Power and Difference

Gender in Island Southeast Asia

Stanford U Press, 1990

Japanese Factories, Malay Workers

Class and Sexual Metaphors in West Malaysia

Aihwa Ong

In the previous paper, Blanc-Szanton explored the interaction of local and colonial gender systems in the historical past. In her treatment of the the sexual imaging of Malay factory women, Aihwa Ong examines the dynamic interaction of Malay village culture, Japanese electronics firms, Malaysian politics, the government-controlled media, and revivalist Islam. Rejecting the notion that gender symbolism in rapidly industrializing contemporary Malaysia could be reduced to a single, static cultural code, Ong explores the processes whereby multiple, competing, and unstable assertions about sexuality and gender are generated through the interaction of conflicting sectors of society.

Ong begins with an examination of relations between women and men in rural village life in West Malaysia. Her account can be compared to Hatley's and Keeler's accounts of gender relations in Java. In both areas women possess a high degree of economic and social autonomy, yet in both areas women are defined as weaker than men in terms of self-control and spiritual potency. And in both areas divorce poses a serious threat to women's security and social viability.

Ong then explains the massive shift of young unmarried Malay women into the manufacturing industry over the last fifteen years. In the electronics industry, Malaysian government policies, foreign culture and management policies, and kampung *(village) culture meet. Ong's paper*

offers important insights into the industrial culture of Japan and its influence in Southeast Asia today.

Several contributors to this volume (Rodgers, Hatley, and Blanc-Szanton) have suggested that depictions and expressions of gender and sexuality serve as vehicles for social and political commentary. Ong analyzes how Malay factory women have become a focus for the expression of ambivalence about economic development and social changes in contemporary Malaysia by a number of powerful sectors of Malaysian society. Of particular note in a region of the world in which Islam predominates is Ong's exploration of Islamic revivalist responses to young women's participation in the industrial sector of the Malaysian economy.

Just as Ong argues for an analysis of symbolism not as text but as process, so too she is acutely aware of the agency of the people being imaged by different contingents of Malaysian society. Instead of leaving us with a picture of passive Malay factory women as depicted by others, she presents an extraordinary account of these women "in their own voices" as they struggle with their rights as workers and their obligations as family members.

In Malaysian free-trade zones (FTZs), young Malay women working the "graveyard" shift are sometimes visited by demons. A bloodcurdling scream suddenly shatters the silence, followed by wailing and sobbing on the shop floor. The spirits of ancestors and aborigines, many claim, will not be appeased until corporate managements hire *bomoh* ('spirit-healers') to ritually cleanse factory premises with the blood of sacrificed animals. Such incidents of affliction, generally labelled "mass hysteria" by the local media and commentators, raise questions about the lived experiences of young Malay women who are being made into an industrial labor force. This paper will consider how the diverse images of docile female workers, "loose women," and spirit visitations in modern factories confound local and scholarly thinking about control, morality, and sexuality in the process of cultural change.

Recent studies about the cultural construction of gender tend to presume that sexual meanings are produced from core symbols derived from a cultural system (see some examples in Ortner and Whitehead 1981a). Feminist scholars have taken at least two different perspectives to account for perduring sexual meanings in particular societies. Sherry Ortner (1974) maintains that western

European cultures have fundamental philosophical principles for thinking about and ordering gender relations that persist over long historical periods. In another approach, scholars attempt to account for opposing views of gender in a single culture by discussing contrastive male and female perspectives of "the other" (e.g., Dwyer 1978; Brandes 1980). What has been overlooked is how sexual symbolism becomes reinterpreted and transformed in the dynamic interplay of power conflicts rooted in class and nationalism, which have often, but not inevitably, been culturally constructed as a gender dichotomy.

My inquiry into the diversity of sexual images that has blossomed in the wake of female proletarianization emphasizes the construction of gender in situations of conflict among groups identified other than by gender difference. I argue first that cultural notions of sexuality depend on an interplay between norms, practices, and the lived experiences of women and men in a material world. Contradictory, discontinuous, and overlapping images of gender are produced from conflicting interests, choices, and struggles among different social groups. Second, old cultural forms and gestures of female-male relations may acquire new meanings and serve new purposes in changed arenas of power and boundary definition. Meaning is not static but dynamic, ambiguous, and provisional, especially in a multicultural society undergoing industrial development and open to the onslaught of divergent foreign influences.

Drawing largely on my field research in West Malaysia (1978–80), I maintain that the multiple and contradictory images of Malay factory women are modes for thinking through control and morality by dominant groups that are profoundly ambivalent about the social effects of industrialization. As a counterpoint to these public commentaries, the changing views of factory women, largely ignored by the censuring public, are introduced as an alternating theme of daily contradictions and private anguish experienced by the first generation of Malay industrial women.

The inquiry begins with a discussion of *kampung* (Malay village) perceptions of young unmarried women as vulnerable and controllable by men. This rural notion of gender difference becomes reconstituted by corporate practices in the local Japanese

factories that employ rural Malay women on a large scale. Next, I will discuss how the sexuality of neophyte factory women becomes a matter for public discourse and surveillance by the media, politicians, and Islamic revivalist groups competing for control over cultural production. Caught in a moral dilemma produced by family claims, factory coercion, and public criticisms, Malay factory women in daily acts of resistance attempt to construct alternative identities in their own terms.

Male and Female in Rural Malay Society

Male Reason, Female Passion

In the following sketch of customary norms governing male-female conduct in contemporary rural Malay society, I argue that Malay notions of gender-specific prerogatives, obligations, and cultural justifications of ideals are historically produced categories. The ideal of male prerogatives in religious ceremonies, inheritance, marriage, and divorce, which developed primarily out of the interactions between Malay *adat* (customary sayings and practices) and Islamic tenets, has nevertheless left village women with a remarkable degree of autonomy in everyday life (Djamour 1959; Swift 1963; Rosemary Firth 1966). I argue, however, that Malay notions of male prerogatives and the related values of male responsibility toward women can be easily translated, given the institutional arrangements, into norms for the systematic domination of women by men. This is particularly the case when Malay male authority, most fully realized in the control of young female virgins, becomes the basis for ideological justification of male supremacy over all women in modern bureaucratic and industrial institutions.

In kampung life, two sets of beliefs underpin and legitimatize male claims to prerogatives: (1) according to derived Islamic ideas, men are more endowed with *akal* (reason and self-control) than are women, who are overly influenced by *hawa nafsu* (disruptive emotions/animalistic passion); and (2) men are therefore obligated to protect women's honor and socioeconomic security. Women are perceived to be more susceptible to imbalances in the four humoral elements, which result in a state of weakened spirituality (*lemah semangat*). In such a spiritually vulnerable condition, women become susceptible to irrational and disruptive behavior. Such conduct includes *latah*,[1] during which the victim breaks into obscene language and compulsively imitative behavior. Alternately, the spiritually weakened woman invites spirit possession (*kena hantu*) and may explode into raging fits. Subsequent ritual intervention by male healers is considered necessary to restore the victim's spiritual balance so that self-control and self-knowledge (akal) once again regulate human passion (cf. Siegel 1969:98–133; Kessler 1977:320–21).

Village Malays consider the higher incidence of spirit possession and latah episodes among women as evidence of women's weaker spiritual strength and limited ability to consistently exercise reason and self-control in the conduct of their daily affairs. Anthropologists, however, associate spirit possession and latah episodes with the particular stresses Malay women experience as daughters, wives, and divorcées, i.e., in relation to men in the domestic sphere. For young unmarried women in particular, the threat of spirit possession operates as a powerful sanction to keep them emotionally and physically close to home (Ackerman 1979). Malay girls, unlike boys, are brought up to be shy (*malu*), especially obedient to their parents (*ikut parentah bapamak*), and timid/fearful (*takut*) of strangers and unfamiliar surroundings. They are discouraged from venturing out unless accompanied by at least a younger sibling. Young single women who go out alone at dusk run the risk of attracting wayside spirits that will attack them.

Such cultural mechanisms for controlling daughters are not applied to married women, especially those who have had many children or are past menopause. Married women move freely from house to house, go marketing, and travel alone to their garden plots. They gather in groups to prepare feasts, gossip, and cackle loudly, making sexual innuendos even in the presence of kinsmen. In their own houses, married women are not constrained by sexual modesty and may go about their housework with only a sarong tied around the waist. However, Malay women who try to resist their assigned roles as mothers and wives are said to become vulnerable to spirit attacks and/or be transformed into demons (see Laderman 1982). In commonsensical Malay idiom, the weak spiri-

tuality of the female sex is also the source of their physical-social weakness in the material world. Since men are blessed with more akal, they are given the responsibility of protecting kinswomen and morally correcting local women who step out of line.

