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Chasing Fate & Fortune in the Borderland: Cross-Border Marriage & Migration at the Malaysian-Thai Frontier

À la recherche du destin et de la fortune en région frontalière : mariage & migration transfrontalières à la frontière entre la Malaisie et la Thaïlande

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Chasing Fate & Fortune in the Borderland: Cross-Border Marriage & Migration at the Malaysian-Thai Frontier

The Malays of the northern states of Malaysia and the southern provinces of Thailand share a long history of royal intrigues and intermarriages in the past. Today, they continue to maintain strong familial, cultural, ethnic, and religious affinities, fostered in part by cross-border marriages between Malay men of Malaysian nationality and Malay women of Thai nationality in the present. Some of these unions are arranged between distant cousins by parents hoping to reunite families scattered across both sides of the border. Many also, as this article will explore, are the result of “fated encounters” (*jodoh*)¹ that occur when women of Thai nationality – of both Malay and Thai ethnicities – migrate in search of “fortune” (*rezeki*) to Malaysia, where they meet Malaysian Malay men whom they eventually marry – including as second wives in a polygynous marriage.²

Although these encounters are regularly described as “destined” by my Thai and Malaysian interlocutors, in this article I argue that they are in fact engineered by

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1. All vernacular terms in brackets are taken from standard Malay, except where alternative origins of the term including from Kelantanese Malay (Kel.) or Arabic (Ar.) are indicated.

2. Polygyny is a type of polygamy (multiple marriage), in which one man has multiple wives. In Malaysia, polygyny is permitted for Muslim men up to four wives at a time under Malaysian Syariah (Islamic) law, but must first be approved by a Syariah judge upon the fulfillment of certain financial conditions.

various historical and contemporary developments unique to this region that have precipitated the migration of Malays of Thai nationality (henceforth, “Malay-Thai”)³ to Malaysia – namely, the socio-political and economic instability in Thailand’s “Deep South,” and the shared cultural and religious history between ethnic Malays who inhabit both sides of the border. What is furthermore distinctive about the migration occurring at the Malaysian-Thai border is the statistical domination of women driving this phenomenon: while the overwhelming majority of migrant laborers officially registered in Malaysia are male, Thai women migrating to Malaysia outnumber men, contributing to what scholars have called “the feminization of migration” (Hwang, 2009; Kim, 2012).

This article examines the feminization of migration at the Malaysian-Thai frontier through the lens of cross-border marriages between Malaysian men and Thai women, both of whom share a similar ethno-religious identity as Malay-Muslim. First (Points II to V), I will analyze the migration of Malay-Thai women to Malaysia as an endeavor in seeking “fortune” in several senses of the word: as employment and economic prospects (*rezeki*), and as opportunities for marriage and intimacy (*jodoh*). Second (Points VI to VII), I unpack the local impact of this influx of Malay-Thai women in Malaysia from the perspective of Malays living in the border city of Kota Bharu, who report having been targeted with sorcery by Malay-Thai female migrants. This emphasis on the community impact of migration shows how local lives and livelihoods have been directly impacted by the arrival of Malay-Thai women over the years, illustrating how the aspirations and everyday realities of both migrants and the host society are entangled in one another’s.

This paper is based on 15 months of long-term, multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork at the Malaysian-Thai border conducted between 2014 to 2015 (with regular return visits since). My research was largely concentrated in the cities of Songkhla and Hat Yai, located in Songkhla province in Southern Thailand, and the city of Kota Bharu, situated in the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan. In these cities, I interviewed around a dozen Thai female migrants who had worked or were working in Malaysia, aged in their early 20s to early 40s, predominantly of Malay ethnicity. Of these, two were ethnically Thai, but had converted to Islam to marry Malay-Malaysian men, showing that the desire for the female Thai Other is not exclusive to women of Malay ethnicity. To understand the impact of female migration from Thailand in Kelantan, I have also interviewed Kelantanese⁴ (ethnically Malay) women aged between 30 to 55 who had employed, traded with Malay-Thai women, or whose marriages had been threatened by these migrants.

3. For uniformity’s sake, the rest of the article will refer to ethnic Malays of Thai nationality as “Malay-Thai”. Malays of Malaysian nationality will be referred to as “Malay-Malaysian”.

4. As Kelantan is predominantly Malay, my usage of the term “Kelantanese” thus refers specifically to Malays from Kelantan, not other ethnic groups.

I. Southern Thailand: Past & Present

To appreciate the conditions germinal for the proliferation of marriage and migration across the Malaysian-Thai border in recent years, we must first step back in time: Kelantan and Southern Thailand are not only connected by the border in the present, but also by centuries of shared political, religious, and cultural history. Historian Stefan Amirell's study on female rule in Patani⁵ in the 17th century illustrates that during this period, the Malay Kingdom of Patani succeeded in incorporating the Sultanate of Kelantan under its rule, before succumbing to the latter in 1651 during a period of political and economic decline (Amirell, 2011: 313-8). But the Kingdom of Patani was, "for most of her history... in a loose suzerain relationship with the Thai state" – a state of affairs that lasted until the late 19th century, when Siam began to enforce greater control over its vassal state in the south (Koch, 1977: 70). The Anglo-Siamese Treaty between the British and Siam in 1909 finally abolished the Kingdom of Patani and resulted in the "definitive absorption of the territories of the former sultanate into the Thai state" (Jory, 2007: 259). It also established the Malaysian-Thai border as we know it today, and safeguarded the Kelantan and Terengganu Sultanates – then under British rule – from Siamese influence (Koch, 1977: 88; Lamey, 2013: 1). It was through this tense and tumultuous historical trajectory that the Kingdom of Patani became one of the five provinces of Southern Thailand as we know it today, which include Narathiwat, Yala, Satun, and Songkhla.

Historical sources suggest that the Kingdom of Patani converted to Islam sometime in the mid- or second half of the 15th century (Bougas, 1990: 115).⁶ Tamara Loos, a historian of Siam (as Thailand was historically known), describes Patani as "ethnically Malay and religiously Muslim" and "the center of Islamic teachings and Malay culture in the northern Malay Peninsula" (Loos, 2006: 77). Islam played a significant role in the educational, social, and spiritual life of Patani: between the 15th to 19th centuries, the proliferation of Islamic institutions such as mosques and *pondok* (Islamic schools) in Patani gave it the reputation as the "cradle of Islam in Southeast Asia" (Che Man, 1990: 255; Liow, 2010b: 19) and "Mecca's verandah" (*serambi Mekah*) (Johnson, 2013). Indeed, Patani was known as a "much-heralded intellectual center of Islam in Southeast Asia," producing several prominent *Shafi'e* scholars who also taught at study circles in Masjidil Haram in Makkah in the 19th century (Liow 2011: 1387). This phase of Islamization in the Kingdom of Patani mirrored similar projects of Islamic expansion

5. Following Liow (2010a: 29, footnote 1), I have used "Patani" to refer to the ancient Malay-Muslim kingdom, and "Pattani" in reference to the administrative province it is known as today.

6. A historical study of Patani's oldest mosque, Surau Aur, suggests that Patani could have been "one of the first, if not the first, Malay kingdom on the peninsula to convert to Islam" (Bougas, 1992: 89).

occurring in the neighboring Malay sultanates of Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu under the British around the same period (Liow, 2010b: 13). These parallel religious developments between the northern Malayan states and Patani contribute to a sense of religious affiliation and familiarity between Malaysian and Thai Muslims today, and further reinforce the common ground they already share based on Malay language and culture.⁷

The vibrant Muslim intellectual life in Patani at this time provided a fertile context for a form of Islamic law in Patani that, according to Loos, “entailed an admixture of Quranic law and local adat law that varied over time and place” (2006: 79). Though there is limited comprehensive study of the scope and scale of the implementation of Islamic law in Patani before the 20th century, scholars have indicated that Islam certainly held a juridical force in Muslim family matters such as marriage and inheritance (Che Man, 1990: 256; Samah, Abdullah & Ferdousi, 2017: 357). These were governed by an Islamic family law that was legally recognized by the Siamese state, which gave special dispensation to the Muslim community to apply religious and customary laws in family life (Loos, 2006: 79; Samah, Abdullah & Ferdousi, 2017: 360-1).

