Chapter 7
Older Malay Muslim Women in Brunei Darussalam: A Non-Western Conception of Aging

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Abstract This chapter examines older Muslim women from a postcolonial perspective and details the relevance of spirituality to aging in Brunei Darussalam. Ten Malay Muslim women aged 60–76 were interviewed in conjunction with photo-elicitation to gauge their everyday experiences of aging. Participant data indicate that aging among these women is largely viewed as a gift from God but that in practice embracing this gift is not always straightforward. The discussion considers the ways in which these women's experience of aging is mediated by societal influences, such as Malay cultural and religious values, interdependence of familial organisation through expectations of filial piety, social rapport and networks. Recounting their experiences provides a nuanced appreciation of aging among Malay Muslim women that adds further texture to our understanding of aging in non-Western contexts.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Malay · Women · Aging ·
Postcolonial perspective · Spirituality · Islam

7.1 Introduction

Malays constitute the largest demographic of Brunei Darussalam's population (66%) and comprise seven indigenous groups (*puak*) as stipulated in the Brunei Nationality Enactment 1961—Brunei Malay, Kedayan, Tutong, Belait, Dusun, Bisaya and Murut. Malays represent the dominant population group and are especially concentrated in the district of Brunei-Muara. As a Malay Muslim majority country, Brunei ascribes to the values of Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) that underpin the

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national aspiration of a nation devoted to God (*negara zikir*).[1] These values influence norms, behaviour and attitudes such as good manners, respect for the elderly, close-knit kinship practice, family values and adherence to religious obligations and practices (*Borneo Bulletin* 2017).

Brunei's substantial resource wealth has also allowed it to achieve the second-highest ranking in the Human Development Index in Southeast Asia (UNDP 2022). As a result, the majority of the population enjoys a relatively high standard of living with free access to health care and education. Those aged 60 and over account for 8% of the population and this is expected to increase to 28.7% by 2050 with a longer life expectancy for females (currently 77 years) than males (75 years) (UN DESA 2019; Azlan 2020; World Bank 2022). Aside from these macro indicators, there is limited documented research on the impact of aging on the lives of Brunei's older women. Investigating their experiences and perceptions is an initial step to understanding the specific needs and challenges faced by Malay Muslim women.

This chapter investigates gendered and spiritual dimensions of aging among a group of older women in Brunei. As a starting point, it views age as a gendered construct both sociologically and culturally (Biggs 1997; Covan 2005; Wray 2007; Andersen and Hysock 2008; Twigg 2013). Female aging, in particular, remains under-theorised and largely Western-centric (Dolan and Tincknell 2012; Al-Sarrani and Alghamdi 2014). As such, the chapter adopts a postcolonial feminist lens to examine the gendered embodiment of aging and to consider the different perceptions and attitudes towards spirituality and religious and moral values outside of Western contexts. It identifies the spiritual dimension as a significant feature of the feminisation of aging in Brunei and underscores aging as an active and dynamic process embodied within subjective identity and lived experiences.

7.2   Methodology

This chapter adopts a qualitative approach for rendering a contextualised portrait of the everyday aging experience of Malay Muslim women in Brunei and the ways in which they give meaning to their experience. Data collection carried out by the author included in-depth semi-structured interviews facilitated by a photo-elicitation method. Participants were purposively selected through snowball sampling and networks of family and friends. Interviews were conducted with 10 women aged 60–76 years; six were married, one was married but separated, two widowed and one divorced, and they were from different backgrounds with an equal number of homemakers and retirees. More than half the participants were affiliated with Kumpulan Muslimah, a religious-spiritual community for women. A majority relied on government pension allowances as their primary source of income. Only one

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[1] This is a concept promoting the active congenial pursuit of social, economic and spiritual goals under the rule of a monarchy with the remembrances and blessings of God (Thambipillai 2012: 94).

participant had a service pension allowance and another had additional income from rental properties. Nine of the 10 participants coresided with their children. The age range of 60 and above places the participants within the pensionable age (60 years old) and average life expectancy (77 years) for Bruneian women.[2] All participants lived through the country's early period of modernisation and Islamisation from the 1960s to the 1980s and their accounts speak to the experiences that have shaped their personal narratives on spirituality and aging. All interviews were conducted at the residence of the participants for convenience and to ensure a relaxing environment for participants. Interview sessions were conducted in Malay and lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. Interviews were recorded with participant consent and later transcribed and translated.

