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Reviewed work(s):
Source: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Medical Anthropology (Feb., 1988), pp. 28-42
Published by: Wiley-Blackwell on behalf of the American Anthropological Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/645484
Accessed: 24/08/2012 10:26

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the production of possession: spirits and the multinational corporation in Malaysia

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The sanitized environments maintained by multinational corporations in Malaysian "free trade zones"[1] are not immune to sudden spirit attacks on young female workers. Ordinarily quiescent, Malay factory women who are seized by vengeful spirits explode into demonic screaming and rage on the shop floor. Management responses to such unnerving episodes include isolating the possessed workers, pumping them with Valium, and sending them home. Yet a Singapore[2] doctor notes that "a local medicine man can do more good than tranquilizers" (Chew 1978:51). Whatever healing technique used, the cure is never certain, for the Malays consider spirit possession an illness that afflicts the soul *(jiwa)*. This paper will explore how the reconstitution of illness, bodies, and consciousness is involved in the deployment of healing practices in multinational factories.

Anthropologists studying spirit possession phenomena have generally linked them to culturally specific forms of conflict management that disguise and yet resolve social tensions within indigenous societies (Firth 1967; Lewis 1971; Crapanzano and Garrison 1977). In contrast, policymakers and professionals see spirit possession episodes as an intrusion of archaic beliefs into the modern setting (Teoh, Soewondo, and Sidharta 1975; Chew 1978; Phoon 1982). These views will be evaluated in the light of spirit possession incidents and the reactions of factory managers and policymakers in Malaysia.

Different forms of spirit possession have been reported in Malay society, and their cultural significance varies with the regional and historical circumstances in which they occurred (see Maxwell 1977; Skeat 1965[1900]; Winstedt 1961; Firth 1967; Endicott 1970; Kessler 1977). In the current changing political economy, new social conditions have brought about spirit possession incidents in modern institutional settings. I believe that the most appropriate way to deal with spirit visitations in multinational factories is to consider them as part of a "complex negotiation of reality" (Crapanzano 1977:16) by an emergent female industrial workforce. Hailing from peasant villages, these workers can be viewed as neophytes in a double sense: as young female adults and as members of a nascent proletariat. Mary Douglas' ideas about the breaking of taboos and social boundaries (1966) are useful for interpreting spirit possession in terms of what it reveals about the workers' profound sense of status ambiguity and dislocation.

This essay explores different interpretations of spirit possession episodes in multinational factories based in Malaysia. Drawing on fieldwork data and secondary sources, it deciphers the cryptic language of Malay spirit possession in relation to gender symbolism, social boundaries, and morality. This interpretation is contrasted to the corporate view that, by using the cosmopolitan medical model, converts workers into patients. By presenting these divergent views of spirit possession in factory settings, the essay seeks to illuminate general questions regarding the connections among affliction, cultural experience, and hegemony in the process of social change. [Malay culture, industrial capitalism, spirit possession, gender, symbolic analysis, medical anthropology, hegemonic discourse, world system]

Second, their spirit idiom will be contrasted with the biomedical model to reveal alternative constructions of illness and of social reality in the corporate world. I will then consider the implications of the scientific medical model that converts workers into patients, and the consequences this therapeutic approach holds for mending the souls of the afflicted.

economic development and a medical monologue on madness

As recently as the 1960s, most Malays in Peninsular Malaysia[3] lived in rural *kampung* (villages), engaged in cash cropping or fishing. In 1969, spontaneous outbreaks of racial rioting gave expression to deep-seated resentment over the distribution of power and wealth in this multiethnic society. The Malay-dominated government responded to this crisis by introducing a New Economic Policy intended to "restructure" the political economy. From the early 1970s onward, agricultural and industrialization programs induced the large-scale influx of young rural Malay men and women to enter urban schools and manufacturing plants set up by multinational corporations.

Before the current wave of industrial employment for young single women, spirit possession was mainly manifested by married women, given the particular stresses of being wives, mothers, widows, and divorcées (see, for example, Maxwell 1977, and Kessler 1977). With urbanization and industrialization, spirit possession became overnight the affliction of young, unmarried women placed in modern organizations, drawing the attention of the press and the scholarly community (see Teoh, Soewondo, and Sidharta 1975; Chew 1978; Lim 1978; Jamilah Ariffin 1980; Ackerman and Lee 1981; Phoon 1982; Ong 1987).

In 1971, 17 cases of "epidemic hysteria" among schoolgirls were reported, coinciding with the implementation of government policy (Teoh, Soewondo, and Sidharta 1975:259). This dramatic increase, from 12 cases reported for the entire decade of the 1960s, required an official response. Teoh, a professor of psychology, declared that "epidemic hysteria was not caused by offended spirits but by interpersonal tensions within the school or hostel" (1975:260). Teoh and his colleagues investigated a series of spirit incidents in a rural Selangor school, which they attributed to conflicts between the headmaster and female students. The investigators charged that in interpreting the events as "spirit possession" rather than the symptoms of local conflict, the *bomoh* (spirit healer) by "this devious path . . . avoided infringing on the taboos and sensitivities of the local community" (p. 267). Teoh had found it necessary to intervene by giving the headmaster psychotherapeutic counseling. Thus, spirit incidents in schools occasioned the introduction of a cosmopolitan therapeutic approach whereby rural Malays were "told to accept the . . . change from their old superstitious beliefs to contemporary scientific knowledge" (p. 268).

