

EPIDEMIC HYSTERIA AND SOCIAL CHANGE: AN OUTBREAK IN A LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL IN MALAYSIA

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SYNOPSIS

The interest in Epidemic Hysteria has been due to an increased prevalence of the phenomena in Malaysia in recent years. This paper describes the prevalence and characteristics of Epidemic Hysteria in Malaysia. An outbreak in a rural Malay lower secondary girls' school was described and the factors precipitating the outbreak were studied in depth. The social interactions, native interpretation and psychodynamic constellations in the microcosm of tensions and interpersonal conflicts leading to the outbreak of hysteria were analysed and discussed. The paper also deals with the problem of social change within a closed-in rural community and how the various key personalities involved grappled with a problem thereby instituting social change.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most interesting and yet most neglected phenomenon of social psychology in recent years in Malaysia is that of outbreaks of epidemic hysteria amongst adolescent girls from rural Malay schools and hostels. Outbreaks of hysteria have also spread to involve Malay female factory workers working in urbanized regions. No doubt epidemic hysteria has been in existence in Malaysia from time immemorial, occurring sporadically in distant *kampongs* (villages) and remote rural areas. It has also been known to occur in secluded girls' hostels of religious schools. Because of an increase in the prevalence of the condition in recent years, the subject is now accredited due importance. It is postulated that the exacerbation of outbreaks could be related to the rapid social changes that are occurring in Malaysia in the last decade.

Medical literature on the subject, especially in the latter part of the nineteenth century, is abundant (Hecker, 1844). Ignorance, insecurity and anxiety were among the important generating factors that disturbed societies and caused epidemics of hysteria. Million (1969) wrote: "..... as terrifying uncertainties of medieval

life persisted, fear lead to wild mysticism and mass pathology. Signs for detecting those possessed of demons became increasingly indiscriminate . . . epidemic manias of raging, jumping, drinking and wild dancing were first noted in the 10th century . . . referred as Tarantism in Italy . . . and in Europe as St. Vitus's dance." Madden (1798) regarded these passing events as of an extraordinary character as indications of too much political excitement, sectarian strife and too little rationalism in religion. Like mental illness, mass epidemics were recorded by Hecker (1844) in convents and nunneries in Europe, by Huxley (1952) at London, by Davenport (1906) at John Wesley's revival meetings and by Stone (1934) at the height of the Second Adventist Millerite movement in New England. More recently, Johnson (1945) described the 'Phantom Anaesthetist of Mattoon, Schuler *et al*, (1943) reported outbreaks of involuntary twitchings at a school in Louisiana and Cantril (1942) documented the mass panic resulting from Orson Welles' broadcast of the "War of the Worlds." Ikeda (1966) investigated an outbreak among nurses in a Japanese leprosarium, while Jacobs (1965) described the "Phantom Slasher at Taipeh". More recently, McEvedy and others (1966, 1970) recorded epidemics of fainting among school girls, as well as the postulate that the Royal Free Epidemic of Encephalomyelitis among the nursing staff could have been outbreaks of epidemic hysteria. Two outbreaks of 'hyperventilation syndrome' among school girls were recently reported in Japan (Yamakawa T. *et al*, 1969; Daido, S., 1969).

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Prevalence and Characteristics of Epidemic Hysteria in Malaysia

Between 1962-1971, twenty-nine schools in Peninsular Malaysia were recorded to have had outbreaks of epidemic hysteria. Whilst outbreaks were sporadic in nature, the year 1971 saw a total of 17 schools being involved with such outbreaks. Each phenomenon was highlighted by the press and mass media and more schools were affected. Except for these schools (two from the English medium), all the others were from the Malay medium, affecting principally adolescent Malay school girls in lower and upper secondary classes. In only two schools were outbreaks confined in highly urbanized regions. In practically all the schools involved, there was a co-educational system.

