Introduction
Polygamous Anxieties

Aisyah's Story about Rejecting Polygamy

Aisyah, fifty-seven, is monogamously married, and completely rules out polygamy; she would never accept it in her marriage. She is emancipated, educated and economically secure, facts clearly influencing her robust rejection of polygamy. Aisyah explained her position succinctly:

> There are two types of women: those who say that if it is in the Qur'an it must be accepted, since they would see criticism of polygamy as criticism of the 'ultimate', so they feel they cannot criticize polygamy even though they may not be for it. And then there are women who are independent and think on their own, and do not accept it. It is often very religious people; for example, religious leaders in kampungs [villages], who will practise it, because they see it as sanctioned by Islam, and to emulate the Prophet. Whereas people like me, with a head, who can think independently, we will say to our husband you must choose between your wives, and we will leave if he does not choose or chooses the second one.

Aisyah sees polygamy as basically incompatible with a marriage based on partnership and mutual respect and love. In polygamy a husband must suddenly divide his love and attention between several women, in effect cutting them off from sharing in significant parts of his life when he is with his other family. Aisyah has 'yet to meet a woman who is happy in a polygamous marriage', and suggests that the only situation where a woman might find some peace of mind in polygamy is if she cannot have children, and accepts it if her husband wants children.

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Personally, Aisyah has never feared facing polygamy. Firstly because of her conviction that it is not acceptable, and secondly because she knew she could take care of herself and her children if her husband took another wife and she left him: 'I was not particularly worried about leaving my husband for several years when I took my degree (abroad) with respect to polygamy, since it is his right to take another wife and he could do that anytime.' Aisyah is aware that her privileged position allows her to outright reject polygamy, yet she is unforgiving towards the men who let their 'strong desires' rule them: 'All men go around thinking they are "MBAs". Many men marry a second wife because at the back of their minds they feel they are married but available.'

Beginnings

This is a book about Malay Muslim polygamy, as it unfolded some years ago among the urban elites of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's bustling federal capital. Polygamy's prominence in the narratives of the urban elite Malay women I worked with led me to focus on this particular subject; it was not an *a priori* interest that drove me to explore it. It was rather the compelling undercurrent running through the many stories the women told me about polygamy – that they may be forced to expect and accept polygamy as Muslims, but that they mostly condemn and reject it as women and wives. It could be felt in the conflicted sentiments between their personal and their religious convictions with regards to polygamy. It could be felt in their condemnation of what they considered men's manipulation of Islam and their false management of polygamy, a falseness reflected in the many secret secondary unions, which first wives often discovered in traumatic and humiliating ways. That intense undercurrent fuels this ethnographic account of urban elite Malay polygamy.

Kuala Lumpur was my interlocutors' main daily reference point for business and leisure. Some of them lived in the city, while others lived in the surrounding urban and suburban areas of Selangor, one of Malaysia's thirteen states. Kuala Lumpur is a Federal Territory (*Wilayah Persekutuan*), one of three in the country, and generally (and henceforth) referred to as K.L. Twenty-five years ago, when I first visited K.L., I believed that polygamy was not only rare, but fast dying out with modernity. Coming back some years later, just before the turn of the twenty-first century, to conduct fieldwork

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among urban Malay women as part of my Ph.D. studies in social anthropology at University of Cambridge, England, my focus was on 'modern' Malay lifeways in Kuala Lumpur, with all the global influences of contemporary urban life. Yet I was admonished early on by Hussein, the husband of one of my main interlocutors Rokiah, that: 'you cannot study Malays in K.L., they are all Western, educated, … they are too extreme. … Real Malay culture is not found in K.L., it is all corrupt from Western influence'. Presented with such a 'fatal impact thesis', lamenting local cultural demise in the face of Western expansion and domination (Sahlins 1999), I was all the more determined to conduct my fieldwork in K.L. Polygamy was the last thing I expected to find there.