This dismissal of Malay interpretation of spirit events by Western-trained professionals became routine with the large-scale participation of Malays in capitalist industries. Throughout the 1970s, free-trade zones were established to encourage investments by Japanese, American, and European corporations for setting up plants for offshore production. In seeking to cut costs further, these corporations sought young, unmarried women[4] as a source of cheap and easily controlled labor. This selective labor demand, largely met by *kampung* society, produced in a single decade a Malay female industrial labor force of over 47,000 (Jamilah Ariffin 1980:47). Malay female migrants also crossed the Causeway in the thousands to work in multinational factories based in Singapore.

In a 1978 paper entitled "How to Handle Hysterical Factory Workers" in Singapore, Dr. P. K. Chew complained that "this psychological aberration interrupts production, and can create hazards due to inattention to machinery and careless behaviour" (1978:50). He classified "mass hysteria" incidents according to "frightened" and "seizure" categories, and recommended that incidents of either type should be handled "like an epidemic disease of bacteri-

ological origin" (pp. 50, 53). In a Ministry of Labour survey of "epidemic hysteria" incidents in Singapore-based factories between 1973 and 1978, W. H. Phoon also focused on symptoms ranging from "hysterical seizures" and "trance states" to "frightened spells" (1982:22–23). The biomedical approach called for the use of sedatives, "isolation" of "infectious" cases, "immunization" of those susceptible to the "disease," and keeping the public informed about the measures taken (Chew 1978:53). Both writers, in looking for an explanation for the outbreak of "epidemic/mass hysteria" among Malay women workers, maintained that "the preference of belief in spirits and low educational level of the workers are obviously key factors" (Chew 1978:53; Phoon 1982:30). An anthropological study of spirit incidents in a Malacca shoe factory revealed that managers perceived the "real" causes of possession outbreaks to be physical (undernourishment) and psychological (superstitious beliefs) (Ackerman and Lee 1981:796).

These papers on spirit possession episodes in modern organizations adopt the assumptions of medical science which describe illnesses independent of their local meanings and values. "Mass hysteria" is attributed to the personal failings of the afflicted, and native explanations are denigrated as "superstitious beliefs" from a worldview out of keeping with the modern setting and pace of social change. "A monologue of reason about madness" (Foucault 1965:xi) was thereby introduced into Malaysian society, coinciding with a shift of focus from the afflicted to their chaotic effects on modern institutions. We will need to recover the Malays' worldview in order to understand their responses to social situations produced by industrialization.

spirit beliefs and women in Malay culture

Spirit beliefs in rural Malay society, overlaid but existing within Islam, are part of the indigenous worldview woven from strands of animistic cosmology and Javanese, Hindu, and Muslim cultures (Mohd. Taib bin Osman 1972). In Peninsular Malaysia, the supernatural belief system varies according to the historical and local interactions between folk beliefs and Islamic teachings. Local traditions provide conceptual coherence about causation and well-being to village Malays. Through the centuries, the office of the *bomoh,* or practitioner of folk medicine, has been the major means by which these old traditions of causation, illness, and health have been transmitted. In fulfilling the pragmatic and immediate needs of everyday life, the beliefs and practices are often recast in "Islamic" terms (Mohd. Taib bin Osman 1972:221–222; Endicott 1970).

I am mainly concerned here with the folk model in Sungai Jawa (a pseudonym), a village based in Kuala Langat district, rural Selangor, where I conducted fieldwork in 1979–80. Since the 1960s, the widespread introduction of Western medical practices and an intensified revitalization of Islam have made spirit beliefs publicly inadmissable. Nevertheless, spirit beliefs and practices are still very much in evidence. Villagers believe that all beings have spiritual essence *(semangat)* but, unlike humans, spirits *(hantu)* are disembodied beings capable of violating the boundaries between the material and supernatural worlds: invisible beings unbounded by human rules, spirits come to represent transgressions of moral boundaries, which are socially defined in the concentric spaces of homestead, village, and jungle. This scheme roughly coincides with Malay concepts of emotional proximity and distance, and the related dimensions of reduced moral responsibility as one moves from the interior space of household, to the intermediate zone of relatives, and on to the external world of strangers (Banks 1983:170–174).

The two main classes of spirits recognized by Malays reflect this interior-exterior social/spatial divide: spirits associated with human beings, and the "free" disembodied forms. In Sungai Jawa, *toyol* are the most common familiar spirits, who steal in order to enrich their masters. Accusations of breeding *toyol* provide the occasion for expressing resentment against econom-

ically successful villagers. Birth demons are former human females who died in childbirth and, as *pontianak,* threaten newly born infants and their mothers. Thus, spirit beliefs reflect everyday anxieties about the management of social relations in village society.

It is free spirits that are responsible for attacking people who unknowingly step out of the Malay social order. Free spirits are usually associated with special objects or sites *(keramat)* marking the boundary between human and natural spaces. These include (1) the burial grounds of aboriginal and animal spirits, (2) strangely shaped rocks, hills, or trees associated with highly revered ancestral figures *(datuk),* and (3) animals like were-tigers (Endicott 1970:90–91). As the gatekeepers of social boundaries, spirits guard against human transgressions into amoral spaces. Such accidents require the mystical qualities of the *bomoh* to readjust spirit relations with the human world.

From Islam, Malays have inherited the belief that men are more endowed with *akal* (reason) than women, who are overly influenced by *hawa nafsu* (human lust). A susceptibility to imbalances in the four humoral elements renders women spiritually weaker than men. Women's *hawa nafsu* nature is believed to make them especially vulnerable to *latah* (episodes during which the victim breaks out into obscene language and compulsive, imitative behavior) and to spirit attacks (spontaneous episodes in which the afflicted one screams, hyperventilates, or falls down in a trance or a raging fit). However, it is Malay spirit beliefs that explain the transgressions whereby women (more likely than men) become possessed by spirits *(kena hantu).* Their spiritual frailty, polluting bodies, and erotic nature make them especially likely to transgress moral space, and therefore permeable by spirits.

