DEVIANT SPIRITS IN WEST MALAYSIAN FACTORIES

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Abstract: This paper examines spirit possession among Malay female factory workers and shows the way in which a "normal" village reaction to stress in rural areas has been transformed into "deviance" by foreign owned transnational corporations operating in the new urban industrial estates.

Résumé: En étudiant la possession d'alcool parmi des ouvrières d'usine au Malay, cet article démontre comment, dans une communauté rurale, une réponse normale au stress s'est transformée en déviance sous l'influence d'entreprises multi-nationales opérant dans les nouvelles zones industrielles urbaines.

Introduction

Spirit possession has always been common in rural Malay villages (Firth 1967; Kessler 1977; Banks 1976). It should be pointed out that in rural areas spirit possession is motivated by problems such as illness, sorrow, tension and family problems. Many kinship compounds have a member (male or female) susceptible to spirit possession and trancing, but these tend to be "private," rather than the "public" and dramatic performances which anthropologists have concentrated upon (Firth 1967; Kessler 1977).

However, patterns of spirit possession have increased very dramatically during the tenure of the Malaysia's New Economic Policy and industrialization, particularly in the urban areas. As Ackerman notes:

> A stereotyped pattern follows the many events. Victims, predominantly unmarried Malay girls, suddenly begin to scream and shout in terror, run aimlessly, complain of chest pains and breathing difficulties, become aggressive and abuse everyone in sight. Some exhibit trance-like behaviour, others experience convulsions or hallucinations and report seeing supernatural beings. This behaviour becomes highly contagious and spreads through the group. Victims struggle violently and display extraordinary physical

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> strength. After recovery victims universally claim amnesia and insist they were unaware of their behaviour. (Ackerman 1980:171)

Malays interpret these outbreaks as supernatural possession and the victims are believed to have disturbed the spirits. Some interpret them as punishment for the violation of moral codes, while others see spirit possession as the work of spirits who attack victims while they have weak soul essence. The victim becomes a source of spiritual power, so is not responsible for any of her actions. Whatever occurs is the machination of a spirit. To pacify the spirits a Malay ritual expert, *bomoh*, prepares a sacrifice, gives the victim protective amulets, holy water and orders her to follow certain taboos for a time (see also Lee 1981; Ackerman and Lee 1978, 1981).

Contrary to "orthodox Islam," the Malay world view includes a tenacious belief in a spirit world, and even the most sophisticated Western-educated Malay holds to such concepts. This includes animistic, Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic elements which are fused in a syncretic manner. The foundation of this syncretism is the concept of soul essence, "*semangat*," the "spirit of physical life and vitality." There is a close interaction between *semangat* and the body it occupies. Any strength or weakness of *semangat* is transmitted to the body and vice versa; they are both weakened by illness, care, worry and fear. When *semangat* is in a weak condition, a spirit can enter the body and cause disruption by possession (Endicott 1981:48).

Malays strive at all times to be refined, to hide negative feelings, to remain in perfect control of their demeanour, never to cause offence and always to "give face" to others. This is glossed by the term *budibahasa* which comprises a matrix of ideals relating to harmonious relations between individuals. A Malay who is well socialized in *budibahasa* is considered to be refined (*halus*), and worthy of respect as a person "in control" of his or her emotions and life.

> *Budibahasa* can be attained through mutual adaptation and compromise in social interaction, the norm of unobtrusiveness is treated as the ideal in any form of social interaction. A person who displays insensitivity to the dignity of others is coarse (*kasar*). Subscription to these codes of behaviour is maintained by a desire to avoid feeling shamed (*malu*). *Malu* is a major technique of instilling discipline by shame. It is an effective mechanism of social control. (Lee 1981:236)

Raw emotions are unacceptable since they bring shame to people and may provoke anger which will be expressed through supernatural attacks. During personal interaction, Malays are always aware of subtle communication nuances; they constantly look beyond explicit messages and seldom take direct speech literally (Ackerman 1981). Spirits actually form an integral part of Malay cultural management. The fact that hostilities can be re-

solved on a supernatural level preserves "harmony" in Malay life. Such a state *must be maintained* if debilitating shame is to be avoided and *budi-bahasa* retained. According to Lee (1981), *budibahasa* is a Malay structural characteristic that separates individuals along the refined-coarse behaviour continuum. Spirit possession is the antithesis of this structure in that it constitutes a release from normative structural constraints; it facilitates role reversal and role enhancement in Malay culture-bound syndromes.