The subject came to me through sheer force of presence. Elite women's constant reference to polygamy, from freely exchanged gossip to formal interviews, alerted me to this major but at the time ethnographically under-explored theme in urban elite Malay women's lives. The suggestion that polygamy was uncommon, in the then-current ethnographies on rural Malays of modest means, did not seem to apply to urban Malays of substantial means. The women I worked with all believed that polygamous marriages had gained prominence, either in actual numbers or in public awareness, among their peers, and acted according to this belief. It was a belief rife with anxieties, irrespective of whether there was in fact a numerical increase in polygamous marriages. As Blackburn (2004: 136) notes on the lack of precise data on polygamy rates in Indonesia, 'for many women the actual incidence of polygamy is irrelevant: its sheer existence and social sanction is enough to make them feel insecure about marriage'. Among the urban elite Malay women I worked with, the psychological impact of polygamy far outweighed its statistical presence in their lives.

In Malaysia, the right to polygamy is based on Islam, which conditionally allows a man up to four wives. This right is regulated by the Islamic Family Law codes, administered by the state religious departments and implemented by the Syariah (Islamic law) courts. In K.L., the current Islamic Family Law is Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) Act 1984 (Act 303), with a number of amendments (henceforth IFL (FT)).[1] Those of my interlocutors who were resident in the state of Selangor were held accountable to the Selangor Islamic Family Law. In Malaysia, Syariah law is applicable only to Muslims, hence only Muslims are allowed to be polygamous in Malaysia.[2] As in Indonesia, it is difficult to get accurate data on polygamous marriage rates in Malaysia: the Department of

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Statistics only publishes non-specific marriage numbers and there are no central federal marriage registers. Estimates range from 2–3 per cent of marriages being officially registered as polygamous, up to 5–6 per cent of marriages, if unregistered and non-court approved polygamous marriages are taken into account (Abdullah, Abdullah and Ferdousi 2015: 144; Peng 2011: 153–54).[3] The small numbers make it easy to dismiss polygamy as a rare occurrence. One does not have to live in K.L. very long to discover that the perceived, if not practised, reality appears very different among urban elite Malays.

Modernity has not eradicated polygamy in Malaysia, as I had originally assumed. Modernity may be understood as an assemblage of grand narratives, shared stories that create a history of progress and emancipation set against a premodern past (Lyotard 1984). Malay modernity is an ongoing process, not a modernity imposed on Malaysia by external or Western forces, but rather a localized, historically contingent development, building on centuries of cultural creativity and hybridity (Mee and Kahn 2012). In contemporary Malaysia, modernity is for many Malays coupled with a focus on performing a Muslim identity within a global Islamic discourse (Frisk 2009; Hoffstaedter 2011; Peletz 2002). 'Traditional' Malay polygamy, itself a product of adaptations to changing circumstances over time, has adapted to this global Islamic discourse and offers today's polygamous practitioners new benefits from reworked forms.

There are contemporary urban elite Malays who accept polygamy as Muslim marriage compatible with a modern cosmopolitan lifestyle, while others reject it as a primordial custom incompatible with modern Muslim life. Some engage in polygamy because it serves a need or has particular value for them, not because it is necessarily seen as 'authentic' Muslim marriage. Others, like many of my interlocutors, can find no place for it in their personal lives, yet acknowledge it as a marriage form available to Muslims. Polygamy is also gaining public prominence, in principle and in practice, as various religious leaders, Islamic organizations and prominent polygamists cast the practice of polygamy as the practice of Islam. Yet whatever people's perceptions of polygamy, its prominence establishes it as a marker of Malay Muslim modernity, however understood. Polygamy as Malay Muslim modernity incorporates both cosmopolitanism and primordialism, and shapes the formulation and articulation of Malay Muslim cultural identity; they are interconnected rather than distinct cultural processes (Kahn 1998: 5). As there can be no homogenous Malay cultural identity – all

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cultural identity formulations and expressions are negotiated and contested – there will be many ways to be a modern Malay Muslim today. Some elite Malays will practise polygamy, some will not.