Generally Malay adolescent girls were influenced by hysteria although thirteen school boys in the 1971 epidemics were also affected. In at least three schools, Malay school teachers and a female school clerk were also affected. The only non-Malay girl (a Chinese) who was reported to have been affected suffered from a past history of epilepsy. The number of pupils affected altogether ranged from 2 to 78 persons. The ages extended from 11 to 18 years. The duration of the outbreaks was from one or two days to one with a total period of six months. Such episodes of hysteria often coincided with some major catastrophe or event in the life of the school or hostel. In some schools, sports practice, examinations or a natural disaster precipitated the outbreaks.

The clinical characteristics of the outbreaks were monotonously similar. The girls screamed, hyperventilated into a state of tetanic spasms and some even went into a trance-like state. Tan (1963) recorded vividly an outbreak of hysteria in a religious Arabic school, and that pattern of behaviour still exists unchanged. One or two of the subjects in an altered state of consciousness acted as the mouth-piece on behalf of the group, ventilating their many frustrations and discontentments. The girls characteristically took hints and cues from each other and afterwards claimed amnesia for the episodes. The visual objects seen in their trance-like states were not dissimilar to the description of Malay ghosts in mythology, recorded by Skeat in 1900.

The interpretation of all the outbreaks was connected with rural Malay belief, i.e., a person could be possessed by a *jinn* (free spirit) at any time in his life, either accidentally or because

he had interfered with the living places of these *jins*. The *bomoh* or *pawang* (Malay indigenous healer) was invariably called upon to pacify the offended *jins* and ritual cleansing of the territory performed.

TABLE I
SCHOOLS AND THEIR MEDIUM OF
INSTRUCTION AFFECTED BY
EPIDEMIC HYSTERIA, 1962-71

Year	No. of Schools	Medium of Instruction
1962	1	Malay
1966	2	Malay
1967	2	Malay
1968	2	Malay
1969	2	Malay
1970	3	2 Malay, 1 English
1971	17	15 Malay, 2 English

Description of an Outbreak of Epidemic Hysteria

It was in one of these many isolated rural Malay schools and hostels that an episode of epidemic hysteria occurred in early 1971 among adolescent Malay hostel school girls. The hostel housed approximately 50 Malay secondary school girls. The author investigated this outbreak at depth. All parties involved in the outbreak were interviewed immediately after the episodes. The affected girls were psychologically tested for intelligence, and their projective perceptions (Ravens, TAT, Draw-a-Man-Test) and the headmaster of the school was given 10 sessions of psychotherapy for both diagnostic and therapeutic purposes. This study deals with the nature of the outbreak, its native interpretations and cultural implications, the intertwining of personality conflicts and social interactions and the psychodynamic constellations precipitating the outbreak of hysteria.

In January 1971, the devastating floods that swept Peninsular Malaysia affected this school. The obsessional headmaster was reluctant to evacuate the hostel girls to higher grounds (thus endangering their lives). The Ministry of Education subsequently issued a directive to all heads of schools to issue flood relief financial subsidy to affected pupils without undue investigation and delay. Again the headmaster of this school was unable to deal with this open-ended order and delayed the handing out of relief money, thereby resulting in a mass of petitions from parents against him.

Six weeks after the floods, one of the hostel girls, suddenly became depressed and hyperventilated into a state of tetanic spasms. She was

revived by a *bomoh* immediately. Within the next fortnight, two more seizures affected this girl. A little while later, two more residents were possessed. One of them spoke out, under a state of spirit possession, in a stylized fashion in the manner of Malay royalty, saying that the place was *kotor* (dirty) and that there was enmity and jealousy among the hostel girls. She complained that the girls had disposed of their soiled sanitary towels into a disused *lom-bong* (mining pool) behind the hostel and had ritually and physically polluted the living quarters of the offended *jin*. She further ventilated the ill-feelings and grievances of the hostel residents. The following day more girls were possessed until eventually five girls would go into possession simultaneously practically every day. Each time the same girl spoke up, in possession, making wrong doers apologise, demanding that stolen articles be returned and instituting spiritual rules and regulations for the hostel girls to follow.