A Village Case

The case of Ma' Su is an example of the way in which spirit possession allows an individual, unconstrained by the requirements of *budibahasa*, to say what cannot otherwise be expressed, in a blunt, direct and very dramatic manner. Ma' Su's younger sister, a divorcee aged 40, came back to the village after her marriage with a soldier husband was dissolved. The younger sister Ka' Ngah had lived in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur for a considerable number of years, and so, by contrast with her rural kin, was somewhat "street wise" in a manner unbecoming to rural values. She spoke in a rather coarse manner, told lewd jokes and talked to young girls about sexual matters; in these actions she transgressed the bounds of decency. Since Ka' Ngah had moved into her elder sister's house with two young children there had been a constant round of irritations over domestic work, money and food. Ka' Ngah soon found work tapping rubber trees, but scandalized villagers by frequenting Chinese-owned coffee shops and conversing with men. In order to earn additional income, she baked Malay rice dishes and sold them house to house in a nearby fishing village. After some five months, rumours came back that Ka' Ngah was having an affair with a married man in the next village—a rumour which so shamed her elder sister that, in one week, three events of spirit possession took place, all between the hours of 1:00 and 3:00 in the morning. Each time Ma' Su was possessed by the spirit, she screamed and woke up the whole compound—everyone came pressing into the house to witness the spirit possession. Each time she yelled obscenities, threw her sarong off until she was naked and rolled upon the floor of her house. This was a complete inversion of her controlled, quiet daily demeanour. The scene was terrifying for her eight children who cried incessantly. Her husband calmly orchestrated events by lighting special heavy incense and preparing ritual bowls of rice, betel nut and a Malay *kris* (a weapon).

The spirit (of a grandfather from the state of Kelantan where Malay magical powers are very powerful) spoke through Ma' Su and demanded that the younger sister cease her shameful activities, Ka' Ngah was told to take special medicine to be found under the banana tree in the compound to

"cool" her down. The spirit ordered Ka' Ngah to leave the village. Ka' Ngah herself was totally shaken and terrified by the spirit possession; she descended the house ladder and braved the snakes to rush outside for the medicine. It was there—a phial of holy water. In the two subsequent visitations that same week, the spirit actually cited the misdemeanours of everyone in the compound. A *bomoh* was not called until the third evening, but he was a kinsman who thus knew about the tensions in the compound. A ritual dish of uncooked rice, betel nut and sireh leaves was placed in front of him. The specialist spoke for a while with Ma' Su, blew upon various parts of her body and, eventually, managed to despatch the spirit. On the second and third nights, the spirit revealed the tensions that existed between Ma' Su and her sister-in-law over a sack of rice, between Ma' Su and her eldest son who refused to find work and, finally, between Ma' Su and her factory-working daughter. The latter, like Ka' Ngah, was ordered to take medicine to protect her virginity from the "love magic" of urban men in Sungei Petani. Ka' Ngah wrote a letter to a "boyfriend" who came all the way from Kuala Lumpur by taxi to collect and take her back to the capital city. Ma' Su recovered immediately after Ka' Ngah's departure.

Malays use ancient methods to deal with the differing realities of the rural and urban settings. The recent emphasis upon urban spirit possession in factories is dramatic, yet public and media coverage emphasizes its "extraordinary" qualities. Like Banks (1976), my research indicates that trance and spirit possession are part of the normal range of behaviour to be found in villages and that most people are capable of it. At the rural level, spirit possession is not considered to be deviant—indeed it is an integral part of village life and cultural management.

