Old Age: Widows, Midwives and the Question of "Witchcraft" in Early Modern Southeast Asia*

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I. Introduction: Age and the Historiography of Gender

In an overview of feminist historiography at the end of the twentieth century, Joan Wallach Scott, herself a pioneer in gender studies, has tracked the intellectual shifts which have helped refine academic discussions of broad social categories such as "working-class women." Over the last decade or so there has been a growing appreciation that the fluidity of gender constructions calls for analytical approaches sensitive to the specifics of particular contexts and circumstances. Most of us would probably accept Scott's view that it is not sufficient to merely describe "differences" and the social distinctions thus established. More particularly, we should direct our attention to the historical processes which gave rise to those differences, and this requires that we are alert to the interaction between gender and other indices of power relationships, notably class and race.[1] However, we also need to acknowledge that the "categories of identity" which modern historians have delineated are themselves the product of academic interests and priorities. One could argue, for instance that the scholarly preoccupation with class and race in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe has tended to override exploration of the profound ways in which age could both affect gender relations and recalibrate the relative status of

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1 See further Joan Wallach Scott (1996).

individuals. By contrast, historians of medieval and early modern Europe have displayed greater interest in the implications of the ageing process, although their discussions have been generally subsumed within more circumscribed categories such as "widows" and "witches."[2] In general, however, "age" has not joined class and race as an independent indicator of difference. As one authority has stated recently, "together with gender, ethnicity and class, aging is one of the four dimensions of individual and social experience, though it has hitherto been given much less attention than the other three."(Laslett 1995: 4) This is the more surprising since it is recognized that in Europe a woman's life expectancy, though still short by modern standards, exceeded that of a man; by the eighteenth century it averaged around 34 years, as opposed to 31 for men. Furthermore, female autonomy and authority tended to increase with age, with the status of senior women more closely resembling that of men in their own cohort.[3]

I have given some attention to expanding interest in "age" in the gender historiography of Euro-American studies because topics and issues identified here have tended to set the agenda for work in non-Western societies, especially when the sources are co-operative. It is surely no coincidence that in China and India research focusing specifically on widows has proliferated in recent years. In both cases "widowhood" (as opposed to female old age, since a woman who lost her husband could still be young) was a culturally marked category of considerable significance in the gender regimes promoted by the state and the religious-philosophical order.[4] Widows in Hindu and Confucian societies, like their Christian

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[2] The literature on both topics is voluminous, but see, for example, Veenstra and Van der Ploeg (1995), and the useful "Suggestions for Reading" in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cavallo and Warner 1999), and Ch. 7, "Witchcraft", and the extensive bibliography in *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Wiesner 1993).

[3] See Kerns and Brown (1992: 2). New interest in this topic is evident in *Aging in the Past: Demography, Society and Old Age* (Kertzer and Laslett 1995). Demographic samples from East Asia similarly indicate that women generally lived longer than men (Wiesner 1993: 74; Liu 1985: 49; Morris and Smith 1985: 239).

[4] For example, see the references cited in "Between Constraints and Opportunities:

counterparts in Europe, are particularly visible in the historical records because the transfer of property meant a woman's legal position was conditioned by her marital state (Crick 1999: 36; Skinner 1999: 57; Todd 1999: 66-83). However, in China and India this visibility is also due to a much greater cultural insistence on the ideal that a woman's attachment to her husband should extend beyond his lifetime. In addition, the prominence of "widow-burning" in the scholarly literature from India reflects the Western fascination with what was seen as bizarre and extraordinary (Van den Bosch 1995).

In Southeast Asian history, where we are just beginning to develop some expertise in gender, historians are still uncertain about the extent to which lines of inquiry developed in very different cultural contexts should become a guide for their own research. While patterning research in accordance with European interests would have the great merit of fostering more comparative work, it also risks privileging certain issues to the detriment of others that more closely reflect indigenous perspectives. Western historians working on early Southeast Asia history face many disadvantages, but there has been a long-standing concern to identify local viewpoints, and an awareness of the distortions that can arise from the imposition of Western frameworks on earlier mental worlds. I would, for instance, be rather nervous about "prizing" widows from the documentary record, as Julia Crick has done in relation to Anglo-Saxon England, where the vocabulary used to refer to a man's sexual partners in "vernacular" documents differs from the Latinized terminology of post-Conquest times.[5] Comparative research stresses that any kind of interpretation must be carried out contextually, and that translators attempting to draw cross-cultural parallels must be extremely circumspect in their choice of equivalents. For example, since we know in England "spinster" was not

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Widows, Witches and Shrews in Eighteenth Century China," (Paderni 1999). Also see Sommer (1996) and Hawley (1994).

[5] In Anglo-Saxon England women are rarely described as widows, and more often just as *wif* (wife, woman, female partner) (Crick 1999: 32, 35-36).

used to denote marital status until the second decade of the seventeenth century (Huften 1999: 146). We therefore need to exercise caution in assuming Khmer-European equivalents in the French translation of a Cambodian code, which cautions men to marry a young woman or a widow, "but never a spinster or a divorced woman" (*épouse une jeune fille, épouse une veuve, mais jamais une vieille fille ou une femme divorcée*) (Leclère 1903: 212). To take another case, it seems that in ancient Assyria the term "widow" (*almattu*) was applied only to a woman who is left without a husband, a father-in-law or a son – i.e. who lacks male support (Van der Toorn 1995: 23). Students of Malay studies will remember that in the great Malay epic, the so-called *Sejarah Melayu*, two "widows" (*perempuan balu*) encounter the supernatural figure Seri Teri Buana, *whom they then adopt as their son* (my emphasis). In light of this example, can one infer that the Malay terms *balu* and *janda*, normally translated as "widow", indicated not merely that a woman lacked a husband, but also children as well? (Brown 1952: 28-29) If we are prepared to pursue this line of argument, it would not be surprising to find that the Malay concordance project, which lists nearly sixty texts of several different genres stretching from the early seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, includes only twelve references to *balu* and ten to *janda*.