The Kingdom of Patani’s incorporation into Thai rule in 1902 marked the beginning of what scholars have referred to as the “Thai-izing” of the people, language, culture and religion of Southern Thailand (Che Man, 1990: 255-6; Chalk, 2001: 243). In 1921 for example, the Thai state enforced the Primary Education Act, which made it obligatory for Malay-Muslim children to attend Thai primary schools where Malay and Jawi (also known as Yawi) language and headscarves for girls were forbidden. Thai civil law became the dominant rule of the land, reducing the scope of Islamic law to only Muslim marriage and inheritance (Che Man, 1990: 255-6; Loos, 2006: 79; Liow, 2010b: 21). These efforts were intended to create more uniformity between the Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand and the rest of the Thai population. However, Malay Muslims regarded these reforms as suspicious attempts to “stamp out” their religion and language – both important cornerstones of their Malay identity (Che Man, 1990: 257).

These integration policies, designed to eradicate cultural difference and to assimilate Malay-Muslims into the Thai nation-state, only served to further alienate them from the Thai majority in the following decades. The political tension in the region reached a turning point in January 2004, when “suspected militants” raided an army camp in the southern province of Narathiwat, which has since resulted in daily acts of violence and political instability between Thai authorities and Muslim separatist groups in the South (Liow, 2010b: 36).

7. For more information on how this religious affiliation strengthened into bureaucratic cooperation between the Malaysian and Thai Islamic bureaucracies in recent years, see my study of Malaysian cross-border marriages and elopements to Southern Thailand (Nurul Huda, 2021).

Since 2004, these violent attacks have cost the lives of nearly 7,000 people, two thirds of whom were civilians, with 60% of the victims being Muslim (Girard, 2018: 72).

The escalation of violence in Southern Thailand in recent decades has exacerbated economic pressures in a region already struggling with economic depression and high poverty rates. A project document from United Nations Development Program's Southern Thailand Empowerment and Participation (STEP) Project, for example, reveals that Yala, Pattani, and especially Narathiwat "had markedly lower average household income than the national level"; furthermore, nearly a third of the households in these provinces are below the national poverty line – a much higher rate compared to 9.5% nationally (UNDP, 2010).

A recent World Bank Group (2016) report illustrates even grimmer prospects with its findings on the economic situation in the South, where slow and stagnating economic growth in modern sectors trailed far behind the rest of the country. Poverty levels in the South have resulted in poor educational outcomes, largely due to the lack of teachers and educational resources in schools. Moreover, 18.54% of the population between the ages of 18 to 65 were inactive – meaning neither engaging in work, skills training, or educational pursuits that could improve their future employability (World Bank Group, 2016: 145). This reflects their detachment from the labor market, which exacerbates their disenfranchisement from Thai society at large where their status as an ethnic minority and *khaek* ("dark-skinned visitors" in colloquial Thai) invite discrimination (Liow, 2010b: 12).

Both reports moreover indicate that violence and poverty in the South have taken a particularly heavy toll on women. For example, in 2003, nearly 11% of women in the south were widows (though not all lost their husbands to violence), meaning that since the violence exacerbated in 2004, even more women would have lost their husbands, and had to seek employment to support their families (UNDP, 2010: 6). At the same time, labor force inactivity among the female working age population in the South – "among the highest in Thailand" – also means that Malay-Muslim women from this region are excluded from the formal job market in Thailand (World Bank Group, 2016: 145). However, this data must be interpreted with caution, since it does not explain whether this high rate of unemployment for women is due to the lack of employment opportunities or other factors. It is furthermore likely that women take up casual jobs in the informal sector where their income or employment status are not officially recognized. Nevertheless, considering the high rates of unemployment in this region, it is unsurprising that poverty levels among women in Thailand were found to be high in Pattani, and the highest in all of Thailand in Narathiwat.

The Southern provinces also demonstrate very poor health outcomes for women: Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, for example, have among the highest maternal and female infant mortality rates in the country (UNDP, 2010: 6). These

Fig. 1 – Street sign in Kota Bharu written in Jawi (Malay in Arabic script), saying “Kota Bharu Bandaraya Islam” (Kota Bharu Islamic City); picture: Nurul Huda Mohd. Razif, 2020.

indicators thus point to a poor quality of life for Malay-Muslims in the South, and for women in particular, who are more likely to end up poor, unemployed, widowed, and less likely to survive child labor or to see their female infant child survive after birth compared to their compatriots. The dire living conditions in the South constitute strong reasons for Malay-Thai migrants to seek refuge in Kelantan, where the porous border between Malaysia and Thailand and the demand for labor fuel migration in the region.

II. Migration at the Malaysian-Thai Border

Malaysia’s population of 32.7 million people (as of 2021) is predominantly Malay-Muslim (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). The Bumiputra⁸ – comprising of Malays and indigenous groups – make up 69.8% of the population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021)⁹, while 61.3% of its people profess the religion of Islam (Department of Statistics Malaysia,

⁸. Bumiputra (meaning “the sons of the soil”) is an official ethnic category introduced by the British colonial government. It includes groups considered “native” to what was then Malaya – primarily Malays and indigenous groups (*orang asli*). Now it includes indigenous populations of East Malaysia too and is still used to this day.

⁹. Malaysia’s other ethnic groups include the Chinese (22.4%), Indians (6.8%), Others (1%), and non-citizens (10%, largely made up of migrant workers) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021).

2011).¹⁰ Kelantan has a higher concentration of Malays and Muslims in its demographic make-up than any other state in Malaysia: its population consists of 96% Bumiputra, and only 3.1% Chinese, 0.3% Indian, and 0.6% Others (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020: 62). As every Malay in Malaysia is constitutionally recognized as a Muslim, this Malay-majority also translates to the presence of an overwhelmingly Muslim community in Kelantan.¹¹

Kota Bharu is the administrative, commercial, and spiritual capital of Kelantan. With a population of 608,600, this city is home to about a third of Kelantan's population of 1.88 million (as of 2019) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020: 45). It is also home to the Islamist opposition party PAS (*Parti se-Islam Malaysia*, or the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), that runs the state under a style of religious governance known as "*ulama* leadership" (*kepimpinan ulama*).¹² Under *ulama* leadership in Kelantan, the spiritual and the political go hand in hand: its previous leader, Nik Aziz Nik Mat, was a revered *Mursyidul Am* (a localized term from Arabic meaning "Spiritual Leader") for PAS from 1990 to 2013. He also, more notably, served as the Chief Minister of Kelantan from 1991 until his death in 2015. From upholding of the Islamic principle of "enjoining the good, forbidding the evil" (Ar. *amar ma'aruf, nahi mungkar*) in its public policies, Kelantan has acquired the reputation of being the most Islamically "conservative" state in all of Malaysia. This is, for example, the only state where cinemas and entertainment centers such as nightclubs are banned, and whose ruling government attempted to enforce *hudud* (predetermined crimes and punishments listed in the principal texts) through the Syariah Criminal Code (II) Bill in 1993, and yet again in 2015 (Nurul Huda, 2020). The restrictive climate for entertainment in Kelantan feeds into fantasies among Malaysian men of neighboring Thailand as a "Las Vegas" of sorts, where one may be free to indulge in alcohol, prostitution, and drugs away from the prying eyes of the Vice Prevention Unit (mal. *Unit Pencegah Maksiat*).¹³

Kota Bharu is situated only 45 kilometers (about a half hour's drive) from the Malaysian-Thai border. Stretching across the width of the Malay Peninsula for more than 500 kilometers, from the coast of the South China Sea to the east and where the Strait of Malacca meets the Andaman Sea to the west, the

10. Other religions practiced in Malaysia include Buddhism (19%), Christianity (9%), Hinduism (6%), and others (5%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011).

11. Article 3 of the Malaysian Constitution defines a "Malay" as an individual who "speaks the Malay language", "practices Malay adat", and "professes the religion of Islam".

12. The Malay term "*ulama*," imported from Arabic, refers to a religious scholar. It is used in Malay in the singular sense, even though in Arabic, it is the plural form of "*alim*."

13. The Vice Prevention Unit operates under the Department of Islamic Affairs (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Kelantan, JAHEAIK), and is responsible for arresting Muslims who have committed offences under the Syariah Criminal Act such as alcohol consumption, gambling, and pre- or extra-marital sexual offences.

Malaysian-Thai border has long been a place of exchange and opportunities. Here people, ideas, and goods move with relative fluidity and ease. Both Malaysia and Thailand mutually profit from the porous border in different ways: Thailand economically depends on Buddhist pilgrims, tourists, and eloping couples from Malaysia to create jobs and economic opportunities in a largely rural and agricultural region of the country. Malaysia, in turn, benefits tremendously from the cheap labor of Malay-Thai migrant workers who come to the border states (Perlis, Kedah, and Kelantan) to work in the construction and service sectors (especially in restaurants and retail), small and medium enterprises (SME), and in factories.