Insecurity of Women, Responsibility of Men

Although they agree that Malay women enjoy relative social and economic autonomy in everyday life, scholars observe that women in both rural and urban communities do suffer from great insecurity because of the impermanence of the marital relationship, mainly the consequence of male prerogatives to pronounce divorce and to practice polygamy (Djamour 1959:42–43; Swift 1963:260; Firth 1966). Clive Kessler notes that the situation of women in Kelantanese villages is not as favorable as commonly believed; only the low status and impoverishment of the fisherfolk, which make conjugal cooperation and the wife's earnings critical to the household budget, "militate against any marked subordination of women to men" (1977:303–4). He stresses that women's individually acquired income should also be seen as a strategy to avoid subjugation by husbands and as the realization of enforced independence, especially following divorce. In Sungai Jawa, rural Selangor, where I conducted fieldwork,[2] women retain private wealth in land, jewelry, and cash; they resist pooling it in the household budget unless the husband, as required by Islamic law, contributes the bulk of family maintenance (*bagi nafkah*). Over the past decade, most of the divorces in the district of Kuala Langat have been motivated by the failure of the husband to provide maintenance.[3] Divorced women have to fall back on personal savings and the support of their immediate kin. Thus, women's "relative autonomy" is to a large extent the opposite side of their socioeconomic insecurity in relationship to men, and to male prerogatives in forming and breaking marital relations.

Malay notions that buttress such male prerogatives over wives are strengthened by male obligations to protect their kinswomen. Fathers and brothers are morally responsible for the chastity of their daughters/sisters; by extension, all men in the village guard against the violation of young unmarried women by outside men. In matters of property and economic security, Malay men are expected to look out for their daughters and sisters. Even after marriage, parents consider their daughters less able than sons to fend for themselves. Women are given portable inheritance (clothing, jewelry, household items) upon marriage; only rarely do they inherit land. Divorced or widowed women are expected to move back into the natal home or be supported (at least partially) by an older brother. Thus David Banks argues that Malays justify unequal devolution of land along sex lines on the grounds of men's greater sense of responsibility and the laws that enable kinsmen to thwart attempts by other men to appropriate women's property (1976:577–78). While Banks overstates "Malay fraternalism," his observation reflects the Malay recognition that women are less able to protect their bodies and property from exploitation by nonkinsmen (e.g., husbands), and the special responsibility of fathers and brothers for ensuring the moral and economic security of their kinswomen.

This tension in differentiated male responsibility toward their womenfolk is reflected in the male perception of daughter/sister as vulnerable and controllable, and of wife/divorcée as petty and manipulative. I suggest that the view of female untrustworthiness is linked to the inadequacy of actual attempts by kinsmen to safeguard the socioeconomic interest of women. Wives often have to resort to private strategies to secure their interests, and those of their children, even at the expense of husbands and kinsmen. Thus a married woman's control of her private resources and maintenance of close relations with her natal family may be construed by the husband as manipulation of the marital relationship. Alternately, a woman may use her independent source of wealth or sympathy generated by spirit affliction to hold together a faltering marriage (Kessler 1977). A divorcée may use her charms to forge a new marital relationship in order to ensure her socioeconomic security and that of her children, sometimes from different previous marriages.[4] Such practical management of their affairs no doubt earns divorcées and widows (*janda*—single, previously married women) the image of the sexually experienced flirt, not attached to or protected by any man, luring youths into illicit liaisons.

This most critical image of the Malay women is symbolically linked to the beautiful and dangerous *langsuir*, the demon of a

woman who dies in childbirth, and the *pontianak*, her stillborn child. The former has a gaping hole, concealed by long tresses, in the nape of her neck, through which she sucks the blood of infants at childbirth (Skeat [1905] 1965:320–28). Both langsuir and pontianak thus represent women in transitional states (existing between birth and death, both giving and taking life) who pose a threat to human social order (cf. Endicott 1970:61–63, 82). The pontianak, for instance, is also believed to materialize before men and attempt to seduce them into marriage. Like the pontianak, who is transformed into a human woman only when a man inserts a nail into the hole in her neck, the janda is considered a socially respectable woman only when she remarries.

In rural Malay society, then, the form and content of gender relations are shaped by norms and attitudes that uphold male superiority and guard against women attempting to gain male prerogatives. The sexually fertile woman not legally tied to a man threatens family interest. In daily life, male authority is most easily enforced over young unmarried women, referred to as *budak budak* (children/virgins), whereas single, previously married women are most able to challenge male authority. Janda are not answerable to any kinsman; their sexual misconduct can only be punished by the Islamic judge (*kathi*) or members of the Religious Department.

The following sections of this paper will deal with the changes in and increasing complexity of sexual imagery when budak budak enter factory employment in large numbers and come to experience some of the social freedom hitherto enjoyed and managed only by janda. To sort out the divergent meanings embodied in the symbolic representations of Malay factory women, we will need to consider the different interests of social groups and institutions other than those in rural Malay society.

Japanese Factories, Malay Women: Manufacturing Gender Hierarchy

Japanese Factories in Kuala Langat

Export-oriented industrialization introduced since 1970 has brought about the reorganization of the sexual division of labor among Malays, and in the process it has reshaped local ideas about male-female relations. Industrial production has been undertaken mainly by inviting transnational companies to base labor-intensive factories in FTZs; the bulk of the semi-skilled labor force is drawn from the pool of young rural Malay women (see Ong 1987). It is estimated that in 1970, no more than 1,000 Malay migrant women worked in manufacturing industries; by the end of the decade, over 80,000 of these women were industrial workers, most of them concentrated in the electronics, textile, and food-processing industries (Jamilah Ariffin 1981). The great majority of Malay women workers are employed in the electronics industry. There are over 140 electronics firms in Malaysia, mainly the subsidiaries of Japanese and American corporations, which together employ over 47,000 women workers, the majority of them Malays (ibid.). The most common image of the new working-class Malay woman is in fact "Minah *letrik*" (the local equivalent of "hot stuff").

Field experience in Japanese and American firms in rural Selangor and urban Penang (1978–80), however, uncovered significant differences in corporate ideologies and in the impact of these policies on Malay notions of gender relations and sexuality. Other scholars have briefly observed that American companies encourage individualistic practices, whereas Japanese factories emphasize group cooperation and subordination to male authority (Grossman 1979). Cosmetic shows and beauty contests in Western firms, together with images of passive sexuality in advertising, have induced city-based factory women to spend more on market items than on food (Gay 1983). The new subjectivity, including the adoption of Western forms of social intercourse, is the source of factory women's *bebas* ('loose') reputation, and the secret envy of their sisters in staid Japanese factories.

Significantly, the Malaysian prime minister recently proclaimed his "Look East" policy of emulating the Japanese model of industrial development. Japan is not only the biggest investor in Malaysia, he argued, but it presents the particular combination of policies that ensures efficient systems of production without sacrificing "Malaysian values." He elaborated: "[I]t is true that they [the Japanese] are not very religious, but their cultural values are akin to the kinds of morals and ethics that we have in this country

or would like to have in this country . . . profit is not everything" (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 11, 1982). The prime minister pinpointed the Japanese company's concern for the "welfare" of its workers, who are said to show great loyalty to their company as "their family." Furthermore, he observed, Japanese house unions promote the workers' feeling of belonging (ibid.: 38–39).

This picture of the Japanese company[5] is part of the general Japanese corporate strategy of using the idiom of the family to disguise relations of production that systematically subordinate women to men. Here I will focus on the Japanese factories in Kuala Langat district, Selangor, where I conducted fieldwork in Malay villages and in the local free trade zone. In the early 1970's, three Japanese factories, which I will call Electronics Japan Incorporated (EJI), Electronic Nippon Incorporated (ENI), and MUZ, a micro-machine plant (manufacturing musical movement components), were set up in the FTZ. They have a constant labor force of over 2,000, the vast majority being young Malay women from the surrounding villages. The forms and gestures of male power in these factories, I argue, are informed by Confucian principles that sustain a corporate ideology rooted in non-Malay patriarchal values.

Mukim Telok is an agricultural subdistrict lying just south of the Klang Valley industrial belt. The FTZ has been inserted into a local economy of plantations and Malay villages. The five villages are settled primarily by Javanese immigrants, who produce coffee, coconut, rubber, and palm oil in their smallholdings. The plantations (which employ large Tamil labor forces) specialize in rubber, palm oil, and cocoa. In the wake of the establishment of the FTZ in 1971, state agencies, large private enterprises, and political parties have penetrated Malay village society, bringing about the emergence of new social groups.

In the local Malay society, "traditional authority" in the Weberian sense is vested mainly in Islamic scholars, locally elected hamlet leaders, and, less firmly, government employees like the *penghulu* (administrator of the mukim), teachers, and party functionaries, who all command, in varying degrees, the loyalty of the commonfolk. In day-to-day life, men enjoy moral authority over

women, and adults over children, although such deference to men and elders is not inevitable and unproblematic in a situation where most adult women and men enjoy some measure of autonomy in work and access to some independent form of wealth (in land or savings). Malay values of male prerogatives are asserted and enforced in attempts to control and protect young unmarried daughters within individual households. Male authority is *never* realized in a systematic male domination of all women, who enjoy a moral authority of their own as elder kinswomen and in interhousehold relations.