Mary Douglas (1966) has noted that taboos operate to control threats to social boundaries. In Malay society, women are hedged in by conventions that keep them out of social roles and spaces dominated by men. Although men are also vulnerable to spirit attacks, women's spiritual, bodily, and social selves are especially offensive to sacred spaces, which they trespass at the risk of inviting spirit attacks.

Spirit victims have traditionally been married women who sometimes become possessed after giving birth for the first time. Childbirth is a dangerous occasion, when rituals are performed in order to keep off evil spirits (see Laderman 1983:125–126). As a rite of passage, childbirth is the first traumatic event in the ordinary village woman's life. I visited a young mother who had been possessed by a *hantu,* which the ministrations of two *bomoh* failed to dislodge. She lay on her mat for two months after delivering her first child, uninterested in nursing the baby. Her mother-in-law whispered that she had been "penetrated by the devil." Perhaps, through some unintended action, she had attracted spirit attack and been rendered ritually and sexually impure.

The next critical phase in a woman's life cycle comes at middle age. Kessler (1977) observes that among Kelantanese fisherfolk, possessed women were often those threatened with widowhood, divorce, or their husbands' plan to take a second wife. Laderman (1983:127) claims that Trengganu village women who resist their assigned roles as mothers and wives are said to become vulnerable to spirit attacks and may be transformed into demons. These ethnographic observations from different Malay communities demonstrate that in village life, spirit attacks are most likely to occur when women are in transition from one phase of life to another. On such occasions, they are perceived to be the greatest threat to social norms, and taboos enforce some degree of self-control in order to contain that threat.

In everday life, village women are also bound by customs regarding bodily comportment and spatial movements, which operate to keep them within the Malay social order. When they blur the bodily boundaries through the careless disposal of bodily exuviae and effluvia, they put themselves in an ambiguous situation, becoming most vulnerable to spirit penetration.

Until recently, unmarried daughters, most hedged in by village conventions, seem to have been well protected from spirit attack. Nubile girls take special care over the disposal of their cut nails, fallen hair, and menstrual rags, since such materials may fall into ill-wishers' hands

and be used for black magic. Menstrual blood is considered dirty and polluting (cf. Laderman 1983:74), and the substance most likely to offend *keramat* spirits. This concern over bodily boundaries is linked to notions about the vulnerable identity and status of young unmarried women. It also operates to keep pubescent girls close to the homestead and on well-marked village paths. In Sungai Jawa, a schoolgirl who urinated on an ant-hill off the beaten track became possessed by a "male" spirit. Scheper-Hughes and Lock remark that when the social norms of small, conservative peasant communities are breached, we would expect to see a "concern with the penetration and violation of bodily exits, entrances and boundaries" (1987:19). Thus, one suspects that when young Malay women break with village traditions, they may come under increased spirit attacks as well as experience an intensified social and bodily vigilance.

Since the early 1970s, when young peasant women began to leave the *kampung* and enter the unknown worlds of urban boarding schools and foreign factories, the incidence of spirit possession seems to have become more common among them than among married women. I maintain that like other cultural forms, spirit possession incidents may acquire new meanings and speak to new experiences in changing arenas of social relations and boundary definitions. In *kampung* society, spirit attacks on married women seem to be associated with their containment in prescribed domestic roles, whereas in modern organizations, spirit victims are young, unmarried women engaged in hitherto alien and male activities. This transition from *kampung* to urban-industrial contexts has cast village girls into an intermediate status that they find unsettling and fraught with danger to themselves and to Malay culture.

spirit visitations in modern factories

In the 1970s, newspaper reports on the sudden spate of "mass hysteria" among young Malay women in schools and factories interpreted the causes in terms of "superstitious beliefs," "examination tension," "the stresses of urban living," and less frequently, "mounting pressures" which induced "worries" among female operators in multinational factories.

Multinational factories based in free-trade zones were the favored sites of spirit visitations. An American factory in Sungai Way experienced a large-scale incident in 1978, which involved some 120 operators engaged in assembly work requiring the use of microscopes. The factory had to be shut down for three days, and a *bomoh* was hired to slaughter a goat on the premises. The American director wondered how he was to explain to corporate headquarters that "8,000 hours of production were lost because someone saw a ghost" (Lim 1978:33). A Japanese factory based in Pontian, Kelantan, also experienced a spirit attack on 21 workers in 1980. As they were being taken to ambulances, some victims screamed, "I will kill you! Let me go!" (*New Straits Times,* 26 September, 1980). In Penang, another American factory was disrupted for three consecutive days after 15 women became afflicted by spirit possession. The victims screamed in fury and put up a terrific struggle against restraining male supervisors, shouting "Go away!" (*Sunday Echo,* 27 November, 1978). The afflicted were snatched off the shop floor and given injections of sedatives. Hundreds of frightened female workers were also sent home. A factory personnel officer told reporters:

> "Some girls started sobbing and screaming hysterically and when it seemed like spreading, the other workers in the production line were immediately ushered out. . . . It is a common belief among workers that the factory is "dirty" and supposed to be haunted by a *datuk*" [*Sunday Echo*].

Though brief, these reports reveal that spirit possession, believed to be caused by defilement, held the victims in a grip of rage against factory supervisors. Furthermore, the disruptions caused by spirit incidents seem a form of retaliation against the factory supervisors. In what follows, I will draw upon my field research to discuss the complex issues involved in possession imagery and management discourse on spirit incidents in Japanese-owned factories based in Kuala Langat.

the cryptic language of possession

The political economy of Islam is set up and orchestrated around the silence of inferiors.