In thinking about female aging in Southeast Asian societies in historical terms, this paper puts forward some tentative ideas still in the process of development. The inspiration is partially linguistic – i.e. the tendency in Southeast Asian languages to address women in terms of their generational position in regard to ego, rather than their marital status.[6] Admittedly, there

[6] During a Ph.D. defense I was alerted to the fact, that in west Tauranga (Aru Islands, eastern Indonesia) there is a specific word meaning "old woman" (*gasirasira*). I would be intrigued to track the connection between terms for "old woman" and "widow" through a sample of Southeast Asian languages (Nivens 1998: 26). Dr. Michael Aung Thwin informed me that the word "lan" (pronounced "lin" today), was used in the mid-13th century for both "husband" and "spouse', although the word "maya" (wife) was used and existed. The same seems true for the word "offspring" which used the word for "son" ('sa" pronounced "tha" today), although the word for daughter ('sami" or pronounced "thami') was used and existed (Personal communication on March 1, 2002).

are more than thousand "Southeast Asian" languages, but I would like to hypothesize that indications of relative age are more important in choosing terms of address or reference than is marital status. The position of a woman who outlived her husband was conditioned less by her obligations as wife of a deceased man than by her position as mother and grandmother, by the living kinship links established through her children, and by the very real possibility that she would soon be a wife again. The category of "senior or elderly women" which I posit for Southeast Asian societies is thus only indirectly related to an individual's marital situation. Heartened by a recent anthropological account which concludes that in Thailand at least "older women's claims to…age-based standing is not altered by the death or other loss of a husband," (Mills 1995: 254) I would even be prepared to argue that the identification of a "widow" category was largely an outgrowth of efforts by both the indigenous and colonial state to codify inheritance law (Nguyen 1964; Soekanto and Usman 1986; Watson and Ellen 1993). I continue with this line of argument by suggesting that for a number of reasons "older women" were generally valued by Southeast Asian communities, and this worked to lessen any tendencies to associate "witchcraft" with elderly females.

In embarking on this admittedly ambitious enterprise, I am mindful of the work of colleagues, who have cautioned that a "universal" category of the widow does not exist, nor can different conceptions of widows within a particular society be reduced to a single "typical" image (Buitelaar 1995: 15). At the outset, however, I must emphasize that any generalization across "Southeast Asia" – an area of immense cultural and linguistic variation – is always open to challenge, and what follows here is in the nature of a proposition rather than an assertion. At the same time, however, I follow in a long line of scholars who have seen the complementary relationship between men and women, and *relative* female autonomy as a broadly distinguishing feature of the region.[7] The reasons for this are complex, and

[7] For example, See Coedès (1944: 7-10); Hall (1964: 3); Reid (1988a; 1988b: 146, 162).

as yet await a full historical study. Here it is sufficient to say that several factors – a low level of state penetration into rural areas, the late entry of world religions, a largely agricultural economy, limited urban development, widespread bilateral kinship systems, frequent matrilocal residence – combined to lessen the disadvantages associated with being born into a female rather than a male body.

II. The Position of Elderly Women in Traditional Southeast Asian Societies

As I thought about the source material for the "early modern" period in Southeast Asia (contested, but roughly 1450-1800) I was struck by the general absence of negative stereotypes attached to older women. I understand, of course, that according respect to the elderly is a common feature in most traditional societies, and was often enhanced by specific cultural contexts. In the Confucianized world, for instance, the stress on filial piety meant grandparents were treated with accorded a special status. In early seventeenth-century Vietnam, which had experienced a thousand years of Chinese rule, an Italian Jesuit was struck by the "great reverence" paid to the aged; as he saw it, Vietnamese always honored "the ancientest, of what degree and condition whosoever they are." (Borri 1970) Yet in the material I reviewed it appeared that the value placed on old age went far beyond obligatory respect. The contemporary autobiography of a man who grew up in a Kammu community in Laos nicely captures what I see as a prevailing attitude: "In a good Kammu village there should be some elderly people in almost every house … When we live with our parents, we feel our hearts warmed." (Tayanin 1994: 81-82)

In this paper I would like to try to venture along the path of "historicizing difference" by suggesting some possible reasons for the generally positive attitudes towards older women found among Southeast Asian communities. In the first place, in a region of traditionally low population they gained status by sheer longevity. We have naturally no

census figures for the early modern period, but impressionistic evidence indicates that although life expectancy was generally short, those women who survived disease and childbirth did outlive their male counterparts. In a cautious commentary on the very early archaeological record, for instance, Charles Higham has speculated that women in communities in northeast Thailand may have lived longer than men (Higham 1989: 139-140). Indigenous chronicles are peppered with the "grandmother" trope, and demographic sources, though limited, suggests that women outnumbered men in most village communities. While providing no division into age groups, Javanese data from three regencies in north-coast Java in the late eighteenth century indicates that the female population (35,193) was substantially larger than that of the male (29,508). Men's activities, like military and labor service, could well explain this discrepancy but some years later John Crawfurd recorded that in Jogjakarta there were considerably more widows (1919) than widowers (1479) (Kumar 1997: 327, 340; Traeger and Koenig 1978: 102; Crawfurd 1849: 43). In light of the widespread practice of matrilocality and customs whereby the younger daughter remained with her parents even after her marriage, it is interesting to make comparisons with Japan, where studies have suggested that longevity for women increases when they live with their daughters (Cornell 1991: 79). An elderly woman's position would also have been enhanced because in societies where female celibacy was almost unknown she had confronted the very real possibility of a premature death every time she became pregnant. Death during or after labor would have meant reincarnation as a restless, dissatisfied and voracious spirit, and the very triumph over such threats meant that a woman's status rose with every successful birth. In Timor, for instance, a mother was traditionally dressed in a headhunter's costume in post-birth rituals, with the large sarong, headdress and neck pendants of a victorious warrior (Barnes 1992: 41).

Because a woman literally risked her life to bear children, it is understandable that a heavy emotional weight was invested in motherhood.

Elsewhere I have argued strongly that despite the often ambiguous symbolism attached to females, the *imaginaire* associated with maternal figures carried with it almost unassailable ideas of unselfishness and unstinting kindness (Barbara Watson Andaya 2002). While much of the iconography of motherhood is universal, it is interesting that the deep sense of child-indebtedness that runs through all Southeast Asian societies was often tapped by the teachers of imported philosophies and religions. Repeatedly one encounters the view that an individual's greatest obligation is to one's mother because of her sacrifice in giving birth and her unselfish nurture afterwards. In exploiting these ideas in seventeenth-century Vietnam, for instance, Christian missionaries used the language of filial loyalty inherited from China: "We are indebted to our mothers for conceiving us, bearing us in their wombs for nine months and ten days, giving birth to us in great pain and nursing and feeding us for three years." (Phan 1998: 220) The close mother-child bond receives an added twist in the Filipino version of the Christian Pasyon, where Mary is accorded a central role that has no biblical foundation. After Christ dies, for instance, Mary, now said to be over seventy, is depicted as intimately involved in missionizing activities, serving as a mother to the disciples (Javellana 1988: 153, 181). Still today in Theravada Buddhist societies the merit gained by a boy's entry into the monastery as a novice accrues to his mother, and this rite of passage thus stands as a public acknowledgement of the lifelong obligation he has incurred (Hanks 1963: 43; Barbara Watson Andaya 2002).