Traffic of labor and goods are much heavier on both coastal sides of the border (in Kelantan to the east, and Kedah and Perlis to the west) than inland (see fig. 3). This is because the inland border, where the Malaysian state of Perak meets the Thai province of Yala, forms part of the mountainous backbone of the Malay Peninsula, known as *Banjaran Titiwangsa* (Titiwangsa Mountains). The heavily-forested terrain makes movement difficult, though this provides ideal conditions for smuggling drugs and contraband items, as well trafficking human beings (especially refugees) across the border into Malaysia (Sharifah Mahsinah, 2021).

Crossing the border legally is not a difficult feat: Thai border residents can enter the Malaysian border states with just a border pass, which makes it possible to work in the informal economy without a legal work permit and stay for months – even years – at a time. Border passes do not substitute as a legal work permit, but they offer a period of stay of up to three months at a time, and only cost RM10 (€2) to renew every year. The practicality and affordability of border passes allows many Malay-Thai labor migrants to find employment in the border cities in the Malaysian side without being tied to an employment contract or spending a fortune in obtaining a legal work permit. Such loose working arrangements also leave these migrants free to return to Thailand should work conditions in Malaysia prove unfavorable.

The porous border between Malaysia and Thailand is one of the main factors contributing to illegal migration between the two countries. It is reported that there are “considerably more irregular border crossings than regular ones” along the Malaysian-Thai frontier, rendered convenient and even preferable by the traversable nature of the shallow Sungai Kolok River in the Kelantan side (Weigand, 2020: 32). Due to this, it is difficult to provide reliable numerical data to illustrate the scale of migration occurring across the Malaysian-Thai border – the number of illegal migrants who did not register with Thailand’s Department of Employment Services, or with Malaysia’s immigration authorities far exceeds those who do. During the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, since the Malaysian government ordered migrants with expired social passes to leave the country in April 2021, Thailand’s Consul General in Kota Bharu, Mongkol Sinsomboon, anticipated that around 30,000 Thais were to return home, “including those

Fig. 2 – Kelantan and Southern Thailand from a regional perspective

Fig. 3 – Field Sites and Kuala Land Checkpoints at the Malaysian-Thai Border

working illegally in Malaysia” (Bernama, 2021). This may be a conservative estimate: indeed, reliable numerical data on Thai migrants is scarce: the only available official statistics obtained from the Office of Labor Affairs at the Royal Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur from 2007 suggests that there were 18,456 Thai workers legally registered in Malaysia (Klanarong, 2013: 10). However, it estimated that the number of unregistered Thais working entering Malaysia using a border pass for employment could in fact be as high as 100,000 (Klanarong, 2013: 10). The overwhelming majority of these migrants – 84% – work in the service sector, with the rest employed in agriculture, fishery, and construction; most originated from the Southern provinces, and arrived in Malaysia without the help of employment agents, relying instead on their extensive social network to find unskilled jobs in the service sector that pays much higher wages than in Thailand (Klanarong, 2013: 10-11).

Certain estimations indicate that as of 2009, as much as 20% of the working-age population in the Southern Thai provinces reside or work in Malaysia (Girard, 2018: 72). Among the factors facilitating this, besides the logistical ease of crossing the border, are the cultural, ethnic, and familial ties that bind the Malays of Southern Thailand and Malaysia. The four southernmost provinces of Thailand – Narathiwat, Satun, Yala, and Pattani – are home to Thailand’s largest religious minority: Muslims that are largely ethnically Malay, who number between 4 to 8% of Thailand’s population of 65 millions (Liow, 2010b: 12). Unlike in Thailand, where they constitute the marginalized minority, Malay-Thai migrants can easily blend in with the Malay-Muslim majority in Malaysia. They speak a similar dialect of Malay spoken in Kelantan known as the “East Coast” (*pantai timur*) dialect and dress similarly, which makes it difficult to distinguish a Malay-Thai woman from a native Kelantanese. Most important are the strong familial connections between Malays in Southern Thailand and those in the northern Malaysian states of Perlis, Kedah, and Kelantan that go back centuries. These kinship ties have been maintained to this day through inter-marriages between Malay families and “ethnic kin” from both sides of the border (Haemindra, 1976: 198; Klanarong & Ishii, 2016: 8).

It is important to note that despite being a primary destination for employment for many Malay-Thai migrants, especially from the provinces of Narathiwat and Pattani, Kelantan is actually one of the least economically developed states of Malaysia (Lafaye de Micheaux, 2019). As of 2010, it has the lowest urbanization rate at only 42.4%; in 2019, it also held the lowest rate of mean household gross income (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Yet this is rapidly changing, with Kelantan recording an economic growth rate of 5.3% in 2019, double that of the previous year (2.6% in 2018) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020: 39). Its economy is primarily powered by the service sector, which employs

64.9% of Kelantan's workforce (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020: 73). This is followed by agriculture and fishing, manufacturing, construction, and mining (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020: 48). Up to a third (33.5%) of the state's revenues from the service sector derive from the retail, food and beverages, and hotel industries (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020: 53).

Kelantan is home to a large number of restaurants serving Thai cuisine. These are typically owned by Malay-Thai nationals who are long-term residents (*pemastautin*) in Malaysia, and employ many Malay-Thai migrants seeking casual work. According to a recent estimation, there were about 50 Thai restaurants operating in Kota Bharu alone in 2020, many of which were forced to cease operations when their Malay-Thai owners had to repatriate to Thailand during the pandemic (Sharifah Mahsinah, 2020). Given that one can easily find food stalls serving Thai cuisine in the streets of Kota Bharu however, it is very likely that this number is much higher.

Kelantan does not have an established fishing industry that absorbs many Malay-Thai migrants as its neighbor on the west coast, Kedah, does (Klanarong, 2003; Horstmann, 2006). By contrast, it does have a thriving handicraft industry that produces, sells, and distributes hand-painted silk known as *batik*, typically worn with a cotton veil hand-embroidered in great detail by Malay-Thai craftswomen. Retail is another sector that commonly employs Malay-Thai migrants, while some seasonal day laborers work in fruit orchards, rubber plantations, and agricultural land closer to the border.

The porous frontier between Malaysia and Thailand, the cultural and linguistic similarities in the border region, and Malaysia's demand for a flexible workforce in the service sector have created employment opportunities in the Malaysian side of the border. As I show next, this employment market particularly favors a female workforce, thus fostering the "feminization of migration" from Southern Thailand to Malaysia.

III. The Feminization of Migration to Malaysia

Southeast Asia is a productive site for studying the feminization of migration, given that, according to a UN Women report, "Women comprise nearly 50% of total migrants globally, and nearly 48% in the ASEAN region" (UN Women, 2017: 33). To address the gendered impact of migration – and the impact of gender on migration – various scholars have sought to explore the local and transnational forces that give rise to various structural and social precarities female migrants are subjected to (Piper, 2003, 2006; Williams & Yu, 2006; Piper & Lee, 2016; Constable, 2005, 2020). These scholars recognize that migration is a specifically gendered phenomenon, because men and women are differently affected by social and structural factors that govern migration. For example, even though women account for nearly half of migrants globally, they – and the economic gains they make through migratory labor – are considered as

secondary to men, who often migrate through more official migration channels in larger groups, and are protected by unions and regulatory frameworks of the state (Williams & Yu, 2006: 59; Piper, 2006: 144).

Men and women also follow different legal pathways to migration, which are often determined by the gender-specific labor markets they attempt to penetrate: while male migrants tend to go into the industrial or construction sector, women tend to gravitate towards the service sector or the domestic sphere, where there is a different kind of labor – usually emotional, reproductive, domestic, or sexual – involved (Constable, 2014; Le Bail, 2017). While male migrants are usually protected by unions and state regulatory frameworks, and valued by host societies as “essential labor,” women’s work in the domestic sphere or as providers of pleasure is considered as not “serious” enough to deserve equal protection.

To the contrary, the migration application process typically disadvantages women, and upon arrival in host countries such as Singapore, female migrant workers are subjected to strict corporal surveillance that attempts to control their sexuality (Constable, 2020). As a result, many scholars have argued that the “feminization of migration” is in fact far from a neutral phenomenon, but rather one that engenders a serious “violation of human, women’s, labor, and social rights” (Piper, 2006: 151). Indeed, as a UN Women report on the study of women’s migration in Southeast Asia concludes, “while trade liberalization may increase migration of women because of the economic opportunity it presents, without adequate protections women are unlikely to benefit from these opportunities and will remain vulnerable to informal employment and exploitation” (UN Women, 2017: 34).