Background

The political impetus to rapid industrialization in Malaysia came about as the result of ethnic riots in 1969. The targets of the New Economic Policy, set up in 1970, required the establishment of labour-intensive, export-oriented electronics, garments, textiles, rubber goods and food-processing factories. Malaysia is now deeply integrated into international markets because of its role both in establishing free trade zones and in inviting transnational corporations from Europe, Japan, Korea, the USA and Canada to open factories. At the same time, the dismantling of industrial relations was deemed necessary in order to attract foreign capital which demanded "no unions." Transnational corporations specifically request female workers, and operate night shifts to ensure the continual operation of assembly lines. The Malaysian government states that, at the present stage of industrial development, workers would only be manipulated by trade union leaders and that such

manipulation would be contrary to their own, and the nation's, interests. It is further maintained that collective bargaining will drive foreign investment away and will, therefore, have adverse effects on the growth of employment and incomes in the country.

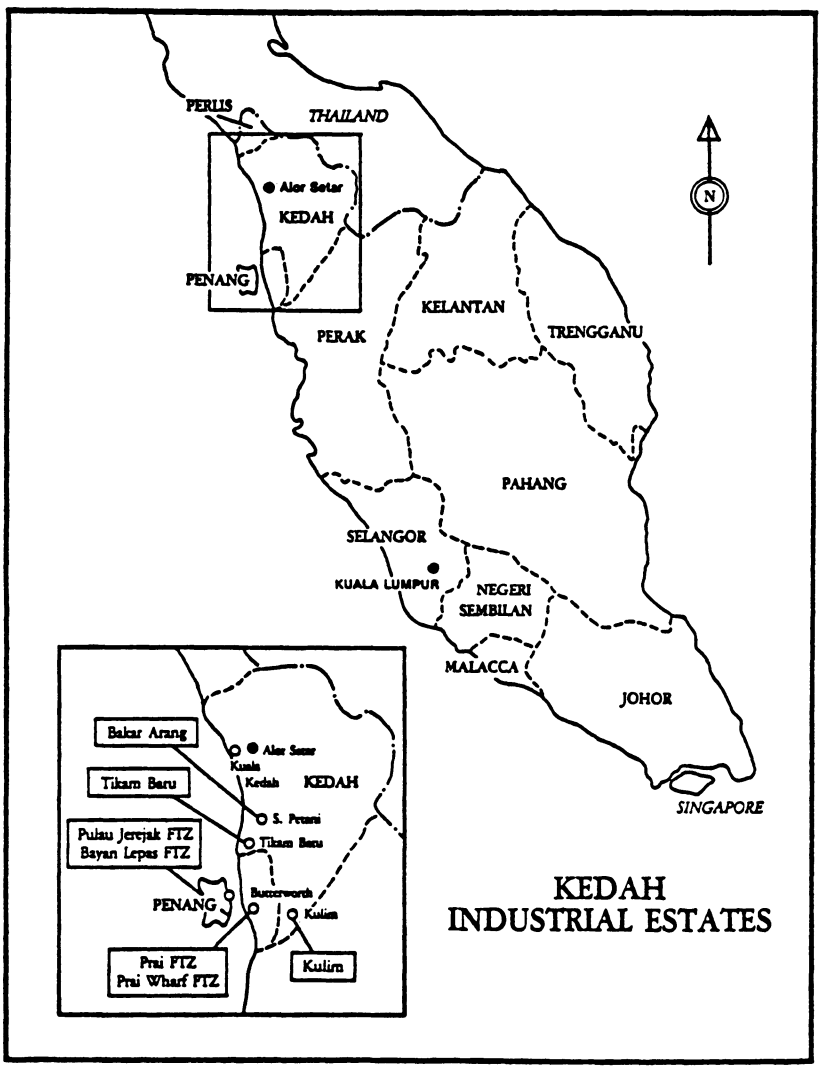
The wages of female employees of transnational corporations are low in comparison with average earnings in other sectors of the economy. Families live in rural areas and young daughters may commute or migrate to urban industrial estates. Young girls contribute a significant portion of their earnings to their families (from 20% to 100%). This income is crucial to peasant households which must develop strategies to cope with the high cost of living and low returns in the agricultural sector.

