epistemological and ontological aspects of sexuality and gender; part two looks at the case of Anwar Ibrahim as one that illuminates the ways in which Malay society grapples with issues of sex and morality; and part three interprets the Anwar Ibrahim's case from the epistemological and ontological perspective of gender and sexuality. The case received much attention locally and abroad because it involved a political leader who had been seen by many as a probable Prime Minister. However, Anwar Ibrahim was alleged to have indulged in unnatural sex with a few men, forbidden in Islam, and shocking to many because of his image as a pious Muslim leader. His case, however, provides an opportunity to analyze relevant wider issues about the construction of Malay sexuality and morality.

Key words: Malay sexuality, gender, Islam, homosexuality, Malay morality

PART 1:
THE EPISTEMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER

Human sexuality is not a simple biological matter which can be explained purely in terms of reproductive biology. It is a socio-cultural, historical construct. Its forms and meaningful content are comprehensible only within its subsumed socio-normative elements, such as gender stratification, stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, the language of emotions, religious considerations, representations of the body and rules of verbal decency (Featherstone et. al 1995; Friedman 2001; Turner 1996). Hence, every society makes some kind of difference between the “right” and “wrong” kind of sex. Thus, some sexual behavioral patterns that are obviously dysfunctional or incorrect in one context can be quite functional and useful in another context. Behind any normative definition of “right” and “wrong” sexuality are hidden relations of power, such as the social control of men over women, parents over children, or state over individuals. The struggle over these rules and definitions is the core of the whole history of sexuality.

At present, the struggle is particularly sharp if not intense, both overtly and in a subterranean manner. The “sexual revolution” of the second half of the 20th century is the major course. The “revolution” is the result of several macro social trends and they are as follows: the breakdown of gender stratification based on male dominance; changes in masculinity/femininity stereotypes and corresponding sex role prescriptions and expectations; the increasing instability of marital relationships; new liberal attitudes towards the body and emotions; a general rise in social tolerance of individual differences and non-conformity; the weakening of parental, school and peer-group control over adolescents; the progress in contraceptive techniques, especially in the human invention of the birth control pill; the liberation of women from the fear of unwanted pregnancy; the progress of sex research and education; the advent and spread of HIV/AIDS; and the accessibility and availability of pornography on the Internet (Shilling 1996; Milner & Browitt 2002; Ben-Ze’ev 2000; Blum 1997; Hite 2000; Laqueur 2003; Tannahill 2001; The Diagram Group 1992; Turner 1996).

All these trends have a profound influence on sexual attitudes and behaviour. Owing to globalization, in all industrialized and some non-industrialized countries, young people are now beginning their sexual life earlier than did earlier generations. In the former, attitudes towards premarital sexuality have become more permissive, and in most cases such relationships are considered socially and morally acceptable. Such tendencies are also beginning to be observed in non-industrialized countries. Sexual satisfaction has become a major factor in marital success and stability. Sexual techniques are becoming more sophisticated and diversified, indeed in some cases, especially in the West, through resorting to “exotic” forms of the East (Cooper & Stoler 1997; Stoler 1995). It is not surprising, therefore, if people demonstrate higher demands, expectations and worries about the quality of their sex life.

The gender impact of these trends is no less significant. For instance, the changes in women's sexuality are especially important. The age differences in the beginning of sexual life for boys and girls, for example, in industrialized countries, have been considerably reduced or have even completely disappeared. Women strongly object to the "double standard" in sexual morality, especially, on the "virginity question". Therefore, sexuality is becoming an important aspect of the new female social and personal identity.

We could say that "sexuality consciousness" has also increased globally through aggressive consumerism, especially within the context of marketing and branding efforts of all sorts of products, from toothpicks to dildos. The highly gendered advertisements on billboards and MMS messages are just some such examples. The commodification of pornography, on-line and off-line, has contributed hugely to this new form of "sexuality consciousness" or "borderless sexuality". The key role played by the mass media need not be emphasized. It indeed thrives on sexuality issues and news of that sort, from scandals to exposés, straightness to gayness, and rapes to confessions. All these have led to a new form of tolerance in the form of the gradual changing status of sexual minorities.

Homosexuality, instead of being treated as a moral vice or, later, an incurable illness, is now considered rather as a specific lifestyle and, whatever the causes of this sexual orientation may be, may not be used as a reason for social and moral discrimination or legal prosecution, especially in the West. In most European countries, the laws against homosexuals have been abrogated, and gay and lesbian organizations, fighting for their human rights, have emerged. The spread of HIV/AIDS gives further legitimacy for open public discourse on homosexuality.

