The "Rebirth" of a Modern Malay Muslim Woman

Judith Nagata*

Like the flower children of another culture, but of the same era, Zainab was very much a child of her time, of the young Malay generation rocked by the growing pains of a newly-born nation. Symbolically born in the year of independence of the Federation of Malaysia in 1957, Zainab grew up, like her country, feeling her way through the experiences and crises of a heady new freedom, often without guiding precedents to chart a clear path into the future. Zainab's generation, having now reached maturity, was the first cohort of Malays to be raised in the certainty that their political destiny was in their own hands after decades of colonialism. This generation had to be groomed for that challenging future, starting with a continuously revised educational curriculum and language policy, moving steadily away from the colonial prototype.

Although still children at the time of the distressingly violent Malay-Chinese riots of 1969, these youth were old enough to sense the urgency and crisis, and were much shaped by both the event and its aftermath. Faced with the realization that fundamental cleavages separated Malays from non-Malays and Muslims from non-Muslims, and threatened the foundation of the new state, drastic policy changes, in the form of a series of development plans, conceded to the Malays a series of substantial and increasing privileges in educational, occupational and other fields.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Malay youth from isolated villages (kampungs), who had never previously had access to the advantages of higher education, were suddenly launched into new schools and institutions in droves. For many, it involved resettlement in larger urban centres and life in a dormitory or boarding school. Urban Malay children did not undergo this last uprooting, but were still challenged by the insistent litany of their duty to "uplift their race" and to show the non-Malays what they could do. Everywhere, both subtly and explicitly, young Malays were made more conscious of their oppositional relationship to the non-Malays, although Zainab remembers that role models inculcated by their teachers still perpetuated the stereotypes of successful Chinese merchants and technicians and European civil servants. Zainab was thus tossed between the alternatives of being encouraged to strive to pass all her promotional examinations leading to university entrance, and the assurance that she would be unlikely ever to measure up to the performance of her Chinese peers. So began a life of pushes, pulls and paradoxes.

As in so many other countries, the late 1960s in Malaysia was an era of lively student activism, during which the first stirrings of (Islamic) religious revitalization, or dakwah, were felt. The germs of this revival were already discernible in an assortment of consciousness-raising voluntary programmes and causes among college and university students, who derived a sense of fulfilment and gratification from "helping

* Judith Nagata is Professor of Anthropology, York University, Ontario, Canada.
their own people, ... their faith and their country”, as summarized in the popular epigram “bangsa, agama dan tanahair”, the Malay “motto” of the 1970s.

Other currents bearing the Islamic message of regeneration came indirectly, from outside the country, via a world-wide network of students overseas. Among government training schemes for Malays were courses of foreign study on which they met their Muslim counterparts from Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Libya. Traditionally on the periphery of the Muslim world, Malays were suddenly caught up in the central vortex of change. Not only did some of them return from abroad with a newly-defined faith, but their solidarity with the Middle East and a revised perception of their own identity instilled in them a new confidence on their home ground. Bringing their faith home, many Malays entered the professions, including teaching and the civil service, and through their message, new religious associations began to blossom locally. Some of these were little more than small cliques of like-minded soul-mates, intent on sharing a common experience, while others grew to national proportions and their leaders became the popular heroes and cult figures of Zainab’s generation.

Amidst all this ferment, religious and professional, in Malay life, women were becoming as deeply involved as the men. While the idea of a public or professional life, as in teaching, had roots as far back as the colonial period, these expectations were rapidly percolating to the ranks of the average village girl. Even established working and professional women, however, had always managed to maintain a culturally acceptable deferent position in relation to their menfolk in most public roles. The ideal of the nurturant, domesticated, fairly docile Muslim female had never changed substantially, for all the attention paid to the myth of the relatively free and “emancipated” Southeast Asian woman in comparison with her East or South Asian sisters. There is still a widespread sentiment, among both men and women, that where conflicts between domestic and other obligations exist, the former should rightly take precedence. Even young women who have lived and studied in the West often express distaste for some of the “excesses” of the Western women’s liberation movement which they feel has been counterproductive. Of late, the religious resurgence has reinforced the ideal of the compliant, modest, unassertive, domesticated Muslim female, even in professional or public service. Although by no means showing the total veiling and sequestering of their Middle Eastern cousins, a growing number of Malay-Muslim revivalists are dressing more modestly than a decade ago. Whereas in the late 1960s and early 1970s girls experimented with jeans and mini-skirts, they are now more reticent and self-conscious about their public image, for the sake of which participation in dances or entertainment are now off-limits. Even as the girls and young women are withdrawing into a social shell, mothers are becoming increasingly ambitious for their daughters, as for their sons. Academic titles and careers are sought and treasured, as much a measure of progress for the Malays as a whole as for their own families. But the unexpected emergence of religious fundamentalism has reared itself as a sudden obstacle in the path of these long-awaited changes in attitudes to young women, which has made the parental reaction to the revival all the more ambivalent and confused. Yet there still lurks enough tradition in the minds of most mothers to keep them on a constant alert to potential marriage prospects. As far as mothers are concerned, daughters at both ends of the spectrum, whether showing a tendency to place a career before marriage, or else an extreme form of religious