Photo-elicitation was utilised as a complimentary method to facilitate unexpected recollection and further a non-predetermined discussion of the aging experience. According to Gillian Rose (2007), visual images can prompt the conveying of meanings. Prior to each interview, participants were asked to choose two photos they considered meaningful as they grow older. Many chose photos with their family, some presented passport photos and student cards, and others showed photos of themselves with their friends. The use of the photo vignettes enhanced rapport in the interview sessions as the participants voluntarily enjoyed reminiscing about their youth and the changes they experienced over the years. It enabled the participants to narrate as well as visually represent the diverse meanings of their aging, especially on sensitive or less tangible aspects of their everyday lives and practices. During the photo-elicitation sessions, participants talked about their transition from childhood and single life to marriage, and from motherhood to family, old age and grandparenthood. This encapsulated how their social relationships that shift and accumulate over time (being wife, mother and grandmother) relate to the aging discourse of their daily lives. As Chris Wieneke et al. (1999) note, social connections shape the aging experience and form an important aspect of empowerment for older women. Towards the end of each session, five visual images were shown to participants to elicit thoughts and feelings. These images were carefully selected as specifically relevant to the Bruneian context. There are, of course, limitations to the effectiveness and appropriateness of photo-elicitation concerning visual impairment, subjective bias and manipulation (Rose 2007; Walent 2008; Martin 2012; Schwandt 2014). However, none of the participants were visually impaired and the participants could voluntarily interpret the socially constructed nature of the images without pressure or inducement and, in turn, gave unique views on their daily realities. Maintaining a high degree of reflexivity in interviews and the author's own familiarity with local customs and cultural values helped alleviate ethical overreach concerns.

Recorded interviews were transcribed and coded using anonymous pseudonyms for each participant. Once transcribed, collected data were collated into preliminary themes to begin a systematic and contextualised analysis (Patton 1990; Boyatzis

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[2] In Brunei, a common indicator of old age is associated with qualification for and entitlement to the universal old age pension.

1998; Braun and Clarke 2006). The preliminary findings were then further refined into three major themes: the gendered constructions of aging, the development of spirituality and the negotiation of aging.

7.3   Conceptualising Aging: A Postcolonial Turn

The positionality of many Western studies on aging and later life tends to focus on white female aging at the expense of those from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds (Henry and Cumming 1959; Laslett 1987; Chatzitheochari and Arber 2011; Berk 2018). An often unintended consequence of this is a silencing of elderly female voices that do not necessarily correspond to predominant Anglocentric viewpoints. On a conceptual level, this is reinforced and reproduced by an overreliance on various predominant schools of thought. For instance, disengagement theory asserts that disengagement is universal among the elderly (Henry and Cumming 1959). Major critiques have rejected this stance as a universalistic and ethnocentric assumption framed by the biases of Western contemporary industrial societies (Moberg 2001: 35). It also largely ignores the gendered impact of an individual's aging experience. Moreover, the influential denial of death thesis portrays aging as a disease and discomfort with old age being seen as period of decrepitude associated with fear of death (Becker 1973; Ariès 1974; Mellor 1992; Wink 2006). The Western popular media is saturated with ageist images of 'agelessness'. The aesthetic exploitation of agelessness reproduces and institutionalises an implicit form of ageism (Zhang 2013). Elderly people are often prone to stigmatisation and situated at the periphery of cultural commodification and capitalist globalisation (Neuberger 2009; Kunow 2016). Arguably, this suggests that old age is an exclusionary rather than inclusive experience. Furthermore, negative and reductive stereotypes of old age implicitly ignore the diversity of individual aging experiences.

In aging studies, there is a tendency to represent definitions of old age and aging as universal and this leads to an essentialisation based on the Western experience of aging (Henry and Cumming 1959; Laslett 1987; Berk 2018). The framing is often in terms of frailty, disengagement and isolation. Arguably, these narratives overlook the diversity of the aging experience in different ethnic, religious and cultural contexts. They assume that the experiences of all aging women are similar and mirror a 'standard' Western understanding of it. Although rarely explicit, the assumption is implicit and inferable. But according to Bahira Sherif Trask (2006), the aging of Muslim women in Europe is bounded by the religious contexts of Islam itself. Although her discussion reflects a rather dated and traditional view of Muslim women, it does highlight generational differences in priorities and privileges.[3] Similarly, Maria Zubair et al.'s (2012) fieldwork study on the identity work of older Pakistani Muslim women highlights the ways in which the female aging experience varies despite a Western

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[3] The study of aging of Muslim women in non-Arab societies is currently an under-researched area thereby contributing to misleading representations of diverse Muslim women.

setting. Their experiences were significantly affected by their migration and cultural contexts. These studies underscore the social and cultural intersubjective dimensions of age and aging.