In the Northwest Malaysian border state of Kedah, where I carried out research, transnational corporations have been encouraged by the Kedah State Development Corporations and the federal Malaysian Industrial Development Authority to locate in peripheral rural zones designated as Regional Development Areas.

Since 1973, the Kedah State Development Corporation has opened six industrial estates, comprising 91 factories which employ some 9700 workers. The factories in the Sungei Petani industrial zone are representative of the major trends in Malaysian industrial development in their bias towards electronics, textiles, rubber and wood-based processing. Transnational corporations open factories in rural Kedah to take advantage of incentives and to reduce their production and labour costs. Factories which operate in Kedah can avoid the relatively more expensive "urban workers" of Penang (see map). Electronics factories now saturate the so-called "Silicon Island" which has three free-trade zones. Silicon Island rates second in the world to California's Silicon Valley in the output of integrated circuits. By branching into Kedah, factories remain close to the container port, the free trade zones and the international airport at Penang. The transnational corporations, by establishing factories in peripheral rural areas and by utilizing labour *in situ*, pay even lower wages and rent or buy very cheap land. Wage rates in Kedah range from a mere M$3.20 to M$6.70 per day compared with the M$5.50 to M$9.00 per day in Penang, a three-hour bus and ferry ride away.

> The manual dexterity of the oriental girl is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care . . . who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of a bench assembly production line than the oriental girl? No need for a zero defects program here! By nature, they "quality control" themselves. (Malaysia FIDA 1970:71-22)

The industries, newly established in the Sungei Petani area of South Kedah, reflect the thrust of Malaysia's New Economic Policy in terms of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product and equity ownership. Two of the four electronics factories are foreign-owned (Northern Telecom and General Electric) while two are joint ventures (Singatronics and Sharp Roxy). Northern Telecom took over a large part of the telecommunications component production from its North American plants after a reported loss of some US$60 million. After one year's operation in Penang, the factory made a profit of M$500 000 for its parent company and, by 1983, profits rose to M$80 million. The Canadian Corporation expects Asian sales to form much of its future growth. With US$4 billion in total sales in 1983 and a steady 15-to-25 percent annual growth, Northern Telecom hopes to become a primary supplier for the telecommunications infrastructure in the Asia-Pacific Rim. The Canadian-based corporation's Malaysian factories, upon the receipt of an order, can deliver digital switching gear to North America within one week. This contrasts sharply with the 26 weeks required to fulfil an order in Canada or America. In addition to Northern Telecom, there are four textile factories and six rubber products factories (owned by Uniroyal, Nike USA and the London Rubber Company). Because of their Malaysian branches, the corporations have made profits and their relocation in the Malaysian hinterland reflects the value of overseas processing and cheap Malay female labour.

> Our workers have reached a skill standard beyond that of our American plant. Now they have to improve their skill level to that of the Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese and Hong Kong workers. The Asian standard consists of longer working hours combined with high productivity, low cost of labour and good quality products. I aim to cut down on the training time and introduce more fragmentation. (British expatriate executive of an American transnational, personal communication, 1983)

Management Methods

Factories use various methods of recruitment, the most effective one being visits by Malay male personnel managers to the padi-growing villages in the District of Kuala Muda. They utilize the traditional Malay authority system of the headman and village elders. The village elder ensures that factory vacancies are announced after Friday prayers and that the news circulates round the coffee shops, market and general store. These all-male networks pass on the message to their unmarried female kin at home who, depending on household economic circumstances, call at the factories for work.