Social differentiation, however, engendered by population growth and competition for village land by outside capital, has attenuated the ability of many households in general and of women in particular to retain their autonomy and resist the realization of inegalitarian values in male-female and interhousehold relationships. A 1979 survey of 242 Malay households in Kampong Sungai Jawa (a pseudonym) indicates that about 24 percent of them have access to less than .5 acre of land, if any, while land-poor households (with holdings of .6 to 2 acres) account for 37 percent of the survey population. Another 27 percent of the households operate plots of 2.1 to 5 acres, while middle peasants (with holdings of 5.1 to 10 acres) comprise only 5 percent of all households. Wealthy households, with access to land ranging in size from 10.1 to 70 acres, constitute 6.6 percent of the sample. Thus, differentiation in command of village resources compels more village men and women to seek wage earnings not only to supplement farm incomes but increasingly for subsistence and social reproduction. Most of the male wage workers seek employment in the Klang industrial belt, whereas the majority of young women are employed in the local Japanese factories.

Since the early 1970's, then, Malay village women in *mukim* Telok have been exposed to new modes of control in capitalist industries that they have never before encountered in peasant society. In locally based Japanese factories, the management reconstitutes Malay norms of male-female relations and transforms them into a corporate ideology rooted in Confucian values. Different but overlapping forms of factory discipline generate ideologi-

cal and social acceptance of systematic female subjection to male control, thereby producing a new system of gender hierarchy along with microcomponents.

Nimble Fingers, Slow Wit

Asian women employed by transnational industries have often been characterized in industrial brochures as biologically suited for the painstaking and fine handiwork required in labor-intensive processes. A Malaysian investment brochure notes "the manual dexterity of the oriental female" and queries: "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" (emphasis added; Federal Industrial Development Authority 1975). This dubious explanation of women's biological "qualification" for low-paying, semi-skilled work is further elaborated by the corporate policies of multinational subsidiaries. In ENI, the Japanese manager asserts that "females [are] better able to concentrate on routine work [which may be] compared to knitting, generally speaking."[6] He admits further that "young girls [are] preferable to do the fine job [of assembling microcomponents] than older persons, that is because of eyesight." At EJI, the Malay personnel manager states candidly: "[The] assembly of components is a tedious job . . . [with] miniaturized components we feel that females are more dexterous and more patient than males." Thus nimble fingers, fine eyesight, and, by implication, the passivity to withstand low-skill, unstimulating work are said to be biological attributes unique to women. Perhaps not unexpectedly, the Japanese financial manager of MUZ links these imputed female attributes to cost considerations: "Each initial work is very simple . . . if we employ female workers [it is] enough. . . . Also cost of female labor [is] cheaper than male labor in Malaysia, not so in Japan.[7] . . . If we have male assembly workers, they cannot survive. . . . Fresh female labor, after some training, is highly efficient." A Chinese assistant engineer in the same factory elaborates further these patriarchal beliefs in female passivity: "You cannot expect a man to do very fine work for eight hours [at a stretch]. Our work is designed for females . . . if we employ men, within one or two months they would have run away. . . . Girls [sic] below thirty are easier to train and easier to adapt to the job function."

Given the continual supply of cheap female labor from the surrounding kampung, the three Japanese factories can be selective about the type of female workers they wish to employ: between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, with at least primary education (which is free in Malaysia), and unmarried. Young women are preferred because of their diligence, and their eyes can withstand the heavy use of microscopes employed in many of the basic production processes (wiring, bonding, and mounting of components). Married women are discouraged from applying because they do not represent fresh labor and yet cost more than young single women, who can be employed for a short span of their life cycle.[8] In addition, secondary school graduates are not actively sought because, the ENI engineer feels, "the highly educated person is very difficult to control."

Such corporate notions of sexual differences in adaptation to work find a faint echo in Malay views on male and female differences in work patterns. Malays tend to stress that men should perform tasks involving heavy expenditure of energy, like carrying loads, digging, and construction work. Women, being of smaller build, should engage in activities that require fewer bursts of strength and force. Thus the saying that men can carry two loads on a pole whereas women can balance only one load on their heads (*laki tanggong, perumpuan junjong*). Other attributes associated with women, like patience (*sabar*), are considered to be the result of training, and fine qualities to be cultivated by all Muslims. When I asked the village women why they were concentrated in operator ranks, they replied that they have more patience than men to stick to the complex handiwork; men should operate heavy machines. However, they also said that women will accept low wages, whereas men, who have more expenditures, will refuse such poorly paid work.

Thus, although Malay women may accept the fact that they have been better trained to engage in fine detail work, they are not blind to the connection between their position in the industrial system and the lowest wages. Since they have been socialized

from early childhood to be hardworking, to have modest expectations of reward, and to be more responsible towards their families than men as a measure of their worth as women (daughters, wives, and mothers), Malay women are not dissuaded from low-paying jobs so long as their families depend on those earnings. One cannot simply argue, as Linda Lim has done, however, that the "traditional patriarchy" of Third World families is "at the bottom of women's subjection to imperialist exploitation" by multinational industries (Lim 1983:79, 86). I maintain that beyond preexisting ideas of innate sexual differences and incipient ideas of male domination, the corporations have to intervene to produce and reproduce, in daily conditions, the ideological and social mechanisms whereby concepts of male domination and female subordination are infused into and become the "common sense" of power relations in the industrial system.

The Family Way: Managing Maidens and Morality

Within the factories, production processes are organized for maximum efficiency and surplus extraction, not only capturing in the structure of work relations the existing uneven distribution of expertise between ethnic groups (Japanese, Chinese, Indian, and Malay), but also exaggerating power differences between men and women. The organizational pyramid and wage structure of EJI provide a vivid example (see the accompanying table). There are six major occupational strata: managing director, departmental manager, production manager, supervisor, foreman/technician, and production operator. The last category, which is almost totally filled by women, is further stratified into four categories: chargehand, lineleader, ordinary operator (the majority), and temporary (six-month) operator. As expected, women workers are also concentrated in the secretarial and typing pool, but most of these women are from outside the district.

The massing of women at the lowest levels of the occupational hierarchy ensures that the majority of them will not work for more than a few years because of the occupational boundary. Women workers are not given the training, provided to men, that would qualify them for jobs as technicians and supervisors. The highest positions operators can aspire to are those of chargehand

Distribution of EJI Employees by Ethnicity, Gender, and Earnings, 1979

Occupational rank	Ethnicity[a]				Gender		Total workers	Salary scale
	J	M	C	I	Men	Women		
Management								
Professional	10	0	0	0	10	0	10	$1,500–4,000
Nonprofessional	0	2	2	1	5	0	5	$800–1,080
Supervisory								
Engineer, foreman, supervisor	0	14	32	6	50	2	52	$785–895
Clerical staff								
Clerk, typist	0	17	19	7	11	32	43	$345–480
Service workers								
Phone operator, driver, guard, gardener	0	15	0	3	16	2	18	$225–290
Factory workers								
Skilled—technician, chargehand	0	56	21	19	71	25	96	$275–400
Unskilled—operator (daily rate)	0	460	48	74	5	577	582	$3.75–4.80 male $3.50–4.00 female
Temporary operator (daily rate)	0	135	37	52	0	224	224	$3.10
TOTAL	10	699	159	162	168	862	1,030	—

[a] J, Japanese; M, Malay; C, Chinese; I, Indian.

and clerk. There are only 25 positions for chargehands for the 800 operators in EJI. The most vulnerable workers are undoubtedly the temporary operators who comprise one-quarter of the semi-skilled work force, and who are taken on and laid off according to market conditions. Thus the structure of the industrial system itself rigidly defines and institutionalizes the extreme male-dominated hierarchy wherein all women, concentrated in the lowest job ranks, take orders from and are supervised by male workers in daily activities on the shop floor.

The gender hierarchy embedded in the production system is paralleled by paternalistic management policies toward the female operators in general. Japanese corporate policies are finely tuned to local cultural values, taking into consideration the network of social relationships factory women maintain with their families in the Malay kampung. Cognizant of the particularly junior status of young unmarried Malay women as daughters and as nubile females, and the moral obligation of Malay men to protect them, Japanese firms project an image of "one big happy family." The companies deliberately emphasize the "welfare" and moral custody of the operators, thereby winning not only the social acceptance of kampung elders but also the active cooperation of parents in supporting corporate mechanisms directed at controlling the factory women.

Thus the symbolic expressions of authority and domination over the female labor force depend on values that reverberate within the Malay moral universe. In MUZ, large factory posters proclaim the "company philosophy":

> To create one big family
> To train workers
> To increase loyalty to company, country, and fellow workers

At EJI, factory supervisors refer to the operators as "one happy family" working together, guided by rules and regulations printed in a little book referred to, rather inappropriately, as the "Bible." Couched in the idioms of family, religion, and patriotism, corporate policies acquire moral resonance with such key kampung values as cooperation, loyalty, and sacrifice. Such ideological synchrony of corporate policies and Malay mores help to disguise the extent of factory control over local women.