The cross-comparative work of Jin Kuan Kok and Yuet Ngor Yap (2014) on the aging experience of Chinese Malaysian and Japanese women aged 65–75 also reveals additional material factors at play. Despite having a similar culture of communal and familial interdependence, their data indicate that the aging experiences of women are affected by different socioeconomic environments such as access to pensions and medical insurance plans. Nonetheless, both groups embrace an optimistic perspective of old age—'aging gracefully'. It is a notion that intersects with sociocultural attitudes of reverence and honour towards the elderly. Similarly, other studies on non-Western societies portray positive views and attitudes around aging (Musaiger and D'Souza 2009; Tsuno and Homma 2009; Devasahayam 2014).

Somewhat differently, Simone de Beauvoir's *The coming of age* (1972) reflects on the alterity of old age and its manifestation in the lived experience of senior people. For de Beauvoir, otherness in old age is more of the battle within one's concept of self, in the sense that 'I' becomes 'Other' to oneself. She contends that the refusal to perceive oneself as becoming old reflects alterity and otherness in old age. The work of Simon Biggs (2004: 103) also draws our attention to the hegemony of 'age imperialism'. In an interesting turn for the study of aging, this concept attributes the expression and 'imposition of the … priorities and agendas of one age group onto and into the lives of other age groups' (ibid.). What it indicates is the formation of a hierarchical disposition of young and old age. Of course, deconstructing this binary distinction has its merits, but there is a risk in exaggerating the essentialist agenda (van Dyk 2016). The dualistic old age distinction should not merely be treated in a simplistic way. Conceivably, without a basic distinction, research on old age may not be possible (Zimmermann 2016). The task is to foreground the nuanced diversity of aging rather than deny its existence.

As such, postcolonial lenses remain important in critically considering the diversity and alterity submerged in the study of old age (Kunow 2016). For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999: 270), the compelling concept of 'subaltern' represents the 'irretrievably heterogeneous' whose spatial difference 'is subordinate but also resistant' to the power hegemonies (Kunow 2016: 104). A crucial contribution of postcolonial studies is to bring into focus daily practices that undermine hegemonic standards and legacies. A micro-person-centred approach as advocated by Thomas R. Cole et al. (1993) represents a step in that direction by giving voice to those on the periphery and their 'otherness'. As Paul Gilroy (2005) notes, it is a mature way of looking at the plurality and diversity of female aging experiences in the context of contemporary globalisation.

Previous studies have also noted that spirituality tends to heighten as one advances to old age (Mohan 2004; Krause 2004; Nygren et al. 2005; Koenig 2006; Atchley 2008). Growing spirituality is seen as a subjective aspect of self-identity and wellbeing in the aging process (Krause 2004; Koenig 2006; Flanagan and Jupp 2007; Atchley 2008; Gall et al. 2011; Manning 2012). However, the link between spirituality and religion remains open to contestation and debate. Various scholars

argue that religion and spirituality are synonymous. In these terms, both arise from a search for the sacred that corresponds to the presence of a Divine Being or Ultimate Truth (Principe 1983; Hill et al. 2000). In contrast, for other scholars, religion and spirituality are distinct and separate. For instance, in the largely secular societies of the West, spirituality is viewed as not necessarily coterminous with organised religious frameworks (Schneiders 2003). Furthermore, spirituality in aging studies often revolves around Western settings (Blieszner and Ramsey 2003; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Gall et al. 2011; Manning 2012; Shaw et al. 2016). Significantly, according to Krishna Mohan (2004), a Western secular framework for understanding the spiritual dimensions of aging may be inapplicable to non-Western settings in terms of the way spirituality is interpreted. It may have a closer relation to a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) that is embedded in collective religious and cultural beliefs and traditions (Varga 2007; Aguilan 2013).

As a majority Malay Muslim society, Islam is imbricated in many aspects of everyday life in Brunei (Cleary and Hairuni 2002). As such, spirituality is also predominantly framed in the context of Islam. God consciousness (*taqwa*) is the Islamic version of spirituality (Maqsood 2003; Abdalla and Patel 2010; Ahmad and Khan 2015). This indicates a gap between the ways spirituality and aging in the West are framed and understood and the ways in which Islamic spirituality influences the aging experience of Malay Muslim women in Brunei.