The elite women I worked with mostly felt oppressed by polygamy in their lives (Siraj 2001). This feeling of oppression was in large part due to what they considered men's false management of polygamy. I am not suggesting that polygamy is inherently oppressive to Malay women (Omar 1994; Solway 1990). Polygamy becomes oppressive through the actions and sentiments of its practitioners. Polygamy and patriarchy – men's systematic domination of key structural and ideological resources and positions – are often bedfellows (Inhorn 1996, 2012). Polygamy, contrary to prevailing notions, was and is not common in Muslim communities, yet in many minds, polygamy and Islam are inextricably linked. It makes the subject of Muslim polygamy very sensitive as well as divisive. Western focus on polygamy and veiling (*hijab*), another controversial practice involving Muslim women, constitute stereotypical associations between Islam and Muslim women. Some Malay Muslims practising polygamy may indeed parallel women wearing veils as a political and religious statement. The parallel is apt, because veiling and polygamy are both typically seen as primary sites of Muslim women's oppression, particularly in non-Muslim contexts. Yet Muslim women may voice their support for these actions as Muslim actions (Ahmed 1992; Blackburn 2004; Bowen 2003; Brenner 2012; Hassim 2017; Mernissi 1991; Mondal 1997; Wichelen 2007; Yamani 2008).

The nexus of elite Malay polygamy within a modernity narrative is at the intersection of class, religion, culture, ethnicity, and, fundamentally, gender. These domains of meaning in relation to polygamy will be explored in order to understand women's narratives about polygamy. In this ethnographic account, I will focus on seventeen urban elite Malay women from whom I collected life histories. I will arrange their stories so as to address some of their concerns, as well as these domains of meaning, in relation to polygamy. The seventeen women's cumulative experiences and perspectives on polygamy reflect some of the general insights on polygamy that I collected among Malay elites. While their narratives form the book's backbone, it is based on the experiences and perspectives of the numerous people I have talked to in Malaysia over the last twenty-five years. Of the seventeen women, seven women are or were polygamously married: Rashidah (45) is a first wife; Fauziah (60) and Maznah (56) were first wives but are now divorced; Zuriah

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(42), Noor (40) and Nazriah (35) are second wives; and Salbiah (51) is a third wife. Five women grew up in polygamy or experienced it as children: Rokiah (56), Zainab (49) and Aminah (38), all now monogamously married, and Raihana (43) and Zarena (26), both unmarried. Three women are monogamously married: Aisyah (57), Asmah (56) and Katijah (42), and two women are unmarried: Halima (36) and Kartini (29).

A Note on Terminology

In the text, I use the term polygamy, because it is the term used in daily conversation and legal texts in Malaysia. Technically, Malays practise polygyny, a plural marriage in which a man is married to more than one wife at a time. In the text I generally only refer to the first and second wife, because it is most common for a man to have only two wives. Elite Malay men may have three or four wives, which is uncommon among non-elites. I refer only to second wives to avoid having to write 'second or subsequent wife'.

Polygamous Anxieties

Challenging relations of gender are woven into the very fabric of elite Malay polygamy, because there is a fundamental inequality in men being able to marry several spouses simultaneously, whereas women can only marry one spouse at a time.[4] As Woodcroft-Lee (1983: 186) observed many years ago, looking at Indonesian journals and 'agony-aunt' letters, '[t]he greatest impediment to the development of equality in marriage between husband and wife seems to be the persistence of polygamy'. It is still the case, in Indonesia and in Malaysia (Brenner 2012; Kasim 2002; Mohamad 2011; Nurmila 2009). And where there are unequal gender relations there are unequal power relations (Blackburn 2004; Connell 1987, 2005); I here lean on Weber's (1948) classic definition that power is the likelihood that a person within a social relationship will be able to execute his will even if others resist it.

The elite women that I worked with would probably be considered powerful by most people in Malaysia. Rashidah, for example, is very powerful in the public domain through her professional position, and she is powerful in her private domain, as she can take financial care of herself and her children, and make independent life decisions that often go against the wishes of her husband, such as going abroad to take a master's degree. Rashidah can live her

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life with minimal interference from her polygamous husband, yet she nonetheless considers her private domain the site of her disempowerment, because her husband married another woman. It was doubly humiliating for her through the secrecy involved and her present status as co-wife. It was during Rashidah's overseas studies that her husband met the woman who later became his second wife, and Rashidah now feels that it was in fact her power vis-à-vis her husband, having left to pursue overseas studies without his approval, which ultimately disempowered her in her marriage.