From a macro perspective, this process has led to a paradigm shift in the way human sexuality is perceived and practised, moving from a collective-orientation to the individualization and personalization of sexuality. This shift, subsequently, led to the social control of human sexuality from being external in nature to being moral self-control. These changes are not unilateral and are in fact very contradictory. Therefore, any writing, analysis and commentary on sexuality, be it in industrialized or non-industrialized countries, contain issues of gender, age cohort, ethnic, cultural and other variations.

In non-industrialized countries, the experience of sexuality and gender is more varied compared to the Western one because of European colonization. The dichotomy of the modern and traditional is not always useful. Often these two components are mixed in a complex permutation. The combination of physical conquest, conducted through coercion, as well as epistemological conquest effected through "culturalization" and "naturalization" processes of the colonies through 'colonial knowledge' (a form of knowledge constructed for purposes of official procedure and as a technology of rule and control) resulted in highly complex social and psychological formations that often obfuscates lay observers. This has been the result of the reconstitution and/or reinvention of tradition often laced with or encapsulated by features of modernity, characterized by

many as a post-colonial social formation. Of course, this has affected the way sexuality and gender has been redefined and embedded in the modern-traditional nexus.

The situation gets more complicated in a multi-ethnic postcolonial society in which the conception of sexuality and gender becomes heterogenized and atomized into ethnic enclaves which, in turn, invite contestation articulated, for instance, in religious terms. With the co-existence of the practice and enforcement of the modern constitution alongside religious laws, the individual and particular ethnic group may experience different forms of external control and internal form of moral-self-control in relation to sexuality and gender.

This has often resulted in the weakening of the social regulation of sexuality. When combined with inadequate information and knowledge, it had engendered several undesirable social and psychological consequences, such as the rise in some countries of the rate of adolescent pregnancies and abortions, sexual abuse and epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases. Commercialization of the erotic has also helped to manipulate sexuality in these countries and extensive contacts without love or emotional involvement are transforming what is thought as sexual freedom into sexual alienation.

The dangers of unrestricted or covert sex are strongly emphasized by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which has revitalized many old sexual anxieties and fears, provoking a situation of moral panic. The conservatives, particularly the religious ones, consider sexual liberation as a state of total moral disorganization leading to the self-destruction of culture and society. Any visible sign of moral disorganization, such as in the realm of music and entertainment deemed as sexually permissive, has often led to religious pronouncements and prohibitions of all sorts as a guide to morally-correct behaviour.

In Southeast Asia, the globalised fear and concern has also been present and has become embedded in the Islamic Malay-Indonesian-speaking world, where religious revitalization of various persuasions has become more overt. This is not to say that the Islamic part of Southeast Asia is without its own notions and practices of sexuality. Indeed, various historical texts, such as the writings of Khadijah Terong of Pulau Penyengat, Riau (Ding 2002), the famous *Sejarah Melayu*, *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, *Tajul Muluk*, *Candraning Wanita* and *Suluk Tambangaras*, some of which date back to the 15th century, and other archaeological artefacts, provide us with more than sufficient empirical evidence that the theme on sexuality and gender in the Malay world was an integral part of the social life of the locals. It was certainly a lived reality. Inevitably, since the texts and artefacts were *istana*-centric in nature, the focus of attention was mainly on the sexual life of aristocrats and those living in the *istana* and hardly ever on those living outside this sphere, such as the peasants, merchants and seafarers.

In recent times, the interest in the “exotic and erotic” past sexual practices of the Javanese, for instance, has undergone a revival of sort in Indonesia with

the publication of books such as *Seksologi Jawa* (Suwardi 2002), *Seks Para Pangeran* (Otto Sukatno 2003), *Seks Jawa Klasik* (Hariwijaya 2004) and *Kamasutra Jawa* (Purwadi 2004), which are not only sold in Indonesia, but in Malaysia as well. However, in Malaysia, the majority of the books have been overtly of the “sexual guide” type, mostly targeting males.¹ In the 1970s and 1980s, the market was flooded with “sexual novels” written by authors such as Sabar Bohari, with themes related to illicit sex, and laced with detailed accounts of sexual encounters, activities and techniques. Apparently, such novels have popularity amongst the new and young Malaysian industrial labour force, known popularly as *Minah Karan* and *Mat Karan*.

