

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GDN-6

It's a Man's World

5 Lorong 9/5B  
Petaling Jaya, Selangor  
Malaya  
28 August 1961

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

We became aware of this almost immediately, despite the completely Western atmosphere of the Merlin Hotel, our home for the first week in Malaya. There was an immediate contrast between the receptions accorded us by our Western and our Malayan friends. American friends invited us to informal parties or to family swimming outings. British friends invited us to dinner. Malayan friends invited me to lunch, dinner and other functions.

I was shopping for a car and got involved in one of those extended and complex Chinese relationships. A friend of a friend of a friend took good care of me through his large auto dealership. In the long process of discussion, about everything except the car, that precedes mentioning of the price, I was taken to lunch at the friend's club. We climbed concrete stairs to an apartment above a massage parlor on one of Kuala Lumpur's main streets. A knock at the door, an eye at the peep-hole, and we were admitted. I felt immersed in oriental intrigue. The friend explained that this is just a place where a few of the men get together to exert a little influence - and to have a good time. I made the simple mental note that there is a little roguery everywhere, but I was in part wrong. This is not simply a clandestine club that provides these men with their single opportunity for getting away from their wives. The entire life of public entertainment in Malaya provides such an opportunity. Other than at official functions, there are few public places where these men are seen with their wives.

This is a man's world not only for the Chinese, but for the Malays as well.. In some ways it is easier for the Malays, even when inviting people home to dine. In traditional Malay culture the men dine separately (first, of course). The women are well schooled in keeping out of sight, but the children peek around the corner to be met with a quick word from papa. Nor will the women join in the sitting room conversation. It is not that they do not speak; they are not even present.

I can hear the echoes of the fierce Prussian dictum, "Kinder, kirche und kuchen!" In Malaya, too, men and women live in separate worlds. Naturally, the better of the two worlds is taken by the men.

We have met with this even in our association with the university students. They want to be progressive, but it is very hard for them. They want to initiate and carry on conversation with women, but they appear almost totally incapable of doing so. Their eyes are fixed to the floor as they sit stiffly enduring lapses in the conversation that would make any good fraternity boy squirm.

Recently some of the students invited me to lunch in town. They asked my wife, Jeannine, to come along, but were both relieved and disappointed when she had to refuse. Only Kamil, the most suave of the boys, was accompanied by his girl friend. The lunch was a variety of curried dishes, for which I needed beer. Two of the boys joined me, but Kamil and the others had soft drinks. When Kamil's girl-friend left the table for a moment after the meal, his hand whipped out for the beer glass of his ally across the table. Malay womanhood is the keeper of Malay morality and Moslem orthodoxy.

This separation of the worlds of men and women is more than a little frustrating to Jeannine and me. My reasons are obvious; I like feminine presence. I miss the gentle static electricity that women bring to western drawing room conversations. I should find Malaya more stimulating if there were the possibility of an informal discussion of the equality of the sexes. At present such a discussion would most likely miss the mark, as it would be carried on by men alone.

Jeannine, as any western woman I suppose, misses participation in discussions that go beyond the simplest observations of food and child raising.

There is an added frustration to us as a professional family doing field research in a different society. I saw the significance of this only recently when I compared our life here with the life we had in Denmark a few years ago.

My own understanding of the Danish rural cooperative movement was considerably enhanced by our wider involvement in the society, viewed through endless meetings with Danish families. Together Jeannine and I had a view of normal attitudes towards all events and institutions. We saw the things that make Danes laugh, cry, frown and rage. We carried these observations over into our private lives. Within the protection of our own apartment we talked over, reevaluated, and came to a fuller understanding of the things we had seen together.

In the western world the single male is an anomaly. If you are going to have one to dinner, you have to find someone else to make the party an even number. Man and wife "fit" in a way the single male does not. Indeed a current theme of many social critics is that a man's rightful privacy is violated by large firms that look not only for a suitable man, but for a suitable couple. Certainly for that great possibility that lies within reach of every American boy a wife is an absolute necessity; especially now, America without a first lady is unthinkable.

For the foreign field researcher in the western world, then, a wife is a passport of respectability that provides full entry to the larger society in which all institutions are set. In Malaya the situation is quite different. This is not to say that here a wife is a liability. As an American family man, living in companionship rather than institution, I consider a wife an asset, never (never, never, never) a liability. I do find, however, that the precise character of that asset differs from East to West. Whether or not the twain will ever meet, the differences between East and West are still such as to require different strategies in the use of one's assets in field research.

Men and women in Malaya live in separate worlds. If Jeannine and I cannot view these worlds together, at least she has access to a world that is totally closed to me. If in an interview with a peasant I politely enquire after the health of his wife, his eyes take on that suspicious gleam that says, "What's he askin' that for." I must be careful not to stride boldly up the stairs of a Malay house and knock on the door. If the lady of the house is home alone, she will be thrown into deep terror. I must stand in the frontyard and call out that I wish to speak to the man of the house. It really matters little that I am a foreigner and can therefore be forgiven some violations of the rules. To date I have not gone beyond the sitting room of a Malay house. I can steal surreptitious glances at the back rooms where the women sit watching and listening, but those are quarters forbidden to me.

To the extent that this world is closed to me, it is open to Jeannine. She not only can, but she must enter the women's quarters, for the sitting room with men is closed to her. Our sons (ages 5 and 3) make this women's world even more open to Jeannine. In our sons, Jeannine has produced something highly valued. These two robust, blond boys are greater status symbols than any introductions she could possibly obtain. With our two sons in tow, Jeannine finds the world of women not only open but positively embracing.

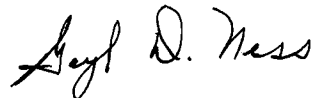
Of course, I exaggerate; I over-state the case. Malayan women are not only the shy secluded people I speak of. Even in the kampongs (villages) there is a large measure of equality within the home, and the woman has a higher status and more influence that in many Moslem countries.

In the towns, of course, there is a new and dynamic type of woman. Che Halimahton, for example, is the first woman to serve on the executive council of the leading Malay political party, the United Malay National Organization. She recently had an article in Her World, a monthly Malayan women's magazine, on "Why women are essential in politics." Three other leading Malay ladies are Members of Parliament, and numerous women are elected to state legislatures. There are also Chinese and Indian ladies who carry a large burden of leadership in civic and welfare associations. The Women's Institutes of Malaya is an influential national organization that, among other things, works at bringing modern learning and modern home economics to the rural women. Most recently Malayan women have been conducting a strong campaign for equal pay for equal work.

Even within this modern sector of Malayan womanhood, however, there are traces of the traditional separate worlds. The lady Members of Parliament, from my observation, confine themselves to criticism of certain vulgar movies and of the corruptive influence on youth provided by teaching boys and girls in the same classrooms. At a recent Southeast Asian conference of Women's Institutes, I (a lone male observer) was asked not to attend the small discussion groups as my presence would inhibit free discussion among the women. For Che Halimahton, the driving force behind her political involvement lies in her hope of bettering the position of Malayan women and of breaking down the walls that separate the worlds of men and women.

Malayan womanhood is on the march, but the march has just begun. This means that as a foreign field researcher, I still have to deploy my forces as though this were a non-western society, which it is anyway.

Sincerely,



Gayl D. Ness