Fatna A. Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*

Young, unmarried women in Malay society are expected to be shy, obedient, and deferential, to be observed and not heard. In spirit possession episodes, they speak in other voices that refuse to be silenced. Since the afflicted claim amnesia once they have recovered, we are presented with the task of deciphering covert messages embedded in possession incidents.

Spirit visitations in modern factories with sizable numbers of young Malay female workers engender devil images, which dramatically reveal the contradictions between Malay and scientific ways of apprehending the human condition. I. M. Lewis has suggested that in traditionally gender-stratified societies, women's spirit possession episodes are a "thinly disguised protest against the dominant sex" (1971:31). In Malay society, what is being negotiated in possession incidents and their aftermath are complex issues dealing with the violation of different moral boundaries, of which gender oppression is but one dimension. What seems clear is that spirit possession provides a traditional way of rebelling against authority without punishment, since victims are not blamed for their predicament. However, the imagery of spirit possession in modern settings is a rebellion against transgressions of indigenous boundaries governing proper human relations and moral justice.

For Malays, the places occupied by evil spirits are nonhuman territories like swamps, jungles, and bodies of water. These amoral domains were kept distant from women's bodies by ideological and physical spatial regulations. The construction of modern buildings, often without regard for Malay concern about moral space, displaces spirits, which take up residence in the toilet tank. Thus, most village women express a horror of the Western-style toilet, which they would avoid if they could. It is the place where their usually discreet disposal of bodily waste is disturbed. Besides their fear of spirits residing in the water tank, an unaccustomed body posture is required to use the toilet. In their hurry to depart, unflushed toilets and soiled sanitary napkins, thrown helter-skelter, offend spirits who may attack them.

A few days after the spirit attacks in the Penang-based American factory, I interviewed some of the workers. Without prompting, factory women pointed out that the production floor and canteen areas were "very clean" but factory toilets were "filthy" *(kotor)*. A *datuk* haunted the toilet, and workers, in their haste to leave, dropped their soiled pads anywhere. In Ackerman and Lee's case study, Malay factory workers believed that they had disturbed the spirits dwelling in a water tank and on factory grounds. Furthermore, the spirits were believed to possess women who had violated moral codes, thereby becoming "unclean" (1981:794, 796–797). This connection between disturbing spirits and lack of sexual purity is also hinted at in Teoh and his colleagues' account of the school incidents mentioned above. The headmaster had given students instructions in how to wear sanitary napkins (1978:262),[5] an incident which helped precipitate a series of spirit attacks said to be caused by the "filthy" school toilets and the girls' disposal of soiled pads in a swamp adjacent to the school grounds (1978:264).

In the Penang factory incident, a worker remembered that a piercing scream from one corner of the shop floor was quickly followed by cries from other benches as women fought against spirits trying to possess them. The incidents had been sparked by *datuk* visions, sometimes headless, gesticulating angrily at the operators. Even after the *bomoh* had been sent for, workers had to be accompanied to the toilet by foremen for fear of being attacked by spirits in the stalls.

In Kuala Langat, my fieldwork elicited similar imagery from the workers[6] in two Japanese factories (code-named ENI and EJI) based in the local free-trade zone. In their drive for attaining high production targets, foremen (both Malay and non-Malay) were very zealous in enforcing regulations that confined workers to the work bench. Operators had to ask for permission to go to the toilet, and were sometimes questioned intrusively about their "female problems." Menstruation was seen by management as deserving no consideration even in a workplace where

85–90 percent of the work force was female.[7] In the EJI plant, foremen sometimes followed workers to the locker room, terrorizing them with their spying. One operator became possessed after screaming that she saw a "hairy leg" when she went to the toilet. A worker from another factory reported:

> Workers saw "things" appear when they went to the toilet. Once, when a woman entered the toilet she saw a tall figure licking sanitary napkins ["Modess" supplied in the cabinet]. It had a long tongue, and those sanitary pads . . . cannot be used anymore.

As Taussig remarks, the "language" emanating from our bodies expresses the significance of social dis-ease (1980). The above lurid imagery speaks of the women's loss of control over their bodies as well as their lack of control over social relations in the factory. Furthermore, the image of body alienation also reveals intense guilt (and repressed desire), and the felt need to be on guard against violation by the male management staff who, in the form of fearsome predators, may suddenly materialize anywhere in the factory.

Even the prayer room *(surau),* provided on factory premises for the Muslim work force, was not safe from spirit harassment. A woman told me of her aunt's fright in the *surau* at the EJI factory.

> "She was in the middle of praying when she fainted because she said . . . her head suddenly spun and something pounced on her from behind."

As mentioned above, spirit attacks also occurred when women were at the work bench, usually during the "graveyard" shift. An ENI factory opertor described one incident which took place in May 1979.

> "It was the afternoon shift, at about nine o'clock. All was quiet. Suddenly, [the victim] started sobbing, laughed and then shrieked. She flailed at the machine . . . she was violent, she fought as the foreman and technician pulled her away. Altogether, three operators were afflicted. . . . The supervisor and foremen took them to the clinic and told the driver to take them home. . . .
>
> She did not know what had happened . . . she saw a *hantu,* a were-tiger. Only she saw it, and she started screaming. . . . The foremen would not let us talk with her for fear of recurrence. . . . People say that the workplace is haunted by the *hantu* who dwells below. . . . Well, this used to be all jungle, it was a burial ground before the factory was built. The devil disturbs those who have a weak constitution."