At ENI, the Malay personnel manager, an ex-army man with the air of an enlightened bureaucrat, explains that his company is "more Eastern in nature" than the other firms. There are no social gatherings or parties held on factory premises, which might encourage the mixing of male and female workers. He points out that the factory is located in "a *kampung* where the outlook of the people [is] too religious, old-fashioned," and that the informal segregation of young unmarried men and women is the norm. He admits that the factory has no time for social functions. Citing criticisms in the press about factory women being "too free" and the few cases of prostitution reported among FTZ workers elsewhere in the country, he spells out his company policy:

> We do not want to go against Malay culture, *and* Japanese culture too. . . . We are entrusted by the parents to give the girls good employment, not otherwise. This is a family system; we are responsible for the girls inside and outside the factory. If the girls get sick, for example, we send them home by private cars. . . . Of course they complain. But we say the big "Yes" here. Parents are very happy and we never receive any phone call or letter from parents calling for their daughters' resignation—like other companies [do]. (Emphasis in the original)

Indeed, social control is so effective that the monthly turnover at ENI is no more than two percent, compared to four percent at MUZ and six percent at EJI.

The corporate attempts to adhere closely to Malay attitudes toward young women not only reassure parents and promote social conformity "to make everyone happy," but also distract workers from work-related problems. Although unions are legal in Malaysia, the government registrar has thus far delayed recognizing unions in the electronics plants established by multinational corporations. In 1979, following a strike, MUZ established an in-house union that has the purpose of working with the management. The Malay personnel manager remarks candidly: "We recognize the union in order to make them [the workers] happy . . . [we] increase efforts on welfare, benefits. We bring them to a point away from the wage focus—otherwise heaven will be the only limit to wage demands . . . we create a happy family environment."

There are no unions at the other two electronics factories, but alternative systems based on paternalistic relations help the man-

agement to confine workers' grievances to manageable channels. At EJI, each work section sends a leader to the "employees' monthly meetings" to meet with the personnel manager. It operates as a "grievance procedure system" to pass all complaints to the top; group leaders are required to poll their workers for reactions to decisions and report back to the management.[9] Operator representatives requesting second sets of factory shoes and overalls for workers are told to increase production output in their lines first. This procedure represents the informal bargaining relationship between fathers and children.

At ENI, corporate policies stress the social obligations that the first-time women workers still have to their village families, thereby enhancing the discipline of the workers and also preserving the conditions in which parents send their daughters to seek wages at the factories. In monthly meetings with workers' parents (not with workers themselves), the personnel manager presents himself as the 'foster father' (*bapa angkat*) of all the female workers, whom he also calls 'children' (budak-budak). At the meeting, he acquaints the parents with the work schedules of the workers because parents are particularly concerned about the night shift and "overtime," which may be used as a cover for nonwork activities. Company bus drivers are given strict orders to keep to assigned routes, and parents are provided with "overtime" forms to check their daughters' daily schedules. The manager thus impresses upon the parents his concern for the moral reputation of his "charges," while eliciting parental cooperation in enforcing control over the workers' movements between home and factory (which affect production schedules). At the meeting the personnel manager also asks parents about the complaints of the 'female children' (*budak budak perumpuan*) because they are too "shy" (malu) to tell factory personnel. The kampung parents thus unwittingly play the part of a grievance feedback system, adding their own moral weight to the social control exerted by the management.

Outstation women workers, who pose a threat to the carefully constructed factory-kampung alliance to control operators' movements, are grouped by ENI in the same rooming houses because "they are exposed to dangers [and] we have to look after them." Migrant workers at the other factories also rent rooms, but their

landlords act as self-appointed custodians, mediating between the workers and the kampung society, which looks askance at them. Thus, although the factory management may genuinely be concerned for the safety of the women workers, their paternalistic strategy ultimately contributes to the formation of a disciplined and docile female work force subject to the dual pressures of kampung and corporate control.[10] Domestic male moral authority and the protection of nubile daughters have been transformed into a large-scale alliance between kampung elders/parents and factories for the industrial exploitation of Malay women.

The Foreman-Operator Relationship: The Daily Production of Female Subordination

Ultimately, Japanese ideals of male domination and female obedience are produced and reproduced in the daily interactions between foremen and operators on the shop floor. The foreman-operator relationship, based on the male-female authority system in Japanese culture, is the mechanism by which women workers become infected with ideas of female inferiority and servility to men, and the process by which high production levels are attained. Because of low labor costs and consistently high production rates, the Malaysian subsidiaries of Japanese corporations are more profitable than parent companies. Nevertheless, Japanese managers feel that in order to compete successfully with American firms, they have to push continually for higher production targets for Malaysian workers. Again, the image of family claims is invoked: "Parents do not say that they are satisfied with their children; every time parents hope for more from their children."

The foreman-operator nexus is pivotal in enforcing such endless expectations. Each foreman is in charge of ten to ninety operators, depending on the particular production process and shift. At ENI, the plant director calls the foreman the "head of . . . family members," leading a pyramidal distribution of female workers, from their immediate assistants (chargehands) to lineleaders of workbenches, to operators at the bottom. To implement production goals, foremen rely heavily on chargehands and lineleaders to deal directly with operators. One lineleader complains: "The foremen,

they give this job, that job, and even before my task is done they say do this, do that, and before that is ready, they say to do some other work. At times I tell the operators and they get angry too because of the repeated orders . . . the endless orders to work fast."

Besides exerting work pressures, foremen also try to control every aspect of operators' behavior within the factory and to influence their outside activities. In daily interactions, male power is demonstrated either in an authoritarian, intimidating manner or in a paternal, benevolent fashion to enforce general compliance and discipline among the women workers. Thus Japanese officials tell me that women cannot make good foremen because they lack the necessary "leadership qualities," such as a "fierce demeanor," the ability to give and stick by decisions, and the capability to command the respect of male technicians.[11] Management thinks that it is necessary to be very strict with Malay operators, even though they are "very obedient and hardworking types." At MUZ, the engineering assistant and head of the in-house union describes the operators whose interests he represents: "Obedience covers all—[it makes them] easier to control. But they are emotional—they cry when errors are pointed out—the threat [is felt] there. Some [however] yell at you." At ENI, operators are instructed not to answer back when reprimanded by foremen, but to be "very polite." Operators are scolded by overvigilant foremen for wanting to go to the prayer room [where as Muslims they have the right to prayer five times a day], the clinic, and the toilet. Some workers are subjected to questioning, conducted in a humiliating manner, about their menstrual problems[12] or nonwork activities, and are even followed to the locker room. Thus, female inferiority is instilled in the operators by such daily surveillance and the need to ask for male permission for the most mundane activities.

Other foremen believe in the paternalistic handling of operators encouraged by Japanese managers. Kindly foremen, who play a role more akin to "father" or "brother," can obtain the women's obedience and loyalty, while fostering a comfortable "family" environment in the midst of actual exploitation. An EJI supervisor explains his approach to me: "Force [is] not so important as understanding of subordination . . . mutual understanding and respect

[are] very important for [the] leader's control." He notes that it is important to encourage the workers daily and to compliment them on their handiwork. This approach is quite successful. A factory woman says, "I consider the foreman as my elder; he takes the place of my father and so I respect him." The gentle treatment of female workers operates within the context of gender hierarchy and as a mechanism for enforcing worker control.

The inequality in the foreman-operator relationship is sometimes enhanced by the emotional gratitude engendered in the women workers by kindly foremen. An EJI supervisor says that he advises his foremen to treat all the operators "equally, but a few fall in love." Other operators are favored with recommendations by their foremen for special cash allowances awarded for reaching high production targets. Favoritism by foremen of a few women workers thus creates division among the operators and reinforces the image of dependency on male authority figures dispensing orders and rewards.

Such factory experiences are in contrast to women's work in the village, where young girls and unmarried women enjoy self-determination in work and are taught complex skills by older women, but are not generally supervised by others. Women set the pace, schedule, and objectives of their activities so long as they see to their family needs. Many women tell me they like to work in the factories mainly for the friends they make there, but they feel that their parents have a better work situation as smallholders because they do not have a "boss" to watch over them, nor can they be threatened with expulsion.

Factory work is performed mechanically and the operators are not taught to understand the production processes.[13] A Malay technician comments: "Operators have never been given training or skills which will be adequate for them to use when they leave [the factory]. They absolutely do not understand [the work operations]. . . . I feel that if they are given more training in operating machines . . . the proper way, maybe they can become technicians. But really, they do not have the opportunity to rise [in the job ranks]." Operators eager to learn more about production operations have to learn from men, not other women. An operator re-

veals that "I feel that if I work closely with men they will tell us whatever we ask, so that for those women who get the most comments, things will be easier [for them]."

In the factory, then, Malay women are shaped, through the cultural reformulation of Malay gender relations and the daily enactment of production roles, into the Japanese ideal of the subservient female who is in every way inferior to men and subjected to their control. Nevertheless, the view that the Malaysian public has formed of industrial Malay women contradicts the actualities of their factory experience. We will next discuss why this is the case.