This brief overview of the literature in the field highlights that the predominant Western theoretical and conceptual rendering of aging contains the potential to reproduce and reinforce forms of bias and misperception in non-Western settings. If we are to mitigate such bias in the study of aging, it is important to develop a sensitivity and appreciation towards the diversity of older women's aging experience in non-Western settings. The following sections seek to address that imbalance. The collected data and analysis underscore the socially constructed and gendered aspects of aging and detail the subjective experiences and the ways in which aging identity is negotiated from the perspective of women of colour outside of a Western context, namely Brunei Malay Muslim women.

7.4   Gendered Discourses of Aging

A 76-year-old homemaker and the eldest child in her family, Pengiran Hajah Mastura chose a group family photograph from 2012 of 300 members of her extended family (including children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren). She noted, 'I feel really happy looking at it. I recognise everyone in the picture'. Similarly, Dayang Zainab, a 60-year-old homemaker, was explicit about her insights into her own life. She also chose a family group photo which was particularly meaningful to her elder years and how much she enjoyed grandparenthood.

> This is my favourite because I'm sitting next to my first grandson. I feel so happy being seated next to him.… He is four years old now, this was when he was two years old [*looking at the picture*]. I'm most cheerful around my grandchildren … most happy.… I love my grandchildren because I struggle to take care of them day and night … even when they are sick … I really love them so much.

According to Dayabati Devi and Amrita Bagga (2006), the arrival of a grandchild or grandparenthood is seen as a social and cultural marker of old age. For Pengiran Hajah Mastura, the value of extended family was strongly apparent. Meanwhile, Dayang Zainab expressed that her grandchildren were the love of her life. It is not surprising that these women chose family photos with their grandchildren and extended family as representations of their old age. As Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) argue, the family often becomes a proxy of women's primary identity. It is well documented that family is at the heart of many women's lives in Asian societies (Mehta 1997; Devasahayam 2014). Childrearing and familial roles are not necessarily viewed as emasculating but act as means of empowerment. Contributing to the informal caring and nurturing of their grandchildren adds to the social and economic wellbeing of the family. Arguably, this provides an outlet for them to negotiate their 'old' identity and also highlights gender-specific dimensions of aging.

Somewhat differently, as much as Hajah Timbang (retired senior architecture officer, aged 66) appreciated the experience of grandparenthood, the label 'grandma' did not impress her. Although she repeatedly admitted to her acceptance of old age 'as a gift from God', the refrain was less than wholehearted. As she asserted, 'I don't want to be called "*nini*" [grandma] by my grandchildren, it would be weird'. In this respect, she openly admitted how the status of being a grandmother is somewhat synonymous as being seen as 'old'. By not adopting the label, she was actively 'othering' herself from the social identity of 'old' that is associated with grandparenthood. It is what de Beauvoir (1972) refers to as alterity in old age. Evidently, being 'old' does not always coincide with chronological age, but rather one engages in an intersubjective contestation and negotiating with what it means to be 'old'.

Significantly, meanings of old age are often implicitly conveyed through how people view their own lives. A middle-class homemaker, Hajah Fatimah (aged 74), conveyed that her husband was a fundamental part of her life. When asked to present two photos of her choice, she showed her wedding photo and a couple portrait displayed in her living room. Due to predominant patriarchal norms in Brunei Malay society, the husband is usually regarded as the symbol of authority and leadership in many families (Ramlee Haji Tinkong 2009). It is not uncommon to hear women, especially homemakers, frame their old age experience as relative to their husband. Hajah Fatimah's narrative below reflects an emotional and physical dependence on her husband, but also expresses a sense of empowerment and a meaningful aging experience.

> I married my husband since 1958, we never had [disagreements] for a long time. As we grow older, we grow fonder with each other. We are still in love with one another; I take care of his food and drink. Wherever I go, he will be my company. He drives, we shop together. He does not even know these things, he would not know what [is] needed in the kitchen [*laughing*].

If I want to shop for clothes and scarves, he accompanies me. Yes, only two of us. It's a pity actually, only two of us. So … it is just like this, always with my husband [*laughing*]. Go to the market, with my husband, then go grocery shopping, with my husband [*laughing*].