As she grew older, a woman could expect to draw on the reserves of obligation her children owed her, but the respect for motherhood also extended to "mother-like" figures, such as wet-nurses. Although wet-nurses were honored in many societies, one can also track a global tendency towards viewing them not as family members but as employees. The contractual relationships between men (the father of the infant and the husband of the wet nurse) that have been described in the Middle East and China are paralleled in medieval Europe, as in France, where measures were

introduced to regulate the duties, wages and conditions of wet nurses (Chung 1981: 40; Hanson 1995: 90; Shatzmillar 1997: 179; Fields: 36, 37, 53). However, historical sources provide no indication that this degree of commoditization ever applied in Southeast Asian cultures. The very act of feeding made a wet-nurse into a mother, and thus strengthened the links of kinship that almost always already existed. This position meant that she could become a critical link between individuals and even between rulers and subjects. In Maluku (eastern Indonesia), for example, the male children of the Sultan were provided with noblewomen as wet-nurses, each suckling the child for one or two weeks (Leonard Y. Andaya 1981: 57, 315; 1993: 68). Such women personified deep relationships which were not easily translated into ideas of employment or a redeemable contact, and in an undated Makassar manuscript from South Sulawesi (Indonesia) a hero talks of the abiding debts he owes his "milk-mother" [*anrong tumappasusu*] (Leonard Y. Andaya 1979: 374; Barbara Watson Andaya 1993: 35). The same attitudes can be found in mainland societies. In Burma in the 1960s informants told Melford Spiro that even though the merit acquired from a novice's entry into the monkhood (the *shin-byu*) was transferred to his mother, his debt remains so great that he had only repaid her for the milk he drank from one of her breasts (Spiro 1972: 234). The belief that a real debt is owed can be traced back in historical sources, where an inscription left by a thirteenth-century Pagan ruler who had "suckled at the breast of mother U Pon San" gave her lands, attendants and cows "as the price of the milk I drank" (Pe Maung Tin 1935; Barbara Watson Andaya 2002).

While grandmothers could point to a large circle of "indebted" kinsfolk acquired by virtue of being female, they also gained status by becoming more "male-like" in their post menopausal years. In some cases the sexual neutralizing of old women can be demonstrated linguistically. For instance, the Javanese kinship term *buyut* is applied to the third generation from ego, both ascending and descending; like young children, old people are not

gender-differentiated (Fox 1986: 324).[8] This kind of gender conflation meant that in their personal lives women were no longer subject to the kinds of restrictions which would have been imposed when they were younger and thought to be "in danger" should they venture far from the physical and emotional shelter of home and family. Such restraints were no longer necessary for senior females at the end of their reproductive cycle; in the Minangkabau house they traditionally slept in an area called the *pangkalan* (jetty, wharf) a word which carries with associations of trade and male activity (Ng 1993: 124). This freedom (not limited to physical movement) applied especially to older women who had outlived their spouse. Burmese law codes, which appear to be based on those from Pagan and which have no clear counterpart in India, lay down that sexual liaisons with a widow who has borne children should not incur punishment: "there is no fault because she owns her own body and she knows all the consequences." (Pan Hla and Okudaira 1992: 587) Recalling my earlier point, it is a woman's age that gives her this freedom, rather than specifically her marital standing. A Southeast Asian historian can only read with surprise that in pre-modern England images of the widow were commonly negative, especially in popular literature (Todd 1999: 67).

Nor does it appear as if the tendency to see an older woman as a mother and grandmother of the living rather than the "widow" of a deceased man was substantially altered by the arrival of the world religions. Despite centuries of Hindu influence, the idea that a devoted wife should die with her husband had a very limited impact. Even in Hindu Bali it seems that the ritual suicide of high-ranking wives was a partial outgrowth of indigenous ideas about appropriate demonstrations of loyalty to any individual of royal birth, regardless of sex.[9] In Tenasserim, the *sati*-like ritual described by one

[8] Dr. Jim Collins informs me that sexual differentiation in Malay kinship terms may be relatively recent.

[9] By the nineteenth century the practice was associated only with males, but in 1633 22 women were sacrificed at the cremation of a Balinese queen (Van der Kraan 1985: 119; Cortesão 1990: II, 176.

European in the early sixteenth century seems to have been conducted as a celebration among women, who sang and danced around the widow, herself in a state of trance. As this account notes, while "those who undergo such a death are the most noble of the land … all, in general do not do this." (Jones 1863: 207-208) Indeed, in most of Southeast Asia one senses that widowhood generally initiated a period of a new independence. In Hindu-Buddhist Java it was quite possible for older women, freed from the responsibilities of domestic life, to live alone as ascetics, and there are indications that in Thai societies it was also acceptable for older females to travel around the countryside like wandering monks (Cortesão 1990: I, 177; Tiyavanich 1997: 282).

Despite the "chaste widow" models imported from India and China (which themselves deserve qualification)[10] the Southeast Asian approval of remarriage even among the elite is an especially striking. Bemoaning the lack of propriety in local practices, a Chinese Buddhist monk traveling through Vietnam in the late seventeenth century was so concerned that he composed four poems to perpetuate the name of a virtuous Cham widow in the hope that other women would emulate her and "discard their vulgar customs [of remarriage.]"(Kelly 1996: 83) By contrast, in an implicit argument for remarriage, Thao-Lao texts convey the impression that the core of the complete household is the husband-wife relationship, and traditional Khmer wisdom advised men seeking "a happy and secure home" to marry a

[10] Regarded as inauspicious, a Hindu widow may have been socially marginalized, even ostracized, but she was usually treated with courtesy by her family and local interpretations of Hindu law could permit her to inherit some property. In Confucian Asia the lot of an upper-class childless widow could make suicide a tempting option, but those with children could become respected and influential matriarchs, despite their theoretical subservience to an elder son. Chinese commentators in Java criticized the speed with which Dutch widows acquired another husband, but in China itself Qing laws gave widows a degree of freedom unthinkable for other women, such as managing the husband's property on behalf of children and permitted remarriage if she gave up these rights. In Japan, too, samurai ideals of faithful widowhood were commonly ignored at the village level, and peasant women readily divorced or remarried (Walthall 1991: 61-62; Kalland 1995: 60; Paderni 1999: 262; Kumar 1997: 399).