Malay marriage, as my interlocutors conceived it, is based on a contract, where husband and wife each have their specified duties towards each other, family and society. If one party reneges on an important duty, it can be grounds for divorce for both men and women; Syariah law (Islamic law) clearly sets out their respective duties (Karim 1992, 1998). Yet contemporary elite Malay women may no longer find much of what was traditionally perceived as Malay women's duties appropriate. As Nazriah lamented: 'Malay men expect their wife to be there for them; they expect to be served, to be number one in their lives. Malay women are brought up to be servants, which men expect; they are conditioned as children.' Elite women are to a certain extent freed from many duties typically expected of Malay wives, because they have servants at their disposal or enjoy elevated social positions (Stivens 1998: 101). As Asmah noted: 'Women in my family do not serve their husbands.'

According to Aisyah, spousal conflicts arising out of differing expectations regarding the performance of Malay gender roles are a function of the patriarchal nature of Malay society. To her, many relationships suffer because Malay boys are brought up by their mothers to be the 'centre of the universe'; they are pampered and continue into adult life thinking they are the most important beings around. Studies have indeed shown that although modern Malay middle-class marriages are based to a certain degree on partnership and egalitarianism between the spouses, husbands tend to retain a greater say in familial decisions (Embong 2002: 85–86). As Fauziah explained: 'The older generation of women was brought up to defer to men, to trust them completely. Mothers would tell their daughters that going against husbands was sinful. Therefore many women trust men without questioning their actions only to be left and deserted by them.'

My interlocutors' views on their husbands' or men's relative position vis-à-vis themselves in marriage were influenced by their particular circumstances as urban elites, educated women with careers

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and independent incomes, often with powerful natal families to back them up. While acknowledging that they should consult their husband before undertaking any major venture, most women remain adamant that they never ask their husband's permission to leave the house or other such minor ventures 'as should a Muslim wife from her husband' (Altorki 1986: 55–57). Aisyah finds the notion 'silly', and her husband never demanded it, not even when she went abroad for several years to study, leaving him and their four children behind. For my interlocutors, asking a husband's permission to leave the house – for example, to go shopping – is seen as unacceptable and out-dated. It can pose a very real dilemma for women, nonetheless, as Katijah explained: 'It is the culture of Malay men, even if they are educated and Westernized, they still want to feel like the boss.'

For urban elite Malay women, who like Aisyah are mostly emancipated, educated and economically secure, marriage is not only a contract but also a partnership. Power-sharing between spouses is the premise of such a partnership (Embong 2002). Katijah considers marriage a partnership made up of equals: 'In Islam a woman is an equal to her husband, a partner, she does not need to be subservient to him.' My interlocutors generally felt that men and women are equal, but different; women are thought to be ruled by *nafsu* or passion, and men by *akal* or reason (Peletz 1995, 1996). According to Aisyah, Malay women are very powerful; they make the decisions in the household, but do it discretely, behind the scenes. A wife's best strategy, I was told, was to pretend to be submissive and let the husband believe he was in charge when in fact the wife was. In Aisyah's own marriage, she also keeps up appearances, for even though she has a tolerant husband, 'he is still a Malay man'. 'Horrible husband' stories were a favourite narrative among the women I worked with, and like urban polygamy legends (see Chapter 1), they may be told to illustrate how men act unfairly towards their wives. In polygamy, the 'horrible husband' acting unfairly towards one (or more) of his wives, or indeed initiating polygamy, is a prime narrative engine.

