

BOOK REVIEW

WIVES AND MIDWIVES: CHILDBIRTH AND NUTRITION IN RURAL MALAYSIA

Laderman, Carol (1983), University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 267 pp.

Carol Laderman, by her own account carried out her field studies in Merchang, a village located on the coast of Terengganu, eastern Peninsular Malaysia. She based her data almost exclusively on her familiarity with a traditional midwife named Sapiah and on one bomoh named Tok Daud. By her own admission, there was only one government midwife named Halimah. Merchang also had six traditional midwives whom she presumably was less familiar with.

Nonetheless, Carol Laderman in her book, beginning with the title speaks of "wives and midwives" in relation to "childbirth and nutrition in rural Malaysia", as if her observations of Sapiah gave her the profound right to speak about all of rural Malaysia. One of the basic rules of scientific study is that generalizations must not be made on the basis of one specific item, however detailed. Unfortunately, Carol Laderman ruins her very detailed account of midwifery in Merchang by assuming that Sapiah represented the several thousand traditional birth attendants in the various states of Malaysia. In her anxiety to appear as an authority on all matters relating to "wives and midwives", she attempts to generalize based on her knowledge of Merchang in general, and Sapiah in particular.

It is most unfortunate that in spite of her year or so in Malaysia, Carol Laderman seems to be under the illusion that Merchang and rural Malaysia are synonymous. Major differences in customs, dialects and practices exist between the many different Malay groups that live in the states of Perlis, Kedah, Johore, Kelantan, Terengganu and Malacca, to mention a few. Unfortunately, Carol Laderman is not aware that Merchang differs from Ulu Terengganu and Besut in Terengganu. She writes as if Merchang is Terengganu, a belief that clearly shows that her Merchang friends were right in believing that "Carol isn't really stupid, she is just ignorant". This unfortunate tendency pervades the book and serves only to reduce her otherwise interesting work to the level of ignorant generalizations.

One cannot help but come to the sad conclusion that Carol Laderman's account would have been so much better had she restricted herself to accounts on Sapiah, Halimah and Merchang. Consequently, the title itself is misleading and should have been "Wives and Midwives: Childbirth and Nutrition in Merchang, a Rural Malay Community". To those familiar with traditional midwifery in Malaysia, Laderman's generalizations typify the "ugly Americans".

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