Spirit possession episodes then were triggered by black apparitions, which materialized in "liminal" spaces such as toilets (see also Teoh, Soewondo, and Sidharta 1975:259, 262, and Chew 1978:52), the locker room and the prayer room, places where workers sought refuge from harsh work discipline. These were also rooms periodically checked by male supervisors determined to bring workers back to the work bench. The microscope, which after hours of use becomes an instrument of torture, sometimes disclosed spirits lurking within. Other workers pointed to the effect of the steady hum and the factory pollutants, which permanently disturbed graveyard spirits. Unleashed, these vengeful beings were seen to threaten women for transgressing into the zone between the human and nonhuman world, as well as modern spaces formerly the domain of men. By intruding into hitherto forbidden spaces, Malay women workers experienced anxieties about inviting punishment.

Fatna Sabbah observes that "(t)he invasion by women of economic spaces such as factories and offices . . . is often experienced as erotic aggression in the Muslim context" (1984:17). In Malay culture, men and women in public contact must define the situation in nonsexual terms (cf. Banks 1983:88). It is particularly incumbent upon young women to conduct themselves with circumspection and to diffuse sexual tension. However, the modern factory is an arena constituted by a sexual division of labor and constant male surveillance of nubile women in a close, daily context. In Kuala Langat, young factory women felt themselves placed in a situation in which they unintentionally violated taboos defining social and bodily boundaries. The shop floor culture was also charged with the dangers of sexual harassment by male management staff as part of workaday relations.[8] To combat spirit attacks, the Malay factory women felt a greater need for spiritual vigilance in the factory surroundings. Thus the victim in the ENI factory incident was said to be:

possessed, maybe because she was spiritually weak. She was not spiritually vigilant, so that when she saw the *hantu* she was instantly afraid and screamed. Usually, the *hantu* likes people who are spiritually weak, yes. . . . one should guard against being easily startled, afraid.

As Foucault observes, people subjected to the "micro-techniques" of power are induced to regulate themselves (1979). The fear of spirit possession thus created self-regulation on the part of workers, thereby contributing to the intensification of corporate *and* self-control on the shop floor. Thus, as factory workers, Malay women became alienated not only from the products of their labor but also experienced new forms of psychic alienation. Their intrusion into economic spaces outside the home and village was experienced as moral disorder, symbolized by filth and dangerous sexuality. Some workers called for increased "discipline," others for Islamic classes on factory premises to regulate interactions (including dating) between male and female workers. Thus, spirit imagery gave symbolic configuration to the workers' fear and protest over social conditions in the factories. However, these inchoate signs of moral and social chaos were routinely recast by management into an idiom of sickness.

the worker as patient

Studies of work experiences in modern industrial systems have tended to focus on the ways time and motion techniques (Taylorism) have facilitated the progressive adaptation of the human body to machines, bringing about the divorce of mental and manual labor (Braverman 1974). Others have maintained that control over the exact movements of the workers allowed by Taylorism has banished fantasy and thoroughly depersonalized work relations in the modern factory (Gramsci 1971:303; Ellul 1964:387–410). Indeed, Taylorist forms of work discipline are taken to an extreme in the computer-chip manufacturing industries set up by multinational corporations in Malaysia (see Ong 1987). However, contrary to the above claims, I would argue that the recoding of the human body-work relation is a critical and contested dimension of daily conduct in the modern factory.

I have elsewhere described the everyday effects of the sexual division of labor and Taylorist techniques on Malay factory women (1987). Here, I wish to discuss how struggles over the meanings of health are part of workers' social critique of work discipline, and of managers' attempts to extend control over the work force. The management use of workers as "instruments of labor" is paralleled by another set of ideologies, which regards women's bodies as the site of control where gender politics, health, and educational practices intersect (cf. Foucault 1980).

In the Japanese factories based in Malaysia, management ideology constructs the female body in terms of its biological functionality for, and its anarchic disruption of, production. These ideologies operate to fix women workers in subordinate positions in systems of domination that proliferate in high-tech industries. A Malaysian investment brochure advertises "the oriental girl," for example, as "qualified *by nature and inheritance* to contribute to the efficiency of a bench assembly production line" (FIDA 1975, emphasis added). This biological rationale for the commodification of women's bodies is a part of a pervasive discourse reconceptualizing women for high-tech production requirements. Japanese managers in the free-trade zone talk about the "eyesight," "manual dexterity," and "patience" of young women to perform tedious micro-assembly jobs. An engineer put the female nature-technology relationship in a new light: "Our work is designed for females." Within international capitalism,[9] this notion of women's bodies renders them analogous to the status of the computer chips they make. Computer chips, like "oriental girls," are identical, whether produced in Malaysia, Taiwan, or Sri Lanka. For multinational corporations, women are units of much cheap labor power repackaged under the "nimble fingers" label.

The abstract mode of scientific discourse also separates "normal" from "abnormal" workers, that is, those who do not perform according to factory requirements. In the EJI factory, the Malay

personnel manager using the biomedical model to locate the sources of spirit possession among workers noted that the first spirit attack occurred five months after the factory began operation in 1976. Thereafter,

> "we had our counter-measure. I think this is a method of how you give initial education to the workers, how you take care of the medical welfare of the workers. The worker who is weak, comes in without breakfast, lacking sleep, then she will see ghosts!"

In the factory environment, "spirit attacks" *(kena hantu)* was often used interchangeably with "mass hysteria," a term adopted from English language press reports on such incidents. In the manager's view, "hysteria" was a symptom of physical adjustment as the women workers "move from home idleness to factory discipline." This explanation also found favor with some members of the work force. Scientific terms like *"penyakit histeria"* (hysteria sickness), and physiological preconditions formulated by the management, became more acceptable to some workers. One woman remarked,

> "They say they saw *hantu,* but I don't know. . . . I believe that maybe they . . . when they come to work, they did not fill their stomachs, they were not full so that they felt hungry. But they were not brave enough to say so."