Sexual Metaphors: Consumer Culture and Social Control

A visitor to the large Malaysian towns will be struck by scenes of factory women not common even ten years ago. Pools of uniformly clad young women can be observed eddying around bus stops, food stands, or factory gates at the FTZs. In the evenings, neophyte factory workers, dressed in more colorful Malay or Western clothes, may be seen on their way home, shopping at marketplaces or wandering around downtown. A running commentary often follows in the wake of these women, many of them recently arrived from the countryside. Shop assistants, passers-by, and street urchins may cheerfully greet them with "Minah *karan*" ('high-voltage Minah,' a variant of "Minah *letrik*"), "*kaki* enjoy" ('pleasure-seekers'), and sometimes "*perumpuan jahat*" ('bad women' or prostitutes). Not only people in the streets but the Malaysian press, politicians, and religious institutions have all raised key moral issues in a cacophony of critical commentaries about these women of the nascent Malay working class.

The various epithets, public warnings, and pronouncements that these factory women have excited among different social groups represent overlapping but divergent perspectives on changing Malay culture. In the context of hegemonic crisis, conflicting dominant interests within Malaysian society—capitalist institutions, state agencies, and the Islamic resurgence movement—

participate in the ideological struggle to redefine the status of the modern Malay woman.

Neophyte Factory Women and the Negative Image

Since 1970, the media (radio and Televeshen Malaysia), which are controlled by the state, have played a role in focusing attention on young Malay factory women and provided the frame of reference for public discussion of their new status. Newspaper articles popularize public familiarity with appellations coined in the streets (*The New Straits Times*, Aug. 31, 1979), describing the apparent proclivities of Malay working women for activities such as *jolli kaki* ('seeking fun') and *jolli duit* ('having fun with money'). Women who seek Western-style recreation in bars and nightclubs are referred to as "*kaki* disco." These terms, which continually play on the words "jolly" and "enjoy," emphasize the image of factory women as pleasure-seekers and spendthrifts participating in Western forms of consumerism. In particular, the emphases on 'feet' (*kaki*) and on "electric" (a triple pun on the women's industrial product, their imputed personality, and the bright city lights that they supposedly seek) imply freedom associated with footloose behavior, the unhampered pursuit of pleasure, and more than a suggestion of "streetwalker." By emphasizing such negative images, the media exaggerates the portrayal of Malay factory women as active participants in a culture of consumption.

Indeed, many factory women, especially in the urban-based FTZs, dress in eye-catching Western outfits and spend their off-work hours shopping and going to the movies. In the village, factory women often go window-shopping after payday. They go into towns in the loose Malay *baju kurong* and return wearing make-up and Western dresses or clothed in T-shirts and jeans, in the "rugged, Wrangler style" affected by Malay youths. In fact, conspicuous consumption and participation in a Western youth culture are most prevalent among young middle-class professionals and university students, but the press has chosen to highlight such activities among working-class Malay women. As one factory woman observes, office workers are also known to be "immoral," but the public "raises itself above those who work in the factories

because they do not have [high academic] qualifications." By riveting public attention on women's consumption, the press trivializes the women's work and helps divert discontent over their weak market position into the manageable channels of a "youth culture."

The mass circulating press also operates as a vehicle whereby public officials and politicians attempt to increase social control over Malay working-class women by amplifying events that tarnish their reputation. From 1976 onwards, newspaper reports intermittently have carried stories about factory women in the Penang Bayan Lepas FTZ who are said to service soldiers and tourists, under such headlines as "Factory Girls in Sex Racket" (*The Star*, May 19, 1978). In early 1979, *The Star* proclaimed on its front page: "It is not fair to associate *all* factory girls with immorality" (Feb. 18, 1979). The factory women featured in the story are from mainland peasant villages working in the FTZ. They rent rooms in kampung homes and are placed under the informal jurisdiction of village leaders so that they will not "fall prey to any city playboy." As the oldest and largest FTZ in the country (with twenty multinational factories on location employing some 18,000 workers), the Bayan Lepas FTZ has developed a reputation for sexually permissive women. Factory workers are dubbed with factory-specific nicknames such as "micro-*syaitan*" ('micro-devils') for operators at Microsystems, and "night-sales" or "*nasi sejok*" ('cold rice,' i.e., leftovers) for workers at National Semiconductors. Malay women in other FTZs are also described as "preyed upon" and "tricked" into prostitution. An Ipoh industrial estate has earned the label of "the Malaysian Haadyai," after the famous Thai red-light border town frequented by Malaysians (*The New Straits Times*, Feb. 16, 1979).

The alarm raised over the perceived threat of Malay factory women asserting social independence, thus casting doubts on official Islamic culture, has prompted state officials to call for greater control of women in the nascent Malay working class. In 1980, the then-deputy prime minister noted that rural women who work in factories are said to become "less religious and have loose morals." As a champion of the export-industrialization program, he advised that the solution to the problem is not to blame the factories but for people to guide the "young girls" to "the right path" (*The Star*,

April 4, 1980). The public association between Malay factory women and "immorality" has become such a national issue, he stated, that further state action is required to quell the fears of Malay parents back in the kampung. In the next year, the Welfare Minister called for orientation programs to be set up by kampung youth associations to prepare village women for urban life so that they would not fall into the "trap" and "discard their traditional values" in the towns (*The New Straits Times*, Oct. 17, 1981).

The problem of "immorality" among Malay women is presented as the outcome of rural-urban migration and the urban Westernized culture, rather than linked to industrial employment. This "sarong-to-jean" movement, the vice chancellor of Universiti Malaya argues, results in problems of urban living that can be alleviated by providing counselling and recreational and education facilities. "Lack of recreation, he says, leads to untoward patterns of behavior" (*The Malay Mail*, June 14, 1982). By thus amplifying the moral corruption of Malay industrial women, the state and mass circulating press suggest a connection between their relative economic freedom and the irresponsible use of that freedom to indulge in commercialized sensualism. This selective focus on the problems of Malay working women provides the excuse for greater public control over their "leisure" time (which in actuality is very limited) while simultaneously diverting attention from the harsh realities of their "working" time.

Islamic Groups and a New Model of Islamic Womanhood

Islam is the religion of all Malays (in the Peninsula), but there are divergent Islamic perspectives on the changing status of Malay women. State religious offices, like other governmental agencies, tend to direct attention toward the perceived misuse of "free time" by factory women, whereas Islamic revivalist groups are more concerned with questions of defining appropriate spiritual and social boundaries.

Since the early 1970's, when the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) brought thousands of young rural Malays into urban educational institutions and factories, state Islamic in-

stitutions and the Islamic revitalist groups (in the missionary or *dakwah* movement) have participated actively in attempts to shape the public image of modern Muslim women. I maintain that the increased vigilance of state Islamic institutions in monitoring the deportment of young Muslims is a deliberate state response, through its ideological mechanisms, to political protests by Islamic resurgence groups over corruption in state bureaucracies and the goals of the development program (see Kessler 1980; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 3, 1983).

To the young Malay workers, official Islam, as represented by the state religious offices, is often experienced as a legal system that deals with marriage, divorce, inheritance, and religious offenses. Since the influx of young Malay women to work in the FTZs, there have been more frequent reports of raids by members of the Religious Department in the poor lodgings and cheap hotels inhabited by workers and the semi-employed. Under current official interpretation of Islamic offenses, Muslims may be arrested for *khalwat*, or 'close proximity' between a man and a woman who are neither immediate relatives nor married to each other. Offenders caught in situations suggestive of sexual intimacy (but not *in flagrante delicto*) are fined or jailed for a few months; the sentences vary from state to state. Muslims may also be arrested for *zinah*, i.e., illicit sexual intercourse, which is more severely punished.

Although theoretically there is general surveillance of other sectors of the Malay population, the understaffed religious offices seem to have turned their attention to areas where Malay factory women are concentrated. Malay factory women found walking around at night are sometimes threatened with arrest for khalwat by men who are not members of Islamic offices (*The New Straits Times*, Aug. 30, 1979). Both parties arrested in an incident are punished, but sometimes the female partner is given the heavier sentence. When the culprits are too poor to pay both fines (M$1,000 or more each), the payment is sometimes made jointly by both parties to release the male offender so that he can return to work, while the female offender serves the jail sentence (see Strange 1981:23–26). Thus the state, through Islamic offices, disciplines

the social conduct of working-class Malays, subjecting women to greater religious surveillance and sanctions.

