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Introduction: the problem of latah

My first encounter with *latah* was in 1966 while I was living in Pasir Mas, Kelantan, early in my initial period of fieldwork (Map 1). It was a minor incident but it impressed me and led to further inquiries. I was walking across what was then an open field in the center of town. Several women were in front, one of whom slipped on some loose gravel at the side of the railroad track running through the field. This woman quickly exclaimed a sexual obscenity and repeated "*mati*" (dead/death/die) rapidly several times. The outburst lasted only a second or two. Others in the vicinity looked around but did not pay much attention. The woman who had slipped regained her balance and proceeded on.

Having read the older literature on the Malays I was familiar with latah and later mentioned the incident to Pak Tengah, one of my friends who lived in a nearby village and who was for me a major repository of information (and whose own wife became slightly latah many years later). He told me about other persons in the vicinity who were also latah, and he and other villagers told me about things that some latah persons had done. One of the incidents he described was especially interesting because it was reminiscent of an episode recounted by Hugh Clifford (1898) in a famous early article on latah. Clifford's account focused on an episode he reported as involving two Malay men that took place in his house in rural Pahang. His cook, Sat, and a visitor were seated on a mat facing one another and chewing *sirih* (betel). A malicious boy who knew that both men were latah suddenly came up and struck the *sirih* box that was sitting on the mat between them with a piece of rattan. The men both jumped and began to shout obscenities and to repeat and imitate each another. This continued for a half an hour until both fell over in exhaustion "foaming horribly at the mouth." Clifford went on to say that he was unaware of what was happening until it was over, at which point he intruded and nursed the men back to consciousness. He asked the men what had happened but they claimed to remember nothing except sitting and eating *sirih*.

The incident recounted to me by Pak Tengah was reminiscent of Clifford's tale in that it also involved two latah men who continued to

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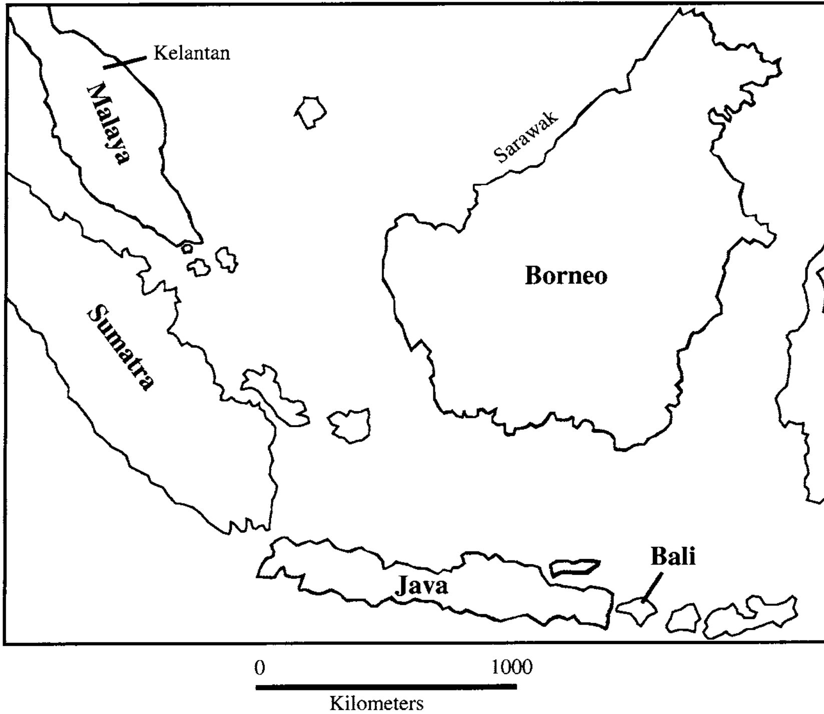