Without doubt, the interest in such books has been enhanced both by historical reasons and contemporary circumstances. In part, the public interest has been historical. But, it could also be said that it has been a result of the new awareness about sexuality and gender brought about by the above-mentioned global influence, in Indonesia and Malaysia, which has been mostly felt at the personal level.

The Malay experience of sexuality and gender in Malaysia is a case in point that we shall presently examine. Necessarily, this effort is exploratory although we hope that it will eventuate into an in-depth analysis at a later stage.

The next part of this article focuses on an interesting recent episode in Malaysian political history, which, arguably, has “awoken” Malay sexuality consciousness to a level higher than ever before. It regards the famous case of Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia’s former Deputy Prime Minister and his alleged sexual excesses. The final part of the presentation is an attempt to develop an argument about Malay sexuality and gender by teasing out relevant wider issues embedded in the Anwar case.

PART 2:
THE ANWAR IBRAHIM’S CASE:
MALAY SEXUALITY & GENDER UNROBED

SEXED AND SACKED

The sacking of Anwar Ibrahim from his post as Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister in September 1998 shocked not only the Malaysian people, but also many others outside the country (Aisan Fadhli 1998). He was accused of corruption and sodomy and was required to stand trial on each of these charges. He was convicted and sentenced for fifteen years. Just recently, however, he was released from jail. Analysts and social commentators are still grappling with what actually happened, speculating especially around UMNO’s heavy defeat at the hands of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) in the 1999 general elections. Malay society as a whole, however, is trying to recover from the sensational sexual details that emerged from Anwar’s trial. In short, the events of 1998, which were catalysed

by the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and which represented a crisis in UMNO leadership, have created an ongoing “national crisis” which has yet to be resolved.

Any informed observer on Malaysian politics is aware of the fact that there have been a number of serious conflicts within UMNO leadership in almost every decade since the political party was founded in 1946. Each conflict has been unique and has to be interpreted within the broader historical context of internal party politics and within the Malaysian domestic socio-political milieu. The Mahathir-Anwar conflict is especially “spectacular” due to the global attention it received – similar in degree to the concurrent “Asian financial crisis”. The incident remains the most internationally publicized conflict in domestic Malaysian politics.

The Anwar-Mahathir conflict stands out because never before in Malaysia had a deputy prime minister been sacked by the prime minister. What is significant here, however, is that Anwar was sacked on moral grounds, namely, for his alleged sexual misconduct. We contend that it is the sexuality component of the conflict that makes it unique, if viewed in UMNO’s historical context. What accounts for this difference? Never before has a high-level UMNO conflict, involving the party’s top leadership, been involved in a sex scandal of any kind. In the past, UMNO had had a murder case, a highly publicized corruption court case, extensive press reports on greed-motivated bitter internal struggles, money politics, fierce jockeying for top UMNO positions, political back-stabbing, and unresolved internal ideological differences, but nothing that had to do with sex or sexuality.

It cannot be denied that rumours with sexual overtones involving top- and middle-level UMNO leaders were aplenty. Rumours about male members taking younger second wives were also common. So, too, was gossip about some Wanita (Women) UMNO members pursuing particular UMNO Members of Parliament or UMNO *Datuks* (high-profiled UMNO leaders conferred the royal honorary title of “*Datuk*” or “*Dato*”). Indeed, it is these “sexual” whisperings or the “unspoken concerns” about people’s private lives that make UMNO politics a lot spicier, turning it almost into *wayang*-like theatrics.

Yet before Mahathir sacked Anwar, this rumour mongering was in the private sphere. When Mahathir removed Anwar for alleged gross sexual misconduct unbecoming for a male Muslim, a father and a top leader in the country, and for one with the public image of a pious and serious Muslim intellectual, in a single stroke, the floodgates of Malay sexuality were opened, and the distinction between the private and the public sphere irreversibly damaged.

Viewed from another angle, for a culture that does not have specific words for the sexual organs in its indigenous Malay vocabulary – *zakar* (penis) and *faraj* (vagina) are both Arabic loan words – excepting a morphologically complex euphemism called “*kemaluan*” (lit. “something one is shy of”), the Anwar case was akin to an explosion that broke down the thick barrier that separated the

private and public spheres of Malay discourse on sexuality. Indeed, these were redefined by it. A brief examination of the conflict between these levels of discourse on Malay sexuality and gender as well as the transformation that subsequently took place will show that this is a significant legacy of the Mahathir era, and indeed also a quick lesson on Malay sexuality and gender.

