

SEXUALITY, ETHNICITY AND POLITICS: A VIEWPOINT AND EXPERIENCE FROM MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Human sexuality is not a simple biological given which can be explained in terms of reproductive biology. It is a kind of socio-cultural, historical construct. Its forms and meaningful content are comprehensible only in the context of socio-normative culture as a whole, including gender stratification, stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, the language of emotions, religious considerations, representations of the body and rules of verbal decency. Hence every society makes some kind of difference between the 'right and 'wrong' kind of sex. However, some sexual behaviour patterns are obviously dysfunctional or in incorrect in one context but can be quite functional and useful in another context. Behind any normative definitions of 'right' and 'wrong' sexuality relations of power are always hidden, such as the social control of men over women, parents over children, the State over individuals. The struggle over these rules and definition is the core of the whole history of sexuality the world over. In the ethnically plural Malay world, ethnicity factor complicates further the issue of sexuality and politics. Therefore, the experience of sexuality, ethnicity and politics amongst the Malays in Malaysia is a case in point that is useful to be examined and analyzed in our brief presentation. Necessarily, this is an exploratory effort.

INTRODUCTION

It has become commonplace to discuss politics and sex at the popular level, especially, after the famous Clinton-Lewinsky amorous encounter in the Oval of the White House. The episode shook the office of US presidency which led to the official impeachment of Clinton by the US Congress (Starr 1998). Although the impeachment came to nought, the spill over effect around the world was hugely spectacular and ironically popular. It has been discussed both at high places and at pubs almost everywhere around the globe. What has been less known, globally, is perhaps the alleged amorous activities of the Indonesian former President Abdul Rahman Wahid, or popularly referred to as Gus Dur, which received a wide coverage both in the print and electronic media in the year 2000, mostly in Indonesia. In comparison, the amorous adventures of Malaysia's former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, perhaps had received a wider international coverage, between 1998-2001, than that of Gus

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Dur's as a result of his surprise sacking by Mahathir, the then Malaysia's Prime Minister, and, subsequently, due to Anwar's *reformasi* movement as well as his trials by the Malaysian court of justice for his alleged corruption and sodomy activities (Shamsul & Smith 2004).

We wish to point out that there has been a massive collection of literature on sex and politics in the social sciences and humanities that covers historical periods as far back as the Greek and Roman period. It is impossible, in this brief paper, to discuss and analyse this rich corpus of material. What we intend to do here is more modest and indeed exploratory in nature. The first part of the paper, deals with sexuality, gender and politics from a conceptual perspective, with a brief reference to the empirical situation in Indonesia and Malaysia. With that as a backdrop, in the second part, we present a highly-profiled Malaysian case, the case of Anwar Ibrahim, in which ethnicity, or intra-ethnic politics, seems to be a significant factor, too.

SEXUALITY, GENDER, ETHNICITY AND POLITICS: A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

Human sexuality is not a simple biological given which can be explained in terms of reproductive biology. It is a kind of socio-cultural, historical construct. Its forms and meaningful content are comprehensible only in the context of socio-normative culture as a whole, including 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. However, some sexual behaviour patterns are obviously dysfunctional or in incorrect in one context but can be quite functional and useful in another context.

Behind any normative definitions of 'right' and 'wrong' sexuality relations of power are always hidden, such as the social control of men over women, parents over children, the State over individuals. The struggle over these rules and definition 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 a 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 roles prescriptions and expectations; increased instability



of marital relationships; new liberal attitudes towards the body and emotions; a general increase 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 birth control pill; liberating 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 in 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 older 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 the 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 for our consideration. The age differences in the beginning of sexual life for boys and girls, say in the industrialized countries and perhaps not so much in the non-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 toothpick to dildo. The highly gendered advertisements on billboards and MMS messages are just some examples. The commodification of pornography, on-line and off-line, contributed hugely to this new form of 'sexuality consciousness' or 'borderless



sexuality.’ The contribution of the mass media need not be emphasized. It indeed thrives on sexuality issues and news of sorts, from scandals to exposes, gays to lesbians, rapes to confessions. All these have led to a new form of tolerance in the form of a gradual but 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 maybe, not to 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 discovery of HIV/AIDS gives the legitimacy for open public discourse on the issue of homosexuality.