The narratives of Hajah Fatimah, Hajah Timbang, Pengiran Hajah Mastura and Dayang Zainab challenge assumptions about disengagement and social isolation being two interrelated 'natural' outcomes of old age. As Anne-Marie Barry and Chris Yuill (2008: 216) note, there is also a combination of certain social practices and cultural values of a particular society to consider. Due to their strong social networks and roles as informal carers for their grandchildren and devoted partners, these women experienced a relatively higher social reverence and cultural visibility. Family empowers and fulfils their aging experience and ultimately shapes their concept of selfhood. Nonetheless, as Pirjo Nikander (2009: 863) notes, '[c]hronological age functions as a significant means of categorisation of one's self and of others throughout' one's aging experience. Several participants viewed retirement and receiving pensions as the objective marker of old age. For Dayang Junaidah, a home-maker, 'The thought of being … [60] reminds me that I have become an old person, because only at 60, you will receive your old age pension allowance'. Meanwhile for the retiree Hajah Rosmah (retired religious officer, aged 60), reaching 55 was considered old: 'When you reached 55, you retired, you are old already. Your service is no longer needed'. Entitlement to an old age pension based on chronological age creates an objective reality for these women. The formal identity of a 'golden citizen' (*warga emas*) is seen as rather more congenial than the blunt term 'old person' (*orang tua*). It reflects the value placed on politeness in Brunei Malay society and a face-saving gesture in a status-oriented society. As Rüdiger Kunow (2016: 104) notes, such a congenial term conveys a 'publicly mandated age identity'. Several participants praised the old age pension scheme as a gracious gesture from the government. Inherently, the scheme reinforces the differentiation of old age. The 'elderly' person is viewed as the object rather than subject of governmental development policies. In reality, the term promotes affinity towards this differential identity in the public sphere which subsequently masks ageist attitudes of the mandatory state retirement policy.

According to Carroll Estes and Chris Phillipson (2002), Western stereotypes of old age represent older people as dependent beings who are biologically, socially and psychologically limited in their daily lives. As a result, they are assumed to lack the agility and capacity to participate in the productive workforce. This conceivably draws the elderly citizen onto the map of subalternity within political and governmental landscapes. In Althusserian terms, official retirement age and pension schemes are 'ideological state apparatuses' of socioeconomic and political subalternity which structure and systematise people of a specific age (elderly) at the periphery of political and sociocultural participation (Althusser 1970). Although participants acknowledged their leisure time, several did view retirement in less favourable terms. They considered themselves as still healthy and able to contribute to society.

Overall, participants articulated subjective gendered discourses of aging within multilayered alterities of social identity, including grandparenthood, retirement (aged

55) and entitlement to the old age pension scheme (aged 60). Their narratives suggest that the negotiation of age identity and aging involves a rather complex and dynamic combination of selfhood, lived experience and interrelated embodiment within social circles.

7.5 Acceptance of Aging

As Mohan (2004) argues, understanding the spiritual dimension of aging through a Western framework of spirituality may be inapplicable in a non-Western culture. During interviews, allusions to spiritual development and the implication for their aging were observed from participants. In general, participants framed Islamic spirituality of God consciousness as a central element in their aging discourse (Maqsood 2003: 10). Some of the elements of Islamic spirituality's precepts—acceptance of fate or contentment (*redha*), gratitude (*syukur*) and sincerity (*ikhlas*)—played a paramount role in their understanding and acceptance of spiritual concepts of aging. As Hajah Rosmah observed about *redha*:

> We shouldn't care [about] … things that have passed. We are content and accept our aging moments that have been written by God. Because in the Qur'an it has stated the process of aging, from baby, youth and to old age. Live it with a contented heart. There is no need to worry about being old.

On *syukur*, Hajah Aspalela (retired clerk, aged 62) noted:

> Whatever God has given to me, I feel gratitude for my good health. What is the point of being young if you were only to waste your time with worldly things? What God has decreed to you, you should feel grateful. Accept the fact that we are going to be old and we are old.

On *ikhlas*, Hajah Timbang stated:

> The truth is sincere. Have a sincere heart. Once you're old, then you're old. Take it as it is whatever Allah has given to you. If he gives you old age, then accept it with an open heart.

From the interview data, all participants acknowledged aging and old age as 'a gift of God' that should be positively embraced. The passage of time is constructed in the realm of divine power and humans should not contest such a fate. Arguably, the socialisation of Islamic spirituality as a way of life (politically, economically, socially and culturally) in Brunei may contribute to such holistic attitudes towards and acceptance of aging.[4]

Interestingly, while aging is often conceptualised in the discourse of avoidance and fear in Western settings (Neuberger 2009; Higgs and Gilleard 2015; Kunow 2016), aging in the Brunei context takes on meaning as a divine gift to be accepted with profound gratitude. In other words, religious beliefs enabled the participants to

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[4] In Brunei, spirituality is not detached from religion but rather induced by the attachment to it. This context matters in defining spirituality in Brunei.

embrace their identity as aging women. Nonetheless, in practice some participants, particularly the early sixties cohort, expressed a rather more reluctant acceptance of their aging. For instance, the excerpt on sincerity is drawn from Hajah Timbang who previously rejected the label 'grandma' in her narratives to distance herself from an 'old age' identity.

