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0521472199 - Latah in Southeast Asia: The History and Ethnography of a Culture-Bound Syndrome

Robert L. Winzeler

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“Latah,” the Malayan hyperstartle pattern, has fascinated Western observers since the late nineteenth century, and is widely regarded as a “culture-bound syndrome.” Dr. Winzeler critically reviews the literature on the subject, and presents new ethnographic information based on his own fieldwork in Malaya and Borneo. He considers the biological and psychological hypotheses that have been proposed to account for “latah,” and explain the ways in which local people understand it. Arguing that “latah” has specific social uses, he concludes that it is not generally appropriate to regard it as an “illness” or “syndrome.”

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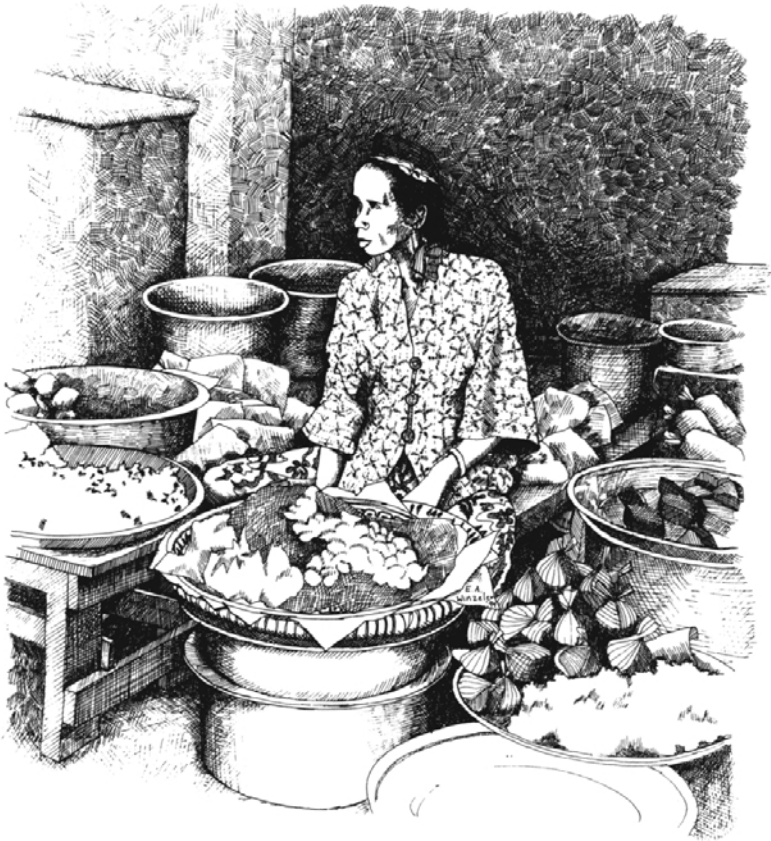
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Robert L. Winzeler

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

latah (lah'tah) [Malay, ticklish]. A nervous affection characterized by an exaggerated physical response to being startled or to unexpected suggestion, the subjects involuntarily uttering cries or executing movements in response to command or in imitation of what they hear or see in others. See also jumper *disease*.

Steadman's Medical Dictionary, 25th edition (1990)

Cambridge University Press

0521472199 - Latah in Southeast Asia: The History and Ethnography of a Culture-Bound Syndrome

Robert L. Winzeler

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
<i>List of maps and tables</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
Introduction: the problem of latah	1
Part I The problem of latah	9
1 The study of latah	11
2 Latah, history, and gender	25
3 “Latah” elsewhere	33
Part II Latah, society, and culture	53
4 Latah in Kelantan: an overview	55
5 Latah and Malay culture	74
6 Symbolic meanings and social uses	92
Part III Borneo comparisons and perspectives	107
7 Latah in Borneo	109
8 Latah and the Iban	119
Part IV Conclusions	127
9 Explaining latah: paradigm and paradox, syndrome and ritual, nature and culture	129
<i>Glossary</i>	137
<i>Notes</i>	141
<i>Bibliography</i>	156
<i>Index</i>	169
	ix

Cambridge University Press

0521472199 - Latah in Southeast Asia: The History and Ethnography of a Culture-Bound Syndrome

