The Family in Flux in Southeast Asia

Edited by
Yoko Hayami
Junko Koizumi
Chalida Pongsamphane
Ratana Tosakul

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Between Malay Kinship and Islamic Marriages: 
Negotiating Polygamy from Past to Present in Malaysia

Shanthi Thambiah

This chapter draws attention to the crucial distinctions between Malay kinship, which emphasizes bilateralism, and Islamic norms, which contribute to the shaping of Malay marriages. Malay society is often said to be an Islamic society that permits relatively egalitarian relations between the sexes compared to other gender-segregated Islamic societies. This chapter explores the literature on local practices related to Malay kinship, egalitarian gender norms, and Islamic norms that permit polygamy. Drawing on historical accounts, it also highlights how polygamy is negotiated and resisted. However, forces related to economic development and Islamic revivalism undermine the egalitarianism in Malay kinship, leading to increasing acceptance of polygamy with acquisition of new wealth. In addition, polygamy is also justified as a duty to the ummah (the Muslim community). The interaction of contradicting values and norms of Malay kinship and Islamic marriage, which are central to the social construction of Malay families, can be observed in the negotiation of the practice of polygamy in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Local practices and the interaction between traditional Malay kinship adat (customs and traditions), which emphasize bilateralism, and Islamic norms regarding marriage contribute to shaping Malay families. Malay society is known to be an Islamic society that permits relatively egalitarian relations between the sexes compared to other gender-segregated Islamic societies.