

Norani Othman

## Work and Globalization



Born and raised in Johor Baru, the southernmost town of peninsular Malaysia, a few miles north of Singapore. Educated at Universiti Malaya, University of Hull and Wolfson College Oxford. A Fellow and Associate Professor at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia since 1995, having previously taught for many years at the Jabatan Antropologi dan Sosiologi (Department of Anthropology and Sociology) at the same university. – Address: IKMAS (Institute for Malaysian and International Studies), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor D.E., Malaysia.

By mid-1998 I was greatly looking forward to my stay in Berlin. I needed a change: to sit quietly, to read and think, and to do a bit of writing, especially after the hectic four years I had just completed in IKMAS, helping this recently established institute, with which I am now affiliated to set up its various research and teaching programmes.

However, I arrived at the Kolleg only in early November. The delay was due to the political uncertainties which broke out in Malaysia after 2 September 1998, when Anwar Ibrahim, then Deputy Prime Minister, was dismissed from his post and party membership, unleashing a series of unprecedented events in Malaysian political life. Street demonstrations which broke out in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, were followed by the arrest of Anwar on charges of corruption and sexual wrongdoing. It was not easy for me to leave home while these events and their implications were unfolding. My research interests over the past decade have focused on the social, political and intellectual predicaments of contemporary Islam, on the process of Islamization and the various political agendas related to it, as well as on the issues of women's situation within Islamic civilization and its constituent societies. Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal and the *Reformasi* movement which ensued drew various Islamic organizations together into a loose coalition in support of his cause.

Hence a large part of my time in the first two months at the Kolleg was spent perusing Malaysian newspapers on the Internet, reading various news updates posted to my e-mail box, and browsing the numerous web-

sites which had suddenly appeared as alternative sources of information about political developments in Malaysia and as channels for emerging new trends of public opinion.

The Internet was my immediate and convenient mode of keeping abreast with the latest news and events in Malaysia. This, I later realized, was my first and direct experience of “globalization” while in Berlin. The “compression of space and time” resulting from the use of new information technologies (which sociologists such as Giddens see as the essence of the recent advance of globalization) enabled me to keep in touch with the day-to-day news and political events of home at the click of a computer mouse. Satellite television was never sufficient nor can it ever satisfy one’s need to know more about remote unfolding events. It lacks the local insight and the perspective of a ground-level view. One of my conditions for a leave of absence from IKMAS was that I had to bring with me the institute’s continuing project on “Globalization”, of which I was one of the two co-ordinators. The research project involved a group of about fourteen researchers; its final phase was a workshop scheduled for April 1999, where members of the working group had to present a final draft of their various research analyses of topics on the theme of “Capturing Globalization”. At the Kolleg, then, I both carried forward this globalization project which I brought with me and, at the same time, found myself launched experientially into the globalization process as I availed myself of the resources offered through the new information technologies to fathom the depths of unprecedented political developments at home in Malaysia.

For my work on the IKMAS globalization project, I found the Kolleg’s library to be an excellent support and provider of much of the latest and most relevant reading materials. It has a wonderfully simple system; it does not require one to spend time checking through catalogues. One just places order slips for the books or articles required and in a few days they simply appear – as if by magic but, as the grateful researcher is keenly aware, in reality because of the wonderful dedication of the library staff – on the shelf ready to be collected. It was as simple as producing a doctor’s prescription at the chemist’s counter.

In the first half of the period in which I was at the Kolleg, I accepted several invitations to present conference and workshop papers or to give lectures, sometimes in an academic forum and sometimes public lectures. I was a speaker at the “Islam and the Universality of Human Rights” conference organized by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights in Geneva. I presented a paper at the Institute of Federal Studies, University of Hannover at its conference on “Constitution, Islam and Democracy”. It was most enjoyable to attend the workshop on

“Globalization, Gender and Civil Society” organized by Dr. Gudrun Lachemann at Bielefeld University. Lectures at Hamburg, the Centre of Asian Studies in Bonn, to the organization *Médecins sans frontières* in Amsterdam and several others in Berlin were related to a variety of themes of my research (Islam, human rights, women’s rights and *shari’a* law in a modern state) or to a book project in which I am also engaged on Islamization and Globalization in Malaysia. The book is nowhere near completion, but exchanges with friends and colleagues in Germany and elsewhere have been a source of great help and stimulation. Meanwhile, I also used the time at the Kolleg to revise papers for publication in Malaysia and for a book chapter in Singapore.

It was a rewarding experience to be at the Kolleg – to talk to a number of scholars from different countries and disciplines. I had lively discussions with two women’s groups in Berlin – a Muslim women’s group called *Huda* and a women’s group at the Humboldt University. The friendships formed while at the Kolleg were deeply enriching and I hope abiding. My culinary interest and skill were revived when I had to teach an Italian colleague – now a dear friend – two Malaysian versions of banana cake, a German Fellow of how to prepare a Thai curry which he greatly likes, a Turkish friend from Free University and a physicist from Freiburg University how to make *gado-gado*, an Indonesian salad, and the wife of a Wiko Fellow from Georgia how to prepare a certain kind of Chinese noodle. The globalization of food reached its peak when, after the *Abschiedsfest*, Frau Klöhn at the Kolleg’s kitchen and four Fellows of the Kolleg requested a special lesson and demonstration on how to cook *nasi kuning* or saffron rice, Malaysian *rendang* (a rich meat or chicken curry prepared for special festive occasions), and *dalca*, a vegetarian curry.

My greatest misfortune while at the Kolleg occurred during the seven weeks between mid-May to early July when I was devastated with a bad case of hay fever. Those who are prone to allergies from summer pollen or grass mould, be forewarned! In this, as in so many other ways, Berlin will test your limits. No amount or variety of antihistamines can provide relief. My allergy was so acute that early one morning I had to be taken to a doctor after an asthma-like attack overnight. Yet, unwelcome though this extended hay fever episode was, it is truly a happy year, one must say, when that is the greatest misfortune that one must endure. In so many ways, the nine months I spent in Berlin were happy, productive, fulfilling and indeed memorable.