A total of eight girls went into possession throughout the period of the next ten weeks. However, the five girls who were simultaneously possessed formed one sorority under their 'spokesman'. Of the other three girls possessed, two were incidentally possessed due to onlooker suggestibility, while the third was the headgirl, the headmaster's favourite, and a strong antagonist to the 'spokesman'.

All these episodes culminated in a climax at the end of April 1971, when high-ranking Ministry of Education officials converged on the school to investigate the outbreak. All the five girls suddenly went into hysteria together. The community leaders of the small town, the district officer, the *penghulu* (headman), the chairman of the school board of governors, all made their appearance together. The 'spokesman' in a trance-like state held court with the *bomoh*, headmaster and ultimately with the *penghulu*, kneeling reverently and beseechingly before her and after 30 minutes of hard bargaining, agreed to the sacrifice of a white cockerel instead. Her language was in extremely fluent regal Malay, almost poetic and very imperious. All the onlookers agreed that her vocabulary was beyond her educational status.

Three days later, on a Friday, a *pawang*, performed a ritual ceremony in the school before 300 witnesses to placate the offended *jin*. The ritual was as old as mythology and the instruments and elements utilized were steeped

with tradition. The *pawang* assured the offended *jin*, on behalf of the girls, that they would not offend him again. He then instituted a three day *pantang* (abstinence) period when certain observances were set for the whole local community to follow. If such rules were violated, then there was a possibility of re-possession by the offended *jins*. Following this ritual, practically all episodes of hysteria halted.

Native Interpretation of the Outbreak of Hysteria

Almost universally, the local Malay community subscribed to the belief that the hysterical episodes were due to possession by offended spirits called *jins* (free spirits), probably a good Muslim *jin*. These *jins* were believed to dwell in a territory behind the girls' hostel. These *jins* were offended by the disposal of soiled menstrual towels in their territory, thereby causing physical and ritual pollution. Since they could no more tolerate the pollution, they decided to attack the girls when their *semangat* (life force or vital energy) was at their lowest ebb.

The Role of the Headmaster in the Outbreak of Hysteria

The girls' hostel at this school was run by a headmaster. The former hostel mistress had left the post due to his gross interference. He then made no further effort to find a new hostel mistress. He spent much of his time making unannounced rounds at the hostel at odd hours of the day and night. This behaviour was deeply resented by the hostel girls and were most *malu* (embarrassed) by it, since within the Malay *adat* (customary laws) it was taboo for a male to enter the living quarters of a female (Fraser, 1962; Wilder, 1970). However, he rationalized that since he treated them like his daughters, he was allowed to transgress this social taboo. It became a universal fear among the girls that he might suddenly appear while they were in a state of undress.

It was generally felt by the local Malay community that it was incorrect and improper for a man to manage a girls' hostel. Furthermore, the open secret of the headmaster's voyeuristic behaviour was regarded with apprehension by most of the community leaders who even suspected that he had sexually molested them, although there was no evidence of this.

The headmaster took upon himself the twenty-four hour responsibility of caring for the hostel

girls. He was regarded with ambivalent feelings by the girls who identified him as a father-figure and yet resented him for his misdemeanours.

Community Reactions and Solutions to a Problem

There was mounting community pressure to have the headmaster transferred for the following reasons:—

- (a) The maladministration of the school and the poor headmaster—teacher relationship.
- (b) The wild rumours of his voyeuristic behaviour.
- (c) The administrative inefficiency in obtaining electricity for the school.
- (d) The crisis at the January floods when he endangered the lives of the hostel girls.
- (e) The mass petitions by parents over the delay in distribution of flood-relief money.
- (f) The low standard of education at the school.

The district officer, *penghulu*, chairman of the school board of governors pressurized the chief education officer of the state to effect an immediate transfer. However the headmaster managed to retain his post after promising the community leaders that he would work harder to raise the level of education at the school. A new hostel mistress was promptly appointed and the teachers given a severe reprimand by an education official for insubordination.