Map 1. Malaya, Java, Borneo

provoke one another in a continuing manner. In this instance one latah man was preparing *laksa*, a fresh rice noodle used in a favorite Malay festive dish of the same name. Another man, who was also latah, came up to watch and talk. Then a third man, who had been standing around with some friends and who knew that the men conversing over the *laksa* were both latah, came up and suddenly shouted "*ramas laksa*!" (knead the laksa!). Both of the latah men were badly startled (*kejut*) and began to repeat "*ramas laksa*" and to knead the dough in imitation of one another. Pak Tengah described the incident as a "story" (*cerita*) which he knew rather than an occurrence which he himself had witnessed. I have sometimes wondered if this story somehow had its origins in Clifford's written account or, alternatively, if the incident that Clifford described derived in whole or part from Malay oral tradition.

In the mid-1980s I returned to work systematically on latah. My decision to do so was due partly to my previous interest and partly to the emergence of renewed discussion and controversy about latah and about what has come to be known as the "culture-bound syndromes." Latah itself has been

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an important topic of Western discourse about Malayan peoples for a long period of time. By the middle of the nineteenth century or soon after, European observers in Malaya and Java began to note that certain persons upon provocation, usually by a startle, would behave in the manner noted above – shout an obscene utterance, or in some instances imitate words, gestures or actions, or automatically obey commands that would not normally be followed. They also noted that it affected certain individuals slightly and others very strongly, that the pattern was well known to the Malays and Javanese themselves, and that it apparently occurred among other Malayan peoples as well, though this was less certain. In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, numerous accounts of latah in both Malaya and Java were published which offered further instances or new interpretations.[1] From these latah soon made its way into the second- and third-hand literature of manuals of tropical medicine and psychiatric handbooks as a recognizable (if apparently incurable) mental disease of uncertain nature, where it tended to remain.[2] Eventually also on the basis of this existing literature latah became a standard textbook case of an exotic psychosis or neurosis in studies in culture and personality, then in psychological anthropology[3] and more recently in medical anthropology.[4]

Beginning in the late 1970s latah was taken up again as a theoretical problem by anthropologists and transcultural psychiatrists in a series of articles (Drush 1984; Kenny 1978; Murphy 1972, 1976; Simons 1980) and in a documentary film (Simons 1983c), followed by further exchanges (Kenny 1983; Murphy 1983; Simons 1983a, 1983b). These discussions have focused on various issues but especially on the "latah paradox," an idea set out by Hildred Geertz in 1968. The paradox, in brief, is the proposition that while latah can only be understood in highly specific cultural terms, unique to the Javanese (or to the Javanese and other Malayan peoples) it occurs also among various distant peoples as well.

It has been noted concerning Malayan studies that writing about latah as well as *amok* and other favorite colonialist topics created and perpetuated images of mental deficiency of the Malayan Other, which justified and encouraged European domination (Alatas 1977: 48, 177). No one who has read the older accounts of latah would likely deny that they would contribute to such Orientalist notions, which is not to say that the observers who wrote them intended to do so. Such accounts do typically contain general observations about Malayan character which might both indicate inferiority and suggest the possibility of improvement under European influence. Orientalism everywhere involved certain assumptions about the psychological nature of the Oriental Other – about such matters as stability, sensuality, femininity, and masculinity. In Malayanist versions of Orienta-

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lism, sensuality and femininity (focal points of Indological Orientalist concern [Inden 1990: 115–116]) were seldom raised, but instability was given great emphasis. It was axiomatic that Malays, Javanese, and other Malayan peoples were by nature "nervous," "sensitive to the slightest insult," "volatile," preoccupied with maintaining balance and composure, and so forth. Such psychological tendencies were held to be in part a matter of inherent character and in part a consequence of despotic political rule and a rigidly hierarchical social order that was to be changed through the creation of a new way of life under European guidance.