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

In the 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 does not hold water all the time. Often these two components are mixed in a complex of 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) had resulted in a highly complex social and psychological formations, often obfuscating to the 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 a modern-traditional nexus.



The situation gets more complicated in a multi-ethnic postcolonial society in which the conception and notion of sexuality and gender becomes heterogenized and atomized into ethnic enclaves which, in turn, invites contestation articulated, for instance, in religious terms. With the co-existence of the practice and enforcement of modern constitution as well as 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 often has resulted in the weakening of social regulation of sexuality. When combined with inadequate information and knowledge it engendered several undesirable social and psychological consequences, such as the rise in some countries of the rate of adolescent pregnancies and abortions, sexual abuse, 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 to 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 self-destruction of culture and society. Any visible sign of moral disorganization, such as in the real of music and entertainment deemed as sexually permissive, has often led to religious pronouncements and prohibitions of all sorts as a form of moral response and guide to morally-correct behaviour.

In Southeast Asia, the globalised fear and concern became embedded in the Islamic Malay-Indonesian-speaking world, where religious revitalization of various persuasions had become more overt. This is not to say that the Islamic part of Southeast Asia is without its own notion and practice of sexuality. Indeed, various historical texts, such as the writings of Khadijah Terong of Riau, 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 artifacts, provided us with more than sufficient empirical evidence that the theme on sexuality and gender in the Malay world had been an integral part of the social life of the locals, and certainly it was a lived reality. Inevitably, since the texts and artifacts had been *istana*-centric in nature, the focus of attention was mainly on the sexual life of the



aristocrats and those living in the *istana* and hardly on those living outside this sphere, such as the peasants, merchants and seafarers.

In recent times, the interest on the 'exotic and erotic' past sexual practices of the Javanese, for instance, has recently 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, too. However, in Malaysia, the majority of the books have been overtly the 'sexual guide' type, mostly targeted for 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 account of sexual encounters, activities and techniques. Apparently, such novels have popular amongst the new and young Malaysian industrial labour force, known popularly as *Minah Karan* and *Mat Karan*.

Without doubt, the interest on such books has been motivated by both historical reasons and contemporary circumstances. In part, the public interest on these books 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, mostly felt at the personal individual level.

The Malay experience of sexuality and gender, in Malaysia, is a case in point that we wish to examine and analyze in our brief presentation. Necessarily, this is an exploratory effort that we hope would eventuate into a book-length manuscript. The next part of our presentations consists of an interesting recent episode in Malaysian political history which, arguably, has 'awoken' Malay sexuality consciousness like never before. It is regarding 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.

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 bibliography of this paper.



MALAY SEXUALITY, GENDER & POLITICS UNROBED: THE AMOROUS ADVENTURE OF ANWAR IBRAHIM

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 required to stand trial for each of these charges. He was convicted and sentenced for fifteen years and remains in jail, despite efforts to appeal these convictions. Five years later, analysts and social commentators are still grappling with what happened, especially of 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 have emerged from Anwar's trial. In short, the events of 1998, which were catalyzed by the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and which represented a crisis in UMNO leadership, have created an on-going "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 is unique and has to be interpreted within the broader historical context of internal politics within UMNO and within the Malaysian domestic socio-political milieu. The Mahathir-Anwar conflict is especially "spectacular" due to the global attention it has 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 has 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 UMNO top leadership, particularly members of the Supreme Council, involved a sex scandal of any kind. In the past, UMNO has 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 to do with sex or sexuality.



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

Yet before Mahathir sacked Anwar this rumor 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 who presents the public image of a pious and serious Muslim intellectual, in a single stroke Mahathir opened the floodgates of Malay sexuality, and irreversibly damaged the distinction between the private and the public sphere.

Viewed from another angle, we are arguing that 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 -- except 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 sphere of Malay discourse on sexuality, indeed redefined it. We propose to briefly examine the conflict between these levels of discourse on Malay sexuality and gender as well as their transformation which has subsequently taken place, and argues that this is a significant legacy of the Mahathir era, and indeed a quick lesson on Malay sexuality and gender.