Malays involved in the dakwah movement—"a politically-informed religious resurgence" (Kessler 1980)—are primarily disaffected students and intellectuals more concerned with the inculcation of Islamic-Malay ascetic values than with punishing Muslims who deviate from the principles of moral behavior. For many highly educated Malays, especially members of the dominant dakwah group ABIM (*Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia*: Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement), which has some 35,000 followers,[14] Islamic revitalization provides a means of affirming kampung values (Kessler 1980) and of "striving (*perjuangan*) for religious truth" (Nagata 1981:414) in the alienating urban environment. Other Islamic sects like Darul Arqam and Jemaat Tabligh[15] also have alternative versions of an Islamic society they would like to see installed in Malaysia (see *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Mar. 3, 1983). The main dakwah groups demand, among other things, a new model of Malay womanhood.[16]

The modern, religiously enlightened Malay woman is defined in opposition to what is considered capitalist and derivative of Western individualist and consumer culture. Through a radical reinterpretation of the Quran and Sunnah, the revivalists call upon Muslims, but especially Muslim women, to abstain from Western forms of behavior like drinking alcohol, driving cars, and watching television and movies (regarded as the major vehicles for transmitting undesirable foreign values). Instead, women are encouraged to veil themselves modestly, observe segregation of the sexes, undertake communal activities, and participate in serious Quranic studies. Although few, if any, of the Malay factory women (as compared to office workers) don Arabic robes in voluntary purdah, the dakwah movement has struck a responsive chord in many young women who wish to be recognized as morally upright Muslims engaged in honest hard work (*kerja halal*). They see in the Islamic resurgence an assertion of pride in Malay-Muslim culture and an affirmation of its fundamental values in opposition to foreign consumer culture.[17] Factory women, humiliated by their public representation, often ask that religious instruction be given on factory

premises so that Islamic guidance will foster harmony among workers, discipline in work, and an ascetic attitude towards life (see below).

To some working-class Malay youths, ABIM is considered the appropriate vehicle for organizing workers in their conflicts with industrial enterprises and attempts to articulate a working-class consciousness. Radical criticisms of multinational corporations by the intellectual leaders of the movement have informed the consciousness of worker-members, providing them with a lens for recognizing their situation as exploitative and a political idiom to articulate this "*exploitasi*." Thus a Malay technician at EJI, who joined ABIM when he was training in a vocational school in Kuala Lumpur, analyzes the management strategy of giving annual dinners to workers as a means to "ease their hearts" and make them "forget" basic issues like worker allowances and work conditions. He claims that as an ABIM member, he is not "blinded," like the kampung folk, by the disguised intentions of the factory management: "I know my own feelings [of being manipulated and exploited]. I know the feelings of other [workers]. Therefore, I am sort of in 'revolt' [against the management] . . . behind their backs." He argues that there is no "one road" to solving the problems faced by factory women who are badly underpaid and "stamped" with a degrading image. A university don has suggested that one solution to the "social problems" of Malay factory women is to provide them with dormitories near the FTZs, but the technician disagrees: "I feel that to tie them up like this . . . is not the 'democratic' road. We cannot tie them up . . . it is not practical." Such statements reflect attempts to link Islamic ideas of chaste honest work and worker rights with democratic notions, perhaps within the context of an emerging proletarian consciousness.

The conflicting images of Malay factory women, linked to public agencies, official religious authorities, and the dakwah movement, are symbolic expressions of different mechanisms of social and class manipulation. The mass-media portrayal of the Malay factory woman as a pleasure-seeking creature is connected with increasing social surveillance of her "free time," whereas her in-factory presentation as a child requiring male custody is expressive of the industrial control of her working time. These images of

wantonness and childlike dependency are ultimately significant as the cultural legitimization of state and industrial control, while revealing general anxiety over young Malay women gaining control over their own lives. Their assertion of social autonomy would begin a process of undermining public assumptions about the "common sense" of gender inequality in power relations. We will see how, by mediating the reconstruction of their subjectivities, factory women develop a gender consciousness based on social responsibility to family, class, and race.

Malay Factory Women: In Their Own Voices

We now turn to the off-stage voices of factory women themselves, their own self-perceptions, which have emerged partly in reaction to external caricatures of their status, but mainly out of their own felt experiences as wage workers in changing rural Malay society. I have argued that in a society undergoing capitalist transformation, it is necessary not only to decipher the dominant gender motifs that are the symbols of relations of domination and subordination, but also to discover in everyday choices and practices how ordinary women and men remake their own identities and culture. Class is taken as a cultural formation (Thompson 1967), but one that is constantly remade in definite contexts structured by the state. Disparate statements, new gestures, and untypical episodes will be used to demonstrate how Malay notions of gender become transmuted through the new experiences and emergent consciousness of women workers.

Self-Images: Young Women Between Self-Esteem and Social Emancipation

In rural Selangor, Malay women employed in the Telok FTZ, together with their parents, reject the commoditized image of factory women as illegitimate and an affront to Muslim womanhood. The media portrayal of industrial workers spending so much of their time and money on individual gratification assails kampung communal norms and expectations of female loyalty to family in-

terests. The emerging self-image of factory women in the kampung is conditioned by simultaneous efforts to be true to family expectations on the one hand, and to claim new rights as workers on the other. Such conflicting claims are *not* resolved in favor of individualism as a crucial part of their new identity.

As previously discussed, kampung Malays consider the moral purity of young unmarried women to be the responsibility of kinsmen, and these women, more than any other social category, are most subjected to male authority and control. Closely connected to these customary expectations are the moral obligations daughters owe their families. Wage employment at the factories enables young women to contribute to their household budgets, thus helping to conserve family relations in circumstances of declining agricultural economy. This increased ability to fulfill family obligations enhances the women's self-esteem.

Social emancipation, however, especially in the form of rampant consumer behavior, is viewed as destructive of the very kampung social relations that the women's wages help to sustain. Thus, though kampung women understand the yearnings for social freedom betrayed by urban-based and migrant workers, they severely censure any such individualistic orientation. In their view, the pursuit of consumer behavior is associated with the "unnatural" inversion of noncapitalist ideas about sexual difference: "It is not nice the way [factory women] attempt to imitate male 'style.' Like, they want to be 'rugged.' For instance, men wear 'Wrangler,' the women want to follow suit. . . . Some of them straight away behave like men, in their clothing. They forget their sex. If they are already very *bebas* ['unrestrained,' 'loose'], they forget that they themselves are women." The term "social" has entered Malay parlance to describe young single women who freely associate with men in the Western manner, quite contrary to kampung adat, which expects an informal segregation between unmarried members of both sexes. Factory women who are "social," and thus bebas (untied by convention), are believed to reverse noncapitalist values in other ways: they are said to be less hard-working, to be careless about their work, to seek self-gratification, and to not be restrained by parental guidance. One factory worker comments on the bebas women: "Our values and theirs are entirely different . . . they want *bebas* values, do not want to be tied down. They do not want to be shackled so that they can go out and be *bebaslah*. . . . It would be better if their earnings are for their families, that way, they will not bring disaster to their families, do something that will bring them shame."

Kampung women who work in the nearby FTZ define their own self-images in opposition to the cultural alienation exhibited by urban-based workers. Informal social mechanisms such as moralistic platitudes, gossip, and the idealization of chastity (*kesuchian*) by kampung women regulate intrafactory interactions between male and female workers. "Dating," a Western practice in which a man selects out a woman to spend time with alone, seems to reflect unequal market relations and generates competition within the ranks of women workers. In cases of interethnic dating (where the male technicians/foreman are almost all non-Muslims), a "*krisis*" situation develops as co-workers intervene to protest this added violation of Islamic injunctions against liaison with non-Muslims. Incessant gossip, moral outrage, and sometimes physical violence usually put an end to such assaults on kampung ideals of sexual and ethnic solidarity.

Village women's censuring statements are fraught with the effort of upholding noncapitalist values of reciprocity, and yet are poisoned with secretly nurtured envy of the "free women." Women who use their earnings to satisfy newly acquired needs are said to be "so free that they have no thought for their families." "In following what their hearts desire" (i.e., extramarital sex), such women can only end up "damaging themselves" (i.e., pregnant and abandoned). Malay women who seek Western individualistic behavior and capitalist values are not only accused of having no regard for family interests, but also are charged with being 'not Malay' (*bukan Melayu*) and 'un-Islamic' (*bukan orang Islam*). As one kampung operator assures me, "Most of us do not want to be *bebas*; we are truly Malays who have been properly brought up by our parents."

Not surprisingly, positive attempts at self-construction of a new female identity depend on a cult of purity and self-sacrifice. The neophyte factory women identify with an intensified Islamic asceticism (advocated by dakwah members), which not only incor-

porates kampung emphasis on a daughter's loyalty and moral virtue, but also a new kind of sexual repression (not inherent in rural Malay society). Since the women's new self-esteem is based on their wage contributions as unmarried daughters, many postpone marriage to fulfill such familial expectations, thus prolonging their junior status to their parents and to male authority. In Sungai Jawa, the average age at first marriage for women increased from 19 to 21 years between 1976 and 1980, when many village women began working in the FTZ.

Postponement of marriage introduces new problems of controlling adult daughters and guarding their virtue. Malays acknowledge sexual drives and provide cultural means for their adequate satisfaction in daily life. Until recently, parents arranged early marriages for sons and daughters for the legitimate management of sexual needs (among other reasons) (see Banks 1983:88–90). When marriage is delayed for women, their sexuality becomes more susceptible to individual control; therefore greater social discipline is considered necessary to reduce this threat to male authority. Thus the self-esteem and self-images of rural factory women as honest workers and loyal daughters become inextricably tied to prolonged junior status, increased Islamic chastity, and the rejection of social emancipation promised by wage employment. This reinforcement of noncapitalist norms and rejection of Western values were produced out of the contradictory situation the workers found themselves in. An operator complains:

> [Malaysian] society only knows how to criticize [us] but does not know the importance of our work in the factories. . . . What ought to be done is to establish religious classes . . . to give warning to factory workers, and then to set up rules . . . against the unrestrained interactions (*kebebasan*) of workers during work in the factories as well as outside. These rules should be directed at increasing "discipline." Most of us read the newspapers; we should explain our problems in the papers to the general public.