A male technician used more complex concepts, but remained doubtful.

> "I think that this [is caused by] a feeling of 'complex'—that maybe 'inferiority complex' is pressing them down—their spirit, so that this can be called an illness of the spirit, 'conflict *jiwa,*' 'emotional conflict.' Sometimes they see an old man, in black shrouds, they say, in their microscopes, they say. . . . I myself don't know how. They see *hantu* in different places. . . . Some time ago an 'emergency' incident like this occurred in a boarding school. The victim fainted. Then she became very strong. . . . It required ten or twenty persons to handle her."

In corporate discourse, physical "facts" that contributed to spirit possession were isolated, while psychological notions were used as explanation and as a technique of manipulation. In ENI factory, a *bomoh* was hired to produce the illusion of exorcism, lulling the workers into a false sense of security. The personnel manager claimed that unlike managers in other Japanese firms who operated on the "basis of feelings," his "psychological approach" helped to prevent recurrent spirit visitations.

> "You cannot dispel *kampung* beliefs. Now and then we call the *bomoh* to come, every six months or so, to pray, walk around. Then we take pictures of the *bomoh* in the factory and hang up the pictures. Somehow, the workers seeing these pictures feel safe, [seeing] that the place has been exorcised."

Similarly, whenever a new section of the factory was constructed, the *bomoh* was sent for to sprinkle holy water, thereby assuring workers that the place was rid of ghosts. Regular *bomoh* visits and their photographic images were different ways of defining a social reality, which simultaneously acknowledged and manipulated the workers' fear of spirits.

Medical personnel were also involved in the narrow definition of the causes of spirit incidents on the shop floor. A factory nurse periodically toured the shop floor to offer coffee to tired or drowsy workers. Workers had to work eight-hour shifts six days a week—morning, 6:30 A.M. to 2:30 P.M.; afternoon, 2:30 P.M. to 10:30 P.M.; or night, 10:30 P.M. to 6:30 A.M.—which divided up the 24-hour daily operation of the factories. They were permitted two ten-minute breaks and a half-hour for a meal. Most workers had to change to a different shift every two weeks. This regime allowed little time for workers to recover from their exhaustion between shifts. In addition, overtime was frequently imposed. The shifts also worked against the human, and especially, female cycle; many freshly recruited workers regularly missed their sleep, meals, and menstrual cycles.

Thus, although management pointed to physiological problems as causing spirit attacks, they seldom acknowledged deeper scientific evidence of health hazards in microchip assembly plants. These include the rapid deterioration of eyesight caused by the prolonged use of microscopes in bonding processes. General exposure to strong solvents, acids, and fumes induced headaches, nausea, dizziness, and skin irritation in workers. More toxic substances used for

cleaning purposes exposed workers to lead poisoning, kidney failure, and breast cancer (Federation of Women Lawyers 1983:16). Other materials used in the fabrication of computer chips have been linked to female workers' painful menstruation, their inability to conceive, and repeated miscarriages (*Business Times [Asia]*, 9 October 1982:19; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 January 1987:23, 27). Within the plants, unhappy-looking workers were urged to talk over their problems with the "industrial relations assistant." Complaints of "pain in the chest" were interpreted to mean emotional distress, and the worker was ushered into the clinic for medication in order to maintain discipline and a relentless work schedule.

In the EJI factory, the shop floor supervisor admitted, "I think that hysteria is related to the job in some cases." He explained that workers in the microscope sections were usually the ones to *kena hantu*, and thought that perhaps they should not begin work doing those tasks. However, he quickly offered other interpretations that had little to do with work conditions: There was one victim whose broken engagement had incurred her mother's wrath; at work she cried and talked to herself, saying, "I am not to be blamed, not me!" Another worker, seized by possession, screamed, "Send me home, send me home!" Apparently, she indicated, her mother had taken all her earnings. Again, through such psychological readings, the causes of spirit attacks produced in the factories were displaced onto workers and their families.

In corporate discourse, both the biomedical and psychological interpretations of spirit possession defined the affliction as an attribute of individuals rather than stemming from the general social situation. Scientific concepts, pharmaceutical treatment, and behavioral intervention all identified and separated recalcitrant workers from "normal" ones; disruptive workers became patients. According to Parsons, the cosmopolitan medical approach tolerates illness as sanctioned social deviance; however, patients have the duty to get well (1985:146, 149). This attitude implies that those who do not get well cannot be rewarded with "the privileges of being sick" (1985:149). In the ENI factory, the playing out of this logic provided the rationale for dismissing workers who had had two previous experiences of spirit attacks, on the grounds of "security." This policy drew protests from village elders, for whom spirits in the factory were the cause of their daughters' insecurity. The manager agreed verbally with them, but pointed out that these "hysterical, mental types" might hurt themselves when they flailed against the machines, risking electrocution. By appearing to agree with native theory, the management reinterpreted spirit possession as a symbol of flawed character and culture.[10] The sick role was reconceptualized as internally produced by outmoded thought and behavior not adequately adjusted to the demands of factory discipline. The worker-patient could have no claim on management sympathy but would have to bear responsibility for her own cultural deficiency. A woman in ENI talked sadly about her friend, the victim of spirits and corporate policy.

> "At the time the management wanted to throw her out, to end her work, she cried. She did ask to be reinstated, but she has had three [episodes] already. . . . I think that whether it was right or not [to expel her] depends [on the circumstances], because she has already worked here for a long time; now that she has been thrown out she does not know what she can do, you know."