Thailand provides a productive ground for examining the feminization of migration, as it has the highest percentage of female emigrating workforce among the ten member-states that make up the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) region. Statistics from the UN Department of Economics and Social Affairs (UN DESA) as of 2020 show that 61% of emigrants from Thailand are female – much higher than the global average of female international migrants at 48% (Migration Data Portal, 2021). It is difficult to determine how many of these nationally-Thai female emigrants make their way to Malaysia due to the fact that there are no transparent data-keeping from either Thailand or Malaysia. In fact, female migrants typically migrate to Malaysia through “irregular and/or unsafe” channels, leaving the bulk of them uncounted by the authorities (UN Women, 2017: 46). Nevertheless, what we do know from data gathered by UN Women confirms that “irregular migration has been a structural component of ASEAN workers’ movements to Malaysia,” and that “a large share of the undocumented workers are women migrants” (UN Women, 2017: 45). And due to their unregularized status, many female migrants in Malaysia are forced to take up vulnerable employment in

the informal sector, especially in domestic and care work, which rarely come with labor and social protections (UN Women, 2015: 3).

Existing studies on labor migration at the Malaysian-Thai border have noted that this phenomenon is driven by an increasingly young and female workforce, especially since the late 1980s (Klanarong, 2013; Klanarong & Ishii, 2016; Tsuneda, 2009). The anthropologist Michiko Tsuneda (2009), for example, illustrates how the struggling local economy in Southern Thailand and the growing industrial and service sector in Malaysia have created new economic opportunities across the border that transform existing migration patterns. In her study of Malay migrants from Southern Thailand in the early 2000s, she shows that there is a significant shift towards more young, unmarried women migrating to work in Malaysia's service sector, becoming the important "builders of the cross-border network" (Tsuneda, 2009: 6). This, she notes, is remarkably different from the "largely seasonal, agricultural, and largely male labor migration of the past" (Tsuneda, 2009: 6).

Tsuneda analyzes migration at the Malaysian-Thai border through a gendered lens, arguing that the experience of migration is preferable for women than for men, due to their access to different opportunities in the employment market: although men traditionally enjoy more mobility and can earn more than women in Malaysia, the limited scope of work allowed for them as an undocumented migrant meant that much of their freedom has been curtailed by the need to live cautiously (Tsuneda, 2009: 264). Their limited freedom exacerbates their feeling of exclusion from the host society (which they call "*tanoh dio*," or "their land") and a longing for "our home" ("*tanoh kito*"). Women, by contrast, are very much in-demand in low-skilled jobs where their performance of femininity sells. This includes working in the service sector in restaurants and coffeeshops, where their supposedly "gentle" nature (*lemah lembut*) – and the exoticism of Thai women (of Malay and other ethnicities) in the Malaysian imagination, elaborated further below – is suited for attracting and serving customers (Tsuneda, 2009: 269).

As discussed, the porous border between Malaysia and Thailand has ushered in a new phase of migration dominated by a young, female, and unmarried population of migrants who fulfill Malaysia's need for cheap, unskilled labor in its growing service and industrial sectors. While these studies have focused extensively on Malay-Thai migrants' navigation of the labor market in Malaysia as a means of pursuing a better life, little emphasis has been given on the non-material aspirations behind their migration, explored next.

IV. Malaysian-Thai Cross-Border Marriage

Marriage and migration are two intricately connected phenomena that have prompted the question, "Does one migrate to marry or marry to migrate?" (Williams & Yu, 2006: 59). This question is rendered even more

complex when we add employment into the equation. Scholars recognize the multiplicity of female migrants' identity as "wife or worker" (Piper, 2003), arguing that is not always clear which precedes which, but the general trend seems to show that when one door opens, so does the other: marriage paves the way to employment, and can also present a way to break out of the migration circuit between the home and host societies (Piper, 2003; Williams & Yu, 2006). Others are driven by personal aspirations and ambitions such as love, or the desire to seek more cosmopolitan experiences abroad with foreign men (Constable, 2003). Women's motivations furthermore change over time in response to the circumstances and constraints that they encounter, as is the case at the Malaysian-Thai border, where looser migration laws allow Thai women to pursue a multitude of desires simultaneously.

Malaysian-Thai cross-border marriages I describe here form part of a wider transfer of brides across Asia, usually from poorer Southeast Asian countries to wealthier nations in East Asia. These unions typically involve couples of different nationalities, and are thus often referred to interchangeably with "transnational marriage" or "international marriage." Although they emerge from different political, economic, and demographic circumstances compared to other Asian regions, Malaysian-Thai cross-border marriages nevertheless emerge from similar aspirations for economic prosperity, the desire to pursue a better life, and a job market that profits from women's mobile, usually informal, and unskilled labor.

Cross-border marriages first grew in demand and popularity during East Asia's period of rapid industrialization in the 1970s. During this time, women were choosing to postpone their marriage or to not marry at all to work in the cities (Lee, 2012: 180). Despite women's increased participation in the labor force, the responsibilities of producing, raising, and caring for children and the elderly remained, unchangingly, a female duty, thus creating a crisis of social reproduction that threatened the preservation of the family unit. This shortage in domestic and care labor paved the way for the "globalization of reproduction" in countries such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, where imported brides "[take] on roles such as housekeeping; car[ing] for children, the elderly, and the ill; moral and social cultivations of children; and sex and reproduction" (Liaw et al., 2010: 50).

There are also "supply and demand" factors that fuel the international marriage migration trend in Asia (Jones & Shen, 2008: 15). Foreign brides from the "supply" side usually engage in cross-border marriage for the opportunity to find higher-paid employment opportunities to bring their natal family out of poverty (Kim, 2012: 553; Thai, 2012: 216). Furthermore, marriage is perhaps one of the few legal avenues for women to settle in these developed countries as a long-term resident and acquire citizenship. This demonstrates a specific "cultural logic" in their marriage to foreigners, as Suzuki (2005: 128) suggests, which is considered an "easy and secure entry to wealth, stability, and mobility."

On the “demand” side, cross-border marriages provide marriage opportunities for lower middle-class men of rural background, with limited education and income-earning capacity. During this period of intense industrialization, rural areas in particular experienced a severe “marriage squeeze,” in which rural-urban internal female migration led to an excess of marriageable men but insufficient potential brides (Lee, 2012: 182; Lu & Yang, 2010: 17). These men would otherwise have limited chances of succeeding in the local marriage market, forcing them to seek foreign brides who are “not in a position to be as ‘choosy’ as local women” (Jones & Shen, 2008: 15). In Japan, this social crisis of what the anthropologist John Knight calls “involuntary bachelorhood” was considered to be a national problem when rural male celibacy reached over 25% in 1990 (1995: 9). This prompted local municipal governments to intervene through various programs such as establishing municipal marriage consultants, meeting clubs, marriage awards to young couples, and go-between reward schemes that offer financial incentives to prospective couples and matchmakers (Knight, 1995: 12).

In East Asia, cross-border marriage is thus a way of solving a national crisis through transnational means. Female marriage migrants fulfil a clear reproductive need to prevent the demographic decline of the host society, which allows the patriarchal family institution to endure through the contribution of migrant wives’ (economic) production and (social) reproduction. This is very much in contrast to Southeast Asia, specifically in Malaysia, where marriage and migration are driven by a tumultuous political climate and a pressing economic need, not a demographic demand for wives in the bride-receiving country. In fact, transnational marriages between Malay-Malaysian citizens and foreigners in Malaysia in recent years have been perceived as disruptive and suspicious, even as a matter of national security requiring the response of the Department of Immigration, the Department of National Registration, local state and federal governments, and religious authorities nationwide.

In an article published by the Malay-language newspaper *Harian Metro* in April 2019, the Director of the state of Selangor’s Department of Islamic Affairs, Haris Kasim, announced that there has been a marked increase in transnational marriages between Muslim (predominantly Malay) citizens and foreign nationals. In 2014, there were 983 of such marriages recorded in Selangor, involving 635 brides and 348 grooms who were Malaysians. A large majority of these married spouses originating from Indonesia (617 in total, 148 male and 469 female), followed by Thailand (94; 20 male, 74 female) (Idris & Yusmizal, 2019). In 2015, the number of transnational marriages increased to 1,066, with Malaysian grooms (570) exceeding the number of brides (496) this time. The origins of foreign spouses also differed: the leading country of origin continued to be Indonesia (581; 236 male and 345 female), followed by Pakistan (106; 97 male, 6 female), and Thailand (62; 23 male, 39 female) (Idris & Yusmizal, 2019). This statistical rise in marriages with foreign nationals – particularly the

uptick in male citizens marrying foreign brides – is a sign that, according to Haris Kasim, “love transgresses racial boundaries and national frontiers” (*cinta melampaui batas ras dan sempadan negara*) (Idris & Yusmizal, 2019).