7.5.1 Becoming Spiritual

Previous studies have shown that spirituality is often heightened as one advances into old age (Mohan 2004; Manning 2012). As Terry Lynn Gall et al. (2011) note, growing spiritual is central to an aging individual's concept of self. Similarly, Kieran Flanagan (2007: 5) contends that spirituality illuminates the subjective dimensions of self-identity. Arguably, spirituality provides a greater existential meaning to life and enhances wellbeing. During reflections on the old and youthful aspects of their self-identity in the photos they chose, participants expressed a growing sense of spiritual affinity as they aged. They started to adopt headscarves, wear looser clothing, endorse extra spiritual practice (such as the night prayer [*tahajjud*] and voluntary morning prayer [*dhuha*]), go to mosques and become more informed about religious teachings. Reflecting on their own morality was also common. In many ways, this growing awareness of God and reflecting on one's own mortality reaffirm previous research (Krause 2004; Koenig 2006; Atchley 2008; Manning 2012). It suggests that aging is an invitation to deeper contemplation and indicates that age may be a factor in stimulating greater spirituality.

Nonetheless, mortality awareness is not only mediated by increasing age. This study also finds that Islam as a religion plays a significant role in spreading awareness about death in contradistinction to a more Western construction of the female aging experience. Participants suggested that the influence of age on spiritual growth is both personal and relational. The data indicate that spiritual affinity is not only induced by chronological age but also through circumstances experienced while growing old. This was reflected in Hajah Maimunah's (retiree-turned-businesswoman, aged 63) narrative about how the death of her mother partially triggered the pursuit of a more emotional and spiritual engagement with God:

> My mum passed away when she was 50 plus, so I thought to myself, 'Hmm, will I die at 50 plus too?' But thank God, God gave me longer life and He keeps on adding the number to my age. So as my age increases from time to time, I am becoming more concerned about myself and death. Ironically, I never thought of this before. I am more concerned about my deeds and prayers. I don't want to sin anymore. I'm scared already to do bad things. I just want to do more good deeds for myself. I also do more almsgiving to people. I want to collect as many [good] deeds as I can.

The death of Hajah Maimunah's mother caused her to contemplate deeply about life and deepen her spiritual understanding. This suggests death awareness is also mediated by loss of a loved one regardless of one's chronological age. If death invokes the search for meaning, it is a concept that is foreign yet familiar, precisely because of one's limited knowledge and lack of spatial and temporal control over it. For all the

interviewees, the discussion of death was often extended to the spiritual narratives of afterlife. For instance, when shown the last photo vignette, Hajah Timbang shared her previous fear of graveyards. She recalled, 'I used to be so scared every time I pass by this place [grave]. I felt it was a scary place. I was worried about my sins, I was worried if I am prepared to go "there" and see Him [to die]'.

It also often induced sadness by reminding them of the loss of their loved ones. For example, Hajah Rogayah (homemaker, aged 70) shared how much her husband's death impacted on her both emotionally and spiritually. She prayed and recited words from the Qur'an to comfort herself whenever she was reminded of her late husband. High levels of death awareness among the participants probably have a strong connection to Islamic notions of afterlife. As Ernest Becker (1973) notes, those who believe in the existence of an afterlife may have lower potentiality for death anxiety. As such, it may promote a greater acceptance towards aging and mortality.

From both Hajah Timbang's and Hajah Rogayah's accounts, the indication is that spirituality acts as a form of coping mechanism to deal with sadness and traumatic events (Atchley 2008; Woodhead 2008; Manning 2012). The respondents' spiritual values gave them succour and comfort as they aged. The data suggest that Brunei's strong socioreligious context influences understandings of death and aging among this group of Malay Muslim women.