widow rather than a divorcee (Sahai 1996: I, 34; Leclère 1903: 212). In the island world Islam placed no difficulties in the way of remarriage, for several wives of the Prophet himself were widows of men who had died in battle. The revered al-Ghazali in his *Book of Marriage* noted that although a woman should be "melancholy in the absence of her husband" it was not necessary to mourn longer than four months and ten days, during which time she should avoid perfume and adornment (Farah 1984: 125). A group of stories which an authority has regarded as attributable to an emerging sixteenth-century Malay "middle class" projects a clear message that women who had lost their husbands should act quickly and find another man, so that their youth and vigor shall not be wasted. In one of these entertaining tales a man specifically tells his wife that, "if I die, you can certainly take another husband." Another story in the same collection advocates that a man should take the wife of a dead brother into his own household, a practice common among many Southeast Asian societies (Winstedt 1969: 118; Johns 1976: 305-306; Winstedt 1966: 47, 60). Though less forthright than Islam, Christianity was also amenable to remarriage, especially of younger women, for in Paul's words, "it is better to marry than to burn (i.e. engage in sex outside marriage)." (Corinthians 7:9) In the Philippines convents and *beaterios* certainly existed, but there were limited opportunities for local women to enter the religious life, and it never became a place of retreat for widows as was the case in Europe or in Buddhist societies. When Spanish inquisitors interrogated 145 "old" Filipino women accused of involvement in spirit propitiation, their marital state was carefully noted but not a single widow was recorded (Brewer 2001: 318).

"Widowhood" was thus in general the preserve of older, "male-like" women, and when we look closely at the distribution of political authority in the "early modern" period, we can see that it was often placed in the hands of widows. Elsewhere I have tracked some of the historical evidence suggesting that some mainland areas, notably the northern Thai region, the assumption of authority by a Queen Mother was a common pattern. A text

from the Liu kingdom of Chiang Kheng, on the upper Mekong, records that on numerous occasions, when the throne was vacant, or when a ruler had unexpectedly died, it was the queen mother who took control. Occasionally her position as caretaker became permanent. In 1612 the Queen Mother was installed with all the appurtenances that would have been used for a king -- the crown, the sword, the umbrella, the betel set, the drum, the set of clothing – and ruled until 1637 (Lafont 1998: xxi, xxii, xxv, xxvii, 106, 116, 119-120, 165). Her influence, I would argue, was derived not only from her own personality but also from the cultural importance placed on the position of the elderly (grand)mother. In local chronicles such women are commonly represented as archetypal mother figures, attentive to the needs of their people and ruling with justice, wisdom and compassion (Cheah 1993: 6). Aceh represents a particularly striking case. Here, debates over Qu'ranic teachings and what comprised heresy had raged back and forth from the early seventeenth century, but despite some scholarly disapproval the question of female rule did not become a contentious issue until the 1680s. Likewise, the widow ruling in Java's northcoast kingdom of Grisek when the first Dutch ships arrived in 1596 had numerous counterparts in the seventeenth century, and Dutch East India Company sources testify to the strong hands of older women in Jambi, Patani, Sulawesi, Johor and elsewhere. In early seventeenth century Banten (west Java) it was said that "there is an old woman who commands the Protector (i.e. regent) and all the rest and indeed is called Queen of the land by the Syahbandar (Harbor master) and others, although she bee not of the King's blood, but only for her wisdom is held in such estimation among them of all sorts that she let as if she were solely Queen." (Purchas 1905: II: 471) Women continued to be installed as rulers or regents in some areas even after 1699, when a *fatwa* allegedly arrived in Aceh from Mecca condemning female rule. This pattern seems especially pronounced in Sulawesi; in one kingdom on the east coast a royal widow's succession following the death of her husband in 1825 was said to be "according to the custom of the country." (Hussain 1966: 63-64;

Veth 1870: 362; Clercq 1890: 125)

This willingness to accept older women as leaders is also evident at lower levels of society. For instance, in pre-modern Burma women could inherit the position of *myo-thuygyi*, or village head, and in some case this appears to have been passed through the female line. A headwoman told officials conducting the 1767 revenue inquest in the Pagan area that her great-grandmother had been in charge of the village. "When she was no more, my grandmother administered. When she was no more, my mother administered it. When she was no more I till now have administered." (Traeger and Koenig 1978: 343) Thai and Burmese sources also show that governments appointed women as tax-collectors in local markets and as their agents in "female" occupations like weaving and dyeing, and these types of market relationships and female-led work groups would also have given women training in leadership organization. It was quite common for widows to succeed to positions once held by their husband, or to take control of his business, even if they were former slaves like the Balinese "widow" of a Chinese captain in Batavia. Furthermore, because female inheritance was so common and because women could even be economically advantaged by the death of a husband, the trope of the poverty-stricken widow is not particularly evident in historical sources. For instance, in Vietnam the Lê Code allowed widows to retain administration of the matrimonial estate, even if she remarried, a practice which contrasted with the Chinese and later Vietnamese codes which deprived the remarrying widow of all property rights. The Lê code also gave to the widow full ownership over the property she had brought to marriage, half of the common property and also some claims on that part which would revert to her late husband's family (Ta 1981: 130-132).

My research thus leads me to doubt that the "poor abandoned widow" was a common feature of lived experience in pre-modern Southeast Asian. I suspect that the "acid test" of attitudes to dependency can best be measured

in relation to orphans, rather than widows or old age.[11] While divorce and remarriage were common, the decision to re-enter married life was not necessarily due to economic needs (as it seems to have been among lower social classes in China), for a congruency between "poverty" and "female old age" was by no means a given. As today, village markets in Southeast Asia were largely a female domain, and women's earnings as producers and retailers were the mainstay of the domestic economy. The evidence suggests that in the past this income was usually maintained separately from that of a husband and was used to support the household, reinvested in joint economic activities or expended in portable wealth such as jewelry or cloth. Female responsibility for household management and income was encouraged by the fact that men could be absent for days or even months at a time as soldiers, raiders, sailors, hunters, fishermen and traders men, or in corvée duties. An eighteenth-century biographical work accordingly describes now a Minangkabau pepper trader, finding himself in straitened circumstances far from home, sends a message back to his wife to request funds so that he can purchase a boat and cargo to continue his voyage (Drewes 1961: 121). Recent historical work indicates that female inheritance, ownership and control of land may also have been more widespread than previously thought. A seventeenth-century text from southern Thailand, for example, mentions a group of mothers and daughters who dedicated their lands to a local Buddhist temple (Gesick 1995: 39). In Vietnam few early village registers have survived, but a study of certain villages in the Red River Delta during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries shows that nearly a quarter of the landowners were women, although their holdings were usually smaller than those of men. Vietnamese historians have used these records to demonstrate that even low-born women could become wealthy by buying land with money obtained from rice sales (Nhung Tuyet Tran 2004: 146-176; Lustéguy 1954: 129; Truong 1994: 4, 6; Phan 1995; Tran 1999: 97-98). In Southeast Asia at least it is thus worth