THE HALAL AND HARAM IN MALAY SEXUALITY: THE MASCULINE UMNO

If we observe the organization and internal political style of UMNO, we notice that it has always been patriarchal and masculine. Organizationally, there is the “main party of UMNO” and its Supreme Council, dominated by men, the UMNO Youth – also dominated by men – and a special Women’s Wing (Wanita UMNO). In 2002, the women’s constituency was further divided with the establishment of a Puteri Wing (Young Women’s Wing). There has been a clear lack of women in positions of authority in UMNO since its inception. Notable exceptions include Rafidah Aziz, the Minister for International Trade and Industry. In general, women members of UMNO have been isolated from male politicking and have occupied a separate realm and possessed a separate political identity, despite the fact that they were the backbone of UMNO’s survival at the grassroots level.

Ideologically, in gender terms, the system of leadership in UMNO preserves this patriarchy because women have been rarely nominated or elected at the local UMNO division level to become divisional representatives and, as female party members, have not been allowed to vote in the main elections during UMNO’s General Assembly. What is more significant is the fact that the leadership is highly male-oriented in the sense that there is an unwritten and unspoken but essential rule that no woman shall hold the position of UMNO president, deputy president or one of the three elected vice-presidents.

Heterosexual misdemeanours in the form of polygamous marriage or illicit sexual relations are still considered normal for UMNO males. They may be “immoral” but are, nevertheless, accepted as something masculine or macho, and in Malay, these are described as *bukti kejantanan* (proof of one’s “machismo”). Even though the *khalwat* case many years ago of Mohamad Sabu, a PAS politician, did create a small political storm for a few months, it was soon overshadowed as many other *khalwat* cases involving local UMNO politicians came to light.

The positive reactions from different groups within UMNO towards Anwar’s sacking can be understood as reflecting disapproval of his perceived un-masculine activities. But, these protests against Anwar’s “lack of masculinity” were expressed in a rather indirect way. Instead of pointing out that Anwar’s alleged sexual misconduct was un-masculine, he was vilified for the un-Islamic nature of the activity, seen as unbecoming of a male leader. He was labelled a sexual degenerate, and someone unfit to call himself a father. In contrast to these reactions within UMNO, PAS leaders, even though bitter rivals of UMNO politicians,

reserved their judgment on the matter, saying that as long as UMNO officials were not able to provide sufficient evidence to support their allegations, UMNO members should remain neutral on this matter.

Interestingly, no high ranking UMNO member raised, as a reason for Anwar's sacking, the issue of the economic crisis and the policy-option differences between Mahathir (who was more domestic and "nationalist" oriented) and Anwar (who was the global crusader who courted the IMF and the World Bank) in their approaches to finding a solution to the situation. Nor was the issue of Anwar's own style of *KKN* (cronyism, corruption and nepotism) mentioned as the reason for his removal. What seemed to matter most was the fact that Anwar had tarnished the essentially masculine image of UMNO. By implication, UMNO remains a bastion of Malay masculinity.

SEX IN THE CITY: SEXUAL *HEBOH* IN KUALA LUMPUR

For more than two decades now, Malaysian authorities and leaders, including Anwar himself, who was once the Education Minister, have resisted the idea of introducing sex education to school children for "moral reasons". Ironically, in the opinion of many, the Anwar's trial became the most comprehensive introduction to sexuality, a very public form of sex education, for all Malaysians, young and old, and one that was impossible to avoid in normal daily life. Terms such as "sodomy", "homosexuality", "anal sex", "pubic hair", "semen" or "bodily fluids", "masturbation", "sexual intercourse", and "DNA", came to be continuously defined and discussed in graphic legal and scientific detail in the court cases for weeks at a time.

All of this was duly reported on television and published, almost verbatim, in the local newspapers. The impact of this media coverage goes beyond the issue of "sex education". For instance, the Malay language arguably became enriched through the whole exercise. New Malay words have had to be coined by the Malay language mass media to express the technical vocabulary of human sexuality that was once considered unspeakable in a Malay cultural context. Although the phenomenon may be adequately described as "sex education" for the general Malay public in Malaysia, at the heart of this discourse was indeed the issue of Malay sexuality, including various forms of Malay masculinity.