The accounts of latah written in the second half of this century are less subject to such criticism. Westerners have been responsible for the bulk of the more recent work on latah but Asian scholars have also produced both descriptive and interpretative studies. In particular, the findings and ideas of P. M. Yap will be referred to throughout this book. A brilliant Chinese psychiatrist who was born in Malaya and educated at Cambridge and the University of London, Yap is responsible for both one of the most important accounts of latah and the development of the notion of "culture-bound syndrome" (Yap 1952, 1966, 1967, 1974). There are also more specific studies of Thai and Malay latah by the Thai psychiatrist Sangun Suwanalert (1972, 1984) and of Javanese latah by the Javanese psychiatrist R. Kusumanto Setyonegoro (1971). Nor are the culture-bound syndromes – the category of psychic afflictions into which latah is (rightly or wrongly) generally put – still regarded, as they formerly were, only as exotic patterns found among non-Western peoples. As will be noted below, one of the main applications of the concept in recent years has been to the interpretation of various conditions and afflictions in post-industrial Western (and Japanese) society.

Whatever colonialist associations the study of latah may continue to have, the topic is also a matter of interest and importance to contemporary Malays. It continues to figure in national consciousness as a symbol of traditional Malay culture in various ways. During the mid-1980s latah was shown on Malaysian television in two different contexts. One of these was a humorous government commercial in which a person was startled and then repeatedly said "buy shares." The other was a serial drama about an urban Malay family in which the kindly but old-fashioned and perplexed grandmother Opah, for whom the drama was named, was latah. The use of latah in an advertisement and in a popular drama as a characteristic of a sympathetic figure strongly indicates that it continues to be viewed with curiosity and amusement by the mass Malay audiences to which such material is directed, and that it continues to be regarded as a part of Malay life.

Another incident involving latah which also received national publicity was of a tragic rather than an amusing nature. It took place in the bitter and

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divisive aftermath of the "Memali" incident in 1985 in which the police used force to arrest a dissident religious leader and his followers in Kedah, resulting in the deaths of eighteen persons. Among those reported killed was an elderly woman. The critics of the police action and of its justification by the ruling Malay political party cited the killing of a harmless woman as pointless brutality. The government response was that the woman had not been harmless for she was killed while waving a knife and acting like she was attempting to attack. This, however, drew the retort that the woman had been behaving that way simply because she was latah. She had, it was said, become startled by the noise and confusion and was simply imitating what she had seen around her. However pathetic, this incident also suggests that latah comes readily to the minds of contemporary Malays.

Latah and the culture-bound syndromes

The resurgence of interest in latah over the past several decades has been closely associated with the emergence of the culture-bound syndromes as a central focus of discussion in transcultural psychiatry and in medical and psychological anthropology. As originally formulated by Yap (1966) and first applied to latah, *amok*, *koro* (all initially linked with Malayan peoples), and a few other instances, the concept of culture-bound syndrome meant a class of abnormal and pathological patterns found in non-Western societies which could not be readily explained in Western psychiatric terms. Given the acknowledged complexity of understanding Western, let alone non-Western, mental health, and the existence of competing theoretical systems in psychiatry and psychology, there was room for disagreement and reinterpretation. But there appeared to be consensus among a community of scholars that culture-bound syndromes existed and that they should be explained through a synthesis of ethnographic and psychiatric or psychological knowledge. Conferences were held, proceedings were published, and further instances were discovered and described (Caudill and Lin 1969; Pfeiffer 1968, 1971, 1982; Lebra 1976).

By the 1980s the culture-bound syndromes had become a matter of controversy. In the case of one of the classic instances (Windigo psychosis, the cannibal compulsion complex) the actual existence of the pattern itself had been disputed (Marano 1982). While this has not been so of most of the others, questions have begun to be raised about the general field of inquiry. Some scholars who have conducted research or read the literature on one or another reported syndrome, or who have examined the general logic of the concept, have either expressed basic doubts about its meaning or utility, or have advocated its abandonment altogether (Hahn 1985; Hughes 1985a; Jilek and Jilek Aall 1985; Karp 1985).[5]