In order to alleviate worries over Muslim girls meeting men, much stress is laid upon the separation of the male and female working areas. Personnel managers state that the girls leave the protection of their fathers for the protection of the factory manager which, a process which "reassuringly stresses paternalistic values" and attention to the girls' moral welfare. Some factories have a family day to which they invite village leaders and parents

for a traditional feast, utilizing the Malay core-cultural values of food and reciprocity as an industrial recruitment strategy. Malay male personnel managers have to work hard to convince peasant Malays that factories are good places to work in, and to dispel the severe social stigma currently attached to factory work. Factory work contravenes the Malayo-Muslim view of virgin girls. Before marriage, they are, ideally, sheltered and totally dependent upon their kin in all matters. They must be shy, demure and modest in their behaviour and afraid of anything outside their villages and kin. Because of this ethos, parents fear for their virgin daughters' virtue and reputation — marriage prospects and bridewealth may be severely damaged by factory work. On the other hand, peasant households need the small amounts of cash income that the girls can bring home.

The larger foreign and joint-venture factories offer various facilities as incentive devices to attract girls to assembly line work. These include subsidized canteens, air conditioning, prayer rooms, free uniforms, sports clubs, annual dinners and outings. Workers are, however, susceptible to dismissal and layoffs without warning or compensation. Factories prefer to employ young, single girls and use very specific segments of the labour market which are more easily controllable. Girls acquire only fragmented skills which cannot be used outside the factory and employers do not provide unemployment, sickness or old age security benefits. My observations reveal that production levels are set high and occupational diseases are common. Discipline and time keeping are strictly regulated by a clocking-in system, and girls are under constant surveillance by line leaders. Visits to the washroom have to be timed with permitted breaks.

Various forms of incentive bonus subsidize the low basic wage. Working conditions are presented as extra benefits to offset an average pay packet of M$120 a month which, in Kedah, is two-thirds below the poverty line income. Most factories operate a 24-hour day on a three-shift system; workers are hourly rated and paid fortnightly for a basic 48-hour week. New workers must undergo training; they learn the job in several days but are not confirmed in their job until 12 months later. This long period means that management do not have to raise the wage rates. Frequent layoffs, shut-downs and retrenchment mean that permanent work is difficult to find. To avoid paying benefits required by law, hourly-rated workers are often put on short time or unpaid leave. Factories violate labour laws by forcing girls to work "voluntary" overtime, and avoid paying correct overtime rates by calling the extra time worked "overlap" (Law-Asia 1983). When workers approach a personnel manager for a day or two of annual leave, they are frequently told it is inconvenient and will disrupt production; consequently, paid leave is seldom granted. The falsification of workers' leave records is common practice in Kedah factories whether they are owned by foreign or

local capital. Workers who do not ask for time off are forced to take their leave at the convenience of factory schedules to coincide with stock-taking, slow-downs or audits. A worker can have paid sick leave only if she is certified by a panel doctor as being ill. Since the factory appoints panel doctors, it is difficult to obtain a medical note. The panel doctors (who are non-Malay males, trained in Western medicine) receive retainers from the factories; their treatment invariably is to administer aspirin and order the girls to report back to work. Factory management does not consider any medical certificates obtained from government-run, free clinics to be suitable.

An unofficial ''gentlemen's agreement'' between factories curtails the efforts of workers to change their employment from one factory to another. The subtle workings of the agreement were explained to me, independently, by managers of textiles, electronics and rubber products factories, and were even endorsed by the Kedah State Labour Office. Each month, all managers participate in a joint meeting which discusses and exchanges current labour lists. Lists of workers and their identity card numbers are exchanged. Whenever new workers apply for jobs at the factory, their names and identity card numbers are checked off against the factories' master lists. If an applicant's name appears on the list, she is refused employment unless the original factory agrees to release the worker. The lists prevent the practice of factory-hopping, whereby workers seek employment in a factory which offers better basic wages. The philosophy behind this unethical practice is to ''instil work discipline and company loyalty into the workers'' (American expatriate 1983). For factory workers, security, benefits, long term prospects, training in transferable skills and even a basic living wage are denied.

