A way of speaking up

FROM the late 1980s into the 1990s, social anthropologists were interested in studying the cultural-splitting which took place in rural Malaysia – the rise of Islamic revivalism or *dakwa* and the push of young rural Malay girls into factories in the urban Free Trade Zones.

There were families that welcomed the residential religious secondary schools where the syllabus was both secular and Islamic, combining the Lower Certificate of Education (Sijil Rendah Pelajaran) and the Sijil Rendah Ugama (SRU) or Lower Certificate of Religion (Islamic).

Malay parents wanted their daughters to be teachers and *ustazah* as this would ensure stable income, respect, marriage and family life. On the other hand, many welcomed the easy income their daughters would receive as production workers in the factories, although this involved leaving the villages for the city.

Strangely, despite the radical difference between the two situations, outbreaks of mass hysteria occurred in both – in the co-ed rural Islamic schools and on the assembly line in cities. Both were triggered off by the sighting of ghosts and apparitions and both were treated with exorcism by *bomoh* or shamans.

As a medical anthropologist who previously studied other medical culture-bound syndromes like *amuk* (homicidal suicide), *latah* (jumpers syndrome), *gila moroyan* (puerperal psychosis or post-partum depression) and accusations of witchcraft (belief that certain men and women harboured malevolent spirits), I felt that treatment by exorcism only addressed the symptoms and not the underlying causes.

Sure enough, at the co-ed secondary religious school at Langgar, Kedah where I observed a prolonged outbreak of mass hysteria among the younger girls, efforts by the *bomoh* to dispel the spirits did not work. The girls shrieked as if possessed, smashed window panes, dashed around with impromptu weapons of broken glass, rolled on the floor and fainted. Their eyes were glazed and they did not make eye contact. The female teachers told us they refused to eat or drink and their clothes were soaked with perspiration.

When the girls were revived after their fainting spell, they started the same bout of screaming. They were hostile to men who tried to help them. Malay teachers and local politicians were also chased away when they tried to help. These girls drew apparitions of ghostly figures, mostly in the male form, on the walls of the *surau*. But unlike the recent incident at SMK Pengkalan Chepa in Kelantan, not a single teacher was possessed in the same way.

We found that the school practised strict gender segregation with little opportunity for inter-gender socialisation. The boys seemed to have more opportunities for sports and games and could go to the nearby town during weekends. If a female student was found with a secret note or love verse (*pantun*), she was blamed for it, not the boy who slipped it on her desk. The moral behaviour of the girls was constantly under scrutiny.

Weeks later, after the incident subsided and we asked for official permission to give the girls group counselling at the Women's Development Research Centre (Kanita) at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, we found them to be quiet and subdued. After lunch, many started to relax and slowly began to talk. They said the syllabus was too heavy and Maths and Science subjects were too difficult to keep up with. They did not address gender and religious issues and said they had no memory of being possessed.

We found that many of the girls aged 13 to 15 were still in the comfort zone, sleeping with their mothers in their village homes and were closely bonded to them. It was quite obvious that in most incidents of this kind, a prevailing anxiety over sexual morality, studies and discipline had reached breaking point.

The factories gradually dealt with the problem by whisking out the first few girls who started screaming and sending them to the factory clinic. The factories developed an "elder sister" system (*kakak angkat*), not unlike a "big brother" programme, which linked them up with seasoned women workers from the cities. This programme worked and mass hysteria in the factories gradually died down.

The rigid structure of the assembly line, manned by supervisors who were mostly men back then, of different ethnicities was a system too alien and frightening for these young rural Malay girls, although they were school-leavers and a few years older than those in the schools.

Mass hysteria occurs in other Muslim societies and is not just a Malay phenomenon, while spirit possession, including the sighting of ghosts or spirits, features heavily in European societies.

But the paranormal is a mere manifestation of the depth of fear and anxiety of women who are pushed beyond their usual limits of tolerance and endurance. They are unable to articulate their inner fears and anxieties due to modesty, suppression or the absence of channels of communication.

In Kelantan, some of these ritualised channels of communication in the *Mak Yong* or *Main Puteri* (*Main Bagih* in Kedah) tradition, where women adopt the role, attire and mannerisms of princesses and vent their anger on those who have hurt them, have been banned since they are said to be contrary to Islamic teachings. Yet, in the pre-*dakwa* era, these were believed to be therapeutic and legitimate public venues for women to seek recourse for perceived injustices on their sex and gender.

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