The observation that polygamy affects women's perception of marriage is perhaps obvious, but cannot be emphasized enough. The prominence of polygamy among urban elite Malays has led to changes not only in spousal relations within marriage, but seemingly to changes in Malay gender relations more generally. Divisions between modernists and revivalists rejecting the ills of modernity have implicated polygamy in competing definitions of Malay family

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life, which have polarized into a discursive opposition between Islam and adat (Malay cultural codes or customary law) (Stivens 1996, 1998, 2012) (see Chapter 3). These changes are crystalized in the disempowering effect of 'the threat of polygamy'. I was often struck by the enormous effect this 'threat' of polygamy could have on women's perception and indeed actualization of marriage. As Kartini, an unmarried 29-year-old, described it: 'Women are so stressed out in marriage here, the motivating factor to be nice to their husband is not love any more but just to prevent that he takes another wife, it is very disempowering for women.'

Polygamy has hence become a key aspect of contemporary Malay gender relations. No matter how powerful or well-connected a wife is, the knowledge that her husband might take or has perhaps already taken another wife secretly is altering husband-wife relations to women's detriment. When I first interviewed Katijah in her office, I saw a woman in charge. When I later had lunch with her and her husband, this forceful and articulate woman metamorphosed into a demure wife, serving him and hardly uttering a word in his presence. Her public display of submission was perhaps part of a calculated strategy of not appearing in charge when she was in fact relatively powerful in her marriage when away from the public eye, as I discovered when I visited her and her husband at home. It has been suggested that women in South East Asia typically have informal rather than formal power (Atkinson and Errington 1990; Karim 1992, 1995, 1998), yet my interlocutors daily contest this premise in their professional lives. My conversations with Katijah revealed how her increasing anxiety about her husband taking another wife was clearly affecting her autonomy and influence in her marriage by making her more submissive even in 'private' domains. Like other women I talked to, she never voiced this anxiety directly, because that would be tantamount to saying she had failed as a wife. She implied it through general comments about polygamy and cases involving 'friends'.

Katijah's anxieties revealed how deeply disempowering the potential of polygamy was felt to be by a woman like her, highly educated, ambitious and successful in her career and seemingly in her marriage. The prospect of her husband being able to marry another woman without her being able to prevent it, or indeed know about it, was seen as a serious threat to their partnership, undermining the bonds of equality that she felt they had always shared. Her worried comments also underscore that polygamy's impact on Malay gender relations is not uniform, nor is it constant, but rather is in

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constant motion, as it is influenced by the ebbs and tides of women's polygamous anxieties.

The 'threat' of polygamy may indeed be used by husbands as a strategy to keep powerful wives in check. Elite women may dread the prospect of becoming part of a polygamous marriage, and this dread may be enough to alter wives' behaviour to husbands' advantage, without them actually having to engage in polygamy. They may not even need to 'threaten' their wives with polygamy, but just mention it with respect to others or partake in rumour exchange and legend creation, thus establishing the possibility of polygamy in their wives' minds. Such strategies reinforce changes in gender relations that Malay women may find detrimental and disempowering. Polygamy is of course not seen as detrimental to gender relations by all women; and some may feel empowered in entering such marriages. Yet contemporary elite Malay polygamy as I got to know it through my interlocutors' stories appears to be mostly perceived as a distinctly male strategy.

Working with Elites

The women I worked with were all Malay, Muslim and from the urban upper middle and upper classes, what I believe in Malaysian terms to be elite (Case 1996; Shamsul 1999; Sloane-White 2014). The term class, and particularly middle class, is highly contested in the social sciences (Embong 2002; Kessler 2002; Stivens 1998); likewise, the term elite is a rather fuzzy concept, and it remains difficult to clarify according to which criteria elites are 'elite' (Marcus 1983; Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima 2000; Shore 2002). I will use the terms nonetheless, for want of a better terminology. Assigning women to a specific 'class' may be done through such parameters as occupation, residence, economic and social standing, social and familial background – either the women's own or their husbands'. The seventeen women featured in this book were of varying wealth and social status. They all lived on a permanent basis in K.L. or Selangor, though many of them were not born and raised there, but had come from other Malaysian states in order to work or following their husbands. They were all working women, keen on their careers in the public or private sphere, and most of them held academic degrees acquired abroad, typically in England, Australia or USA, including Ph.D. and master's degrees, MBAs, medical and law degrees.