Kelantan’s Department of Islamic Affairs has not issued similar statistics on transnational marriages in recent years, but the number of Kelantanese women marrying Pakistani men has been a cause of great concern among the local and national public. This issue was brought to light in January 2019, when the Department of Immigration announced that, as reported in another local newspaper, *Malaysia Kini*, “there exists a trend [in which] Pakistani citizens have been marrying Kelantanese women on the grounds that they want to stay longer in this country” (N Faizal Ghazali, 2019). As of 2019, more than 400 marriages involving Pakistani men and Malay-Malaysian women were recorded by the Malaysian authorities (N Faizal Ghazali, 2019). Some of these unions were suspected of having questionable motives: local business owners in particular have been complaining of Pakistani migrants running businesses in Malaysia using their Malaysian wives’ business permit and privileges as a Malaysian citizen (Khairil Ashraf, 2019).

This prompted public pressure on the state government to put an end to these scams. The then-Deputy Chief Minister of Kelantan, Mohd Amar Nik Abdullah, argued that state governments do not have the authority “to obstruct people from marrying because this [concerns] individual rights” (*tidak ada alasan untuk kerajaan negeri mengawal atau menyekat rakyat berkahwin kerana ini hak masing-masing*) (N Faizal Ghazali, 2019). The response from the federal government, however, was more encouraging: to ensure that Malaysian women do not end up used by Pakistani (and other foreign) men as a ticket for long-term residence and economic prosperity, a deputy minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, Fuziah Salleh, promised to establish a “Standard Operating Procedure” (SOP) requiring every Malaysian and foreign citizen intending to engage in such a marriage to be “interviewed and vetted, mentally and psychologically” (Khairil Ashraf, 2019).

The rising sense of national crisis concerning transnational marriages between Malay-Malaysian women and Pakistani men illustrates how marriage, migration, and money intertwine and impinge on the economic interests of local Malays. Malay-Thai women’s presence in Kelantan similarly proves disruptive to the local marriage market, particularly as legal polygyny allows the possibility of marrying to Malay-Malaysian men as second wives. Malay-Thai cross-border marriages, as I discuss further below, are amplified by two other important factors unique to this region: first, a reciprocal vision of exoticism and affluence of the Other; and second, the ease of contracting polygamous marriages in Southern Thailand.

V. Chasing Fate & Fortune: Polygamy, *Jodoh & Rezeki*

The cultural and linguistic overlap between Malays of Southern Thailand and Malays of Kelantan mean that they also share key conceptual understandings

for making sense of the world, such as *jodoh* (fated match) and *rezeki* (fortune or sustenance). The Malay concept of predestination is an amalgamation of both their ancient Hindu tradition and their contemporary Islamic faith. *Jodoh* (“twin soul,” “affinity,” or “second self”), for example, traces its etymological origins to Tamil (*jōdu*), in which the word similarly means “a pair, match, couple” (Hoogervorst, 2015). Both my Kelantanese and Malay-Thai interlocutors have described *jodoh* as “a meeting between two individuals who then marry” (*pertemuan antara dua insan yang kemudiannya berkahwin*). But *jodoh* could also simply refer to that moment of encounter itself (*jodoh pertemuan*, or “fated encounter”), which is believed to have been divinely ordained to occur at that particular moment, at that particular time, with that particular individual.

In my discussions with my Malay informants from both the Malaysian and Thai sides of the border, I also frequently heard of *jodoh* being classified as a form of *rezeki* – a term localized into Malay from the Arabic *rizq*, meaning “sustenance” (Van Dam, 2010: 230). The anthropologist Michael Swift (1965: 91) defines *rezeki* for Malays as being “a person’s divinely inspired economic lot.” *Rezeki* must be sought through one’s own endeavors; at the same time, *rezeki* can also be understood as “riches” or “good fortune” (Catafago, 1975: 160) obtained through “chance,” “luck,” or “divine beneficence,” independent of one’s efforts or labor (Lont, 2000: 49; Fessler, 2002: 41). Both *jodoh* and *rezeki* are categorized as a subset of “fate” (*takdir* in Malay), which comes from the Arabic *taqdīr*, meaning “predestination” or “decreeing.” In Islamic belief, one’s destiny has already been decided when the soul is infused into the body before one is born into this world. Nevertheless, an unlivd future means that there is much that one can do to change its course to a more favorable outcome.

Alice Elliot (2016), writing on young university women looking for marriage in a migrant town in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, shows how women deal with this complex relationship between action and theological imagination. In the town of Zafiah, these young women engage in beauty practices such as using makeup to attract the gaze of their male peers, in the hope of attracting a promising man who can offer marriage and a migratory future in Europe or elsewhere. The paradox lies in attempting to steer the male gaze and possibly engage in premarital romance – both of which are hardly socially or religiously appropriate for an unmarried Muslim woman – in order to fulfil a destiny they believe is Islamically determined by God.

Elliot thus asks: “How does one live a life that has already been determined by non-negotiable forces, but that nevertheless requires action, choice, and alert anticipation?” (2016: 496). The answer to this dilemma is to recognize that “everyday actions” in the present are what set the wheels of predestination into motion, which then catalyse very tangible consequences in the here and now. In this way, she argues, “destiny triggers a complex “labor of hope” wherein one feels compelled to act in the human world in specific, hopeful ways, in view of a future that is already written” (Elliot, 2016: 497).

In this section, I examine how Thai women's migration to Malaysia can be seen as an undertaking of this "labor of hope" to change their fate and fortune and to secure their *rezeki* and *jodoh*. *Rezeki* as recorded in the literature is more widely used and understood in the Malay world in economic terms (Swift, 1965; Lont, 2000; Fessler, 2002). Yet my Malay-Thai and Kelantanese interlocutors frequently interpreted *rezeki* to encompass one's fate in love and marriage as well, such that whom one marries is also considered to be part of one's "fortune" in life. Thus, finding *rezeki* is, for many of these women, a pathway towards finding *jodoh*, and both courses of destiny are usually entangled in one another.

This seems to be in accordance with dominant discourse on Malaysian-Thai cross-border marriages circulating in the western side of the border in the state of Perlis. In 2016, a local Malaysian news website highlighted the growing desirability of middle-aged Malay-Malaysian men by women from Southern Thailand, who seek economic security in a spouse. The piece, published by the online Malay-language news outlet *ProjekMM*, was tellingly titled "Southern Thai ladies crazy for Malaysian husbands in their 40s" ("*Suami Malaysia, umur 40-an jadi kegilaan gadis selatan Thai*") (ProjekMM, 2016). Based on interviews with Malay-Malaysian men registering their polygamous marriage in Perlis, the article reports that many Southern Thai women (whose ethnicity was not specified) were willing to be married polygamously to men between the ages of 50 to 60. These men would be in a much more stable financial position, having paid off their mortgages, car and study loans by then, often with some savings built up on the side. In fact, the article further suggests, men in this age group are particularly attractive to Thai women because if they were employed in the private sector, they would be able to make a large cash withdrawal from their Employees' Pensioners Fund (EPF) when they reach the age of 50; if they were civil servants, they would have a comfortable lifelong pension after retirement. For all these reasons, the article says, "Thai Muslim women are less attracted to young men in Malaysia because they are just about to set up their lives, besides not having their own assets" (ProjekMM, 2016).

Despite Malay-Malaysian middle-aged husbands being in "high demand," the rate of polygamy officially recorded by the Islamic authorities in the state of Perlis remains low at only 3% (ProjekMM, 2016). However, it is very likely that the incidence of polygamy is severely under-reported, considering the fact that the rate of Malaysian couples eloping to Thailand to contract eloped marriages¹⁴ (*kahwin lari*, legally known as "cross-border marriages" as well) far exceed the number of applications for legal polygyny – a rising

14. The legal and technical term for eloped marriages also translates as "cross-border marriages" (*perkahwinan rentasan sempadan*). However, to avoid confusion with cross-border marriages that are akin to transnational marriages, I will refer to these simply as "eloped marriages" or "elopements."

