

## Correspondence

### *Reply to Ian Caldwell's Review of Women and Culture by Wazir Jahan Karim*

Ian Caldwell's review of my book *Women and Culture* in this journal [25, 1 (March 1994): 212–14] highlighted three major points of criticism – that I have over used or misused the “semi-bogus technical vocabulary of the Social Sciences” and that perhaps acquired some of this vocabulary second hand; secondly that I had wrongly used the *Sejarah Melayu* to interpret certain events in Malay history and thirdly, that my knowledge of Malay *adat* is “equally suspect”. I would like to make a general comment that there is a difference between a bad book and a bad review.

My research was about the reconstruction of Malay gender relations over history, looking at two primary sources of Malay ideology, *adat* and Islam, and seeing how *adat* and Islam have directly and indirectly constituted a system of gender relations which is more bilateral than patriarchal and one clearly distinct from the kind found in many West and South Asian Muslim societies today.

What I developed was a rigorous cultural analysis in the understanding of male-female relations in Malay Muslim society. For the reviewer to suspect my knowledge of *adat* accumulated over ten years of research from secondary and primary sources for which I established long lasting and permanent social ties is similar to saying that all the participants of Malay culture in the past and present who live by a value system which is meaningful to them in the way social relationships are sorted out, are basically wrong about themselves and their culture. Throughout the book I offer no Western theory of interpretation of sex and gender, based in feminism, neo-marxism, post-modernism or any other “ism”. I pointed out nexus of relationships which produced tension and conflict – between royalty and commoners, King and subject, chiefs and followers, men and women, showing the inter-relationship across these different sources of tensions and how they brought forth a very varied and complex interpretation of “social difference”. The Rajuna Tapa story, that a “Malay should be obedient to his ruler and that only divine forces might punish an unjust ruler”, or the gender version, that “a Malay women should be obedient to her husband and that this is divinely spoken in Islam” does not explain contradictions between Malay recognition of hierarchies and their ability to live with them. This is the essence of the theme of the book. I think and I believe from what they tell me, that Malays are as concerned for their empowerment as their subjugation in society, and that they have demonstrated this concern through both *adat* and Islam. The same goes for Malay women who sometimes lean more heavily on social consciousness of rights and privileges through *adat* and other times on an Islamic consciousness of rights and privileges and this builds up a value system where patriarchy is not taken for granted.

I am fully aware that the *Sejarah Melayu* passages are oral narrations. I am also aware that historical sources of Malay cultural history are based on written and edited versions of the narrative of others and it is mainly to make this point that I had the explanation on the use of *Hikayat*, in particular in the Malay Annals as a source of Malay cultural history. Even the points brought out by Caldwell in his review on

“errors of fact” are based on the interpretations of others. They may also be “errors of facts”. I have at least acknowledged these narratives in the *Sejarah Melayu* as narratives of culture – in history.

This book offers the anthropologist another look at certain themes in Malay ethno-history and ethnography which have not been given much attention before – the Bendahara/King conflict and the role of women in the House of Bendahara; the importance of the “following” in the King-Chief-subject trilogy; the gender of *adat*; differences between complementary and hierarchical relationships of gender; the continuity between “domestic” and “public” activity and its implications on the status of Malay women; Malay fundamentalism as an anti-Western ideology rather than an anti-cultural and so on. It is unfortunate that Caldwell could not read the book for what it sets out to do. The result has been a vicious attack on words, language and paragraphs taken out of context and flung together for sensation and effect. It demonstrates not only a lack of understanding of Malay ethnography but an insensitivity on the attempt of many local and Western social scientists to write ethnohistory and ethnography through the world view of the subjects of study. The Malays have used and adopted the *hikayat*, *syair* and *pantun* as media to describe social rules and codes of ethics and behaviour and their rules and codes eventually came under the rubrics of meaning of *adat*. Many other sources of early Malay writing, such as Malay maritime log books have been written in the *syair* and *pantun* mode. The utilization of such works in a study of Malay ethnography, is perfectly appropriate to show the historical continuity of culture geopolitics on world views. I am not totally surprised that Caldwell found this incomprehensible, since it only reflects on his ability to go beyond descriptive metaphors to meaning.

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