The nonrecognition of social obligations to workers lies at the center of differences in worldview between Malay workers and the foreign management. By treating the signs and symptoms of disease as "things-in-themselves" (Taussig 1980:1), the biomedical model freed managers from any moral debt owed the workers. Furthermore, corporate adoption of spirit idiom stigmatized spirit victims, thereby ruling out any serious consideration of their needs. Afflicted and "normal" workers alike were made to see that spirit possession was nothing but confusion and delusion, which should be abandoned in a rational worldview.

the work of culture: hygiene and dispossession

Modern factories transplanted to the Third World are involved in the work of producing exchange as well as symbolic values. Medicine, as a branch of cosmopolitan science, has attained

a place in schemes for effecting desired social change in indigenous cultures. While native statements about bizarre events are rejected as irrational, the conceptions of positivist science acquire a quasi-religious flavor (Karnoouh 1984). In the process, the native "work of culture," which transforms motives and affects into "publicly accepted sets of meanings and symbols" (Obeyesekere 1985:147), is being undermined by an authoritative discourse that suppresses lived experiences apprehended through the worldview of indigenous peoples.

To what extent can the *bomoh*'s work of culture convert the rage and distress of possessed women in Malaysia into socially shared meanings? As discussed above, the spirit imagery speaks of danger and violation as young Malay women intrude into hitherto forbidden spirit or male domains. Their participation as an industrial force is subconsciously perceived by themselves and their families as a threat to the ordering of Malay culture. Second, their employment as production workers places them directly in the control of male strangers who monitor their every move. These social relations, brought about in the process of industrial capitalism, are experienced as a moral disorder in which workers are alienated from their bodies, the products of their work, and their own culture. The spirit idiom is therefore a language of protest against these changing social circumstances. A male technician evaluated the stresses they were under.

> "There is a lot of discipline. . . . but when there is too much discipline . . . it is not good. Because of this the operators, with their small wages, will always contest. They often break the machines in ways that are not apparent. . . . Sometimes, they damage the products."

Such Luddite actions in stalling production reverse momentarily the arrangement whereby work regimentation controls the human body. However, the workers' resistance[11] is not limited to the technical problem of work organization, but addresses the violation of moral codes. A young woman explained her sense of having been "tricked" into an intolerable work arrangement.

> "For instance, . . . sometimes . . . they want us to raise production. This is what we sometimes challenge. The workers want fair treatment, as for instance, in relation to wages and other matters. We feel that in this situation there are many [issues] to dispute over with the management. . . . with our wages so low we feel as though we have been tricked or forced."

She demands "justice, because sometimes they exhaust us very much as if they do not think that we too are human beings!"

Spirit possession episodes may be taken as expressions both of fear and of resistance against the multiple violations of moral boundaries in the modern factory. They are acts of rebellion, symbolizing what cannot be spoken directly, calling for a renegotiation of obligations between the management and workers. However, technocrats have turned a deaf ear to such protests, to this moral indictment of their woeful cultural judgments about the dispossessed. By choosing to view possession episodes narrowly as sickness caused by physiological and psychological maladjustment, the management also manipulates the *bomoh* to serve the interests of the factory rather than express the needs of the workers.

Both Japanese factories in Kuala Langat have commenced operations in a spate of spirit possession incidents. A year after operations began in the EJI factory, as well-known *bomoh* and his retinue were invited to the factory *surau*, where they read prayers over a basin of "pure water." Those who had been visited by the devil drank from it and washed their faces, a ritual which made them immune to future spirit attacks. The *bomoh* pronounced the *hantu* controlling the factory site "very kind"; he merely showed himself but did not disturb people. A month after the ritual, the spirit attacks resumed, but involving smaller numbers of women (one or two) in each incident. The manager claimed that after the exorcist rites, spirit attacks occurred only once a month.

In an interview, an eye witness reported what happened after a spirit incident erupted.

> "The work section was not shut down, we had to continue working. Whenever it happened, the other workers felt frightened. They were not allowed to look because [the management] feared contagion. They would not permit us to leave. When an incident broke out, we had to move away. . . . At ten

o'clock they called the *bomoh* to come . . . because he knew that the *hantu* had already entered the woman's body. He came in and scattered rice flour water all over the area where the incident broke out. He recited prayers over holy water. He sprinkled rice flour water on places touched by the *hantu*. . . . The *bomoh* chanted incantations *[jampi jampi]* chasing the *hantu* away. He then gave some medicine to the afflicted. . . . He also entered the clinic [to pronounce] *jampi jampi*."

The primary role of the *bomoh* hired by corporate management was to ritually cleanse the prayer room, shop floor, and even the factory clinic. After appeasing the spirits, he ritually healed the victims, who were viewed as not responsible for their affliction. However, his work did not extend to curing them after they had been given sedatives and sent home. Instead, through his exorcism and incantations, the *bomoh* expressed the Malay understanding of these disturbing events, perhaps impressing the other workers that the factory had been purged of spirits. However, he failed to convince the management about the need to create a moral space, in Malay terms, on factory premises. Management did not respond to spirit incidents by reconsidering social relationships on the shop floor; instead, they sought to eliminate the afflicted from the work scene. As the ENI factory nurse, an Indian woman, remarked, "It is an experience working with the Japanese. They do not consult women. To tell you the truth, they don't care about the problem except that it goes away."