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
Registration of cross-border polygyny	886	746	750	622	209	470	440	4,123
Polygyny applications lodged	141	131	105	81	90	168	178	894

Table 1 – Registration of cross-border polygyny (Kes Mal 012) and polygyny applications (Kes Mal 011) received by the Syariah Court of Kota Bharu, Kelantan, between 2012 to 2018. Source: Syariah Court of Kota Bharu, Kelantan.

phenomenon I have addressed elsewhere (Nurul Huda, 2021). As the statistics in the table above from the Syariah Court of Kota Bharu, Kelantan, indicates, the registration of eloped polygamy contracted without permission of the judge (*pendaftaran poligami tanpa kebenaran*) is about 4.6 times higher than the number of applications for polygamy (*permohonan poligami*).

The ease of eloping across the border to marry in Thailand gives little incentive for Malay-Malaysian men to become polygamous the legal way. This usually entails a lengthy bureaucratic process that would involve applying for permission from the Syariah judge in court, who can only approve the application if the husband can prove his financial eligibility and his ability to be “just” between his wives (among several other conditions). More importantly, as part of this process, the court will send an official “notice” to the first wife (and all existing wives), informing them that their husband has applied to marry another woman. This procedure would inevitably foil the husband’s plans to keep his polygamous marriage a secret from his existing families, thus discouraging him even further from pursuing legal and transparent polygamy. The alternative – that is, to elope to Southern Thailand – allows the polygamous couple to marry under Islamic rites (*mengikut hukum Syarak*); but only marriages contracted at the recognized offices of the Provincial Council of Islamic Affairs in Southern Thai provinces (specifically, in Satun, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Pattani) can be legalized in Malaysia by a Syariah judge, upon the payment of a fine.

The majority of eloped marriages contracted in Thailand are between Malay couples who are both Malaysian citizens, but a minority do involve Malay-Malaysian men marrying foreign wives (usually Thai, Indonesian, or Cambodian), or Malay-Malaysian women marrying foreign husbands (usually Pakistani). Based on my analysis of 100 case files of registration of illegal polygyny (Kes Mal 012) between 2012 to 2014, ten of these were between Malaysian men (aged between 32 to 68) and women of Thai nationality (aged between 16 to 46). From this, we may surmise that on average, about 10% of registered polygamy were Malaysian-Thai cross-border marriages.

Statistically, this number might seem minimal, but what may be even more significant is the discourse on desire for the Other circulating in the media and also in everyday banter among Malay-Malaysian men.

The *Malay Mail* article described above gives a revealing insight into how reciprocal fantasies of affluence and exoticism are conducive to Malaysian-Thai cross-border marriages by enhancing the perceived desirability of the Other. Malay-Thai women's attraction to Malay-Malaysian men is reciprocated by the prevalent stereotype in Malaysia that Malay-Thai women are, according to my male Kelantanese interlocutors, "cute" (Kel. *comey*), "beautiful" (Kel. *muko molek*), and "gentle" (*lemah lembut*). Men "melt" (*cair*) in their presence, particularly as they are known for "sweet-talking" (Kel. *kecek manis*). While conducting research in Kota Bharu, I encountered several taxi drivers who reported having regular Malay male clients from all over Malaysia who frequently ventured to the Thai side of the border town of Sungai Golok for alcohol and prostitution – largely catered by non-Muslim, non-Malay Thai sex workers. Malay-Malaysian men's engagement in sex tourism at the border perpetuates stereotypical representations of women from neighboring Thailand – whatever their nationality – as sexualized, seductive, and skilled in charming men. In his study of migration and citizenship at the western part of the Malaysian-Thai border, the anthropologist Alexander Horstmann (2006: 161) also found that Malay-Malaysian men in Kedah and Perlis often project a sort of "male fantasy" in which the daughters of Thai-speaking Muslims are seen — and desired — as "submissive housewives." This makes Malay-Thai women desirable as second wives to men who seek in polygamy the love and sexual fulfillment they cannot find in their first marriage.

But this exoticism and desire for Thai women is not exclusive to those of Malay ethnicity, but also those who are ethnically Thai. One Malaysian-Thai couple I met in the Central Mosque of Songkhla while conducting research in Southern Thailand in December 2014 shows how these two fantasies of the Other, and the ease of contracting polygamy in Thailand, facilitates cross-border marriages. At the time of our meeting, the couple had just completed their solemnization (*nikah*) ceremony and were waiting for their documentation to be prepared, which was more than enough time to conduct an interview. The husband, Ahmad, was a retired Malay teacher from Perlis in his late 60s. He had decided to marry in Songkhla because he did not want to officially apply for polygamy in court, which would mean having to declare his polygamy to his existing wife. He was already married to a Malay-Malaysian wife of similar age, with whom he not only shared children, but also grandchildren: when asked why he resorted to marrying a second wife from Thailand, he complained that his first wife "was always busy with the grandkids" (*asyik sibuk dengan cucu*), that he felt rather lonely and abandoned.

But Ahmad found a remedy for this in his ethnic Thai second wife, Ariza, who was in her late 30s and had lived and worked at the border town of Padang

Besar in Perlis for a few years. She was, in fact, a divorcée and a single mother who had left behind her children in Thailand to pursue work opportunities in Malaysia. At the time of our meeting, she was working in a hair salon, where she was able to earn a much more decent income than in Thailand. Ahmad claimed to have found in Ariza a new source of affection and fulfillment that was emotional, and perhaps also sexual: “She treats me well” (*dia layan saya baik*), he said, and when justifying his decision to become polygamous, he asserted that Islam allows polygamy for men because they supposedly have “stronger sexual desires” (*nafsu kuat*) than women. Ariza, on the other hand, said she would welcome the opportunity to stay on longer in Malaysia so she could earn comfortably to support her growing children in Thailand. Though this was not mentioned explicitly, her marriage to a Malaysian man with a pension may also help to alleviate the heavy economic burden she bore as a single mother attempting to survive in a foreign land. For this, she was willing to even convert from Buddhism to Islam the day they solemnized their marriage, and at the same mosque.

From this Malaysian-Thai cross-border marriage, we see that the possibility of contracting a quick and discreet polygamous marriage in Thailand is advantageous on many levels for the couple: the husband may preserve appearances of monogamy to his first wife by keeping his second marriage a secret, thereby preventing any unpleasant conflict or confrontation; the wife of Thai nationality may marry a Malaysian spouse with less bureaucracy involved. Furthermore, it is clear that Ahmad was projecting the Malaysian male fantasy of Thai women as sexually desirable. This forms one of the main motivations behind this union, alongside the promise of economic prosperity in Malaysia Ariza expressed. For Ariza, migrating to Malaysia for work enabled her to meet and eventually marry Ahmad. This allowed her to carve a new path forward from her past divorce in Thailand and to build a new life in Malaysia, from where she could remotely fulfil her current responsibilities to her children as a single mother through regular money remittances. Ariza’s circumstances, like those of other Thai female migrants of Malay ethnicity I met in Kota Bharu, showed how life “back home” in Thailand could be “*susoh*” (mal. “*susah*”) – a Kelantanese word meaning “difficult,” which encompasses a multitude of hardships with making a living and surviving; but despite the job precarities in Malaysia, it was nevertheless possible to find both their *rezeki* and *jodoh* there.

VI. Risks of Abuse

Some Malay-Malaysian men, however, may harbor their own reservations about marrying Thai women, including those of Malay ethnicity, despite the ethnoreligious similarities they share. This was explicitly expressed by my taxi driver in Kota Bharu, Rizal, whose chauffeuring services I regularly engaged while conducting fieldwork in Kelantan in 2015. Rizal was a young Malay man of 28 years old from the town of Bachok (24 kilometers from

Kota Bharu), who was – rather unusually for a Kelantanese man of his age – still unmarried. Having been a taxi driver in the Kota Bharu area for some time, with regular trips to the Thai border, Rizal’s clientele had grown to include Malay-Thai businessmen and businesswomen who frequently came to Kota Bharu to trade and deliver their merchandise. One wealthy Malay-Thai businesswoman, he told me, had recently offered him her daughter’s hand in marriage. He politely refused this proposal (Kel. “*tokseh*”), which puzzled me, considering the prevalent stereotypes of Malay-Thai women as prime wifely material I had heard from other Malay-Malaysian men. He explained to me that even though “she [the daughter] was pretty” (Kel. *muko meme molek*), marrying her would be “too risky”:

“If your [Malay-] Thai wife returns to her parents’ home all battered and bruised [*berbekas*, literally meaning “with traces”], her father and brothers may come and hunt you down with a rifle.”

