

Chapter 1

Spirits and Discipline in Capitalist Transformation

Writing this book is rather like opening Pandora's box: what kinds of spirits is one releasing? My inquiry into the meanings industrialization has for Malaysian society necessarily elicits the social significance of neophyte factory women not only for peasants but also for managers of transnational companies, government officials, Islamic zealots, school teachers, village children, and the wider society. Ethnographic knowledge builds upon a negotiated reality between the anthropologist and informants, and my claim to this alongside other possible interpretations rests on the inclusion of many voices seldom heard in the cacophony of academic and political exchanges. By documenting changes in rural society and weaving a multi-stranded, multilingual social reality into the account, this text discloses diverse reactions to an emerging Malay female proletariat, as well as their own eloquent descriptions of the disruptions and ambivalences of cultural change. Thus, while my interpretation may refract like a multifaceted lens, it preserves a dialectical tension vis-à-vis various particularistic views expressed about changing Malay society. In this account, the *hantu* (evil spirit), hovering over the passage of young Malay women into industrial modernity, becomes "an image which mediates the conflict between [non]capitalist and capitalist modes of objectifying the human condition" (Taussig 1980: xii).

The introduction of industrial capitalist discipline into Malay society involves both resistance and assent to change in work patterns, consumption, group identity, self-consciousness, and ultimately, a greater

synchronization of local life with the rhythm of advanced capitalist societies. The historical and ethnographic contexts lead me to ask: What are the effects of capitalist development on Malay peasant society? What are the possible connections between capitalist discipline and cultural discourse? How are the experiences of neophyte factory women and their images of vice and virtue mediated by the visitations of Malay spirits in modern factories?

To answer these questions, I take a dialectical approach by juxtaposing opposed or contradictory social phenomena. My descriptions will continually oscillate between the analysis of changing material relationships and the interpretation of cultural attitudes and practices both emerging and receding in the wake of Malay proletarianization.

This book seeks to illuminate cultural change in an industrializing society by talking about changing peasant beliefs and practices in a situation of shifting, complementary, and contradictory meanings. Previous analyses of Southeast Asian cultures have emphasized the syncretist paradigm of cultural streams (Geertz 1964) or the two-tiered model of great and little traditions (e.g., Scott 1976). Departing from this framework of society as a segmented system of cultural traditions, I consider divergent and discordant cultural forms in Malaysia where a complex network of bureaucratic mechanisms has been deployed to mobilize meaning in the discursive practices of everyday life, for the maintenance and reproduction of the political economy.

For too long, anthropological concepts of "culture" have been one-dimensional, overly comprehensive and extrahistorical. Clifford Geertz made a significant break when he urged that "culture" be taken as "webs of significance" (1973: 5), constituted by a system of shared meanings, symbols, and practices, to be read "from the native's point of view" (1979). What has been of less interest to Geertz is the question of power in the production, definition, and maintenance of dominant cultural patterns. More recently, Eric Wolf called for an examination of different cultural forms in specific social-historical contexts. He emphasized the importance of relating alternative symbol systems and practices to the "field of force" generated by the mode of production (1982: 387). The task of the analyst is to decode and understand changing cultural meanings, their making and unmaking, in relations of domination and resistance.

In this book, "culture" is taken as historically situated and emergent, shifting and incomplete meanings and practices generated

in webs of agency and power. Cultural change is not understood as unfolding according to some predetermined logic (of development, modernization, or capitalism) but as the disrupted, contradictory, and differential outcomes which involve changes in identity, relations of struggle and dependence, including the experience of reality itself. Multiple and conflicting complexes of ideas and practices will be discussed in situations wherein groups and classes struggle to produce and interpret culture within the industrializing milieu. Raymond Williams has suggested that in class-divided societies hegemonic domination is not to be understood as merely controlling ideas and practices but as "a saturation of the whole process of living." By this he means that dominant meanings and practices shape the substance of everyday experiences: our lived expectations, meanings, and practices constituting our sense of social relationships and of reality (1977: 110).