The problems have concerned both the "culture-bound" and the "syn-

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drome" parts of the concept. In regard to the former, the problem (well illustrated by latah) is how restricted a "syndrome" must be in order to be regarded as "culture-bound" rather than "universal," or at least "transcultural." Nor does the assumption of complete cultural relativism solve the problem. For if all syndromes (or at least all those with a mental or behavioral basis) are said to be culture-bound, then the phrase "culture-bound syndrome" is redundant. In regard to the latter (also well illustrated by latah) the problem is in determining how pathological (and how frequently so) a pattern of behavior must be to be considered a "syndrome" rather than something else. Yap originally meant the notion to refer to a psychosis, the severest form of mental disturbance, although he acknowledged that this would not fit in the case of all the persons said to be suffering from one or another syndrome. Yet it soon became apparent that such use was often inappropriate, that it was often difficult to tell how dysfunctional an exotic pattern of behavior was, and that in some instances it might not be dysfunctional at all.

But if the culture-bound syndromes have become controversial they have also increased in importance as a field of inquiry. Over the past decade the scope of the concept has continued to be expanded and more and more new examples have been noted. A glossary published in 1985 includes more than 180 instances, though some are different ethnic versions of the same pattern (Hughes 1985b). Most notably, however, the notion has been increasingly applied to a variety of conditions and maladies occurring in modern post-industrial society as well. Examples coming from the United States and Great Britain include *para suicide* (overdosing of medical drugs), *agoraphobia* (inability to go into public places alone), *anorexia nervosa*, shoplifting (by affluent persons), flashing (Littlewood and Lipsedge 1987), and even obesity (Ritenbaugh 1982) and "adolescence" (Hill and Fortenberry 1992). In Japan such syndromes include the "childrearing neurosis," the "high-rise apartment neurosis," the "kitchen syndrome," and the "school-refusal syndrome," all of which are recognized by Japanese psychiatrists and the public as "diseases of civilization" and "medicalized" (Lock 1992). Roland Littlewood and Maurice Lipsedge (1985, 1987) have sought to generalize about a wide range of both old/non-Western and new/Western culture-bound syndromes. They attempt to use the older culture-bound syndromes as a model for analyzing the newer ones, and they seek to show what all of them have in common with other ritualistic, expressive, dramatic modes of behavior.

The present study

With the exception of spirit-possession, few of the culture-bound syndromes have been the focus of extended, ethnographically and historically

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contextualized treatment.[6] For the most part the literature has been one of notes and articles, book-chapters and anthologies, rather than of monographs and books on particular instances.

Latah is particularly appropriate for more detailed consideration. As two recent analysts point out, it has been the most frequently discussed and most important of the culture-bound syndromes (Prince and Tcheng-Laroche 1987: 11). It has also been the most controversial. The status of latah both as "culture-bound" and as a "syndrome" have been sharply disputed. Further, as with the literature on the older culture-bound syndromes generally, much of the discussion of latah has had a strong armchair character. The reader who is familiar with the recent discussions of latah will know that, overall, they are considerably longer on interpretation and argument than on new information. Several of the most important and stimulating modern accounts have been written by scholars who have not claimed to have seen a latah person at first-hand, or in one instance to have been near the Malayan world, let alone latah.

The organization of the book and the use of the term "latah"

In the remainder of this book I develop more fully the background to my own inquiries and discuss the results of my own fieldwork. The book is organized into four parts, the first of which concerns the historical and comparative background of the problem of latah. I begin in the following chapter with the history of European discourse about latah in Malaya and Java from the nineteenth century to the present, including the recent arguments with which I am most concerned. In Chapter 2 I deal with the specific question of whether the existing evidence indicates a pattern of demographic change in the occurrence of latah over time, and in Chapter 3 I examine the controversy regarding the comparability of the non-Malay and non-Javanese cases and then evaluate the information which has played a greater or lesser role in theories about latah, including that from Africa and the Arabian peninsula, northern Eurasia and North America, as well as the broader region of Southeast Asia.

