

# communication and cognitive pluralism in a spirit possession event in Malaysia

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## spirit possession: theoretical perspectives

While an ample ethnographic literature on spirit possession exists, most of the published studies employ two well-worn analytic frameworks. On the one hand, functionalist approaches, treating spirit possession as a cultural form of conflict management that provides a sanctioned "safety-valve" through which powerless individuals may assert themselves, are presented in studies by Harris (1957), Mischel and Mischel (1958), Freed and Freed (1964), Lewis (1971), Frankel (1976), Crapanzano (1977), and Obeyesekere (1977). On the other hand, the meaningfulness of possession in its cultural context is the focus of studies such as those by Stirrat (1977) and Claus (1979), which examine the collective representations that underlie and shape possession behavior. Lambek (1980), however, suggests a stimulating departure from these standard lines of analysis in viewing possession as a system of communication based on a minimal triad: host, spirit, and intermediary.

Our interest is in spirit possession in relation to communication processes among individuals with diverse understandings about their social world. Given that no social actors can be expected to share exactly the same meanings and interpretations of events, it can be asked how competing definitions of reality articulate to produce a performance of spirit possession. We propose to examine how social actors with plural cognitions structure their communication to create and sustain spirit possession events. To do so, we focus on the communication process through which definition of and response to spirit possession is organized within a context of cultural pluralism.

Wallace (1970) argues that shared meanings, values, or motives are not a fundamental prerequisite of culture. He rejects the all too often unquestioned assumption that cognitive sharing or homogeneity is the basis of patterned social interaction. Social actors can re-

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*This study is concerned with how diverse definitions of spirit possession events in a factory are organized into predictable equivalence structures. A model of communication is utilized to show how information about possession is exchanged through reciprocal role behaviors at the primary level and through interpretive accounts at the secondary level. This approach emphasizes the complex processes involved in the communication of possession events. [Malay culture, spirit possession, communication]*

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spond appropriately and predictably to each other without sharing the same meanings and interpretation of events. Complementary, reciprocal expectations of behavior—what Wallace has termed “equivalence structures”—emerge over time despite cognitive heterogeneity. Following Wallace’s approach to culture, it can be argued that an analysis of spirit possession in relation to beliefs, ideologies, or collective representations presumed to be uniformly distributed among members of a society leaves much to be explained.

While it is undeniable that certain shared beliefs and conceptual categories or collective representations can be found to underlie spirit possession, or any other patterned social interaction for that matter, it does not follow that they are cognitively internalized, evaluated, or elaborated by members of a society in an identical manner. The inevitable diversity of the process, as well as the content of cognition, implies that “all societies are, in a radical sense, plural societies” (Wallace 1970:109–110). The organization of this cognitive heterogeneity into stable, predictable role behaviors then becomes problematic. Cognitively, homogeneous approaches to culture obscure the processes by which social actors with disparate motives, values, and cognitions form equivalence structures and communicate about events. There is no necessary one-to-one correspondence between collective representations and equivalence structures. The possible sets of equivalence structures that could be “mapped” onto a given set of collective representations are potentially unlimited.

An emphasis on the organization of cognitive diversity is useful in elucidating how events such as spirit possession are produced in a multiethnic setting where communication is particularly problematic. We are concerned with the issue of how communication occurs among groups of individuals distinguished from each other by language, religion, and customs, which amplify the pluralism intrinsic to any society. The crystallization of equivalence structures during the course of social interaction over a period of time enables such groups to communicate.

Spirit possession can be viewed as an event generated by communication. An adequate account of spirit possession events must specify how social actors *exchange* and *interpret* information about each other’s behavior. We introduce a two-stage model of communication to elucidate the process through which particular kinds of behavior are defined and responded to as spirit possession. The model distinguishes two levels of communication: at the primary level, information is exchanged through reciprocal role behavior (i.e., equivalence structures); at the secondary level, interpretive accounts of the completed interaction are formed by each participant. Exchange of interpretive accounts between the participants objectifies the information comprising the possession event.