[11] See the comments by Margaret Pelling (1999: 37, 46).

stressing that the indigenous respect to older people, and specifically older women, was grounded in a recognition of their contribution to the domestic economy. Unlike hunting and other male activities that required physical strength, "female" tasks such as preparing food and caring for children and animals did not disadvantage the elderly. It was not surprising that the Kammu of Laos are reported to believe that every family should have an elderly woman in the family "for then everything in the house will be in good order." (Tayanin 1994: 85)

This comment reflects the fact that age was recognized as carrying greater experience, greater knowledge, and greater skills. Within elite households, for example, older women were usually placed in charge of training younger ones, especially in activities like dance, which often played a sacral role. When an Englishman entertained by the court of Banjarmasin (east Borneo) noted that an old woman "whom I supposed to be their teacher" was in charge of the royal music and dancing, he was describing a situation found over much of the region. Still today in Bali, when music accompanies the priestly chanting, it is older women who indicate to the women in the inner court which *kidung* should be sung (Beeckman 1973: 77-79; Susilo 1998: 17-18). In the same vein, a nineteenth-century missionary in Sulawesi remarked that the individuals most knowledgeable in the pre-Islamic literature of the region were not the "gurus" (teachers), men who know a little Arabic and Qu'ranic texts, but royal women and female courtiers (Van den Brink 1943: 184). Outside the courts, ordinary women might not boast a skill like literacy, but everywhere weaving was a female task, and many years of experience were required to master the complex and ritually important designs. Among the Baduy of west Java, for instance, only cloth of pure white is used to wrap the dead; this is woven exclusively by old women, who follow special rules in the weaving process (Bakels 1993: 351; Heringa 1993). In a telling phrase, the Iban of Borneo considered weaving to be "the warpath of women", and the skills of an older woman were celebrated by the tattoos on her hand, a public display of her

achievements (Traude 1996: 70, 92). Similarly, knowledge of the ingredients and proportions necessary to produce certain kinds of dyes were largely the preserve of mature females; in a Tuban village in Java elderly women accordingly function as ritual guardians of the indigo vat, the "womb" of cloth (Heringa 1985: 162-163). The same principles apply in relation to the propitiation of supernatural forces, so that an older Burmese woman may give offerings on behalf of her relatives because she knows best how to make them. The leader of the work gangs who transplant and harvest rice is normally the oldest woman, and it is she who makes the offering to the *nat* or spirit of the padi field (Nash 1966: 126). And while examples could be enumerated, one of the most striking occurs among the Padaung of Burma, where it is an old woman considered to have special skills who cuts the metal rods that are wound around the necks of young girls to the correct length (de Golish 1958: 52). Significantly, the handling of metal is normally thought to be the preserve of men.

With their knowledge of "antidotal herbs" and their links with the spirits, women were also the society's principal healers. In the words of one Spanish observer in the Philippines in 1582, "The priestess chants her songs and invokes the demon, who appears to her all glistening in gold. When she enters trance "she declares whether the sick person is to recover or not." (Garcia 1979: 202, 212) As Spanish priests discovered when investigating idolatry in the Philippine town of Bolinao, the transmission of Animist esoteric knowledge was entirely the domain of older women (Brewer 2001: 393). According to an account of Melaka (west coast Malay Peninsula) in the early seventeenth century, the "doctors" were mostly "dayas" (i.e. a wet-nurse or foster mother), "female physicians who are excellent herbalists, having studied in the schools of Java Major. They use plants and herbs in the form of plasters and potions to relieve illness -- cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger etc. They can distinguish illnesses by the appearance of the patient, breathing etc" (Mills 1997: 48). It is not surprising, therefore, to find that an ailing ruler of Palembang in southeast Sumatra

asked the Dutch administration in Batavia to help him locate two female "doctors" whom he believed would cure his illness (Dagh Register Gehouden int Casteel te Batavia 1646: 64).

This leads on to a further area where older women were of vital importance to the community, since those whose reproductive days were past had a particular role to play as leaders in indigenous ritual. The important shifts in gender perceptions as a woman passed her child-bearing years opened the door to greater participation in activities that might otherwise have been threatened by the powerful forces of fertility. A Javanese inscription of 901 CE which mentions a ceremonial dance by both male and female elders provides early support to the argument that elderly women gained in ritual importance as their potential to endanger male activities lessened (Holt 1967: 281-282). Although the importance of senior females as priestesses and spirit mediums is best documented by Spanish missionaries working in the Philippines, mention of similar practices appears in other parts of the island world. In pre-Chinese Taiwan, for example, Dutch East India Company officials described female shamans who were credited with powers such as the ability to control wind and the coming of rain (Brewer 2000; Shepherd 1993: 64). Still in modern times observers comment on the importance of older women to the initiation of the next generation and thus the future well-being of the community. Traditionally, when a Sumba boy returned to the village after the ritual seclusion following his circumcision, he normally received his first "man's" cloth from his maternal grandmother (Geirnaert 1993). Through the medium of a trance-induced dance, like the solemn *mendet* in Bali, elderly women can convene with the gods; in Bonorate (eastern Indonesia) the fate of *perahu* that do not return from fishing expeditions can only be divined through the trance/dance rituals of elderly women (Covarrubias 1937: 273; Broch 1968). Although the evidence is more scattered and for historians often involves inference from later anthropological data, we can safely assume that women comparable roles in mainland Southeast Asia. Several scholars working in

northern Thailand have shown how older females act as lineage elders in matrilineal ancestor cults and in propitiation ceremonies for the household spirits or rituals held at harvest times (Sered 1994: 80). Still among the Akha (a hill tribe group that straddles the borders of China, Thailand and Myanmar), the most senior woman in a family is eligible to wear a white skirt, indicating that she can perform certain rice ceremonies and carry out ancestral rites normally restricted to males. A family that possess a white skirted woman gains great prestige, and one proverb even maintains that "if there is no White-skirted Woman, a village cannot be built." (Kammerer 1986; 1988: 306)