Western and Japanese management techniques have been transplanted to the Malaysian cultural environment in attempts to create a disciplined, non-unionized workforce with a high output. The gender, age and ethnic division of labour is utilized to the benefit of management who manipulate the inferior status of young, unmarried girls in Malayo-Muslim culture. Management exerts control of the labour force through subtle manipulation of cultural values such as ''shame'' and ''fear.'' This is coupled with the necessity to work in order to discharge the reciprocal obligations which the girls have to their natal households. The use of twin concepts of shame and fear as a form of control, is particularly evident when personnel report to kinsfolk on absenteeism or the girls' shortcomings. Factory management propagate an ideological view of the factory as a family to enforce control over the work force, so authority is legitimated within the framework of the social structure and cultural values of Malays. This works to the advantage of management in that the traditional hierarchical criteria of age, gender and ethnicity, rather than the rational criteria of skill levels and labour value, appear to justify low wages.

The Happy Family

In the family atmosphere, the factory hierarchies emphasise paternalism, and male supervisors are referred to by fictive kin terminology such as "elder brother" or "uncle." Malay girls are culturally trained to be tolerant, to obey male kin, never to express anger or frustration and to follow strictly the requirements of *budibahasa*. By these means, young, inexperienced school leavers can be moulded into the factory system. One expatriate American factory manager walked with me around his production lines, chatting and joking with his workers, although he spoke no Malay nor did the girls speak any English. He would occasionally pat them on the head, arm or back, and constantly praised what he termed as his happy family. Many of the girls tried to pull away and he laughingly interpreted this as sexual coyness but, from a Malay cultural view, it is most distasteful for any male to approach a female and touch her. The head is subject to taboo and must never be touched by anyone unless they mean to carry out black magic, for it is the place where the soul (*semangat*) is believed to reside.

Local and expatriate managers are proud of their grievance procedures, whereby assembly line operatives refer problems to their line supervisor who, in turn, refers them to the section leader. If the difficulty cannot be resolved at this level, it goes to the personnel manager who is expected to deal with any difficulties—and he consults the managing director only when every other measure has failed. Both local and foreign management make much of this open door policy, yet production operators are afraid and too shy to utilize this hierarchy. Given the fact that problems frequently arise from verbal abuse and from personality or ethnic clashes with the supervisors, difficulties occur at the lowest level of the hierarchy. Problems are common, and workers would rather lose a day's wages by staying away from work to avoid unpleasantness and contradictions in *budibahasa* values. Workers will suffer agonies of shyness and shame rather than discuss their problems with any person of a higher status. Malay culture is status conscious to such an exceptionally high degree that it negates the culturally alien, "open door" policy; few workers dare to utilize it.

> All management mix freely with the workers, there is no discrimination, no status differentials, the relationship between management and workers is good. We go around the factory on a regular basis to break down barriers, so they know they have access to us, we are very approachable. (American TNC, personal communication, 1983)

When pressed as to the exact number of times he went around the factory, the executive admitted to doing so only once in two months or so, or "whenever I feel like it." My suggestion that unions might be a better way of representing worker grievances met with a negative response. All local

and foreign managers deny the usefulness of unions in Malaysia and are quick to cite examples of unions in Europe that "destroy" business because, "They are only concerned with the workers' interests and not with profit" (American expatriate, electronics TNC, 1983).

