In most developing countries, economic growth since the 1970s has been fueled in part by urban factories that rely on the labor of young unmarried female migrants from rural villages (Kusago 2000:3). This article will focus on these factories in Malaysia and will examine how anthropological research on spirit possession may elucidate the ways in which HIV/AIDS is understood and discussed among female Malaysian factory workers and Malaysian society more generally.

Female Factory Workers in Malaysia
Manufacturing has become one of the most popular forms of employment for women in Malaysia, and approximately a quarter of employed women work in the manufacturing industry (Root 2008:409). Furthermore, factory workers in Malaysia have historically been predominantly female. Roughly 95% of new manufacturing employees were women throughout the early and mid-1980s (Kaur 1999:19). This gender disparity has decreased over time, but women continue to represent over half of unskilled factory workers (Sivalingam 1994:21). Factory work in Malaysia is thus very much a ‘feminite’ profession.

Women frequently work in these factories for only a few years, and their wages may be insufficient to meet even their own cost of living. These low wages mean that roughly 15% of female factory workers simultaneously hold other jobs, perhaps as seamstresses and food vendors (Root 2009:907). Despite these economic hardships, female factory workers have been portrayed in Malaysian popular culture as sexually unrestrained and profligate pleasure-seekers (Ackerman 1991:199).

Some factory workers certainly do engage in conspicuous consumption but generally to a lesser extent than university students and young middle-class professionals. Nonetheless, these working class female factory workers have come under scrutiny in ways that middle-class women have not (Ong 1987:181). Female factory workers have become a symbol of social transgression.

Spirit Possession and Social Boundaries
The anthropologist Aihwa Ong argues that the entrance of large numbers of women into the workforce in the early days of the Malaysian manufacturing boom was experienced as a form of moral disorder and social chaos. Anxieties over social discord translated into fears of filth and overt sexuality that had to be disciplined and regulated (Ong 1988:35). Female factory workers were thus seen simultaneously as vulnerable to moral chaos and as dangerous disseminators of immorality.

In the wake of this societal transformation, a series of spirit possession incidents occurred among young female factory workers, leading to work slow-downs and temporary factory closures. A spirit possession is an event where an external force, such as a ghost or divinity, is believed to take complete control over a person for a period of time (Boddy 1994:407). These spirit possession incidents in Malaysian factories were marked by loss of consciousness and violent convulsions in the victim, as well as aggressive behavior (Ackerman 1991:204). In one incident from 1980, described by Ong, twenty-one female factory workers based in Pontian had to be removed from the factory in ambulances as some screamed, ‘I will kill you’ to factory supervisors (Ong 1988:32).

Ong argues that these mass spirit possessions were triggered by anger toward factory supervisors and fears of defilement.

Spirit possession in Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s was framed around concerns of pollution that arose when social boundaries and spaces were transgressed. Dangerous spirits capable of possession are traditionally believed, in Malaysia, to occupy swamps and bodies of water. Moreover, menstrual blood is perceived to be polluting and the object most likely to anger spirits. In these new factories, female workers viewed the modern toilet tanks as horrifyingly ‘filthy’ spaces inhabited by potentially dangerous spirits (Ong 1988:31-2). Physical spaces in the factories, like the toilet tanks, were therefore experienced as dangerous sites of pollution.

The new factories also pushed social boundaries as large numbers of unmarried female workers mingled unattended with male supervisors. Spirit possessions were thus trig-
HIV/AIDS and Social Boundaries

The Malaysian Ministry of Health deemed female factory workers at high risk of HIV infection as early as 1993, and a 2001 survey by the Ministry of Health reiterated this high-risk label. The anthropologist Robin Root argues that this perception of increased risk stems from discourses within Malaysia that conceptualize factory women as vulnerable to moral risks (2008:407).

Since 1986 when HIV was first reported in Malaysia, over 60 thousand cases of HIV infection have been recorded. The major route of transmission in Malaysia has historically been intravenous drug use among men, and 90% of people in Malaysia living with HIV are male. Moreover, less than seven percent of men or women known to be HIV positive have been factory workers despite factory work comprising over 27% of total employment (PT Foundation 2011; Hassan et al. 2010:21). Female factory workers are therefore not among those most affected by HIV infection in Malaysia, but these women are nonetheless seen as especially at risk.

Many in Malaysia conceptualize HIV infection in moralistic and religious terms. In a 2009 study of staff members at Universiti Putra Malaysia, almost a third of respondents believed that HIV/AIDS is a punishment from God (Tee and Huang 2009:183). It is then not surprising that female factory workers seen as ‘morally vulnerable’ would also be perceived as particularly at risk for infection. This morally-based understanding of illness transmission can also be found among female factory workers themselves.

Root’s research in factories of Penang State, Malaysia found that 80% of the women interviewed did not categorize HIV as a sexually transmitted disease. Sixteen percent of women interviewed believed that HIV infection could not occur through sex with a non-stranger, and 14% stated that infection could not occur through sex with a religious person. Furthermore, 64% of the women interviewed believed that religion could protect against HIV infection. Religion was posited to protect against infection because it orders and reinforces social boundaries and spaces is believed to increase risk of HIV infection. Reaffirming these social boundaries through institutions like religion is, therefore, promoted as a form of illness prevention.

Conclusions

Many in Malaysia experienced the entrance of mass numbers of young unmarried rural women into the workforce in the 1970s and 1980s as a deeply problematic social transgression. Female factory workers faced suspicion from the general public and had to manage their own concerns over moral and social boundaries. These issues became symbolized in fears of defilement and pollution and were embodied in incidents of spirit possession experienced by female factory workers. Today, similar concerns over morality and social boundaries can be seen in understandings of HIV/AIDS that place risk of infection as an issue of moral and social transgression.

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