

GENDER IN THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

interview

with May Hen

May Hen is a researcher who looks at the relationship between global elites and their regional and professional subordinates in the offshore world. Here she discusses how post-colonial society in the Cayman Islands has accommodated itself to the needs of global finance.

Let's start with what drew you to the Cayman Islands.

I became interested in the Cayman Islands because of its geography and legal-colonial history. Not having much arable land, it was poorly suited for a plantation-based economy, in contrast to neighbouring Caribbean Islands such as Jamaica. The Cayman Islands, therefore had to rely on its maritime economy and people leading to turtling, thatch rope making, and seafaring up until the 1960s. What is unique about the Cayman Islands is how it developed quickly from a maritime economy to a finance-based economy in such a short period of time catapulting itself in to one of the largest and most prominent offshore financial centres in the world.

What were you hoping to explore in Cayman in terms of your study?

My Master's research 'Sub-elites as fiduciary gatekeepers of global elites. A fiscal anthropology of the Cayman Islands and

offshore financial industry' found elite-driven values permeating all aspects of governance, culture, and communication resulting in lost economic diversity, homogenized professions, weakened governments' capacity, and an imported labour force indigenous Caymanians have become precariously reliant upon.

You seem to suggest that the Cayman culture changed with the arrival of an elite. Can you say something more about this?

In J.A. Roy Bodden's book *The Cayman Islands in Transition: The Politics, History, and Sociology of a Changing Society* (2007), he describes how right from the earliest recorded histories of settlement, 'Caymanian society exhibited class and colour distinctions', and that '[e]xclusion from the elite on the basis of national origin is more than a pinprick on the body politic. It penetrates to the deepest layers of the Caymanian psyche, especially that

of established Caymanian and Caribbean intellectuals'.

While elite culture appears to have been historically part of the Cayman Islands, what is of note in the present-day Cayman Islands experience, is seen in the employment and professional practices in the financial industry. Bodden, a Caymanian with deep intellectual, social and political roots in the Cayman Islands writes:

Nonetheless, real advance have been made by the society in shaping a relatively harmonious multiracial and multinational atmosphere.

I can attest to this statement based on my 13 months of ethnographic field-work and interviews in the Cayman Islands. Many expatriate circles will agree that the Cayman Islands is incredible expatriate-friendly.

So how do you see the culture of the Cayman islands in non-economic terms; can you say something about the 'rules' unspoken or otherwise?

Again, J.A. Roy Bodden's *The Cayman Islands in Transition* is key here. It describes the Cayman Islands' society from the perspective of a Caymanian who not only

spent a bulk of his life in public service to the Cayman Islands, but was also an educator and academic. While he does not specifically use the gendered framework, he does discuss in detail, what he describes as a 'frontier society' characterized by 'voluntary colonialism'. Both of these aspects entail gendered inequality.

What is your experience of gender biases and inequities in the Cayman Islands?

I will provide two experiences: The first was when I spoke to a British expat and her mom one afternoon. They were complaining about how they had to adjust to the chauvinistic attitude of the island. They tried to get insurance and the agent would not take them seriously. When bills arrived, they always went to the male. I have observed this frequently as well. I asked what they were going to do about it to which they responded: 'I guess we'll have to get used to it. Maybe they think we're the oddballs.' Laws, customs and culture of the island is geared towards patriarchal values. What is more, there appears to be a general acceptance of these patriarchal attitudes. They are treated as a day-to-day nuisance rather than as a legitimate human rights violation.

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Another experience was during an interview with a sexual health worker who told me that it was only in the last decade that teenage pregnancy was accepted in high schools and young women were finally permitted to stay and complete their studies. She said ‘It’s always girls that were shamed – up until several years ago they were kicked out of public school if they became pregnant. It was only recently that abortions were permitted without the consent of the female’s father, father of the child or male-partner’.

The church is quite heavily influential in the day-to-day lives of many Caymanians and this influence spills over in to many of their local laws. Some of these churches seem to be more patriarchal than others and they tend to dominate local discourse on what is appropriate and inappropriate.

I am curious to know why you think the Cayman Islands in particular has flourished as an offshore financial centre?

When a financial industry moves itself onto an island, it often picks places that seem

to have people willing to accept them and have similar values. What made the Caymans such a successful substrate for the financial industry, rather than some other island, has something to do with its accommodation and acceptance of the values of the finance sector and its key personnel. This in turn has some relation with gendered practices, with attitudes towards inequality and so on. Finance and masculinity are coiled together in ways that my PhD research aims to explore further. But it is already clear that there are important links between offshore and the idea of ‘voluntary colonialism’ where the indigenous population enjoys the affiliation with ancient ‘traditional British values’ that include attitudes towards the place of women in society and so on.

The Cayman Islands as a financial centre is a major centre for trusts. The ‘secrecy’ that is a feature of trusts can be used to hide assets from regulatory authorities, law enforcement agencies, and from spouses and children. Would you recognise this description of the Cayman trust industry?

The wealth managers and trustees of high-net-worth-individuals who spoke at the 2014 Mourant Ozannes International Trusts and Private Clients Conference in the Cayman Islands took for granted that many of their clients were male, and that trusts were created in part to serve domestic and intimate purposes. I say this because a few enduring ‘rationalizations’ of what motivated the client’s desire for a trust were obviously domestically oriented. Some motivations for a private or secret trust

included: 1) Shielding asset knowledge and value from children in their formative years in order for them to lead ‘normal’ lives, 2) Allocating funds for ‘cohorts of children’ or illicit children, and 3) Setting aside funds for mistresses or multiple wives.

So what’s the ‘rationale’ for the trust industry providing ‘secrecy’ on such a colossal scale?

Trustees at this conference, from my observations, seemed to separate themselves from the motivation of the trust and the source of funds for the trust by calling the trust itself a product. There did not seem to be much of a discussion on the source of the funds aside from the cursory ‘we don’t support illicit funds’ narrative. It seemed as if lawyers and accountants would deal with that particular aspect of fund source. And while the trust is a product, trustees were keen to separate the trust from their services as trustees. They were offering a service, not selling a product.

Hooi May Hen (May Hen) worked in the Canadian Revenue Agency and completed her Master’s in Communication at Simon Fraser University. She is a visiting fiscal anthropologist at the University of California, Irvine. She begins her PhD candidacy in Economic Sociology at the University of Cambridge in the autumn.