The irony of the reverse logic of his statement is echoed by the following European policy:

> The company looks after the workers and we will not have a union here. It is up to us to deliver or not deliver the goods as we see fit. Basically these girls are ignorant and the advantage lies on the side of the company. The girls are all shy, come from poor families and are forced to work to supplement the income of their parents. (Malay personnel manager, European medical rubber products factory, personal communication, 1983)

and

> These people are simple and they do not understand anything about unions. We have a paternalistic company and look after them. Unions would only destroy the factory and the economy of this country—look at what is happening in Britain. (American rubber products factory manager, personal communication, 1983)

In spite of the managerial ideology of the happy family, many young women to whom I spoke complained of the conflict between the requirements of *budibahasa* and the requirements of their jobs. This appeared to lead, in turn, to an increase in stress over and above that which usually occurred in a village setting.

Spiritual Unions

In response to these conditions of stress and conflict, traditionally rural spirit possession has begun to occur in a new urban industrial setting. On the one hand, it is viewed by young Malay females as a reasonable response to stress and conflict; on the other, it is increasingly viewed as "deviant" by factory management personnel. While factory management may not have a clearly developed term for the deviance which is evidenced in spirit possession, they *do* react to it in ways that make it appear very much out of the ordinary. Furthermore, these reactions appear to differ between Western and Asian managers and seem to be becoming institutionalized.

In one electronics factory, an outbreak of spirit possession, affecting over 50 assembly line workers, coincided with an efficiency drive for high production rates of 1000 cassette radios per day. Labour relations had deteriorated and workers complained about the low wages (then M$3.20 per day), the impossibility of getting paid leave or sick leave, and a dislike of non-Malay supervisors. In retaliation, the workers produced faulty goods,

which were rejected, and pilfered considerable amounts of gold wire (intended for integrated circuits). The Japanese management were totally confused by the mass outbreak of spirit possession, but the local personnel manager (a Malaysian Chinese) asked permission to bring in a Malay *bomoh* to conduct a sacrifice and get rid of the spirits disturbing the workers. The ritual specialist was called in only when it became clear, after nine days of factory closure, that management could not get any of the workers back to the assembly lines. At first, the management refused to believe that spirits could stop work in such a way. It was only after the local personnel manager prevailed upon them to call in a specialist that workers would agree to return, once the ceremony had been completed and the spirits had quit the factory. It was rumoured that one girl died as a result of an injury suffered during her possession, but it was difficult for me to substantiate this. After the outbreak, the girls were taken to the Sungei Petani hospital for an injection to calm them down and then, by the factory bus, back to their villages. Once at home many of the girls consulted with *bomoh* known and trusted by their own kin as an added precaution.

Similar outbreaks of spirit possession on the assembly lines occur in other foreign-owned textiles and rubber products factories, particularly during the night shift which, for Malay virgin girls, is a period fraught with danger from the spirit realm. In a British rubber products factory which makes rubber gloves and condoms, 18 girls were attacked by spirits; their screams and trance state terrified the other production workers who ran out and refused to return to the plant until appropriate spirit propitiation rituals had been correctly conducted. The personnel manager in this factory was from a minority ethnic group; because he had been in the British navy, he used somewhat dictatorial military tactics in labour management and did not enjoy good rapport with the workers. After laying off some of the labour force, this locally born personnel manager became a target of worker frustration.

> There were problems with labour discipline. . . . They have to be made into disciplined workers and change their attitudes—it disrupts our profit and production lines. We dislike the quality of Malay labour but are forced to take them on to meet government Industrial Coordination Act quotas. (Personnel Manager, British Rubber Products Factory, personal communication)

Eventually, the spirit possession events required the factory to call in a Malay *bomoh*, who sacrificed a cockerel and sprinkled holy water around the assembly line area. The English manager was at a loss as how best to explain to his London office precisely why production had been at a "ghostly standstill" for some two weeks. His efforts to explain the outbreak of spirit possession were rewarded by a vituperative telex from Lon-

don which suggested he had been in Asia "too long and, perhaps, gone native." He was advised to sack the workers involved—a ridiculous situation which necessitated hiring a completely new work force.

In contrast to the European reaction which treats spirit possession as worker deviance, Asian-owned corporations are less sceptical of the power of spirits.