This avoidance of the moral challenge was noted by workers in the way management handled the *kenduri,* the ritual feast that resolved a dispute by bringing the opposing sides together in an agreement over future cooperation. In the American factory incident in Penang, a *bomoh* was sent for, but worker demands for a feast were ignored. At the EJI factory, cleansing rituals were brought to a close by a feast of saffron rice and chicken curry. This was served to factory managers and officers, but not a single worker (or victim) was invited. This distortion of the Malay rite of commensality did not fail to impress on workers the management rejection of moral responsibility to personal needs—*muafakat* (see Banks 1983:123–124). Women workers remained haunted by their fear of negotiating the liminal spaces between female and male worlds, old and new morality, when mutual obligations between the afflicted and the *bomoh,* workers and the management, had not been fulfilled.

The work of the *bomoh* was further thwarted by the medicalization of the afflicted. Spirit possession incidents in factories made visible the conflicted women who did not fit the corporate image of "normal" workers. By standing apart from the workaday routine, possessed workers inadvertently exposed themselves to the cold ministrations of modern medicine, rather than the increased social support they sought. Other workers, terrified of being attacked and by the threat of expulsion, kept up a watchful vigilance. This induced self-regulation was reinforced by the scientific gaze of supervisors and nurses, which further enervated the recalcitrant and frustrated those who resisted. A worker observed,

"[The possessed] don't remember their experiences. Maybe the *hantu* is still working on their madness, maybe because their experiences have not been stilled, or maybe their souls are not really disturbed. They say there are evil spirits in that place [that is, factory]."

In fact, spirit victims maintained a disturbed silence after their "recovery." Neither their families, friends, the *bomoh,* nor I could get them to talk about their experiences.

Spirit possession episodes in different societies have been labeled "mass psychogenic illness" or "epidemic hysteria" in psychological discourse (Colligan, Pennebaker, and Murphy 1982). Different altered states of consciousness, which variously spring from indigenous understanding of social situations, are reinterpreted in cosmopolitan terms considered universally applicable. In multinational factories located overseas, this ethnotherapeutic model (Lutz 1985) is widely applied and made to seem objective and rational. However, we have seen that such scientific knowledge and practices can display a definite prejudice against the people they are intended to restore to well-being in particular cultural contexts. The reinterpretation of spirit possession may therefore be seen as a shift of locus of patriarchal authority from the *bomoh,* sanctioned by indigenous religious beliefs, toward professionals sanctioned by scientific training.

In Third World contexts, cosmopolitan medical concepts and drugs often have an anesthetizing effect, which erases the authentic experiences of the sick. More frequently, the proliferation of positivist scientific meanings also produces a fragmentation of the body, a shattering of social obligations, and a separation of individuals from their own culture. Gramsci (1971) has defined hegemony as a form of ideological domination based on the consent of the dominated, a consent that is secured through the diffusion of the worldview of the dominant class. In Malaysia, medicine has become part of hegemonic discourse, constructing a "modern" outlook by clearing away the nightmarish visions of Malay workers. However, as a technique of both concealment and control, it operates in a more sinister way than native beliefs in demons. Malay factory women may gradually become dispossessed of spirits and their own culture, but they remain profoundly dis-eased in the "brave new workplace."[12]

notes

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to the National Science Foundation (grant no. BNS-787639), and the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, for funding the fieldwork and writing of the project. Some of the material contained in this paper has been published in my book, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (1987).

[1]"Free trade zones" are fenced-off areas in which multinational corporations are permitted to locate export-processing industries in the host country. These zones are exempt from many taxation and labor regulations that may apply elsewhere in the economy.

[2]Singapore is an island state situated south of Peninsular Malaysia. Although separate countries, they share historical roots and many cultural similarities and interests.

[3]That is, West Malaysia. East Malaysia is constituted by the states of Sabah and Sarawak in northern Borneo. In Peninsular Malaysia, more than half the population (approximately 13 million) is made up of Malays. Ethnic Chinese form the main minority group, followed by Indians.

[4]Mainly between the ages of 16 and 26 years. Many dropped out after six or seven years because they saw no improvement in their jobs as production workers and because of marriage. In the cities, the women lived in rooming houses or dormitories or with relatives.

[5]Most village girls began buying and wearing sanitary pads after they enrolled in secular schools or began work in factories. In some cases, schools and factories supplied these market items to encourage the girls to wear them, often against their will. Village girls had previously worn homemade girdles lined with kapok.

[6]Most of the factory women in the Kuala Langat free-trade zone lived with their families in the nearby villages, commuting to work every day. Although parents were eager for their daughters to earn wages, they were also anxious about the social effects of their participation in the wider, culturally alien world (see Ong 1987:Parts II and III).

[7]Government regulations required multinational factories to provide female workers with maternity leave of 60 consecutive days. This right has had the unintended effect of discouraging multinational factories from recruiting married women. Those who got married on the job were offered family planning classes and free contraceptives.

[8]In a survey, the Malaysian Federation of Women Lawyers found that some managerial staff in multinational factories were guilty of demanding sexual favors in return for promises of work benefits, bonuses, and promotion. However, their victims "ignorant of their rights [had] nobody to turn to to voice their woes" (Federation of Women Lawyers 1983:18).

[9]Such talk is not confined to Japanese corporations. In the world of semiconductor production, American and European firms also perpetuate such views.

[10]I therefore see a more complex process at work than Ackerman and Lee who note that by reifying spirit possession as the cause of these bizarre incidents, the management of a shoe factory served "to reinforce the belief in the reality of spirit possession" (1981:797).

[11]The vast majority of electronics workers in Malaysian free-trade zones are not unionized, even though government policy does not formally forbid union organization. However, the Ministry of Labour has repeatedly frustrated the efforts of electronics workers to unionize.

[12]This phrase is borrowed from Howard's (1985) study of changing work relations occasioned by the introduction of computer technology into offices and industries.

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submitted 30 July 1987
revised version submitted 18 September 1987
accepted 5 October 1987