For Better or for Worse: Marriage and Family in Sarawak, Hew Cheng Sim, ed.
London, Whiting & Birch, 2015, 218 pp., index.

Adela Baer

By Adela Baer *

A concern for Sarawak women underlies this book. Sarawak is a Malaysian state in northern Borneo that presents both unusual and usual challenges for women, as the book shows. The first three chapters emphasize the large issues encircling the institution of marriage in Sarawak, including courtship and divorce. Much attention is paid to cultural and economic factors that impinge on couples, and the effects these factors have on women’s lives.

Chapter 4 provides data on the labor force in Sarawak. Fewer women than men work outside the home. In dual-earner households in Kuching city, wives do more housework than their husbands, but the husbands are more likely to ferry children to and from schools and help them with homework. “Men dominate outside, women dominate inside.” Changes are slow to come.

Chapter 5 is on money matters. Both gender and cultural setting influence the topic of money in marriage. Forty urban couples with children were studied. None of the husbands expressed money insecurity, but many of the wives did, by saving up for possible emergencies. The men considered themselves to be the main family provider, paying for big-ticket items, while their working wives paid smaller amounts, such as for food. The wives preferred this (traditional) lifestyle. Most couples had separate bank accounts for the spouses so that discretionary spending by the husband or the wife was not a point of conflict, usually. A wife could buy handbags and shoes and a husband could buy a mountain bike for his leisure activities.

Chapter 6 analyzes marriage and divorce among Ibans in the past and present. Ibans are the largest non-Muslim group in Sarawak. Much has changed for them, including rules for courtship and marriage, then divorce. Divorce is rising among the Iban, as it is for other Malaysian groups, and divorcees are much less stigmatized now. The causes of Iban divorce include adultery and polygamy. Some Ibans have jettisoned traditional rules by converting to Christianity where rules are laxer for adulterers and other misbehavers, except that Christianity does not condone polygamy (unlike Islam). Today, young Ibans seem to rush to get married and rush to get divorced” (p. 90).

Chapter 7 describes young Chinese women in a Hakka village outside of Kuching. Why the village was once isolated by a perimeter fence is not explained, but it relates to the period when rebellion against federation with Malaya was widespread in Sarawak, roughly 35 to 50 years ago. In this Hakka setting, women lose membership in their natal family and gain membership in their husband’s family upon marriage. In both families women adhere to traditional ways for the most part. But changes are occurring, one case in point being the greater acceptance now of pregnancy before the marriage ceremony.

Chapter 8 discusses young Malay women’s choices of husbands. With their educational and economic advances, these women in Kuching sought to reconcile their modernism with Islamic teachings, but some romantic ideas did intrude. Malay dating in Kuching centers on group activities in coffee shops and shopping malls so as to protect the virginity of Malay women. Heterosexual marriage is the core of Islamic values and religious character the ideal for choosing a spouse. Playboys, transvestites, and unemployed or poorly educated men were shunned by the Malay women studied. This leaves little room for entrepreneurs, artists, or adventurers.

In Chapter 9, a study of childhood malnutrition in rural Malay households is shown to encompass family economics,
commercial foods, and paternal concern about children’s health. Rice-based meals foster family cohesion while individual snacks do not. Food choices, then, are important markers of social identity, distinguishing parents from their children “globalized” by chips and ice-cream.

A surprising number of languages are spoken in Sarawak, particularly in multiethnic families. As Chapter 10 reports, one Malay family copes with Kelantanese, standard Malay, English, and Sarawak Malay. In another family the children ended up with two or three family languages, Mandarin and English as school languages, and two other Chinese languages for conversation around town. Language loss is indeed occurring, especially for the smaller language groups such as Bidayuh and Kayan, but counter forces are also in play in Sarawak.

Chapter 11 discusses a study of 33 families over three generations in the northern Lawas district of Sarawak. For all three ethnic groups studied (Chinese, Malay, and Lun Bawang), education and employment opportunities have risen over the past half century—from low literacy rates to secondary education and beyond, and from mainly village work to a variety of modern jobs. Women in the families studied benefited notably over time, especially in the latest generation of adults.

The last chapter summarizes the findings of the contributing authors. It focuses on the institution of marriage and its gender relations in a national and international context. In Sarawak marriage and the family are buffeted by factors such as urbanization, transnational migration, and, I might add, land disputes and attendant environmental harm, as well as population pressures. But families continue to be basic mutualistic and resilient groups.

Several chapters lack copyediting, especially for grammar. Statistical analysis of some small-scale survey results would have been welcome. For instance, on p. 34, is 7.54 significantly different from 7.36? Nevertheless, the quotations of survey respondents’ remarks enliven this book. These highlights give an immediacy to women’s lives in Sarawak.

*Dr Adela Baer, History Department, College of Liberal Arts, Oregon State University, USA.

Dictionnaire insolite de la Malaisie, Antonio Guerreiro, Paris, Cosmopole, 2015, 159 pages

Par Jean Baffie *

Après l’Indonésie, le Viêt Nam, la Chine, l’Inde, le Japon, la Thaïlande et le Sri Lanka, les éditions Cosmopole proposent un « dictionnaire insolite » sur la Malaisie. Même si la langue malaise est loin d’être la plus difficile du continent et si le malais/indonésien est enseigné aux langues O’dès 1841 (le thaï seulement à partir de 1874), il se trouve bien peu de spécialistes de la Malaisie en France 1. Cosmopole a fait appel à l’un des rares connaisseurs de ce pays en France, Antonio Guerreiro, anthropologue ayant Bornéo comme terrain principal, membre associé de l’IRSEA, puis de l’IrAsia (CNRS-Université d’Aix-Marseille) et expert pour le musée du Quai Branly (Paris).

La Malaisie n’est pas un très grand pays du tourisme. Si les statistiques donnent pourtant plus de 27 millions de visiteurs pour 2014 (contre 25 millions environ pour la Thaïlande), il faut savoir que la moitié de ces visiteurs sont des résidents de Singapour en visite pour un week-end. Le touriste en Malaisie ne doit pas rechercher les sites historiques anciens, car le pays n’a pas d’ensembles architecturaux datant de la période précoloniale. A. Guerreiro signale clairement l’intérêt de l’architecture coloniale de Melaka (Malacca) – même si la première ville touristique du pays aurait pu être l’occasion de plusieurs entrées 2 – mais passe un peu trop vite à mon goût sur Penang, d’autant que George Town, la capitale de l’État de Penang, a été inscrite