7.5.2 Kumpulan Muslimah

The study also found that more than half of the participants (n = 6) joined Kumpulan Muslimah. This is a religious-spiritual community for women introduced under an initiative by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Its aim is to empower Muslim women and impart Islamic knowledge and skills. Many mosques in Brunei have their own Muslim women's groups. Their activities include religious classes run by qualified female religious teachers, mass prayers, reaching out to the community, charity runs, Qur'an recitation, and delegation or exchange visits with other Muslim women's groups from different districts. Most members are homemakers or elderly retired women. As Woodhead (2008: 156–157) argues, this preponderance of older women helps ensure an autonomous mode of personhood outside the familiar context of family and workplace and potentially promotes greater subjective wellbeing. Kumpulan Muslimah plays a role in their positive and healthy aging strategy. Participants revealed they were either members of the group or had heard about it from their friends or relatives.

Hajah Aspalela referred to Kumpulan Muslimah as her 'outside world' after retirement. Similarly, Hajah Seri (retired chef, aged 69) noted the positive impact of Kumpulan Muslimah and how it had helped her foster a greater spiritual connection with God:

> I gained so much knowledge from Kumpulan Muslimah, knowledge for the next life most importantly. I learned about how to conduct prayers properly, read the Qur'an. I feel happy and my heart is at peace. Even when you feel not happy, but when you get to see your friends

and gather around, you feel happy. You get to exchange your thoughts, make new friends, from being illiterate to literate of the Qur'an. I feel happy. I get to learn something new, I get to go for trips overseas, visit so many places. All these make me happy. I know about the night prayer [*tahajjud*], voluntary morning prayer [*dhuha*] and optional prayer [*sunnah*] and so on, so with all this little knowledge I gained, I get to also teach my young grandchildren a little bit.

Interestingly, interview data also indicate that mobility was a motivating factor to enrol as a Kumpulan Muslimah member. Hajah Rogayah expressed her desire to join the group when she heard her relatives mention upcoming activities especially at wedding gatherings. However, she could only go to places depending on her son's availability as she did not drive. Similarly, Pengiran Hajah Mastura also voiced a similar concern and her preference to spend free time with her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. For more middle-class participants such as Hajah Timbang and Hajah Rosmah, mobility was not a problem since they had domestic helpers, cars and their own driving licences.

Interview data also reveal that some participants felt that spiritual growth needs to be facilitated earlier. Hajah Rosmah expressed how spiritual enhancement among elderly women at a later age may be seen as culturally mediated:

Well, from what I see among the aging members of Kumpulan Muslimah, most of them are those women who weren't concerned for their spiritual connection with God until their later life. They were like, 'Wait till I get old'. So, when you delay it until later life, they were clueless on how to do the proper prayers and what not. Even through my observation, they were still ignorant of spiritual-religious knowledge from the questions they asked me in classes. Prayers should be our daily routine and daily obligation; there should be no excuse for us as Muslims to neglect it until later life.

Arguably, Kumpulan Muslimah is a product of the state's aspiration to be a nation devoted to God. Kumpulan Muslimah reflects the state's efforts to promote an inclusive positive aging platform among the female members of the elderly community. On the other hand, membership of Kumpulan Muslimah not only serves as a vehicle of spiritual growth but also as an expression of their identity as practising Muslims and their faith community.

7.6   (Re)-Imagining Future Aging: Needs, Aspirations and Expectations

Data from the study indicate that filial piety and elderly care are two interrelated aspects of the participants' narratives in their aging experience, especially when discussing photo vignette number two. In Brunei, respect for the elderly is one of the core values instilled from an early age socially, culturally and religiously. It creates a strong sense of community in Brunei society that also shapes women's aging experience. Most participants expressed the hope that their children would take care of them as they grew older. Hajah Aspalela reflected on her impression of the above photo:

We wish that one day, our children would also do the same to us, taking care and loving us when we're old. She seems to love her mother so much. I feel touched. It reminded me of my late mother. I am grateful I am able to take care of my late old mother, fed her and the likes, I hope my children will also do that to us.

Hajah Aspalela's narrative encapsulated traditional caring roles associated with women and notions of filial piety. She talked about how she felt honoured to be given the opportunity to take care of her late mother when she was old and expected the same experience from her children. The opportunity to serve and care for parents and the elderly is considered a great honour and blessing in Islam:

Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and be kind to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, do not say 'uff' to them or chide them, but speak to them in terms of honour and kindness. Treat them with humility and say 'My Lord, have mercy on them, for they did care for me when I was little'. (Qur'an, Al-Isra 17:23–24)

Most participants also admitted that they preferred to be cared for by daughters rather than sons. In Brunei, women are often prescribed with the responsibility of being the nurturer and caregiver of the household. Most participants had devoted their lives to caring for and nurturing their children, and evidently they expected their care to be reciprocated by their adult children. In Brunei Malay society, filial piety, community, reciprocal care and affection from the children towards elderly parents are expected. In contrast, certain Western feminists view the family as a key site for women's oppression (Oakley 1974; Abbott et al. 2005). They argue that domestic and caregiving labour provided by women is actually a form of 'hidden labour' within capitalist society. However, Hajah Aspalela's narrative reveals that the informal social contract between the elderly parents and their adult children serves to benefit older women in a close-knit society like Brunei.