Each of these levels of communication refers to temporally distinct exchanges of information between the participants. At the primary level, interaction is based on each participant assuming the perspective of “the generalized other” (Mead 1934:154). This implies that the performance of behavior is oriented not only to the expected responses of those physically present, but also to the general expectations of the group as a whole. Exchange of information is conducted largely on the basis of behavioral gestures, where individual A performs behavior X in anticipation of individual B responding in terms of behavior Y. The anticipation of behavioral roles suggests that participants create for themselves a sense of common group structure. Or, metaphorically speaking, participants can locate each other’s position on a behavioral map. Although the behavioral gestures are mutually predictable, they do not require the participants to hold the same motivations, intentions, or definitions of the behaviors performed.

At the secondary level, the participants reflect upon and interpret the behaviors which they have enacted or observed. These retrospective accounts of the events generate cognitive diversity. It may be argued that this cognitive heterogeneity arises from disparate motives and/or nonuniform internalization of collective representations by the par-

ticipants. Exchanges of accounts between participants result in further retrospective interpretation. The sequences of complementary interaction performed on the primary level are continuously reconstructed through ongoing conversation between the participants. This reconstruction of accounts is the major mechanism by which primary-level interactions are objectified or made "real," and it extends secondary-level communication indefinitely through time.

We will examine spirit possession in a multiethnic industrial setting in Malaysia<sup>1</sup> by asking how information about behavior is exchanged, interpreted, and objectified as an event. Implicit in our analysis is the assumption that events are created and sustained through interpretation. Our data base comprises informants' exegeses of a series of spirit possession performances in a shoe factory during a ten-month period. The communication process through which behavior in the factory was defined and responded to as spirit possession extends beyond the actual performance of the behavior. None of the participants in this communication process observed all of the spirit possession performances that occurred, although some had access to more performances than others. We directly observed only one instance of the possession performances. Thus, for both the informants and the researchers, spirit possession as an event emerges largely from communication of retrospective interpretations.

### spirit possession in Malay society

Before providing an ethnographic account of spirit possession in a Malaysian factory, it is necessary to divert briefly to discuss the forms of possession in Malay society. Most anthropologists who have written about Malay society have emphasized that spirit possession is a necessary aspect of the Malay style of tension management. Firth (1967) and Kessler (1977) have described in detail the performance of a ritual seance called *main puteri*, which they view as a traditional technique of stress management. The *main puteri* seance appears to be a popular form of public entertainment in Kelantan and other northern states, but not elsewhere, in Peninsular Malaysia.<sup>2</sup>

The seance is presided over by a *bomoh* (Malay traditional healer) and his assistant, the *mindok*, and attended by the patient and his or her relatives, friends, and interested neighbors. In the *main puteri* performance the *bomoh* enters a trance in which he is possessed by one or several spirits and he attempts to determine what or which spirit is responsible for the patient's illness. Once the spirit has been identified it is cajoled by the *mindok* to leave the patient's body. Firth has pointed out that the spirit speaking out through the *bomoh* in these ceremonies frequently spells out the nature of the stressful situation and, sometimes, names which persons are at fault. Thus, spirit possession in *main puteri* provides a mechanism for the resolution of grievances that are normally not given expression in other circumstances.

As a system of communication, the *main puteri* seance allows the *bomoh* freedom of expression normally denied under ordinary circumstances. The entranced *bomoh* provides a vehicle for his spirit-helper to manifest itself and to advise his patient through an intermediary, the *mindok*. Separate identity between the *bomoh* and his spirit-helper is maintained by the former's claim of total unawareness of the seance. This distinctiveness of identity is necessary to protect the *bomoh's* role in the seance, so that no possible blame can be attributed to him.

Firth (1967:202) provides a functional analysis of *main puteri* that focuses on the *bomoh's* role as dramatizer and resolver of his patient's problems: "From our point of view he is a master of men, using traditional techniques to facilitate and control the expression of forces which, uncontrolled, might damage physically and psychologically the personality of a man." Kessler (1977), however, departs from this model and directs attention to the

political aspects of possession which transcend individual psychological conflicts. He views the Kelantanese Malay idiom of spirit possession as a symbolic representation of personality and polity that connects illness and possession to other power-laden contexts. The symbolic language of spirit possession can be regarded as a conceptual system through which abstract power relationships (related to Malay royalty) are represented.