> We call a *bomoh* every year to make sure there are no spirits here. We have had many outbreaks. The girls are probably too weak, nervous, undernourished and tense so they let go. We try to handle them psychologically and get the *bomoh* to conduct prayers to give them peace of mind. (Malay personnel manager, Japanese textile factory, personal communication, 1983)

and

> We have had many spirit outbreaks here. We called a Chinese to pray, to select a site and bless the factory before building started and, again, before production started (this was a Cantonese *feng shui* expert in "winds and water," learned in the selection of auspicious sites for buildings, graves etc). For the past two years the night shift operators complained that they were bothered by ghosts so I had to call a Malay *bomoh* to make offerings and calm the workers down. About thirty years ago, we had similar things in Korea when simple girls started to work in factories. (Korean manager of joint venture rubber products factory, personal communication, 1983)

This factory judiciously catered to the ritual requirements of its considerable number of Korean expatriate, local Chinese technicians and Malay female operators.

Toward the end of every year, most factories at the industrial estate now call a *bomoh* as a matter of routine. Asian-owned factories give feasts for the spirits "to keep things calm and the Malay workers happy" (Malay personnel manager, Japanese textile factory, 1983).

Only one joint-venture electronics factory is out of its 10-year pioneer status and an in-house union was formed recently. The Malaysian personnel manager had the following comments:

> Labour turnover, before the 1982 Collective Agreement was high at 12% and we constantly had outbreaks of spirit possession. Since 1982 turnover has dropped to 2%, and worker management relations are much better. We no longer have night shift work and are reducing to a 44 hour week and fighting for international standards. I am pleased with the way things have worked out since the agreement and am in favour of unionisation. Workers need the union in order to protect themselves and it is the only way they will get a decent wage or benefits. Before 1982 management could, and did, browbeat workers, now they cannot. Previously, the workers were so ignorant that we could talk them into resigning to avoid paying compensation be-

> cause they did not know the law. Now, with the union it is different. (Personal communication)

In spite of his glowing statement, the unionized factory conditions are still far from satisfactory; basic pay rates have improved, but forced leave, orchestrated sick leave and the lack of benefits have still to be resolved. Girls say that the union representatives are all hand-picked by management, and, being non-Malays (i.e., male Chinese and Indians), the union representatives concern themselves only with their own ethnic interests and are reluctant to speak out about real issues affecting the Malay female production workers. The union is of the in-house variety and merely a window-dressing exercise by the Japanese to counteract the critical comments in the Malaysian press on the exploitation of, and lack of representation for, female workers in Malaysia's industrialization process.

Summary

It is apparent from the foregoing that the spirits have a special role in expressing grievances and tensions both at the rural and urban level. Spirit possession prevents direct industrial conflict with the management of transnational corporations and so *budibahasa* values are maintained. Outbreaks of spirit possession in factories are also reported for other parts of Malaysia, such as Penang, Selangor and Malacca, by Grossman (1978), Ackerman (1980), Ackerman and Lee (1978, 1981) and Ong (1984). Trance and possession are part of behaviour patterns found in Malay villages. When spirits close down an assembly line, it is a Malay cultural reaction to a situation of extreme stress and conflict and is linked to the maintenance of control and harmony. I would suggest that spirit possession is now deemed deviant in *urban* Malaysia because foreign industrialists are perturbed at the closure of assembly lines, so that spirits, in lieu of government-outlawed trade unions, conflict with production targets and the profits of transnational corporations. There is an undue emphasis placed by management upon "Westernization" and "modernization," as if Malay workers should leave their culture behind in rural villages before entering the new industrial estates. Foreign and "official Malaysian" judgment is based on the assumption that "superstitions" should disintegrate in the face of urban development, but Malays continue to utilize traditional methods in urban factories. Spirit possession has not become obsolete as a result of industrialization; instead, it has assumed new functions which reflect changing structural conditions, tensions and, most evidently, exploitation in Malaysian factories.

Acknowledgments

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