Nevertheless, the fusion of kampung communal norms and intensified Islamic discipline as the basis of their self-identity does not blind some village women to their rights as workers. One factory woman sees a definite connection between the unsavory public image of Malay women and their weak market situation:

> The opportunities for employment in this country are still limited. In our country, we Malaysian women need greater security in our livelihood so that there will be no occasion to work . . . like prostitutes. . . . The jobs available [to women] are still very limited compared to the work available to men. Also currently very few women are employed so they tend to give priority to housework because employment with the government [greatly desired by women] is still restricted.

In their lived experiences, cultural evaluations, and difficult choices, factory women thus internalize the contradictions between communal values and customary male authority on the one hand, and claims for better employment conditions vis-à-vis men on the other. It is their claims for worker rights, I argue, that lead them to protest the male domination that is so systematically institutionalized in the factories.

Spirit Possession: Rites of Protest

To what extent can customary values, noncapitalist imagery, and new experiences of industrial work promote the beginnings of an articulated awareness of female subordination as members of a nascent working class? On the shop floor, factory women daily engage in covert boundary-setting rituals to limit management control. Operators complain continually that production targets are often intolerable; sometimes, they believe, the management forgets that "we too are human beings." In their resistance to being treated like things, mounting work pressure (*tekanan*), and harsh (*keras*) treatment by foremen, operators often deliberately cultivate an uncomprehending and unconcerned (*tidak apa*) attitude toward orders and the technical details of production. A common strategy is to make excuses to leave the shop floor by citing religious reasons and "female problems." Day-to-day struggle against management pressure takes the form of female resistance to male power. A residual space is contested and held for the preservation of human dignity, but the boundary-maintenance ritual does not articulate the problems of felt female oppression.

I wish here to discover, in the vocabulary and imagery of spirit possession, the unconscious beginnings of an idiom of protest against male control in the industrial situation. E. P. Thompson notes that an examination of the untypical ritual, especially of

female subordination, may yield as yet unspoken values (1977). The phenomenon of hysteria outbursts, formerly associated with middle-aged Malay women afflicted by latah (see Murphy 1972; Kessler 1977),[18] has in the past decade become associated with spirit-possession episodes among young Malay women who have flocked by the thousands to urban institutions and industries. Recent studies of the sudden spate of possession incidents reported among young Malay women in boarding schools and factories interpret the bizarre phenomenon as an "oblique strategy" (I. M. Lewis's term) of protest against male authority in these modern institutions without directly challenging official male control (Ackerman 1979).

Possession episodes, which have plagued both foreign and local factories with sizeable numbers of young Malay female workers, produce epithets and spirit images that dramatically reveal the contradictions between Malay and capitalist ways of apprehending the human condition.[19] In late 1978, a major American electronics firm in the Bayan Lepaz FTZ was disrupted for three consecutive days by dozens of women participating in spirit-possession incidents. The victims screamed in fury and put up a terrific struggle against restraining male supervisors, shouting "Go away!" (*Sunday Echo*, Nov. 27, 1978). In 1980, a possession incident involving 21 women broke out in a Japanese factory in Pontian, Kelantan. As they were being held down (to prevent the spirit seizure from spreading to other workers), the victims threatened, "I will kill you, let me go!" (*The New Straits Times*, Sept. 26, 1980). In the Telok FTZ, spirit-possession incidents usually occur on a smaller scale, but with some regularity. Some victims merely sob continually, others laugh in a demonic manner, while still others ferociously abuse and fight male technicians attempting to carry them off the factory floor. In one case the possessed victim screamed, "I am not to be blamed, not I!" (*Aku ta'salah, bukanku*!). The targets of the victims' abuse are always male staff members; female coworkers, if not kept apart, are easily swept into a fury of unconscious sympathy with their afflicted sisters.

Factory women are usually startled into possession episodes by visions of frightful spirits that suddenly materialize in their microscopes, or loom over their shoulders as they attend to their

business in the locker room or prayer room. Most of the spirits are described as having the form of an ancient man (sometimes headless), clothed in black, pressing down on or gesturing angrily at the women. On one level, this vision is a feverish projection of the awesome male authority figure, like the supervisor, as a local psychiatrist suggests (*Asiaweek*, Aug. 4, 1978). In other cases of hysteria incidents, the victims refer to an ancestral spirit (*dato*) whose wrath has been incurred because the factory operations have made "dirty" (*kotor*) his sacred abode (*kramat*) (*Sunday Echo*, Nov. 27, 1978).[20] In the American factory disrupted by spirit invasion, workers claimed that soiled sanitary pads[21] in the toilets polluted the sacred ground of the dato, who would not be appeased unless the management held a ritual feast (*kenduri*). Similarly, hysteria episodes in Telok have been interpreted by the women workers as the consequence of erecting the FTZ on the sacred burial grounds of aboriginal groups; disturbed earth and graveyard spirits swarm through the factory premises, threatening the women and demanding to be placated. One victim claims to have seen a weretiger, the familiar of ancestral spirits, roaming the factory floor. Another victim has the gruesome vision of a spirit sucking menstrual blood from a sanitary pad—a complex image of danger, loss of corporeal control, and profound social dislocation.[22] These nightmarish visions, and the screaming protests of possession victims, thus give vivid form to their male oppressors; they are also symbolic configuration of the violation, chaos, and barrenness encountered on the shop floor. The noncapitalist imagination thus speaks to the women's alienated experience of capitalist relations. We therefore have the weird juxtaposition of the gleaming, sanitized world of multinational firms with the performance of cleansing rites by hired bomoh who chant incantations, sprinkle holy water, and drench the factory grounds with the blood of chickens slaughtered in sacrifice to the unleashed, avenging spirits of a world torn asunder.

The threat of female fury, momentarily unveiled in spirit affliction episodes, is efficiently controlled; victims are given Valium and sent home on medical leave. In kampung households, however, male power to induce women to conform to their ideal of the subservient sister/daughter is being undermined as female wage

employment changes the content of customary brother-sister, parent-child relations. Female factory earnings, in a situation of under- or unemployment of Malay youths, have provided sisters/daughters with the relative economic autonomy to realign domestic power relations. As sons are kept longer in school (training for potential bureaucratic careers) or out of the labor market by poor opportunities, parents feel that they can rely less on their sons. One working daughter remarks: "The males often do not want to listen to their parents' advice, and so the parents do not have much hope in them. . . . Boys only know how to eat." As regards village male views of factory women, another operator notes, with irony:

> Some of their talk is mocking, because in their view perhaps, our work here gives us too much freedom, as for instance, always going out at night, always "dating" with "boyfriend." . . . Ah, maybe they like [factory women]. They only talk, but they pick factory women too. . . . For instance, in my family, my brother himself has never talked badly about me [as a factory worker]. Now, he is marrying a woman who works at the factory too.

In the kampung then, factory women are more able to define their new self-image in the context of the family. Working daughters, often with the implicit backing of mothers and the expected but weak disapproval of fathers, demonstrate their resistance to male authority in their consumer behavior, use of savings for planning alternative careers, resistance to undesired marriage matches, more daring enjoyment of premarital sex, and refusal of money to parents who remarry. Nevertheless, the self-image of these neophyte factory women continues to uphold family loyalty, Islamic asceticism, and male authority as central values.

In maintaining the official view of male responsibility, kampung women manipulate their formal subordination to kinsmen by playing factory men (largely from outside the district) against kampung men. Male honor/prestige depends on men's ability to protect their sisters/kampung women against nonkinsmen/outside men, especially in the contemporary situation in which kampung men have the economic ground cut out from under their feet. Thus individual factory foremen who are overly zealous in

enforcing production targets or in harassing women workers are talked about in the workers' families. Gossip, complaints, and tears goad village men to undertake acts of retaliation against the black-listed culprits. In Telok, there have been at least three incidents of attacks by village youth gangs on factory personnel as they leave the FTZ gates in the evening. The victims include one Indian, one Chinese, and two Malays, none of whom is of local origin. Such incidents reveal that within the kampung matrix of enforcing rough justice and settling scores, especially where female honor is concerned, village men and women are forging a new kind of solidarity. Rural youths not only empathize with the women's harassment in the workplace, but also wish to register their vengeance against outside men who not only hold relatively well-paid jobs in the FTZ (from which most kampung men are disqualified), but are placed in daily situations of control and competition over nubile village women. This renewed form of kampung male protection of women workers, which compensates for the reduced sense of male honor, is purchased by their women's earnings, which help sustain the rural standard of living.