Unlike the *main puteri* seance, which is performed in a well-defined context, there is a broad category of Malay possession behavior that is spontaneous and disruptive. In *main puteri*, the performance of spirit possession by the *bomoh* is a predefined or conventional role that is expected and accepted by the audience.<sup>3</sup> However, in the other type of possession the role of the possessed emerges spontaneously in relation to the person's sudden enactment of aggressive behavior that can range from uncontrolled verbal abuse to physical violence. It is as though the audience is taken by surprise in the transformation of a person's behavior from calm to aggressive. But once aggressive behavior has been displayed, the emergent role is recognized and reacted to by others as spirit possession. In other words, it is the suddenness and out-of-context behavior that distinguish this type of possession from *main puteri*. As in the case of *main puteri*, spontaneous possession is enacted within a sphere of relative freedom. The person can act in a socially unacceptable manner without having to bear the responsibility for his behavior. This is achieved by attributing undesirable actions to the spirit world and by maintaining a separate identity from the invading spirits through claims of amnesia.

Instances of spontaneous possession include running *amok* and breaking out in hysteria. *Amok* is a well-documented Malay phenomenon involving sudden outbursts of violent behavior of homicidal intensity. In many cases, the *amok* runner would claim amnesia or attribute his actions to spirit possession (Murphy 1972:37). Some writers, such as Carr (1978), have applied a functional analysis to the phenomenon, arguing that *amok* is a "loophole option" or a culturally sanctioned outlet for dealing with difficult situations where other alternatives are not available. Malay hysteria, on the other hand, can either be enacted by a single individual or by a group of persons. In the former case, a Malay can suddenly become extremely aggressive or even physically violent, but not to the extent of going on a rampage (Raybeck 1974:236-237). The case of mass hysteria has also been well documented (Tan 1963; Teoh and Yeoh 1973; Teoh, Soewondo, and Sidharta 1975) and involves mainly young Malay females screaming and shouting for no apparent reason, convulsing, hyperventilating, or becoming extremely aggressive and abusive. The authors of these studies have offered functional explanations relating these bizarre behaviors to underlying conflicts of interest that are symbolically transformed and unconsciously acted out as spirit possession.

While we do not dispute these studies which attempt to draw the relationship between a uniform cultural ideology of possession and its functional or symbolic correlates, we nevertheless want to emphasize the communication aspects of Malay possession that have been neglected earlier. These previous studies have examined spirit possession in a Malay setting, but no data have been reported on the communication patterns in a possession event that occurs in a multiethnic setting. This aspect of possession is important because it amplifies the plurality of communication that already exists in any possession event. How the increased cognitive pluralism is organized comprises a central problem in any study of spirit possession in a multiethnic setting.

### **a case of mass spirit possession**

This case concerns labor-management relations in a shoe factor located on a rural industrial estate in Malacca, Peninsular Malaysia.<sup>4</sup> The Malacca state government is attempting to increase the state's level of economic activity by promoting the growth of in-

dustrial manufacturing. Expansion of the industrial sector in Malacca is seen as a means of containing and reducing the present high rate of migration from the state. Low wages and restrictions on unionization in new industries are offered as incentives for investment in Malacca. The state and federal governments are particularly eager to promote labor-intensive processing of Malaysian raw materials for export.

Kota Selatan (a pseudonym) shoe factory, one of the largest industrial employers in Malacca, is an example of export-oriented, labor-intensive manufacturing of finished products that utilizes local raw materials. The factory, which is located in rural northern Malacca, employs 668 production workers, 533 of whom are young Malay women living in nearby villages with their parents. Kota Selatan procures rubber from local suppliers and processes it into rubber footwear which is produced exclusively for the export market. The factory was established in 1974 as a joint venture between the Malacca State Development Corporation (MSDC) and a Malaysian Chinese family with large holdings in rubber and banking. While MSDC contributed the land and infrastructure and made a commitment to provide seven percent of the equity capital, the controlling shares in Kota Selatan are held by the Malaysian Chinese family. The chief director, among the three directors of the factory, is the eldest son of this family. The general manager of the factory is directly responsible to him.

The factory has adopted a policy of strong antiunionism. The labor force at Kota Selatan shoe factory has remained unrepresented as a result of actions based on this policy. The chief director has instructed the management to listen for rumblings of discontent and indications of collective organization among the workers. The leaders are to be identified and dismissed immediately as an example to any would-be organizers. The chief director candidly admitted to having a network of spies throughout the factory. His kinship ties with several of the middle-managers reinforce the efficacy of the spy network. Several years ago, one of the male workers tried to organize a union. He was overheard by one of the supervisors, who then reported him to the manager. His dismissal effectively intimidated the other workers.