In Malaysia, industrialization has been accomplished through pervasive bureaucratic redefinitions of group identity and relationships in domains of public and private life, including the constitution and boundary-marking processes which define these domains. Such processes are currently intensified in many third world states undertaking capitalist development. Since hegemonic attitudes and practices are necessarily incomplete (at any time, oppositional forms exist), continual activities through education, media, and employment structures are required to defend, modify, and even incorporate the countercultural tactics of subordinated groups in order to shore up hegemony (Williams 1977: 121–27).

Taussig (1980) and Williams thus emphasize the cultural construction and reconstruction of divergent meanings and action which embody a specific distribution of political and economic forces. Such a formulation enables us to deal with cultural change without a false opposition between ideology and practice. Michel Foucault's explication of the varied forms modern power takes is pertinent for our understanding of how social organization and realities are being reconstituted in some third world societies. By suggesting that the operations of modern power are in fact productive rather than repressive (i.e., effectuated through repression) he argues that schemes of discursive practices are involved in the complex production of rituals, objects, and "truth" (1979: 194). The effects of power/knowledge relations (e.g., scientific management) are to implant disciplinary techniques in bodies and human conduct, thereby complementing more overt forms of

control in everyday life. In transnational corporations, we see that relations of domination and subordination, constituted in scientific terms, operate not only through the overt control of workers' bodies but in the ways young female workers come to see themselves. In their changing positions within the family, the village, the labor process, and wider society, they devise counter tactics for resisting images imposed on them and come to construct their own images.¹

A heightened sexuality attributed to Malay female workers by the Malaysian public can be considered the contradictory cultural constructions of a society intensely ambivalent about the social consequences of industrial development. In looking at the complex relation between sexuality and gender, it is necessary to eschew the assumptions of received concepts such as "women's roles," "sexual inequality," and "patriarchy" either in their implied sense of "achieved states" (Williams 1977: 11–20) or as suitable starting points of analysis. Many ethnographies written about "women's status/role" in third world societies often lack this critical understanding of gender as cultural constructions, both imposed and increasingly self-defined, in particular historical situations. Even more rare, as Marilyn Strathern has pointed out, is the recognition that in some societies, gender may not be the primary organizing code of sexual difference but rather an idiom for other kinds of social differentiation, such as prestige ranking (1981). Perhaps most critically, the preoccupation of "women's studies" with statistical measurements of structural "inequality" overlooks the self-formative activities of women which partially structure their identities and the immediate relationships within which they are enmeshed in daily life. As a consequence, they leave underanalysed the dialectical relation between processes out of which constraints are developed and within which gender is culturally formed and transformed. This inquiry asks why sexuality should become a key image/construct in Malay transition to industrial capitalism; what does it tell us about culture as a dialectical construction? It is a major contention of this work that local meanings, values, and practices have been reworked within the operations of administrative organs, capitalist enterprises, and civil institutions.

In Malaysia, capitalist discipline operates through a variety of control mechanisms in social, political, and work domains both to regulate and legitimate unequal relations which sustain the process of industrial modernization. By "discipline" I mean the effects of the

exercise of power on the subjugated, and the enforced and induced compliance with the political, social, and economic objectives, considered rational and functional for capitalist production. The development of political mechanisms of control, whether in state offices, development projects or factories, necessarily involves changing material relations as well as an altered sense of reality, changing self-knowledge, and cultural justification of the social order, in times of noncrisis.

The following section will discuss how the cultural construction and reconstruction of meaning, gender relations, and sexuality are involved in new disciplinary systems and forms of resistance generated in rural Malay society. It will be argued that class formation is not the only process whereby new consciousness and practices emerge or are superseded.

The concept of "proletarianization" is fraught with Marxist assumptions derived from Lenin's discussion of the transition from Czarist feudalism to agrarian capitalism in Russia (1964). The situation in the corner of Peninsular Malaysia I am concerned with is not representative of the classic case of rural differentiation into a small number of agrarian capitalists and a multitude of rural laborers. Rather, the on-going dispossession of Malay peasants in Kuala Langat will be considered in relation to (i) an expanding state bureaucracy for the integrating fractions of the peasantry loosened from the land, and (ii) global corporate strategies based upon the fragmentation of the labor force dispersed throughout the world system. In other words, we are talking about circumstances in which the changing conditions of production and reproduction are less ordered by merchant capital than commanded over by the state apparatus and by global capital. This centralization of bureaucratic control over local reproduction processes is not limited to the production of exchange values but extends to the production of cultural values as well.