While the sheer fact of longevity was itself impressive, an older woman's standing was further enhanced because she had entered a sexual zone where perceptions of a dangerous fertility no longer applied. In turn, the mysterious processes that ended a woman's reproductive years and made her more "male-like" opened up a much larger social and ritual space that previously available. For example, one particular pattern among the textiles offered by the Jogjakarta court to Ratu Kidul, the Princess of the Southern Oceans, is so sacred that it can only be made by women after menopause (Schlehe 1993: 321). The assumption that elderly women were no longer involved in sexual relationships established a tacit connection with the abstinence commonly required to channel ritual energies. Located in a body that no longer manifested the fundamentals of femaleness, older women, to a far greater extent than men, were touched by the liminality that constantly resurfaces in Southeast Asian cultures. A study of hill tribes in Assam completed in the 1930s, for instance, noted that the making of pottery was undertaken only by widows and old women who had never married (Parry 1932: 128). In other words, participation in certain "economic" activities created an effective "rite of maturity," offering a statement that a woman had reached a culminating point in the female life cycle (Hoskins 1989: 143).

The ambiguity of the "woman who is not woman" would also have

resonated deeply in societies that regarded the crocodile who slid between land and sea, the legendary garuda, half-human and half-bird, or the male-female hermaphrodite with particular awe. It is this ambivalence that infuses the image of the old woman (*nenek kabayan*) found across the Indonesian archipelago as she mediates between two worlds, standing guard at entryways to the underworld, maintaining watch while heavenly nymphs bathe, or ruling over her kingdom below the sea (Heuting 1933: 142-144; Mulyadi 1983: 32, 171; Peltier 1999: 15). The image of the senior woman as wise and strong permeates oral legend and written text alike, and spills over into the terminology of ordinary life. For example, in the Minangkabau epic *Cindua Mato,* the name of the wise, intelligent and just queen mother, Bundo Kanduang, is also an honorific for senior women. Holding key positions in the lineage, they are equated with the central pillar of the traditional house (Reenen 1996: 2), and it is no coincidence that in Malay houses the main section of the home is termed "ibu" (mother) (Banks 1983: 4; Carsten 1995: 110, 113). Demographers have warned against the use of literary allusions as evidence for the realities of aging, but one is still struck by the interplay between the *nenek kabayan* metaphor and the widespread perception that older women could be a special conduit to the spirits. This perception allowed them to maintain their ritual role in birth, marriages and funerals even as men increasingly arrogated religious authority, and it is hardly surprising that elderly women have been a driving force behind the revival of life cycle rituals in contemporary Vietnam (Laslett 1995: 40; Malarney 2003: 235).

The role of women as guardians and mediators between the community and the spirit world extended into other contexts, especially those that involved negotiation. While female liaison was probably most common in brokering marriage agreements, it was also often deployed to reach compromises between contending parties, whether in commercial dealings or inter-state relations. Older women, especially those of high birth, were especially effective because they commanded respect as maternal figures

and because refusal of a mother's plea was culturally difficult. So accepted was this practice that even Europeans at times used senior women to make contact with leaders of opposing native forces. Regardless of social status, the community's senior women had by sheer longevity built up their own extended network of indebted kin which made them well-suited to broker marriage agreements, settle family quarrels, and mediate in potentially hostile interactions. In the southern Philippines a chief's female relatives were typically deployed to negotiate meetings with Spanish missionaries, and in 1622 a pious Christian convert, the grandmother of the local *datu*, was instrumental in obtaining permission for missionaries to move into the Kagayano area of northern Mindanao (Paredes 2004: 6-7; Peter Schreurs 2000: 125, 127).

III. The Emblematic Midwife

The special regard for mothers and mother figures, the mastery of healing skills among older women, their knowledge of special ritual, and their "guardian-like" position came together in the person of the midwife. In recent years a number of studies have tracked the way in which the practice of midwifery in early modern China and Japan, as in Europe, was increasingly arrogated by male doctors who drew their knowledge from written, "scientific" manuals. Neo-Confucianist literary and moral rhetoric, which included midwives in the "nine categories" of despised professional women, was supported by male medical experts who condemned midwives and other female healers, despite their continued importance in the lives of ordinary people (Leung 1999: 103; Terazawa 2001). In actual fact, of course, capable and experienced midwives, especially in the urban areas, received not only social recognition but could also be well recompensed for their skills. But even though Chinese female doctors and midwives continued to thrive, one can still note a tendency to link them with the death of children either through infanticide or abortion (Leung 1999: 123).

The pattern in Southeast Asian societies is somewhat different. In some

court circles, such as seventeenth century Siam, it does seem that male doctors are beginning to treat "female" illnesses, and were consulting manuscripts apparently based on Indian texts that included sections on conception, the treatment of menstrual problems and leucorrhoea (Dhiravat na Pombejra 1992: 29, 33; Mulholland: 113). Men who had acquired literacy through the monkhood were also privileged as the practice of medicine started to demand complex written prescriptions and incantations known only from writing (Brun and Schumacher 1987: 37). To a greater extent than in China and Japan, however, it seems that supervision of labor and childbirth among the elite remained in the hands of women, and that the status of a midwife remained high. The situation in Southeast Asia cultures is also far removed from that described in contemporary northern India and Bangladesh, where childbirth pollution is deemed to be even greater than that resulting from menstruation, sexual intercourse, defecation or death. In societies where "touching the amniotic sac, the placenta and umbilical cord…and delivering the baby, cutting the cord and cleaning up the blood are considered the most disgusting of tasks", the midwife or *dai* is understandably regarded as a "low status menial necessary for removing defilement." (Rozario 1998: 149) By contrast, one can point to the standing of the midwife (*bidan*) in Malay culture, exemplified in the adaptation of the Sanskrit-based word *bidadari* (nymph) to become *bidandari*, the heavenly midwife. The seven heavenly midwives were traditionally invoked by Malay midwives and thought to aid laboring women when human assistance had failed (Laderman 1983: 132).[12] This high-prestige connection is reflected in traditional laws. According to one code, the *bidan* is the raja in any house where a birth is in progress, and is so important to the community that the *mukim* (parish) should be responsible for her upkeep (Rigby 1929: 27, 60, 78). The presence of midwives was essential because of the role they played in the rituals necessary to ensure that the baby was

[12] The Semai absorbed these ideas from the Malay (Dentan 1979: 96), but it is worth noting that today the number of female midwives is declining because *orang asli* women themselves believe they lack the requisite courage (Gianno 2004: 37-39).

