

**PENAUNG : PATRONS**

Duli Yang Maha Mulia Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah  
Ibni Almarhum Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Alhaj, Sultan Selangor  
Duli Yang Teramat Mulia Paduka Seri Pengiran Perdana  
Wazir Sahibul Himmah Wal-Waqar Pengiran Muda Mohamed Bolkiah  
Lee Kuan Yew, Esq.

**YANG DI-PERTUA : PRESIDENT**  
Tun Mohammed Hanif bin Omar

1<sup>st</sup> MBRAS Lecture 2014

“Gender at Work: sexualized banter and ‘polygamy talk’ in Malay-Muslim corporate space” by Dr. Patricia Sloane-White

Badan Warisan Malaysia (BWM), Jalan Stonor, Kuala Lumpur

Saturday, 28 June 2014, 5 p.m.

**Abstract**

Does “flirting,” “heckling,” and sexualized banter in public settings suspend gender and power asymmetry between men and women or are these merely examples of how sexual and gender hierarchy is enforced? In the Malaysian corporations where I study the growing role of Islamic and *shariah*-based management policies, sexualized, ribald cross-gender joking--a common and familiar feature of traditional Malay life--persists, but with significant changes.

In this talk, I argue that joking relations between adult Malay men and women prior to Islamization in Malaysia were symmetrical, and reflected an acknowledgement of women’s sexual and marital powers. Such banter allowed women to publicly diminish male prowess and the male privilege of polygamy. As such, I demonstrate that in the past (and as recently as the mid-1990s), cross-gender sexualized banter in public space provided adult Malay-Muslim women with a context for negotiating and creating gender and sexual equality within Islam’s asymmetrical gender norms.

But gender and power relations and Islamic understanding of marital and sexual politics in Malaysian Islam have significantly changed in the past few decades. This talk demonstrates how these changes have registered in today’s Islamic “public space”--that is, in corporate, office-based joking relations and in public life where sexualized banter (like polygamy itself) is accepted as a male privilege against which women can no longer talk back.

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**The Lecture**

Dr. Patricia Sloane-White, the newly-appointed MBRAS representative for North America, delivered the first MBRAS lecture for 2014 which examined the nature of jokes that occur in Government Linked Companies (GLCs) and the Muslim private section of the office, namely male jokes concerning polygamy that were aimed at women colleagues.

Dr. Sloane-White is a cultural anthropologist, lecturing at the University of Delaware. Her work on “sexualised banter” in the Muslim Corporate Sector involves a longitudinal ethnographic study in GLCs such as Petronas, Tenaga Nasional and Telekom Malaysia, as well as numerous smaller firms in the Muslim private sector. Having undertaken participatory research for about 20 years, her insight into how religion affects the workplace proved incisive and described to be accurate by several members of the audience. Some of the Muslim females and even males volunteered their own personal experiences which corresponded with Dr. Sloane-White’s beliefs.

In her talk, Dr. Sloane-White mentioned the prevalence of sexualised jokes aimed at women in GLCs and how she observed that women often remained passive. To explore this shamefully neglected area of gender relations in the Malay-Muslim world, she has proposed several hypotheses which include: “the content of men’s jokes in what [she] calls “Corporate Islamic” space primarily concerns men’s rights to sexual freedoms,” “...there was a long tradition of sexualised joking in Malay-Muslim life,” “...women have lost the right to speak about Malay-Muslim men’s sexuality,” “...changing religious and legal understanding of Malay Muslim marriage and sexual rights,” and lastly, “an aspect of Islam and sexuality...connects men’s and women’s domestic relations and subjectivities to their public and workaday ones”.

Dr. Sloane-White expanded on her hypotheses and focused the discussion on changes in the law that affected sexualised joking in GLCs, a particularly interesting development. For example she pointed out the differences made to the Syariah laws since 1990. She highlighted that the Islamic Family Law Act in Malaysia stated that males intending to contract a polygamous marriage must first obtain the existing wife’s permission or even, in the case of certain states, a written permission from the judge and existing wives. However, Dr. Sloane-White suggests that these rulings have been progressively relaxed in several Syariah jurisdictions from 1994 onward. To illustrate this, she reports that “the chief minister of Perlis urged men to travel there to marry,

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where the first wife's consent was not needed." Additionally, she addresses that "in the state of Selangor, a Muslim man now seeking to marry another wife no longer needs written permission from existing wives." These changes to the law give more sexual freedom to the Muslim males and could possibly fuel the number of such jokes.

After her talk, the audience was particularly active in interacting with Dr. Sloane-White, who proved during the course of the lecture to be a particularly engaging speaker and one who commanded a loyal following among her Malaysian audience as a result of earlier speaking engagements organized by the American Embassy. As she was a familiar face in the KL public lecture circuit, many in the audience who were acquainted with her were eager to share their own experiences while some asked penetrating and inquisitive questions concerning her research. Dr. Sloane-White shared her research experience with the audience, mentioning that throughout her longitudinal study, most of the participants were willing and helpful and she did not face many challenges in receiving information. However, she commented that remaining objective in analysing the data was a challenge. In the end though, her observations provided valuable insight into the sexual nature of jokes that were aimed at the women. The whole lecture and received an extremely positive response from the audience.

\* This report on Dr. Sloane-White's lecture is an amended version of one originally uploaded by Zoe YT Hooper, one of the Society's youngest members, on the MBRAS' Facebook page.

**Patricia Sloane-White**, DPhil (Oxford) is a cultural anthropologist and Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Delaware. In addition to that, Dr. Sloane-White is also the Director of Islamic Studies and administers several programmes for the College of Arts and Sciences, including the Plastino Scholars, Dean's Scholars, and the Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies programmes. For the last twenty years or so, Dr. Sloane-White has been engaged in sustained research on the relationship between Islam and modern capitalism in Malaysia and is a widely-acknowledged expert in her field. Dr. Sloane-White is the current MBRAS representative for North America.

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