In Part II I present my own information and develop an interpretation of the pattern in more general terms. Chapter 4 deals with latah in present-day Kelantan, first and principally among Malays and then among several non-Malay populations. After this I take up in Chapter 5 the question of the nature of the relationship of latah to Malay (and Malayan) culture, initially with regard to notions about metaphysical transformation and magic and then regarding altered states of consciousness. In Chapter 6 I continue this line of inquiry and discuss the social uses and context of latah.

In Part III I shift to Borneo. Here I first discuss in Chapter 7 the occurrence of latah in Sarawak and attempt to show that its spread from

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Malays to various Dayak groups is based upon its compatibility with indigenous Bornean ideas, sentiments, and social practices. I follow this in Chapter 8 with a more specific analysis of latah among the Iban, the largest of the Dayak peoples of northwestern Borneo. Following these eight chapters I conclude in Part IV with a more general discussion of the problem of latah and the culture-bound syndromes.

My own use of the word latah itself presents a problem that requires some initial comment. As noted earlier, once the Malayan term *latah* became well known it was often applied to other apparently similar patterns noted elsewhere. The result is that the term has achieved a general usage in the comparative literature of psychological anthropology and transcultural psychiatry approaching that of "mana" and "taboo" in ethnology and comparative religion. The use of "latah" to refer to startle reactions in different parts of the world which have certain notable family resemblances to it is perfectly reasonable. However it creates a problem when one of the points of contention is the extent to which the Malayan pattern is the same as those found elsewhere.

There are various possible ways of distinguishing references to Malayan latah from those concerning "generic" latah. One would be to italicize or capitalize the latter (Simons's [1980] solution). I prefer to set off generic latah with quotation marks, as "latah," in part because I have concluded that some of the patterns so labelled are much more similar to the Malayan one than others. Admittedly this or another means of distinguishing generic from Malayan latah is open to objection in the sense that not all forms of Malayan latah are necessarily the same. Nor is Malayan latah referred to everywhere in the same way. I am aware of three other local words for latah in different areas of Borneo, and there may be others. However, the term latah is extremely widespread among Malaysian and Indonesian peoples, including all of those among whom I gathered information in both Kelantan and Sarawak.

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Part I

The problem of latah

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1 The study of latah

The earliest European account to be cited as an actual or possible reference to latah (by Yap 1952: 516; Murphy 1972: 43) is contained in J. R. Logan's journal of his trip from Melaka into Naning, published in 1849. A visit to the house of a villager had been arranged. Upon arrival Logan was met at the gate by his host whose character and behavior struck him as peculiar. It is his description of what occurred next that has been cited, though not quoted:

> At first his manner was embarrassed and apparently dry, and his efforts to break through the restraint under which he laboured were abrupt and highly grotesque. When we ascended into the veranda he blurted out his welcome again, jerked his head about and bent his body forward, and shifted his position every second. He was most delighted, he said, highly honoured, but oppressed with shame. His house was such a miserable hut, and he was such a poor, ignorant, vile person, mere dung in fact! "*Sáyá oráng méskin tuán*, – *oráng bodo* – *tái*," and so he continued vilifying himself, and accompanying each new expression of humility by a sudden and antic alteration of his attitude and position. (Logan 1849: 29)

Little about this episode is latah-like.[1] There is no mention of the blurting out of any obscenities, of any verbal or gestured mimicry. It is, of course, possible that the man did say something obscene which Logan chose not to mention in his account. Even so, Logan, while finding it extraordinary, did not identify it as latah or latah-like. Nor evidently did his Malay companions. As an ethnologist with a well-developed interest in Malay culture and language Logan should have been familiar with latah, if it existed in its later characteristic form and had come to the attention of European observers. However, while such a description would suggest that Europeans were by that time still unaware of latah it would not prove it.

Whether or not Logan had witnessed an instance of latah, the pattern had entered European cognizance by the 1860s when it was clearly identified in both Malaya (by Thomson [1984: 170] in 1864) and Java (by F. J. van Leent [1867: 172–173]). By the mid-1870s it was included in at least one European Malay dictionary (Favre 1875(2): 501) and by the 1880s references and detailed descriptions of latah in both places were common.

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