healthy and the mother regained her strength. In 1779 a mosque official, probably from Terengganu on the west coast of the Malay peninsula, compiled a document which laid out the ceremonies normally performed to ensure the protection of a royal child. When his consort is seven months pregnant, the ruler summons four "famous" mid-wives who are responsible for "rocking the womb" (*mandi melenggang perut*, thought to give definition to the life forming inside the mother's womb). This manuscript also stresses the significance of the placenta (*tembuni*), which was placed in a new earthenware jar wrapped in a yellow cloth and carried in a procession to the mouth of the river. Here the jar was released into the water (Panuti H. M. Sudjiman 1983: 60-61). As later anthropological work has shown, the umbilical cord and the placenta were regarded by Malays with considerable respect. A skilled midwife who could "read" the umbilical wrinkles could predict future births, and it was necessary to treat the placenta with extreme care because it was the elder (and sometimes envious) brother or sister of the newborn infant (McCinley 1981: 371-375; Laderman 1993: 141-142, fn. 74). In the state of Kelantan the midwife traditionally kept the *tembuni* for forty days following the birth, checking its condition so that the baby would not be inflicted with some illness or disability.[13] A particularly striking example of the midwife's "religious" role is provided by an account of the Tetum of Timor, where the midwife fastens a pouch containing the afterbirth to the central pillar of the house and ritually drops the soiled birth cloth on to the ancestral altar (Hicks 1984: 31).

As Merry Wiesner reminds us in regard to Europe, it would be simplistic in the extreme to view the past as a golden age in which advancing age automatically entitled women to the respect of their families and community. By the end of the eighteenth century the territorial extension of state control, with its emphasis on defining marital status, particularly in regard to inheritance and tax responsibility, had certainly helped create a view that an older woman without a husband was in need of

[13] Notes taken in Kota Bharu Museum, August 8, 1999.

charity. One can thus track various rulings, like those in Burmese and Javanese registers, which refer to a lower tax liability for widows (Kumar 1997: 327, 340; Traeger and Koenig 1978: 102). Urbanization hastened this trend, for in some English provincial towns as many as half of all elderly women were "residentially isolated," that is, living alone or with non-relatives. The destitute widow was also a depressing reality in Southeast Asia's expanding urban centers, where aging ex-slaves, far from home and family, were so frequently cast upon community charity. In early eighteenth-century Batavia nearly three quarters of the female poorhouse population consisted of older native women who had adopted Christianity (Wall 1995:88; Till 1995: 20). The oral genre of the widow's lament also makes much of the bereaved wife left alone and destitute. As a ritual chant from the Kodi area of Sumba puts it, "A widow is like a basket with no lid, a house with no tower." A kinsman who takes her in, even as a second wife, will thus have "mended what was leaking and tied up what was broken." (Hoskins 1993) One can also track a steady downgrading of the "traditional" knowledge that women inherited, and which had once been considered so necessary to community well-being. Though validating virtuous poverty, a text from northeast Thailand nonetheless records that when an entire Khmer town was destroyed for the sin of eating meat only the "deserted women and widows" were saved, excluded from the feasting because they were "considered useless." (Wajuppa 1990: 82-88)

The contradictions that dog almost every aspect of "femaleness" in Southeast Asia lurk behind the stereotype of the wise and generous older woman as much as behind her younger sisters. The sexually experienced widow or divorcée who snares another's husband or attempts to seduce a young man is a common literary theme, and customary law and written codes frequently included warnings against liaisons between a youth and a mature woman. While those eager to attract a lover, ensure a spouse's constancy, or avenge infidelity could readily see older women as repositories of esoteric remedies and inherited "female lore," a reputation

for success could also justify accusations of evil intent and collusion with supernatural and malicious forces. In her capacity as a midwife, a women might be suspected of supplying a stillborn fetus for some secret ritual, or that most powerful of amulets, the finger of a child who had died at birth. Assistance in the termination of a pregnancy also risked the condemnation of state and religious authorities; unlike its Chinese prototypes, the Le Code includes a paragraph imposing penal servitude on any woman who administers or purchases abortifacients. Buddhist texts go further, threatening the abortionist with rebirth as a naked and hungry female ghost, whose body, swarming with flies, will emit "a strong and revolting odor." (Gamage 1998: 136-138; Lithai 1982: 98) The intimate involvement of older women with life and death explains the tendency to engender the arts of "black magic" as female, a tendency that appears most pronounced in communities subject to Christian influence. As the Spanish material from the Philippines so convincingly demonstrates, missionaries were particularly prone to see spirit propitiation in terms of witchcraft and Devil-alliance, and to condemn "sorceresses" as the cause of infant death and miscarriage (Brewer 2001: Ch. 9; Mills, 1997: 48). The powers such women could tap were thought to present the Christian mission with its most serious challenge. A priest working in Vietnam in the late eighteenth century thus recounted how a young Christian woman tried to free herself from a spell that had caused her to be obsessed with a non-Christian man. She went to "a heathen woman, a sorcerer" who gave her small pieces of paper on which red characters, evidently the name of a powerful spirit, were written. Following instructions, she swallowed the paper but rather than being freed from supernatural manipulation, she had become permanently possessed (Forest 1998: III: 253). Although the status of male shamans was often higher than that of females, missionaries almost invariably saw "witches" as women.

In his authoritative study of early Filipino society, William Scott has contrasted sixteenth-century Spanish beliefs that mortals (mostly women)

could develop demonic characteristics with indigenous conceptions that misfortune or calamity was the work of malicious spirits in human form. Much feared, these counterfeit humans were normally killed, but the relevant point is that they could as well be male as female (Scott 1994: 81; Andaya and Ishii 1992: 510). In Nola Cooke's contribution to this conference, we see that while Vietnamese women were deemed vulnerable to sexual and spiritual overpowerment, they were seen as victims who could be healed rather than maleficents deserving of punishment. Indeed, in early seventeenth-century Vietnam Borri spoke of women who came to him seeking "remedies" that would drive off demons in human form who "approached their beds" at night (Cooke 2004).[14] This is not to say that the stereotype of potentiality alliances between women and malevolent forces does not have an indigenous history in Southeast Asia, although this is yet to be explored. Research might well begin by thinking about the visual support given to textual condemnations of female sorcery, like the depiction of a woman having her tongue cut to ribbons as a punishment for practicing "black magic" in Bali's Kirtha Gosa (Dhammapala 1980: 38, 73; Matics 1992: 10; Pucci 1992: 79, 80, 110). In the late eighteenth century Father Sangermano offered a perceptive observation: "It is impossible to persuade the Burmese that there is no such thing in nature as witches and that they are not extremely malicious and hurtful." In one type of trial by ordeal, "a suspected woman is placed upon a little bier, supported at each end by a boat, and a vessel full of ordure is emptied upon her. The boats are then slowly drawn from each other, till the woman falls into the water. If she sinks, she is dragged out by a rope of green herbs tied round her middle and is declared innocent; but if she swims she is convicted as a witch and generally sent to some place where the air is unwholesome." Given this quote, the translators were probably justified in gendering a Burmese law of 1785 that refers to the immersion of an individual in water "to find out if [*she*] is a witch." (Than 1986: 102)

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[14] I am grateful to Dr. Cooke for sharing her paper with me.