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When describing Malay women as 'elite', it should be noted that for some it is an inherited status, while for others it is acquired, either personally or through their husbands. Some of the women I worked with were from traditional Malay elites, such as daughters of royalty or government ministers. Others were elite based on individually achieved prominence, such as heads of large companies or government departments, or their husbands' prominence, such as wives of high government officials or corporate CEOs. Many of them carried titles, some acquired through husbands or fathers, some through their own merit. Current social mobility in Malaysia tends to blur the line between women with inherited or acquired elite status by allowing a much wider access to elite status through monetary wealth. Today, elite status can be achieved through economic affluence, rather than through traditional forms of hereditary ranking or leadership. The 'new rich' have been associated with state-promoted *Melayu Baru* or new Malay, sometimes called '*orang kaya baru*' or new rich person in contrast to '*orang kaya lama*' or old rich person – that is, belonging to traditional elites (Shamsul 1999).

There are obstacles and challenges in all fieldwork, yet there are particular 'field constraints' when working with elites. There may be social and financial barriers to full participation in elite lives, and elites can seldom be 'observed' in a classic sited way due to their exclusive lifestyles, literally and figuratively (Hertz and Imber 1995). Working with elites hence renders the hallmark ethnographic method of participation-observation somewhat daunting. My observation on the sidelines, as friend and fieldworker, in one of my interlocutor's secret polygamous marriage in London, highlighted that when working with elites there are no defined field boundaries. My work with my closest interlocutors extended beyond my 'official' fieldwork site in K.L. to Malaysia's exclusive East Coast resorts, to shopping in Singapore's glittering malls and to my own private home in London. One might argue that it was multisited fieldwork or rather fluid, dynamic 'fields' (Appadurai 1996; Marcus 1995).

The challenge with such dynamic fields is where does one look for polygamy, as it were, if there are no specific field sites in which to observe it (Koktvedgaard Zeitzen 2015a).One obstacle was physical access. Malay elites live spread out over a large area, in several wealthy 'pockets' of K.L. and the surrounding state of Selangor. There are no neighbourhoods where one can simply stroll around and observe 'elites', let alone participate in their lives, or engage in friendly banter or gossip. Elite Malays may live in large houses,

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surrounded by fences and electric gates, making actual physical access difficult. One usually has to pass at least one gatekeeper before gaining entry into the house, giving the host the opportunity to 'not be in'. I therefore began to focus on people's narratives and conversations and observations of their interactions with spouses, families and friends wherever we happened to be. Such fluid sites were indeed symptomatic of elite polygamy – polygamous families may not have a defined physical locus, as such, where they can be 'observed'.

Social access was another obstacle. Elite Malays, like all elites, are notoriously difficult to work with because of problems of social access. I was introduced to several elite members of Malay society through family connections, in order to establish my social credentials. Yet during my initial long-term fieldwork, I was unable to find a host family to live with, apart from shorter stays, which would have immersed me in elite cultural worlds and lifestyles, in time-honoured anthropological fashion. I had come to Malaysia alone, and as such a single woman around whom men in the household could not be themselves, that is, without potentially violating Islamic rules of modesty and 'close proximity', *khalwat*. Such explanations were often given to me in more or less disguised forms as reasons why I could not live in their houses. The spectre of polygamy was also alluded to in general terms by some women. Yet this apparent obstacle turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Living on my own allowed me to invite whomever I wanted, as I had no allegiance to any particular elite family. This became an important consideration when working with such a relatively small group of people who all know (of) each other, and have as many friends as enemies among them. My apartment became a sort of liminal space, a 'safe haven' where I, being 'foreign' to their worlds, could safely be confided in and where we could talk freely and undisturbed.

In response to the 'field constraints' of working among elites, one of my primary field methods became collecting women's life histories. Life histories contain both women's retrospective accounts of their lives as they choose to present them, as well as cover particular areas prompted by me, such as polygamy. Mostly, it was not necessary to prompt women about polygamy – polygamy looms large in Malay imaginings of marriage, and the 'idea of polygamy' is a prime narrative generator in many of the stories I collected. It might indeed be argued that it is the idea of polygamy, rather than the actuality of it, which has most cultural salience in Malay society.