The recruitment policies of the factory reflect the management's goals of low wages and maximum control over the labor force. Single females under 26 years of age who have not completed secondary school are preferred as production workers. The management regards married women as undependable workers and those who have completed secondary school as likely to look for better jobs. Workers are recruited from the local Labor Office, some apply personally at the factory, and others are recruited by their friends. There are always vacancies at Kota Selatan: an average of 15 female workers resign every month. In general, workers resign upon marriage or obtaining a better-paying job.

The wages offered at Kota Selatan are not competitive with the wages offered at other factories in the area; in fact, Kota Selatan wages are the lowest. On the average, female workers earn a daily wage of M\$3.00, while wages at the electronics factories located about 24 km. away start at M\$4.50 per day.

A clear-cut ethnic and sexual division of labor is evident in the organization of the factory. The administrative side of the factory is dominated by Chinese males, while the production side is overwhelmingly comprised of Malay females. Of the 101 males employed at Kota Selatan, 25 are Chinese; 20 of the Chinese employees hold managerial posts and only 5 are manual workers. The 54 Malay and 22 Indian males, by contrast, are predominantly manual workers; only 5 Malay and 2 Indian males are employed as managerial staff. The factory employs 609 females, 533 of whom are Malay and all but 6 of whom are production workers; the 42 Chinese and 34 Indian females, with 9 exceptions, are all production workers. The production side of the factory includes four main divisions: assembly, sewing, packing, and milling. The female workers are concentrated in the assembly and sewing departments, while the largest number of male production workers are found in the milling section.

The production and administrative sections of the factor are socially, as well as spatially, distinct. Aside from the salary differentials, the administrative staff work in air-conditioned comfort, while the production workers are subjected to hot, poorly ventilated, and noisy surroundings. Administrative workers also receive a monthly salary and an annual bonus, unlike the production workers who are paid a daily wage and no annual bonus.

The dramatic idiom of mass spirit possession has become the focus of labor-management relations at Kota Selatan factory. More than 40 outbreaks of mass spirit possession occurred among the Malay female production workers during the period July 1977 to April 1978. The simultaneous displays of violent convulsions, loss of consciousness, incoherent mumblings, and aggressive behavior among groups of Malay female workers have been interpreted as spirit possession by most of the unaffected workers and by many members of the surrounding community. These episodes of bizarre behavior occur spontaneously, especially in the assembly and sewing departments where most of the Malay female workers are found. When one or several workers become hysterical, others attempt to hold them down, apply cooling agents (water, ointments) to their foreheads, and accompany them home after they have calmed down. Many workers fear approaching the hysteria victims because they believe that their wild behavior is "contagious." But those who volunteer to hold them down usually claim that they are awed by the victims' abnormal strength. None of the Chinese or Indian female workers have been affected by hysteria, but they have reported feeling frightened about these events. Similarly, no male workers in Kota Selatan have been victims of mass hysteria.

The general manager of the factory, G. F., described the female production workers as normally docile and cooperative. Aside from the outbreaks of spirit possession, the management has few complaints with the female production workers' job performance and discipline. The male workers, on the other hand, present continual problems of insubordination and theft. The management, although perplexed by the possession outbreaks among the female workers, does not hold them responsible for their disruptive behavior. The most serious incident to date involved 30 female workers. The general manager had to send the victims home and close the factory for nearly two weeks.

Despite the consequences of these disruptions, the management did not blame or punish the workers involved. Although some of the female workers are regular victims of spirit possession, none of them have been dismissed for their bizarre behavior. While the management refers to the workers' supernatural interpretations as "superstitious," they accept the claim that the behavior labeled "spirit possession" is unmotivated and involuntary. The workers' belief that some of the girls had accidentally disturbed a family of spirits residing in the water tank in the factory elicited a sympathetic response from the management. G. F. summoned four *bomohs* to exorcise the spirits in an attempt to alleviate the workers' fears of alleged supernatural influence pervading the factory. The ritual slaughter of a goat, along with other sacrifices, to propitiate the offended spirits in the water tank failed to control the malign supernatural forces attacking the Malay females. Incidents of mass spirit possession continued to occur even after exorcisms and other rituals had been performed. The four *bomohs* could not agree among themselves on the best measures to take and disparaged each other's occult powers.