Reflecting on this, he was convinced that he had made the right decision for his *jodoh*. But Rizal’s response was revealing in several ways: first, it was a self-admission of Kelantanese husbands’ tendency to be physically abusive in marriage, which was confirmed by my interviews with many Kelantanese wives seeking a divorce in court. This adds another layer of risk – both physical and psychological – for Malay-Thai women considering to marry Malay-Malaysian husbands. Second, it shows the continuity in the social and familial connection that Malay-Thai women maintain with their natal families, even after marrying Malay-Malaysian husbands. This connection offers a safety net in the form of refuge and retribution: should things go awry in the marriage, they have a family to return to in Thailand; more importantly, their male kin would not let unjust treatment of their daughters and sisters go unpunished. The image of gun-wielding Malay-Thai men seeking revenge that Rizal evoked is also noteworthy and indicative of how Malays perceive neighboring Thailand with fear and suspicion, as a lawless place where violence reigns.

Some Malay-Thai women do indeed find themselves trapped in an abusive marriage with no way out. Divorce is particularly difficult if the marriage was officially registered in Malaysia and the husband refuses to make a verbal proclamation of divorce (*talak*), which would mean having to initiate a lengthy divorce process that could consume a lot of time and money. If the marriage was contracted in Thailand and was never legally registered in Malaysia, the bureaucratic process of obtaining a divorce would be even lengthier, as the *nikah* would have to be legalized in a Malaysian Syariah court first before any divorce procedures could be initiated.

One afternoon on my way home after a day of research at Kota Bharu’s Syariah Court in 2015, I happened to share Rizal’s taxi with Fatin – a Malay-Thai woman in her late 20s, originally from Narathiwat. Fatin was married to a Malay-Malaysian man from Rantau Panjang, whom she knew “through

friends.” Unlike many other Malay-Thai women I encountered, Fatin did not migrate to Malaysia for work specifically; she had only moved to Kota Bharu after her marriage, and had since been a housewife. Fatin was in court that day because her Kelantanese husband had been having money problems, and had begun resorting to domestic violence, prompting her to seek legal solutions for a divorce at the Syariah Court. She had taken Rizal’s taxi out of desperation – she needed to make her way back to Kota Bharu to find a lawyer’s office urgently, but with the new Syariah court complex located in a developing area in the outskirts of Kota Bharu, eight kilometers away from the city center, there were few taxis available.

At the point of our meeting, Fatin was accompanied by her elderly mother and her two children – a baby and a toddler. Fatin’s mother had come to Kota Bharu from Thailand specifically to answer her daughter’s call of distress after the beating began. She was fully supportive of Fatin’s decision to seek a divorce for her own safety and that of her children, having seen her daughter being hit by her son-in-law with her own eyes. In Thai-accented Malay, Fatin’s mother said in the taxi that she would endeavor to get Fatin to return to Thailand as soon as possible, where she and children may be safe with her natal family.

Though I was unable to follow up on whether Fatin eventually succeeded in obtaining her divorce, her ordeal corresponds to the risks faced by other cross-border wives across Asia. Studies examining the well-being of marriage migrants in East Asia have found that this move for many cross-border brides has been anything *but* easy, primarily due to the typical patrilocal marital and kinship pattern. In other words, the bride, like Fatin, typically joins the husband’s family in his country, creating social and cultural adjustment issues, social isolation, and discrimination – all of which make assimilation in their host societies difficult (Oh, 2018; Li & Yang, 2020). Furthermore, female migrants’ dependency on their husband for economic support, as well as for the legal right to stay in the host society create unequal power dynamics in the marriage that leave them vulnerable to psychological abuse and domestic violence (Williams & Yu, 2006).

Fatin’s cross-border confirms the risks above, and also affirms Rizal’s remark that marriage to a Kelantanese man presents the threat of domestic violence. This is but one of the many more precarities Malay-Thai women must face when seeking a Malay-Malaysian husband, whose proclivity for polygamy and reputation for being unfaithful additionally means that such exogamous marriages are a dangerous gamble that could lead to abandonment (Horstmann, 2006: 162).

VII. Love Magic & Sorcery

Although *jodoh* and *rezeki* are both considered to be a predestined affair, navigating the marriage market in Malaysia brings new sets of precarities

for Malay-Thai women that add to their undocumented status and fragile economic situation. These precarities emerge from a gendered form of intra-ethnic tension that emanates from Malay-Malaysian women's suspicions that Malay-Thai women engage in powerful love magic (*ilmu pengasih*) and sorcery (*sihir*) to secure a spouse – especially a married man. As such, Malay-Thai women's presence in Kelantan – like that of Pakistani men in Malaysia – is perceived as undesirable, disruptive, and dangerous.

In his study of settlement of migrants from Java in the southern Malaysian state of Johor, Koji Miyazaki suggests that the Javanese used stereotypical images of being “magical” and “mystical” as “a ‘cultural resource’ for gaining a certain position in Malay society” (2000: 77). According to Miyazaki, Javanese migrants are seen with contempt by Malays in the host society due to their immigrant, economically marginalized, and outsider status. At the same time, their Malay hosts perceive them as possessing great physical strength and mystical knowledge, capable of executing impressive feats such as opening virgin forests for new rubber plantations (Miyazaki, 2000: 84). This creates an interesting asymmetrical relationship in which the Javanese migrants are socially marginalized but feared for being “magically powerful,” while the Malays are the dominant group, but not dangerous to the Javanese settlers (Miyazaki, 2000: 92).

Malay-Thai women are seen as occupying a comparable position in Kelantan's socio-cultural landscape. These women are held at the margins of society for being migrants (*pendatang*), poor (*miskin*), and as seeking from a refuge from a hard life (*orang susah*); for all these reasons, they may be susceptible to criminal behaviors that make employers distrustful towards them. For instance, some business owners I knew in Kelantan explicitly mentioned that they refused to hire Malay-Thai migrants to work in their shops, because they feared that Malay-Thai employees would steal their money and run off to Thailand, never to return. At the same time, my Kelantanese interlocutors suspect that they did not come to this side of the border “empty-handed” (*tangan kosong*); rather, they bring with them practices and knowledge of sorcery (*ilmu sihir*) that would enhance their chances of securing *jodoh* and *rezeki* in Malaysia.

This practice of sorcery includes, for example, using certain charms to make their businesses prosper or to beautify themselves. Some of the most popular practices of sorcery I heard about in Kelantan was of Malay-Thai waitresses in coffeeshops and restaurants applying love potions into food and drinks to attract clients. This is an act described with fear and suspicion by my Kelantanese interlocutors as “putting things” (*taruk benda*) – usually an enchanted concoction that has been prepared by an ethnic-Thai sorcerer (*bomoh*) – into food and beverages consumed by the object of affection. These “things” are intended to arouse intense attraction and infatuation in the targeted recipient. Love magic and potions prepared by a Thai sorcerer (*bomoh Siam*)

are considered especially potent, capable of swaying the targeted person's temperament and behaviours, often in inexplicable and drastic ways. Such love potions are rumored to contain "unclean things" (*benda kotor*) such as the woman's menstrual blood (*darah haid*), but their presence are carefully concealed when added into beverages with a strong taste or a dark appearance, such as black coffee (*kopi o*). Malay-Thai waitresses' reputation for engaging supernatural means for securing a husband makes Kelantanese women wary of their husbands spending too much time in coffeeshops with their male peers, for fear that they will end up being seduced by such women.

Fatimah was one such woman who believed that her husband had been ensorcelled by a Malay-Thai woman, and that she too had been a victim of sorcery.¹⁵ I met Fatimah in Kota Bharu's Syariah Court in 2015, where she was fighting a messy battle for her share of matrimonial assets from her ex-husband. Originally from Kota Bharu, and in her late 50s at the time of our interview, Fatimah began telling me her story very calmly at first, before being overtaken by emotion when she recounted her divorce. Fatimah and her husband had been married for more than three decades and were running a business together selling the hand-painted silk known as *batik*. This all changed when her husband began frequenting a restaurant selling *mi celup* – a popular dish of noodle served in a tasty broth, considered a specialty of the Malay-Thai community. Fatimah noticed that her husband was particularly infatuated by the Malay-Thai waitress who often served him at the restaurant. Soon she began to observe drastic behavioral changes in her husband – his increasing propensity for violence (which caused her to be hospitalized and to lodge a police report a few times); the disappearance of large sums of money from their *batik* business; extended absences from home; and an intense aversion to spending time with her and their children at home, especially during mealtimes.