The HALAL & 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 Putri 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 Trade and Industry. In general, women members of UMNO have been isolated from male politicking and have occupied a separate



realm and a political identity although they have been 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 misdemeanors, in the form of polygamous marriage or illicit sexual relations, are still considered normal for UMNO males. They may be "immoral" but are accepted as something masculine or macho, or in Malay, 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 of 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, which is seen as unbecoming of a male leader. He was labeled a sexual degenerate, 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 his sacking, the issue of the economic crisis and the policy-option differences between Mahathir (more domestic and 'nationalist' oriented) and Anwar (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 behind 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 trial became the most comprehensive introduction to sexuality, a very public form of sex education, for all Malaysians, young and old, and one which was impossible to avoid in normal daily life. Terms like “sodomy”, “homosexuality”, “anal sex”, “pubic hair”, “semen” or “bodily fluids”, “masturbation”, “sexual intercourse”, and “DNA”, came to be defined and discussed in graphic legal and scientific detail in the court cases, continuously 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 which was once considered to be 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 is 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 trial. Supposed to be a subdued and serious event, it was 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 Western, 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, but with limited success. In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, he declared Malaysia to be 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 Mahathir’s speeches to the UMNO General Assembly since assuming office, Islamic matters have received special mention. He and Anwar have been credited with bringing Islamic economics and banking into the mainstream Malaysian economy. One would expect then that Islamic morality provides the main framework for Mahathir’s political culture.

In his 22-year rule as Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir has amassed many achievements in Malaysia’s economy and infrastructure. The Penang Causeway, the Proton Saga, the Petronas Twin Towers, the Commonwealth Games, the Multi-Media Super Corridor, Putrajaya, KL 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 bad 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 his economic dealings, especially in cases involving UMNO members. He was willing to expose publicly the names of those who have received government contracts and were connected to Anwar. But he did this selectively and, some said, on the basis of political revenge. He did not provide a list of the dealings of yet other UMNO leaders who have 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 out 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, which is clearly spelt out in the Quran. But he was not willing to ignore Anwar's supposed sexual excesses, which, by the way, are also prohibited in Islam as clearly stated in the Quran. His moral stance on Anwar's wrong doings, 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 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 prior 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 still 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 to, in an attempt to develop a frame of argument on the subject matter at hand.

BEYOND POLITICS:

MALAY SENSITIVITY & SENSIBILITY REGARDING THE SENSOUS

The case narrated and described above reveals not only about the immediate issue of sexuality, gender and politics but also the underlying structural-historical circumstances within which these issues are sociologically embedded and, 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 upon our theoretic-conceptual discussion in the early part of the presentation, and they are as follows.



Epistemologically, it is about Malay morality, especially, regarding the normative definition of 'right' and 'wrong', in this case relating to sexuality and gender and its relations of power, almost hidden and unspoken. 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 the individuals, male or female, is equally unchallenged that even such a politically powerful individual as a deputy prime minister is still at the mercy of State-based structural and cultural apparatus as well as 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 definition of morality, or moral ideals, is exhibited for all to see. For instance, Mahathir, on the one hand, seems to be comfortable to apply both Islamic and Western (read Victorian) moral principles in the way he views, judged and, subsequently, 'punished' Anwar but, on the other, is apparently silent on an 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,' in order to report 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 private minds, or expressed only in a limited close circle of intimate relatives and friends (reminds me the highly-sexed MMS and SMS I have received thus far, jokes or otherwise) usually in a teasing or tongue-in-cheek manner. If repeated at the workplace (beware!) it could 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 matters relating to sexuality and gender? Are these boundaries self-imposed or externally-imposed?

Judging from the availability of published literature in Malay involving societies in the Malay world, in the past and at present (see Bibliography), 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 deep interest, concern and liking on such matters. Indeed, it could be said that sexuality and gender in this context has been treated as a-matter-of-fact. We just have to read weeklies like *Bacaria* that has a readership of around 100,000 for each issue to convince of us that Malays are rather promiscuous in the discourse sense.

It is also interesting to observe how Malay notion of sexuality and gender has 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 involved a Malay male and a non-Malay female or vice-versa? Perhaps “mixed marriage” or inter-ethnic “carnal unity” is an idealized model of national integration?

From texts and records produced by Europeans on the Malays and societies in the Malay world (see Bibliography), be it novels, short stories, archive records or straight descriptions on their sexual behaviour, or deep interest in poison, charms and love potion, the Malay females have been 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.

As a 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 on the nature of Malay sexuality, aspects of which have been explored elsewhere.

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