Cases of spirit possession in the factory became more and more frequent after G. F. was appointed as the new general manager in June 1977. Sporadic cases had occurred from time to time prior to G. F.'s appointment, but the frequency and scale of the outbreaks increased markedly after his arrival at Kota Selatan factory. The previous manager, who like G. F. was also Chinese, was described by the Kota Selatan employees as apathetic and relaxed. G. F. is perceived by the workers as much stricter. However, he reported that he had not implemented any changes of routine or personnel in July 1977 when mass spirit possession

outbreaks reached epidemic proportions in the factory. The workers had, in fact, received several pay increments since G. F. became general manager. G. F., a young science graduate, admitted to being baffled by the strange events in the factory.

Significant aspects of labor relations at the factory were revealed in interviews obtained from four female Malay victims still employed at the factory. Strongly felt personal and collective grievances emerged from these interviews. Each of the possession victims expressed anger over the low wages at the factory and the management's alleged withholding of a commission promised to them as part of an incentive scheme developed by G. F. Lack of a bus-fare subsidy, strict rules, difficulty in obtaining paid leave, and fear of the male production supervisors were also cited as grievances. The possession victims asserted that the other workers also shared these complaints and had covertly cooperated to reduce production output to spite the management.

The four victims' accounts, which revealed their belief that the management had unfairly deprived the workers of their commission, suggest that the new incentive plan adopted after G. F. took charge of the factory might be a factor related to the regular pattern of disruptions that began during the same period of time. G. F. described the commission incentive plan which he had introduced to encourage greater productivity: the girls were offered two Malaysian cents for each additional pair of shoes beyond their production targets. The girls had been enthusiastic when the plan was first implemented, but later became apathetic because they felt that the reward was too low to justify extra efforts. Moreover, delays in the delivery of raw materials as a result of organizational confusion had prevented the workers from achieving their production targets. The incentive scheme was also self-defeating because, in striving to reach their production targets in the shortest time possible, the workers tended to become sloppy and turned out low-quality products which were later rejected. Wasted efforts and failure to earn extra income embittered the workers toward the incentive system.

While antagonism toward the management arose as a result of the workers' dissatisfaction with the incentive system and work conditions, it was neither perceived by the workers nor by the management as a significant causal factor in the occurrence of possession behavior in the factory. Informal interviews at the factory and in the nearby villages with the workers, their families, and neighbors indicated that none of them drew any connections between the numerous outbreaks of possession behavior and labor-management conflicts. None of the informants connected the alleged supernatural influences at the factory with the workers' grievances. Neither was this connection perceived by G. F., who, indeed, expressed surprise when the authors suggested it to him, although he admitted that it was a plausible explanation. Thus, the outbreaks of mass spirit possession at Kota Selatan factory and the resentments of the workers were perceived as two unrelated domains.

### **ethnicity, role behavior, and communication**

The events in Kota Selatan factory will be examined in relation to the communication process through which the participants defined spirit possession and organized their responses to it. We will apply our model of communication to analyzing the interactions *between* the management and the workers and *within* each group of participants.

Communication between the management and the workers was conducted largely on the primary level, where the participants exchanged and interpreted information about each other's position through the enactment of reciprocal role behaviors. There is no evidence to indicate that the management and the workers traded verbal accounts of the possession events. While some of the Malay female workers engaged in bizarre, disruptive

behaviors,<sup>5</sup> the general manager and other administrative staff members chose to respond to them *as though* they were possessed. They sent the girls home on medical leave, allowed them to return to their jobs without penalty, and later summoned *bomohs* to exorcise the factory. These complementary actions implicitly affirmed the female workers' definitions of the disturbances as spirit possession. The management's action was intended to restore order and productivity, though they were not fully convinced of the workers' supernatural definitions. While perplexed about the meaning of the workers' behavior, the management nevertheless assumed the perspective of "the generalized other," anticipating that the possession victims would be brought under control by responding to them in terms of their own definitions.