The crisis is seen in processes involved in the social reproduction of the *kampung*, the basic community, territorial unit, and the social matrix of everyday life. In Kuala Langat, *kampung* households exhibit differential capacities to reconstitute the labor process in smallholding production as more households come to control smaller parcels of land. But the formalism of landownership categories is only one (and often misleading) dimension of changing peasant-capital relationships. The making of new class relations is dependent not only upon

access to land but also upon the ability of households and individuals to realize new forms of linkages with the state machinery and modern labor markets. Furthermore, recognition of the domination by the state and capital over the labor process is politically justified in terms of development *in the interest of* rural Malays. This is a form of “mis-recognized” domination Pierre Bourdieu calls “symbolic violence” (1977). However, as I will try to show, complicity in their own social domination, if an obstacle to group interests, can also be a hidden channel to individual upward mobility.

As more *kampung* folk become wage workers, downward mobility is more commonly endured by the majority than upward mobility into the ranks of bureaucratic or industrial employment. Increasingly, individual educational and occupational trajectories beat a path out of *kampung* society, a structural effect of market and bureaucratic disciplining operating selectively on individuals rather than on groups. Such individuated grassroots reactions to the changing economy make doubtful the significance of peasant responses such as household strategizing (White 1976) and resistance to market and state policies (Scott 1976) which have been claimed for rural societies elsewhere in Southeast Asia. As my description of *kampung* society will demonstrate, group strategies adapted to changes in the local economy are not very effective for class mobilization when the field of conflicting interests becomes integrated within wider structures of political coercion and labor market manipulation. Dispossessed peasants, set upon different trajectories of survival and mobility, are individuated as much by gender, education, village origin, and political affiliation as by social class aspirations.

As productive activities on the land give way to the sale of labor by household members, the power configuration of domestic relations is continually realigned, both in cooperation and in conflict. In this transition to industrial labor, special pressures are brought to bear on women, but especially daughters, in the Malay *kampung* family. Parents’ attempts to set sons and daughters on different career paths, in accordance with selective market demands, are often fraught with conflict and ambivalence. Pierre Bourdieu notes the cumulative structure of dispositions (*habitus*) cultivated through education, acquired values, and practices — symbolic capital — in individual and collective pursuit of upwardly mobile pathways (1977; 1984). The acquisition of symbolic capital in particular families thus mediates

the relationships which restructure emotions between parents and children, brothers and sisters, governs those relationships which distribute individually acquired material resources within and between generations. In this new configuration of day-to-day relations, what women and men come to mean to each other in the domestic domain, and how they perceive the household, are aspects of their cultural history too often overlooked in ethnographic accounts.

In the new milieu of their production activities, neophyte factory women and men experience power as a manifold, ever-changing, and elusive force. Much of the literature on third world women and multinational corporations has neglected to recognize the multiple forms and foci of power relations which constitute the social domains of these industrial workers. State linkages to foreign investments and to labor control condition the constellation of power relations exercised over the nascent working classes. Political disciplining of the rural population involves support for the privileged few who can be integrated into the state apparatus, on the one hand, and political and material constraints on the majority, on the other. The Malay laboring poor, subjected both to bureaucratic culture and to the call of Islamic revivalism, consider themselves politically informed Malay-Muslims rather than a class in the Marxist sense. Female workers express in the culture of their everyday life the ambiguous images and practices of a fragmented, mobile, and ultimately dispensable labor force harnessed to global industrial production.

Induction to capitalist relations of production generates profound contradictions in the Malay peasant's orientation towards work and life. Hitherto, village life was ordered by the rhythm of agricultural cycles, daily Islamic prayers, and *kampung* tasks largely carried out according to personal compulsion; everyday life was decidedly non-capitalist. The over zealous villager seen cycling to his garden on a hot afternoon is mocked as "devil-driven" by neighbors jealous that he is "planting capital" while they take their customary nap. More critically, *kampung* folk expect to work at their own volition, be their "own boss," and not be ordered around by others. In daily life, it is often only young girls who are supervised, if at all, in their domestic tasks by female relatives. Thus, I would argue, the trauma of industrial labor for village women is in the rigidity of the work routine, continual male supervision, and devaluation of their labor in the factory. Spirit possession episodes, in which women become violent

and scream abuses, are interpreted, against Taussig (1980), not as a 'non-capitalist critique of abstract exchange values, but as a heartfelt protest against the loss of humanity/autonomy in work. Six or more years of elementary schooling have not dampened the carefree spirit of peasant girls for whom corporate control and labor discipline is a continuing personal and social crisis.²