Any discussion of the feminization of witchcraft in Southeast Asia would be best conducted with an eye to studies in Europe, Melanesia and Africa, which have demonstrated that witchcraft accusations increase during periods of community stress, being commonly directed towards women who are older, widowed, poor, physically handicapped, strangers, or otherwise marginalized. The "witches" who do appear in historical sources from Southeast Asia may be similarly emblematic of anxieties induced by social and economic change. The imposition of colonial rule in nineteenth-century Malaya, for example, was a time of great uncertainty, and in 1895 a future governor, Frank Swettenham (1850-1946), claimed that "plenty of people" could attest to the drowning of "ancient Malay dames" accused of casting spells. The effects of economic depression in rural areas or the intrusion of modernization may explain other references that link hostile magic to spirits in the form of old women, often outsiders (Swettenham 1984: 198-199; Anuman Rajadon 1961: 119; Irwin 1907: 25; Spiro 1967: 25-30; Sather 1978: 321-324).[15] Yet as C.W. Watson and Roy Ellen have emphasized, witchcraft has never been considered a major social problem in Southeast Asia (Watson and Ellen 1993: 1). There was thus no area equivalent to the central plains of India, where in the early nineteenth century more than a thousand women were killed as witches, far exceeding the victims of *sati* (Skaria 1997: 110) Nor do we encounter any state-sponsored campaign similar to that which occurred in China during the "soul-stealing" panic of 1768. In the latter case, however, the majority of sorcerers arrested were men; women thought to be using shamanistic skills for evil ends were feared but not persecuted, and were considered far less threatening than the stereotyped "treacherous monks" and "disheartened scholars" whose literacy gave them a privileged access to the occult (Kuhn 1990: 1-28, 227). In Southeast Asia societies the continuing prominence of male shamans and the belief that practitioners of magic could use their skills for good as well as ill

[15] The witch spirit (phii ka) of the northern Thai has been discussed in relation to the rural economic situation in Anan Ganjapan's "The Idiom of phii ka: Peasant Conception of Class Differentiation in Northern Thailand (1984: 325-329).

also dampened inclinations to establish a congruency between older women and supernatural malevolence. Furthermore, accusations against humans were always tempered by ancient tendencies to blame "spirits" (notably the resentful spirits of women who had died in childbirth) rather than living people for calamities and misfortunes. As one Englishman noted of southern Vietnam in the early nineteenth century: "When an infant dies, the parents are supposed to have incurred the displeasure of some malignant spirit, which they endeavor to please by offerings of rice, oil, tea, money or whatever they may imagine to be acceptable to the angry divinity." (Barrow 1806: 331) In what seems to be a historically consistent pattern across the region, the Nuaulu of Seram similarly attribute misfortune to the displeasure of ancestral spirits, and women are rarely held responsible for malign magic. Southeast Asia's most famous witch is the Balinese widow Calun Arang, whom a sixteenth-century text depicts as capable of annihilating an entire population through an epidemic or some other catastrophe, but she does not inhabit a mortal body. Despite a relatively elaborated belief in witches (*leyak*), Balinese acknowledge that people of both sexes may have an aptitude for witchcraft and there is only a mild sense that "femaleness" renders women more suspect than men (Ellen 1993: 97; Forth 1993: 119; Covarrubias 1937: 344; Poebatjaraka 1926: 152).

IV. Conclusion:

The study of history is fundamentally an effort to understand the various paths that have led to the presence, and an effort to explain how the present came to be. The field is always moving because the questions we ask, emerging from our own environments, are constantly changing. Forty years ago the major debates in Southeast Asian studies concerned the question of how scholars who using Western sources could free themselves from the restraints and preconceptions of the imperialist vision and develop an "autonomous history". Since that time, however, there has been a steadily growing move towards the development of histories that track the

experiences of individuals and groups who have been marginalized by the demands of the national metanarrative. However, although most scholars of Southeast Asia would probably accept that an important line of inquiry must be the history of gender, as yet this is a very new field, especially in regard to the pre-nineteenth century period. As the bank of case studies slowly develops, historians face a number of problems, such as the question of the extent to which local experiences can be read as typical of the region at large. As they seek to become part of a global conversation where participants are already familiar with an impressive corpus of theoretical literature and detailed examinations of specific areas, historians of gender in Southeast Asian societies must themselves determine how to deploy categories developed in other times and other places.

It is in this spirit that I began to think about comparative features of ageing – surely one of the most universal of human experiences. I started with the work of colleagues on European societies, because this so often sets the pace for those researching the non-Western world. I noted with interest that at least in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries issues of "difference" seemed to be structured primarily around race and class. Age seemed to loom larger in studies of women in the early modern period, but here I detected a particular preoccupation with widows and witchcraft. By contrast, historians of Southeast Asia have been generally uninterested in historical explorations of the ways in which societies construct and perpetuate ideas about "gender," even though the "high status" of women is often held up to be a regional characteristic. When I approached the Southeast Asian material against this background, I was reminded again that we must think carefully about the kinds of categories we create as a focus for research. Rather than setting out to locate "widows" or "witches" in the existing material, it may be more useful to explore the ways in which being "female" and "old" intersected, and as Joan Wallach Scott has urged, to think not just about difference, but how those differences occurred. While any full-blown argument is premature, I would like to hypothesise firstly, that the kinds of

freedoms often associated with widows in European societies were enjoyed by most elderly women in Southeast Asian communities, regardless of their marital status; and secondly, that the kind of cultural underpinnings that provided a basis for witch-hunting were present in Southeast Asia only to a very limited extent. In the process of further exploration I would hope to follow the words of O.W. Wolters, which for me have become a kind of maxim; if properly pursued, he wrote, “a gender oriented study should do more than put women into history. It should also throw light on the history – male as well as female – into which women are put.” (Wolters 1999: Appendix 2, 229)

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