The communication between the management and workers comprises a system of equivalent behavioral expectancies that forms the basis of a mutually predictable relationship. The complementary roles of the possessed as unfortunate victims of the supernatural, and of the management as concerned bystanders, fulfill an implicit contract. This implicit contractual relationship does not suggest that the labor-management conflicts will be solved, however, because no ideological consensus underlies the equivalence structure that forms between the management and the workers during the course of the possession events. There is no overlap in ideological commitments between both groups of participants. On the one hand, the management is committed to the maintenance of a modern factory at minimum costs. It perceives spirit possession as an anachronism that can only be controlled by traditional methods, such as exorcism and animal sacrifice. The workers, on the other hand, believe that possession is real and that it can occur anywhere, even in a modern factory. Thus, their grievances are submerged in supernatural symbols that do not find expression in direct confrontation with the management. In other words, this implicit contract obscures the diverse underlying cognitions of the participants but serves to sustain the external, anticipatory role behaviors that continue to reify spirit possession.

Communication at the secondary level was confined mainly to exchange of accounts among participants within each group. Members of the Chinese-dominated management attributed the disruptions in the factory to physical and psychological causes rather than spirit possession. The management characterized the Malay workers as generally "superstitious," i.e., more preoccupied with supernaturalism than are the other ethnic groups. They also blamed malnutrition for the Malay female workers' susceptibility to possession behavior. The manager's wife, who works part-time in the factory, insisted that many of the Malay female workers did not eat lunch and were undernourished as a result of spending most of their earnings on clothing and cosmetics.

Unlike the management's interpretive accounts, those of the female workers stressed supernatural causes. Their accounts were of two general types: (1) territorial spirits inhabiting the factory grounds had been inadvertently offended, and (2) evil spirits possessed girls who had violated the traditional moral codes. In the first account, it was maintained that a family of spirits residing in a large water tank in the factory had possessed some female workers in retaliation for having been disturbed by them. According to the second account, the habitual victims of spirit possession were "cheap" girls who indulged in such scandalous behavior as going out at night to parties where they danced, drank alcohol, and mixed freely with men. These girls became "unclean" and thus exposed themselves to spirit attacks the following day at the factory.

For the female workers, these accounts alone did not adequately explain differential ethnic susceptibility to possession.<sup>6</sup> Many of them resorted to the use of ethnic stereotypes to account for the observation that Malay females appeared to be more vulnerable to supernatural attacks than the Chinese and Indian females. Some Malay female workers attributed the non-Malay females' relative immunity from spirit possession to pork consump-

tion. They claimed that the spirits have an aversion to people who eat pork and only disturb those for whom pork is taboo.<sup>7</sup> Some of the non-Malay female workers perceived the Malay girls as more promiscuous than the non-Malay girls. They further alleged that sexual impurity on the part of their Malay co-workers provoked the spirit attacks.

These stereotypes are self-fulfilling prophecies that affirm the notion of Malay vulnerability to spirit possession. The communication of these stereotypes among the female workers serves to reinforce their belief in the reality of spirit possession. Similarly, the application of ethnic stereotypes by the management to the Malay female workers forms the basis of their strategy to control the workers' behavior. The management endorsed the use of *bomohs* in the factory because they viewed the Malay workers as superstitious, simple-minded village girls who would only respond to exorcism and other shamanic rituals. The application of ethnic stereotypes in the possession events therefore legitimizes the implicit contract between the management and the workers. Resort to such stereotypes allows post hoc justifications of both parties' present conduct. These justifications are maintained so long as no alternative views are forwarded, accepted, or translated into actual behavior.

Ethnic stereotypes only provide a legitimizing factor but are not instrumental in shaping the rules of the implicit contract. These rules emerge from interactions between the management and the workers but are based on choices and decisions made within each group. For example, the management can choose to adopt a harsher policy by dismissing the possession victims rather than by employing *bomohs* to calm them down. They can decide to view the "simple-mindedness" of the village girls as a serious threat to the welfare of the factory. Similarly, the female workers can choose to shift their definitions of possession from that of a frightening event to that of a public nuisance, while continuing to view "promiscuity" and "pork taboo" as legitimate explanations of their co-workers' bizarre behavior. Each of these decisions, by either the management or the workers, to follow a certain line of action will result in the mutual behavioral adjustment of one group to the other. In short, the possible sets of equivalence structures that could be formed from the various combinations of emergent rules are potentially diverse.

Our model of communication distinguishes between reciprocal role behaviors that perpetuate possession events and intragroup articulations that sustain the enactment of such behaviors. It focuses on the organization of cognitive diversity on the secondary level into stable equivalence structures on the primary level. However, the model does not deal with the question of how decisions are made, within groups, that affect the rules of the equivalence structures. Since the model relies mainly on the immediate statements of our informants, it does not probe the internal dynamics of each group of participants. The question of why the management chose to resort to *bomohs* and not dismissal as a solution to their problem requires an in-depth investigation of the decision-making process at the managerial level. Similarly, the question of how the definitions of the possession events were arrived at by the factory workers requires an investigation of the interactional process among them. However, these investigations were not possible during our fieldwork.