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Life histories' depth of description personally and culturally did not absolve me from looking for other ethnographic insights into polygamous life, to avoid collecting just a waffle of thoughts and memories, recollections and 'hearsay evidence'. Yet using life histories was methodologically liberating, for it enabled me to move beyond the search for 'typical' elite Malays or attempt to create representations of 'typical' elite Malay culture. The premise that the women as individuals, as Malays or as urban, elite Malays were not necessarily 'typical' in any representative way allowed me to concentrate on, and strive to understand, individual women's perceptions and experiences of polygamy, as well as their idiosyncratic approach to life as urban elite Malay women. Personally recounted lives are inherently individual and subjective, and I was mostly unable to check life history data. Yet rather than try to establish the truth or falseness of their accounts, I used life history materials to examine how they conceptualize themselves, their lives and their world (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985). I did not expect women to speak 'cultural truths', nor was I looking for 'true stories'; I wanted to record women's own stories about polygamy as they chose to tell them.

The book is hence written in an indistinct ethnographic present. It is a potentially problematic approach, because life as it unfolds is of course dynamic and ever-changing (Fabian 2014). Yet it allows me to convey particular emotions, particular moments in my interlocutors' lives as they navigate through polygamous worlds. The perspectives and practices of the women who narrate the stories of polygamy found in the pages to come were mostly collected in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Their stories are conveyed within a context of societal processes in Malaysia spanning up to the mid-2010s, however. The women's concerns and the societal processes impinging upon polygamy in contemporary Malaysia are not only broadly the same as when I collected the bulk of the stories, they have in fact become more acerbated. A main change is the vastly expanded use of social media in polygamy discourses, but to protect my interlocutors' privacy, I will not explore this discourse domain. I have indeed chosen this 'soft-lens' approach because it can help protect my interlocutors' privacy, a central ethical consideration in all ethnography. As time goes by, circumstances change, events become less recognizable, memories blur.

Focus on a subject as personally and publically sensitive as polygamy does indeed generate various ethical concerns. Issues of informed consent, protection of sources and invasions of privacy are

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concerns in all ethnography, but particularly when working with elites. Elites will have access to whatever is written about them, and many of them will know, or know of, each other. To safeguard the identity and privacy of the women who shared their lives with me, I have changed their names, and the names of their family members, and I have removed all reference to their titles or specific familial affiliations. I have changed certain aspects and details of their life histories, because they might otherwise be instantly recognizable for other elites, but I have attempted to do so in a manner that does not compromise the essential character of their story. I have also made an effort to respect the women's right to remain silent. Many of the women, or their families, are very prominent and even small biographical details might lead to their identification; elite circles are narrow and circumscribed. When details of their lives set them apart in some specific way, or stories they told me were extraordinary or compromising, I have chosen not to tell them and let them remain silent.

In a further attempt to protect their identity, I have merged these groups of women who are now all 'elite', but may have very dissimilar backgrounds. Furthermore, their reactions to polygamy tend to be similar. Women from traditional elites, such as royal families, who have grown up with polygamy as an ever-present possibility or actuality in their mothers' marriages, are often assumed to be better able to cope with polygamy in their own marriages or to be less disinclined to enter polygamous marriage. Yet they may react just as strongly to their husband marrying a second wife as women from non-elite backgrounds (where polygamy was rarely practised), who have risen through the social classes and now find themselves facing polygamy in their own marriages. They tend to agree that nothing can truly prepare a woman for the emotional and physical turmoil she may face in polygamy.

Notes

1. For IFL (FT) see International Law Book Series (ILBS), Petaling Jaya, Selangor, 2014.
2. For a discussion of the Malaysian legal system and Syariah law, see Endut (2015) and Peletz (2013); the legal history of polygamy in Malaysia is discussed in Abdullah, Abdullah and Ferdousi (2015).

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3. Malaysian population statistics can be found at: https://www.dosm.gov.my/ (accessed 25 May 2017); see also work done by reformist women's group Sisters in Islam at http://www.sistersinislam.org.my.
4. For a discussion about equality and subjugation in polygamy, see Koktvedgaard Zeitzen (2008).

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