The values and choices that inform the gender consciousness of young Malay kampung women are thus interconnected with family strategy and dependence upon their wage earnings at this phase of their life cycle. This helps account for the actions of many village women who reject individual emancipation as wage workers in towns in favor of fulfilling family obligations by working in the local FTZ. In leaving kampung society, young Malay women may realize the social emancipatory promise of wage employment in the urban milieu, but at the expense of male protection and of preserving family relations in the deteriorating rural economy. To remain means that in meeting family needs, the women postpone self-gratification (marriage and retention of their own earnings) and prolong their formal subordination to parental and male authority. It remains in doubt whether female sustenance of rural relations would foster a new solidarity with men as members of the nascent proletarian class.

Women's self-evaluations and value choices have not been achieved without internal conflict, doubts, and distress. The commoditized image of urban factory women holds up to view the

negative consequences of extreme individuation, while their own possession episodes give vent to the pain and protest engendered by the dehumanizing effects of capitalist production. The gender consciousness of Malay factory women in rural Selangor has, I suggest, this fundamental, dynamic ambivalence: adherence to kampung communal values, asceticism, and male authority on the one hand, and different forms of incipient claims as wage workers and resistance to male control (in home and in factory) on the other. The subjectivities of these women are thus reconstituted in the local context of changing family strategy, customary norms, and social relations; they are both gender- and class-specific.

This analysis of the effects of industrialization on social relations in Malay society has focused on the cultural construction and reconstruction of gender as an aspect of divergent consciousness and interests associated with different social groups. I have argued that the key metaphor of Malay factory women as victims of consumer culture is a symbolic expression of the struggle for cultural hegemony by dominant groups in Malaysian society. Below but inseparable from this system of social control, Malay men and women in the local contexts of factories, peasant villages, and worker communities are engaged in their own struggles and reformulation of sexual symbolism.[23] Gender was taken as a potentially contradictory configuration of meaning that codes alternative structures of morality, control, and power. By redefining their self-identities and interests, neophyte factory women have begun to wrest control of their lives in opposition to the dominant forms of cultural production.

Reference Matter

failure of husbands to provide maintenance was cited by the local *kadi* (Islamic judge) as the main reason (i.e., from 1969–79, it accounted for between 30 percent and 45 percent of all divorces each year; see Table 15 in Ong 1987:132). Of course, the issue of nonmaintenance can also be interpreted as evidence of husbands withdrawing funds from the family budget in protest against working wives not contributing significantly to the family budget. In 1978, there were 20 percent more working women petitioning for divorce throughout West Malaysia. "The problem centered on the fact that some men expected their working wives to contribute a big chunk of their income towards household expenditure while the wives felt that their contributions ought to be of a supplementary nature" (*The New Straits Times*, Mar. 27, 1979).

4. Malays do not make alimony payments. Partly for security considerations, divorced Malay women frequently remarry, and some may keep children by previous husbands with them. Thus relations among siblings often override their different paternal ties. Such children are referred to as 'milk siblings' (*adek beradek susu*).

5. In Japan, only a few large Japanese companies—e.g., Sony, Hitachi, Toyota, Nissan, Japan Steel—provide extensive welfare coverage for their workers, who are largely male. The vast majority of working women (70 percent) are employed as temporary, part-time, or unpaid family workers in medium-size and small firms, and they seldom, if ever, enjoy lifetime employment (Cook and Hayashi 1980:5). Besides, in Malaysia, the some 220 Japanese firms in the late 1970's did not expect their workers to become lifetime employees, and many of the companies did not have house unions (see *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Mar. 31, 1983).

6. All interviews with factory managers, engineers, and supervisors (who may have been Japanese, Indian, Chinese, or Malay) were conducted in English. Interviews with Malay technicians, production operators, and villagers, which took place in village settings, were conducted in *Behasa Kebangsaan* (Malay).

7. This point is not quite accurate. In 1975, Japanese women comprised some 50 percent of the total labor force in Japan. Even with the same educational background as men, women by the age of thirty-five earned less than half of men's wages. Moreover, since women cannot be considered part of the permanent labor force, men are the beneficiaries of lifetime employment (Cook and Hayashi 1980:1–14; Matsumoto 1978:62).

8. This practice of employing young women for a short span of their life cycle means that multinational industries are generating, not a classic proletariat, but rather a labor reserve among rural Malay women (Ong 1987).

9. This process should not be confused with the *ringi* mechanism for collective decision-making whereby each segment of the Japanese company participates in presenting its opinions and suggestions concerning firm policies and plans. The "grievance procedure" merely collects complaints from the shop floor without involving the lower ranks in decision-making.

10. Celia Mather (1983) discusses a more systematic case of alliances between village headmen ("Islamic patriarchy") and factory managers to control the supply of young peasant women for factories in the Tangerang region, West Java.

11. At EJI, a Malay woman had been trained to be a foreman; but since she was the only female in that rank, she felt uncomfortable and was given a desk job and never worked in a foreman capacity. In her interviews with some Japanese factory women, Sheila Matsumoto reports that they "feel that men are generally superior to women and prefer a man for supervisor. They fear that women are too emotional and will not perform well under pressure" (1978:72).

12. Matsumoto reports that Japanese factory women also have to bear humiliating questioning by their male supervisors about menstrual discomfort. They are sometimes accused of lying about their need for medical leave (1978:68). In the Telok FTZ, young Malay women working in the factory for the first time (usually in production processes using microscopes) are so traumatized that they miss their menstrual cycles for the next few months, and suffer from assorted bodily aches like eye strain, chest pains, and gastric problems.

13. Again we find echoes of the same situation among Japanese counterparts of the Malay operators. Japanese women interviewed by Matsumoto are not taught the functioning of the machines they operate (1978:67).

14. ABIM leaders are graduates of local universities—Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsan, and MARA Institute of Technology—and their recruitment activities have penetrated the civil service, police, military, professional organizations, and schools. Most of the followers are urban-based Malays who have been exposed to secular education. In 1982, the ABIM leader Anwar Ibrahim "defected" to the government by accepting one of the five vice presidencies of UMNO party. Since this political maneuver by its most charismatic leader, the ABIM movement has lost some of its moral fervor and sense of direction as a major political force critical of government policies.

15. The Darul Arqam movement, centered on a communal kampung outside Kuala Lumpur, stresses economic self-sufficiency. The members

participate in many agricultural projects and operate a number of small factories to produce *halal* (religiously pure) food-stuffs. The Jemaat Tabligh, influenced by Indian Muslim missionary activities, is based on a network of congregations for religious lectures and retreats. Both groups are composed of university students, white-collar workers, and professionals who practice communal life, intensive religious study, and sexual segregation, in contrast to the individualist lifestyle pursued by many middle-class Malays. Women in the Darul Arqam work in the factories, operate the school and hostel, and prepare the communal meals while their men travel the lecture circuit. Female members of the Tabligh group are more confined and are excluded from the men's vigorous missionary activities (see Nagata 1981:416–23).

16. Some of the very small sects modelled after foreign groups try to introduce obligatory sexual activity between female converts and the khalifah (Nagata 1981:416; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Mar. 3, 1983). This association between Islam and female sexual service is extremely repulsive to Malaysian Muslims and has been condemned by all authorities and major dakwah groups.

17. The impact of multinational corporate advertising in West Malaysia has been particularly powerful on young Malays recently arrived in the cities from rural kampung. Many factory women are captivated by the portrayal of white women in the commercials and seek to emulate their Western, glamorous images. Annual beauty contests held in multinational firms also reinforce Western images of feminine passivity (see Grossman 1979).

18. Cases of female spirit possession during the colonial period and up until recently more commonly involved middle-aged Malay women than any other female age group. Such women have a particularly stressful status at this phase of their life cycle, when they become divorced or widowed, and children begin to depart from home. They may also begin to suffer a decline in their standard of living because of these household changes (Kessler 1977).

19. Michael Taussig (1980) argues that the "fetishization of evil" in the form of the devil represents a mode of critique of capitalist relations by Colombian plantation workers and Bolivian tin miners.

20. These images of "filth" and pollution, following Mary Douglas (1966), also reflect the women's sense of having transgressed the boundaries between kampung and public life.

21. Many village women only begin using these market items after they have started working in the factories. They not only have the cash to purchase sanitary napkins, but also need the protection because of the long hours confined at work. Thus factory employment also introduces kampung women to an urban culture of modern sanitary systems and practices that disrupt their corporeal sense of self.

22. In rural Malay beliefs, Negritos and were-tigers, the associates of spirits, move easily between human and nonhuman domains. The were-tiger is said to prey on human beings and suck their blood (Endicott 1970:82, 85). The women's visions thus suggest their acute consciousness of being bodily and spiritually endangered. See Ong (1988) for a more extended discussion of the contrasting Malay, corporate, and cosmopolitan medical views of spirit possession in factory settings.

23. In a forthcoming article (Ong 1990), I link the sexual symbolisms of working-class and middle-class Malay women to the nationalist struggle over the form and boundary of the changing Malay family. I have suggested elsewhere (1989) that a promising direction for understanding gender difference in Southeast Asia, and the contemporary world in general, is one that incorporates insights from both political economy and symbolic analysis.