Robert L. Winzeler

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Maps and tables

Tables

3.1 Latah and other instances of “latah”	50
4.1 Rural Malays	58
4.2 Urban Malays	60
4.3 Rural Chinese	61
4.4 Thai	62
4.5 Latah and the economic status of households among rural and urban Malays	65
7.1 Sarawak Malays	112
7.2 Latah among Dayak peoples in Central and Western Sarawak	113
8.1 Sebuyau Iban	120

Maps

1 Malaya, Java, Borneo	2
2 Pasir Mas and Kota Baru Area	56
3 Latah in Borneo	110

Cambridge University Press

0521472199 - *Latah* in Southeast Asia: The History and Ethnography of a Culture-Bound Syndrome

Robert L. Winzeler

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

While I have been fascinated by *latah* – the “hyperstartle” pattern of the Malays, Javanese, and other Malayan peoples – since my first stay in Kelantan in 1966–7, it was not until I had systematically worked through the many published accounts (Winzeler 1984) that I decided to do field research on the topic. The current project began in 1984 and continued in 1985–6 and involved a region of Kelantan with which I was very familiar. After completing work in Kelantan I shifted to Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, for comparative purposes. I remained in Sarawak until the end of the summer of that year and then returned for further research in 1987, 1988, 1989, and 1990, first regarding *latah* and then concerning another project.

Further information about what I did where, and why, is included at various points throughout the book. In particular, as I later discuss in some detail, previous first-hand descriptions of the pattern are flawed by inadequate consideration of the range of individuals who are regarded by themselves and others as *latah*, and who are hardly “abnormal” in the usual sense of this term. In addition to obtaining new information on the meaning and social uses of *latah* in local settings, I needed to get in touch with a fairly large and diverse number of *latah* persons. My fieldwork thus consisted of four types of inquiry: (1) “participant-observation” and informal discussions with friends and acquaintances in and around Pasir Mas and in several areas of Sarawak, especially rural Lundu in the far west; (2) lengthy interviews with a hundred *latah* persons, about half of them Malays and half other ethnic inhabitants of Kelantan and Sarawak; (3) surveys of about six hundred and fifty households in Malay and other ethnic villages in Kelantan and Sarawak which yielded (among other things) further information on a hundred and fifty *latah* persons, some of whom were among those interviewed at length; (4) a broader ethnographic survey of the occurrence of *latah* among the principal ethnic populations in western and central Sarawak. I had intended to conduct a survey of the latter sort among the aboriginal peoples of the interior of peninsular Malaysia. However, after an initial effort in far-southern Kelantan I gave this up,

Cambridge University Press

0521472199 - Latah in Southeast Asia: The History and Ethnography of a Culture-Bound Syndrome

Robert L. Winzeler

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv Preface

because of difficulties in obtaining government permission and moving from one region to another, in favor of more substantial work in Sarawak where official policies were much more open and where travel, mainly by river, to many different villages was relatively easy.

Each of the various lines of investigation that I pursued has its strengths and weaknesses but together they provided a considerably larger and more diverse body of information about latah than, in so far as I am aware, has been previously obtained. With local assistants I did all of the research myself, using Malay. For reasons which I hope will become clear later on, I decided at the beginning of the project that I was not going to provoke latah myself or encourage others to do so on my behalf. Doubtless doing so would have provided interesting results in some instances but aside from ethical considerations, it would have probably also restricted my inquiries in other respects. Of the hundreds of persons I approached and asked for help I was flatly turned down and thereafter avoided by only one person, a latah Malay man in Pasir Mas. Some individuals were at first puzzled about my motives but, after these were explained, were willing to talk, some more fully than others, but most very forthrightly. However, the fact of my not deliberately instigating it notwithstanding, I saw a fair amount of latah, several instances of which I have described in later chapters. In a few cases the interviews produced what I took to be nervous latah reactions that could not be helped; in many others the mere mention of latah led, before (or in spite of) my explanation of my purposes, to the assumption that if I was interested in latah then I wanted to see it. The attitude in such instances seemed to be “oh, so you are interested in latah, well watch this.” In one incident I was nearly knocked down. Ronald Simons (1983c) has produced a valuable documentary film about latah and latah interaction, to which the interested reader is referred.