The modern cultural trappings of Malay sexuality were also put on display during the Anwar's trial. Supposed to be a subdued and serious event, it became a celebration of consumer culture, a fashion show by some of the more illustrious female witnesses from the prosecution side, whose presence was not only covered in the mainstream press but also in local entertainment and fashion magazines. In the local press, photographs of these well-groomed women dominated the front pages of the English and Malay newspapers. In magazines, the main focus of comment was on the latest fashion, body-hugging *kebaya* outfits, jewelry, shoes, and cosmetics of the witnesses.

MALAY MORALITY: ISLAMIZATION OF THE WEST, OR WESTERNIZATION OF ISLAM?

Mahathir personally recruited Anwar Ibrahim in 1982 to join the ruling party with the intention that he would be responsible for “Islamic matters”. Mahathir also set up the Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM) and did his best to centralize Islamic administration, though with limited success. In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, he declared Malaysia an “Islamic state”. Moreover, Mahathir was declared the “new hero” of the Islamic world at the recent OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference) meeting held in October 2003 in the new federal capital, *Putrajaya*. In all of Mahathir’s speeches to the UMNO General Assembly while he was in power, Islamic matters received special mention. He and Anwar were credited with bringing Islamic economics and banking into mainstream Malaysian economy. One would expect then that Islamic morality would provide the main framework for Mahathir’s political culture.

In his 22-year rule as Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir amassed many achievements for Malaysia’s economy and infrastructure. The Penang Bridge, the Proton Saga, the Petronas Twin Towers, the Commonwealth Games, the Multi-Media Super Corridor, Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur International Airport, freeways and commuter railways have radically changed the lives of Malaysians and the image of Malaysia overseas. But, many have argued that these achievements were built on “money politics,” corrupt bureaucratic practices and non-transparency in numerous business dealings involving public funds, such as in the infamous Perwaja case – at present, Eric Chia, Perwaja ex-CEO is on trial for the embezzlement of company’s fund – in which the government lost more than RM \$5 billion. Mahathir recently explained the Perwaja case as a case of mismanagement. Ironically, he has repeatedly criticized those involved in “money politics”, especially those accused of buying votes during UMNO elections. On the other hand, he has remained comparatively silent on the failed Perwaja case, which involved billions of *ringgit*.

Mahathir’s opponents often ask why he deserted the Islamic morality that he holds so high in economic dealings, especially in cases involving UMNO members. He was willing to expose publicly the names of those who had received government contracts and were connected to Anwar. But, he did this selectively and, some said, for political revenge. He did not provide a list of the dealings of other UMNO leaders who had separate sets of cronies, probably connected to members of his own factions. The most spectacular case here was one involving the CEO of Malaysian Airlines, Tajuddin Ramli, whose shares were bought up by a government company at four times their market price.

In short, he was willing to ignore numerous cases of problematic business activities conducted by UMNO members even though they clearly violated the standards of Islamic morality, as clearly spelt out in the al-Quran. But, he was not willing to ignore Anwar’s supposed sexual excesses, which, by the way, are also

clearly prohibited in the al-Quran. His moral stance on Anwar's wrongdoings, including Anwar's corrupt practices, for which he was convicted and jailed, seems to be dictated more by Western morals of the Victorian era than by Islamic values.

Mahathir was willing to forgive and forget the political wrongdoings of those leaders from TEAM B who opposed him in the 1987 UMNO leadership crisis, in the true spirit of a Western gentleman, as long as they were prepared to repent publicly. Afterwards, he even made some of them, including Rais Yatim, cabinet ministers. Indeed, Abdullah Badawi, the new Prime Minister of Malaysia since 31 October 2003, was once a member of TEAM B, but who finally did not leave UMNO to join the rest of the TEAM B members. In May 1989, TEAM B members set up a new party called *Semangat 46* (Ruhanie Hj Ahmad 1990). The party's dismal performance in the subsequent general elections forced its leaders to dissolve the party in 1996. Most of its leaders and members rejoined UMNO after this and actively campaigned for UMNO in the 1999 general elections. In spite of that support, UMNO was defeated heavily by PAS in many of its traditional safe seats.

These contradictions and selective applications of moral principles have baffled both Mahathir's supporters and opponents. They remain a paradox of, not Mahathirism, but Mahathir's morality. In a broader context, it also demonstrates the paradoxes of Malay sexuality and gender, to which we shall now turn in an attempt to develop a frame of argument for the subject matter at hand.