At the same time, she began to feel physically ill, and described having sexual relations with her husband as particularly "painful" (*sakit*) and "burning" (*panas*). This obstructed any possibility of being physically intimate with her husband, which Fatimah believed compounded his desire to pursue the other woman. Indeed, as the affair grew increasingly serious, Fatimah and

15. It is important to note that accounts of Malay-Thai women's skills in love magic and sorcery that I gathered in my research nearly always came from Kelantanese women who claimed to have been victims of such supernatural aggression. This is because sorcery is a serious sin and forbidden (*haram*) in Islam; any individual who confesses to having visited a sorcerer (*ahli sihir*) for a favor thus also avows to having committed a serious act of *syirik* (betrayal of the oneness of God), thus diminishing his or her own status and religiosity as a "good Muslim." For this reason, none of the Malay-Thai women I interviewed ever admitted to using sorcery. Added to this, such an admission would also reinforce an already negative perception of Malay-Thai women as being spiritually dangerous, which would exclude them even further from their host society.

her children made shocking and scandalous discoveries such as finding “the other woman’s” lingerie and other personal items in her husband’s car, which convinced Fatimah that a sexual liaison had occurred.

Fatimah believed the sorcery instigating changes in her husband’s behavior was aimed at a single purpose: to monopolize access to her husband’s time, affections, and money, all of which Fatimah was receiving less and less as his affair progressed. Fatimah eventually succeeded in obtaining a divorce, after enduring much physical abuse, a failed business, and slandering from her friends, family, and business partners. Had she not divorced, she suspected that the couple would have married polygamously anyway – but it later came to light that the Malay-Thai woman was actually still legally married to her husband in Thailand, where she had also left behind her two children.

Fatimah’s story shows how Malay-Thai women are feared by Kelantanese women for their ability to seize and subdue their husbands with love magic and sorcery. As an employee of a restaurant her husband frequented, Fatimah suspected that she could have easily slipped love potion into the meals she served her customers, including her husband. In the end, Fatimah had no choice but to leave the abusive marriage, particularly as her husband remained firmly under the other woman’s spell. Indeed, most sorcery victims are said to have no hope of recovery, except if healed by an equally powerful *bomoh Siam* in Thailand.

It also tells us that sorcery (including love magic) in Malay society are, in the words of the anthropologist Michael Peletz, “very real – and quite common,” even though more than 30 years have passed since he had written on sorcery in a Malay village in the state of Negeri Sembilan (1988: 144). Sorcery is still applied today for the same reasons – to inflict spiritual and physical harm on an enemy; to enact revenge when one’s romantic advances have been rejected; or to sway the heart of a desired person towards marriage. Sorcery has become the preferred method for dealing with anti-social feelings like “envy, jealousy, frustrated love, personal rejection, loss of face, or some combination of these factors,” because

“these acts are relatively private and secretive, and can thus be accomplished without any public or direct displays of aggression, or of emotions of any kind” (Peletz, 1988: 144-5).

Sorcery’s stealthy nature makes it a particularly apt form of defying the ethnic, structural, and power hierarchies Malay-Thai migrants are subjected to in Kelantan. First, the particular “brand” of Siamese sorcery imported by Malay-Thai migrants is seen by my Kelantanese interlocutors as more powerful and dangerous than other types of sorcery practiced by indigenous or Indonesian sorcerers. This perception affirms the continued relevance of Miyazaki’s observation that Thai sorcerers are considered to be “skilled in supernatural cults,” which intensifies “the association of marginality and ‘supernatural power’” in how Malays view people from Thailand (2000: 91). Malay-Thai

migrants – especially the young, female, and unmarried ones – are especially feared, as they may be “on the hunt” for a husband, whatever the means. As a result, this fearful reputation commands respect from the local Kelantanese population, who would be very cautious not to offend their neighbors from Thailand – ethnically Malay or otherwise – in any social interaction.

Second, Malay-Thai migrants’ practice of sorcery could be read as an attempt to bolster the inferior position and unjust treatment in the workplace they are subjected to as a Malay of Thai nationality in Malaysia. As Tsuneda notes, their employment in low-earning jobs in the service sector will likely reproduce such social hierarchies and expose them to discriminatory treatment towards Thai migrants, who are seen as people from an “underdeveloped” and war-torn country (2009: 28). The lack of an employment contract or labor laws and unions that would protect their rights as a worker moreover all contribute to the utility of sorcery as a response to precarious work conditions as undocumented migrants. For example, Fatimah told me that she once employed a Malay-Thai employee in her *batik* business who, after a disagreement with her, had used sorcery to inflict illness upon her daughter in revenge. The unpredictability of Malay-Thai migrant workers forces Kelantanese employers to be more cautious – and conscient – of their treatment towards their Malay-Thai employees.

And thirdly, Malay-Thai female migrants draw on sorcery and love magic as a rich cultural resource from “home” to facilitate their search for courtship and marital possibilities across the border. Both constitute important means for dealing with precarity in securing emotional and economic resources, particularly in potentially polygamous situations where they might be competing with any existing wives. I would argue that the potency of their love magic and their skills for seduction subvert the gendered power imbalance characteristic of cross-border marriages across Asia (Williams & Yu, 2006; Piper & Lee, 2016): here, Malay-Thai women demonstrate a dominating tendency to make Malay men fall under their spell, leaving behind a trail of marital discord, destruction, and divorce in their wake. In this sense, Malay-Thai women are not as “submissive” as imagined by Malay men; to the contrary, they use (appearances of) their submission to subjugate men, whose time, resources, and affections are diverted to the women who now command their heart.

Peletz, as mentioned above, situates sorcery in Malay society as an important means of dealing with interpersonal conflict without disturbing external appearances of harmony – essential for keeping the fabric of Malay society together (1988: 144). Cross-border marriage adds another inter-communal dimension to the study of this phenomenon in Malaysia today that shows how the mystical intersects with contemporary developments on migration, social hierarchies, ethnic identity, as well as gendered power relations. But most importantly, the prevalence of love magic is reflective of the depth of the emotional and economic precarities Malay-Thai female

migrants experience in life at the border. Here, realizing their everyday personal aspirations for love, marriage, and economic stability is an endeavor that requires extraordinary means.

Conclusion

This paper's focus on Malaysian-Thai cross-border marriages illustrates how socio-economic, cultural, and political conditions unique to this region present new sets of precarities – and also opportunities – for Malay-Thai female migrants who seek their fate and fortune in Malaysia. As past studies have shown, migration between Thailand and Malaysia is far from a nascent phenomenon. What has changed, however, is the increasing tension with which Malays receive Malay-Thai migrants in recent years, whose presence is, among others, considered by Malays as dangerous and disruptive: they are an economic necessity to the local economy, but also a romantic competition for Malay women, who fear losing their husbands in the hands of a Thai woman who may have ulterior motives for migrating to Malaysia besides employment.

But this insight into the feminization of migration at the Malaysian-Thai border illustrates how life on the other side for Malay-Thai women may not be all that it is promised to be. In their search for *rezeki* and *jodoh*, Malay-Thai migrants discover that the marriage market in Malaysia is a contentious and competitive landscape fraught with uncertainties and discrimination. Suspicious stereotypes of the Other further emphasize the intra-ethnic division between local Malays and their neighbors from Thailand, giving marriage the potential to further alienate rather than incorporate Malay-Thais into wider society. Failed conjugal experiences may even prompt a return migration to Thailand, where despite economic hardship, familial and social networks nevertheless remain intact.

Although much has been expounded in the literature on how migrant wives endure precarious conditions in their host countries, in Kelantan we see that Thai migrant women too can be perceived as a perpetrator of violence through sorcery. This fear is compounded during this pandemic: while visiting Kota Bharu on a brief fieldwork trip in September 2020, some of my Kelantanese interlocutors expressed their relief that most Thai migrants had returned to Thailand before the borders closed, so that they wouldn't be able to bring the Coronavirus into Malaysia (even though during the critical period in the pandemic in mid-2020, Thailand actually had one of the lowest infection rates in all of Southeast Asia).

One *batik* seller I knew in Kota Bharu – a Kelantanese woman in her late 60s, who had divorced also on account of her husband's infidelity – expressed her relief that the border between Malaysia and Thailand would remain closed for some time. She questioned how could “outsiders” (Kel. *oghe luar*) such as Malay-Thai women inspire fear among Malays in their own country, and then exclaimed, “It should be the other way around, as they are the ones who are

coming to our country!” (Kel. *Sepatutnya terbalik, sebab dio ye maghi tempak kito!*). Her frustration shows how the changing gender and power relations catalyzed by Malaysian-Thai cross-border marriages have turned guests into hosts, and hosts into hostages in their own homes.

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