The data suggest that isolation and disengagement are not overly significant issues. They indicate that Brunei's prevalent practice of interdependent living with children, the strong cultural expectation of filial piety and family values are contributing factors in diminishing isolation and disengagement. Nine of the participants coresided with their children. The exchange of intergenerational living in a family-oriented society reflects material reciprocity and social support between aging parents and their children. Adult children perform roles of informal elderly care at the physical, financial and emotional levels. They are their 'assurance of care' (Devasahayam 2014: 14). The reciprocal link is maintained as these elderly mothers also act as informal carers for their children's children. Nevertheless, two of the homemakers—Hajah Rogayah, who has no biological children, and Hajah Fatimah, who lives independently from her children—did indicate some feelings of isolation. They voiced concern and fear of isolation and abandonment by their children in hard times.

I'd ask myself, how would I die? How would I look like? Especially remembering I am alone. If I am sick who would take care of me? Who would feed me? It has been playing on my mind as I grow older. If there is someone who would take care of me, *Alhamdulillah* [praise be to God]. (Hajah Rogayah)

> The biggest challenge during old age is health. Imagine, if I were to fall sick, I will be just there lying on my bed, I need somebody to accompany me when going to [the] toilet, feeling all weak and have to be dependent on others. Oh nooo … please God I don't want that to happen to me. I wish I would never have to trouble a soul for this. The last thing I would like is troubling others, even when they are my children. (Hajah Timbang)

These narratives reflect two differing aspirations among many of the participants: the first is to remain independent and self-reliant; and the second is to maintain interdependence with their children and social networks. It is important to note that in Brunei society, the idea of an old people's home is uncommon, primarily due to a strong sense of community, collective identity and expectations of filial piety. This suggests the degree to which the cultural context is significant in influencing perceptions of old age among these women. On the other hand, awareness about eating well to ensure a healthy and active body was also prominent throughout interviews and shows a respect for their selfhood and wellbeing. The findings of the study suggest that, for these participants, a balance between self-reliance and interdependence is key to healthy aging.

7.7   Conclusion

This chapter highlights the everyday gendered and spiritual dimensions of a group of older Malay Muslim women in Brunei. Adopting a postcolonial feminist lens and a photo-elicitation method to investigate gendered embodiments of aging allowed for a consideration of different perceptions and attitudes towards spirituality, and religious and moral values outside of a Western context. The findings reveal that spirituality is a significant feature of the feminisation of aging in Brunei but it is not always a straightforward process. The experience of female aging is negotiated and mediated by sociocultural factors and influences, notably Malay cultural and religious values, interdependence of familial organisation (expectations of filial piety), social rapport and networks. Moreover, the findings underscore that aging is an active and dynamic process embodied within subjective identity and day-to-day lived experiences. The gendered discourses of aging among these women involve a diverse articulation of meaning within the multilayered alterity of their social identities such as mother, wife and grandmother. The participants' experiences spoke to nuanced appreciations of aging.

The study further reveals the importance of familial connections among Malay Muslim women and the ways in which they maintain their feminine differences through roles performed within the family setting. The gender dimension of aging shapes the lived experience of these older women. They were not only actively participating domestically but also engaging outside of their traditional roles. Some joined Kumpulan Muslimah, while most invested their time with their social networks and as active grandparents. This suggests that Malay Muslim women adopt a more holistic

acceptance of aging promoted by Islamic teaching in contrast to some Western viewpoints that portray aging as a time of an increasing fear of mortality and disengagement. Their religious identity was prominent but it also intersected with other factors such as age, gender, class and ethnocultural values to condition their view and experience of aging.

There is evidence to infer that conformity towards Malay values and Islamic teaching coupled with state-level policies and initiatives underpin core social characteristics of Brunei Malay older women. For this author, the often-tearful insights of their personal reflections and spiritual aspirations remain a powerful memory. It was a privilege to listen to these older women unfold the weave of their personal spiritual journeys. Their generous participation in this study provides further texture to our understanding of aging in non-Western contexts.

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