PART 3:

MALAY SENSITIVITY & SENSIBILITY REGARDING THE SENSUOUS

The case narrated and described above reveals not only the immediate issue of sexuality, gender and politics, but also the underlying structural-historical circumstances within which these issues are sociologically embedded and which subsequently came to be articulated in the way they did. We wish to organize and frame our reading and understanding of the whole episode based on our theoretical-conceptual discussion in the early part of the presentation.

Epistemologically, it involves Malay morality, especially the normative definition of "right" and "wrong" relating to sexuality and gender and its almost hidden and unspoken relations of power. It reveals the masculine nature of Malay political parties, such as UMNO, in which the social control of men over women is still overt and almost unchallenged. It also demonstrates how state control over individuals, male or female, is equally unchallenged to the extent that even a powerful individual such as a deputy prime minister is still at the mercy of the state-based structural and cultural apparatus as well as the general understanding regarding sexuality and gender. In this case, it relates to the state's view and attitude towards sexual minorities, namely, homosexuals.

Ontologically, the open articulation of the contestation, indeed paradoxes, between Islamic and Western definitions of morality, or moral ideals, is exhibited for all to see. For instance, Mahathir, on one hand, seemed comfortable in applying both Islamic and Western (read Victorian) moral principles in the way he viewed, judged and, subsequently “punished” Anwar but, on the other hand, is apparently silent on equally morally-loaded issues of corruption and cronyism within his political party, government and business-related dealings.

The public viewing of Anwar’s trial, loaded with sexual content and connotation, and the subsequent difficulties confronted by Malay and Malay-speaking non-Malay journalists to idiomize, or to find accurate Malay “sexual idioms”, for reporting the whole episode in detail also reveals the enormous difficulty that the Malays have, in general, in expressing sexuality-related matters publicly; matters that seemed to be buried deep in the inner sanctum of their minds, or expressed only in a limited close circle of intimate relatives and friends, and usually in a teasing or tongue-in-cheek manner. If repeated at the workplace, this would be construed as “sexual harassment.”

The moot question is, is it the primordial moral principles or the Islamic ones that form the boundaries between the “private” and “public”, the “right” and “wrong” amongst the Malays, with regards to sexuality and gender? Are these boundaries self-imposed or externally imposed?

Judging from the availability and content of published literature in the Malay language involving societies in the Malay world, in the past and at present and the kind of detailed discussion in these texts about all aspects of sexual relations (biological and social, direct or indirect), we can surmise that the Malays have a deep interest, concern and liking on such matters. Indeed, it could be said that sexuality and gender in this context have been treated as a matter of fact. We just have to read weeklies like *Bacaria*, with its readership of around 100,000 per issue, to convince us that Malays are rather promiscuous in the discursal sense.

It is also interesting to observe how Malay notions of sexuality and gender have spilt into the sphere of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. The famous recent “holding hand” case that was brought to court, involving Malay municipal enforcement officers and a Chinese couple, is a case in point. What if it had involved a Malay male and a non-Malay female or vice-versa? The question that begs to be asked is, is “mixed marriage” or inter-ethnic “carnal unity” an idealized model of national integration?

From texts and records produced by Europeans on the Malays and societies in the Malay world, be it novels, short stories, archive records or straight descriptions of their sexual behaviour, or of poison, charms and love potion, Malay females were characterized as not only “exotic” but also extremely “hot” (borrowing the popular parlance). Perhaps these narratives have been influenced by other factors, such as imperialist domination and racist ideology, as described and analysed vividly by Stoler in her famous book *Carnal Knowledge and*

Imperial Power (2002) or the Orientalist ideology as Gouda (1995) and Clancy-Smith and Gouda (1999) have discussed and dissected extensively.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that we are offering nothing really concrete empirically, or in ethnographic terms, on Malay sexuality, gender and politics. We do not pretend that we are doing so. But, we have explored some possible areas where we need to look broader and deeper for a better understanding of the nature of Malay sexuality, aspects of which have been explored elsewhere.

NOTE

1. See for example, the writings of Ibnu Yusof (1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1995a, 1995b and 1996); Helmy Halim (1967); Pak Murba (1998); Jaafar Salleh (2000); Fahmi Marwan (2001) and many more, as listed in the references of this paper.

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