## **conclusion**

Our account of mass spirit possession in an industrial setting in Malacca has identified problematic aspects of possession events that are not apparent in the Kelantan cases described by Firth and others. Unlike cases of spirit possession documented in northern Malaysia, the events that we have examined are not related to a tradition of public ritual seances. The cases of spirit seances observed in northern Malaysia are usually well

advertised prior to their enactments, fairly routinized, and commonly accepted as entertaining, as well as therapeutic, by the audience. However, the occurrence of mass spirit possession in a modern setting, such as a factory, is usually characterized by sudden, spontaneous outbursts and disruption of routine activities. Although the bizarre behaviors manifested in these episodes are fairly predictable, the audience nevertheless perceives them as frightening. The contrast between these two types of Malay spirit possession suggests that it is misleading to treat possession as a uniform, undifferentiated phenomenon.

The meanings attributed to the possession events, whether in a ritual seance or in a factory, are shaped by the larger social context in which the events occur. We would expect the meanings attributed to *main puteri* performances in Kelantan to be more uniform than those attributed to possession behavior in Kota Selatan factory. This is because Kelantan is ethnically more homogeneous and less industrialized than Malacca, although this may be changing as Kelantan becomes more exposed to external influences through the mass media, returning migrants from abroad and other Malaysian states, and government-sponsored development programs. The process of industrialization in Malaysia, as reflected in Kota Selatan factory, generates alternative definitions of reality that compete with traditional world views of the various ethnic communities. These competing world views add to the cognitive complexity underlying a possession event. Our paper focuses on how cognitive variability resulting from the juxtaposition of modern and traditional world views is translated into actual behavior. In this respect, the application of Wallace's model of complementary interactions to the events at Kota Selatan factory demonstrates its utility in analyzing how this cognitive complexity is organized into equivalence structures.

## notes

*Acknowledgments.* Fieldwork was carried out in Kota Selatan (a pseudonym) and the surrounding community from February to August 1978. We would like to thank Drs. Lee Kin Tat and Lim Suan Poh for making this study possible.

<sup>1</sup> Malaysia, a Southeast Asian nation of about 12 million people, is located south of Thailand and north of the Indonesian Archipelago. Malaysia includes a peninsula, consisting of 11 states known collectively as West or Peninsular Malaysia, and the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, known as East Malaysia. The population of Peninsular Malaysia is multiethnic, comprising about 53 percent Malays, 35 percent Chinese, 11 percent Indians and 1 percent "others" (Eurasians, aborigines).

<sup>2</sup> Banks (1976) has discussed the relationship between *main puteri* seances and the court dances and dramas of the Patani Kingdom in south Thailand. He maintains that these seances reflect northern Malaysia's indebtedness to the cultural influence of Patani.

<sup>3</sup> *Main puteri* seances are normally scheduled and well advertised in advance because elaborate preparations are required (see Banks 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Malacca is one of the 13 states in Malaysia and is located on the southwest coast of the peninsula.

<sup>5</sup> We are not concerned here with the question of why it is that only young, unmarried Malay females are usually involved in these episodes of mass spirit possession. Our focus is mainly on the communication process in these episodes of possession. However, we accept to a degree the functional explanation that spirit possession represents a cultural means of temporary release from role constraints on women in certain societies.

<sup>6</sup> The question of differential ethnic susceptibility to possession behavior underscores the importance of cognitive pluralism in these events. Although members of the three ethnic groups subscribe to the same underlying ideology of spirit possession, only the Malay workers have consistently translated elements of this ideology into actual behavior. This suggests that differential ethnic susceptibility to possession occurs as a result of cognitive differences among workers of the three ethnic groups. How an underlying ideology of possession is variously internalized, elaborated, and channeled into an ethnic role poses another research problem which is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> Since all Malays are Muslims by birth, pork is a taboo food item. The Chinese and Indians, however, do not have any religious constraints on pork consumption (except for Chinese and Indian Muslims, or Indian Hindus who eat a vegetarian diet).

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