Finally, it has seemed to me that an adequate consideration of latah must include a reasonably detailed treatment of previous accounts of both latah and other patterns in the world with which it has frequently been compared. In particular, one of the main issues in the literature has involved the degree of similarity of the various instances. For some this is doubtless a sterile matter but for others – myself included – it goes to the heart of anthropology. In any case, this book is about the study of latah as well as about latah itself. Here I make no claim to have exhausted all sources. In particular I suspect that there is more to be found in the older literature on Indonesia than has so far been brought to light. And as far as the various non-Malayan instances are concerned, if I had to satisfy myself that all lines of inquiry had been pursued this book would never be finished. I have, however, attempted to provide a considerably fuller account of the study of latah and other such patterns than has yet appeared.

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0521472199 - Latah in Southeast Asia: The History and Ethnography of a Culture-Bound Syndrome

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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My other debts in this project are also multiple. I am first of all grateful to the large numbers of latah persons and others in Kelantan and Sarawak who talked to me about latah and answered my many questions. I am also very grateful to the national government of Malaysia and the state government of Sarawak for permission to visit and do research in Kelantan and Sarawak. I also wish to thank the Sarawak Museum in Kuching for supporting my research, providing valuable letters of introduction, advice, and other assistance at the beginning of my study, and for providing an extremely pleasant and stimulating base to which I have had frequent recourse throughout all of my stays in Kuching. In Malaysia I was also helped by many individuals. I wish to thank especially Professor Wazir Jahan Karim for hospitality at the University Sains in Penang, Encik Hasan Sulong of Pasir Mas and the Kelantan Civil Service, Encik Mohammed Dollah of Pasir Mas, Dr. Peter Kedit and Mr. Tuton Kaboy of the Sarawak Museum, Encik Leo Janek of Lundu, Temenggung Anthony Sedei of Dalat, and Graman Suat of Kapit. For help in Australia I am grateful to Derek Freeman for information regarding the Iban, to David Chandler, James Warren, and the late William Geddes for information regarding the Bidayuh and for hospitality. I am also indebted to Esteban Sarmiento for translations of the Italian studies of “latah” in north Africa and Yemen, and to Ken Smith for help with the several maps used in the present work.

Cambridge University Press

0521472199 - Latah in Southeast Asia: The History and Ethnography of a Culture-Bound Syndrome

Robert L. Winzeler

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi Acknowledgments

Many other persons have also provided valuable information or assistance, including a number who replied to my queries about the occurrence of latah among particular groups or regions: Anne Schiller regarding the Ngaju of Borneo, Bob Dentan regarding the Semai, and Karl Heider regarding the Minangkabau. I have also benefited from information and discussion regarding latah in Borneo provided by many other colleagues including Vinson Sutlive, Laura and George Appell, Allen Maxwell, Peter Metcalf, Peter Brosius, and Antonio Guerreiro. Of the many other friends and colleagues who have shared my interests in the topics dealt with in this book and with whom I have stimulating discussions, I want to acknowledge especially Ron Provencher, Bob McKinley, Susan Ackerman, and Raymond Lee. While Ronald Simons and I disagree in certain respects in our interpretations of latah, I greatly appreciate his help in formulating my own study, his hospitality, and the very stimulating exchanges we have had on several occasions.

The book itself has also had the benefit of the excellent comments and advice of several readers of various drafts of the manuscript. My colleague Marie Boutté read an early version and discussed it with me from the perspective of medical anthropology. The several readers for Cambridge University Press have been very helpful. James Peacock and Carol Laderman read an early draft and provided much useful criticism and support. Kirk Endicott similarly read a later draft with great care and offered many detailed comments and suggestions. I am also grateful for the interest, advice, and help Bobby Paul provided as an editor of the monograph series in psychological anthropology of which this book is a part. My daughter Elizabeth Winzeler provided the fine drawing which forms the frontispiece. My wife and colleague Judy Winzeler has been a part of the project from the beginning, from the fieldwork through the editing and proofreading, and it is to her I owe my deepest thanks.

Parts of chapters 1 and 2 were first published in different form in *Indonesia*, vol. 37, 1984, while different versions of chapters 7 and 8 first appeared respectively in the *Sarawak Museum Journal*, vol. 41(62), 1990, and in *Female and Male in Borneo*, edited by Vinson Sutlive and published by the Borneo Research Council.