However, contrary to some Marxist assertions (e.g., Burawoy 1979), capitalist relations of production cannot be assumed to have an inherent logic, operating as they do in diverse situations of the multiple and shifting play of power relations. I maintain that the series of disciplinary mechanisms brought into play in the transnational corporation combine both labor control and management techniques disguised and reworked into a "corporate culture" which pervades the workaday life. Drawing on Foucault's insights, I argue that in the labor process, young women are being reconstituted as instruments of labor and as new sexual personalities. Foucault has observed that the deployment of sexuality, as part of the expanding political technology of modern power, unavoidably induces self-management in the subjected, who, in becoming a self-affirming subject, "opens up the possibility of a substantial shift in tactics" (1980: 130). The elaboration of a culture of consumption or a cult of purity by different groups of Malay factory women must be seen in this light of differentiated resistance and cultural maneuvers in changing power domains.

For the Malaysian public, the sexuality of these new working women in transnational factories becomes the focus of anxiety over the social effects of capitalist development. This study therefore seeks to understand the industrial transformation of rural Malay society by looking at the predicament of young *kampung* women. In the public eye, neophyte factory women have become the mediating images of truth, the currency of discourse for parents, brothers, factory managers, male workers, politicians, Islamic revivalists, and themselves. I will talk about the varied coinage of sexuality in the home, the workplace, and the public forum, alternating between external representations of gender roles and sexual meanings and the self-constitution of identity by the neophyte factory women.

In the rural household, the cash-earning unmarried daughter becomes a challenge to the local ideology of male protection: what are the changed perceptions of fathers, brothers, and "boyfriends" (a new category) to the working girl-woman no longer accommodated

under a unified concept of “maiden”? How do factory women handle the contradictory experiences of economic autonomy from kinsmen and political coercion by men in the corporation and the wider society?

Are the *hantu* hallucinations a residual image of remembered village, a present shadow in their industrial life, or both? This sense of affliction is induced as much by a particular corporate surveillance as by a general public gaze of disapproval. In the proliferation of consumer culture, how do neophyte factory women come to reimagine power relations and the public perception of women as sexual/moral threat? What can notions of counter tactics and alternative self-images contribute to our analysis of their attempts to redefine themselves, restructure gender relations, and form different linkages to class and economic power?



The anthropologist shares a meal with village friends

This book is arranged in three parts. Chapter 2 deals briefly with the colonial history of Malay peasants, composed of local inhabitants and immigrants from the wider Malay archipelago who established cash cropping villages in coastal Selangor. The rest of the study draws upon fieldwork investigation conducted in 1979–1980.

Part II takes the reader into a contemporary subdistrict (*mukim* Telok) of Kuala Langat to observe changes in the daily life of Malay villagers, mainly of Javanese ancestry. Primary focus is on the reworking of domestic relations, the structuring of feeling and family strategies in a situation of rapid proletarianization.

Part III concerns the experiences of Malay peasant women in transnational electronics factories located in a nearby "free trade zone." Management techniques of control in the labor process include the management of emotions and the production of a new sexuality. In analysing the rearrangements of power relations, I will discuss the symbolic meanings of the *hantu*, and of the neophyte factory women, for the various participants in this local drama which momentarily suggests the universal features of cultural change in the late twentieth century.

Moving through this threefold study is the theme of cultural resistance among rural Malays at different phases of their encounter with and incorporation within the world capitalist system. Over the last one hundred years, the introduction of new relations of production and exchange into rural Malay society has involved the cultural reconstructions of ethnicity, family, female, male, and morality within changing configurations of power relations. In the transition from cash cropping to industrial labor, preexisting meanings, values, and practices were reformulated by Malay peasants in their everyday acquiescence in and resistance to larger structures of domination. This is a story of cultural struggle in which the dialectic between spirits of resistance and new forms of discipline is the key refrain of rural Malays as they enter into the world of laboring by the clock.