Interestingly enough, none of the community members cited epidemic hysteria as a reason for removing the headmaster. They attributed the phenomena to supernatural causes. This indirect form of communication within the cultural system did not endanger anybody.

Despite of the fact that the community never succeeded in removing the headmaster from the school, some form of social change did result. Epidemic hysteria is essentially a state of crisis within a closed community system when interpersonal and intrapsychic tensions within the community had reached breaking point. The manifestations of the outbreak were culturally-sanctioned, and nobody was hurt. The anger of the girls and the community were unconsciously externalized onto supernatural causes. Nevertheless social change took place by

a process of trial and error and certain innovations resulted from the crisis, although no one consciously comprehended the indirect meaning of epidemic hysteria, except for the abreactive retaliation of the grievances of the hostel girls. What the local community had done was to take two steps forward and one step back.

Social Interactions in an Epidemic of Hysteria

The headmaster, 41 years old, an obsessional, neurotic personality was a very limited person and was conflict-ridden. All the eight girls affected by hysteria were psychologically tested and showed some abnormalities in their personalities. Their 'spokesman' was immature, had difficulty controlling her aggressive impulses and demanded immediate gratification of her needs. The others had personalities which were hysterical, hostile and aggressive, had intense guilt over the separation of parents and had severe separation anxieties from home. The hostel prefect identified with the headmaster as a father-figure whom she was jealously loyal and protective of although she was emotionally confused and unable to cope with his misdemeanours.

The headmaster, a real 'insider', who was the most important personality in the outbreak was least liked by all in the community and interacted ambivalently with the girls. On the other side, the *bomoh*, who was a real 'outsider', was regarded positively by all parties, although his main job was only to attend to the hysterical girls. While other parties became involved in the tensions and conflicts of the school, he maintained the esteemed, neutral position of a healer. Interestingly, the headmaster and *bomoh* polarized in terms of being liked. Despite this, the headmaster relied heavily on the *bomoh's* professional healing role, who refused to be involved in the tensions and strivings of the community.

Psychodynamics in an Outbreak of Epidemic Hysteria

The author conducted a series of ten weekly psychotherapeutic sessions with the headmaster for both diagnostic and therapeutic purposes after the subsidence of epidemic hysteria in the school. It was felt that these sessions might have allayed his anxieties and depression (a view which his medical practitioner shared and had been treating him symptomatically for three years). The headmaster came eagerly and prompt-

ly to these sessions driving four hours round trip. For the author, the information extended his understanding of the character structure and neurotic conflicts of the headmaster and elucidated the psychogenesis of the outbreak of hysteria.

He had a life-long character pattern of an obsessive-compulsive personality. He was rigid, stubborn, overdutiful and conscientious. When subjected to stress, as during the floods, his defences grew even more intense. He clung to rules and regulations even when they violated common sense. The more threatened he felt, the more stubborn he became.

His early childhood was 'lonely and isolated' thereby causing ambivalence. Characteristically he needed his wife, but also hated her for being aggressive and domineering. Rorsarch and T.A.T. responses showed that he harboured strong death wishes against her, and blamed her for his father's death. He struggled to be active in his relationship with her but was constantly tempted to have her take over an active role in decision making. It was when his passive wishes surfaced that he became anxious and depressed and allowed his wife to run his school, hostel and his life.

He showed strong underlying homosexual attachment to his senior assistant whom he identified as a younger and a more extraverted brother. He reacted to him with fear and suspicion which almost took on delusional proportions (thus creating poor interpersonal relations among his staff).

Just as he dealt with his passive wishes by reactive formation and stubbornness, so also did he deal with his sexual impulses to his students in a similar fashion. He spied on them constantly, particularly when they were undressing or sleeping under the guise of protecting them. It was suggested that his original unconscious motive in becoming hostel master of a girls' hostel and his reluctance to relinquish the post, was at least, in fact, an effort to relive his earlier years when he frequented young prostitutes. Also he was sexually impotent with his wife and it appeared that his sexual impulse had a strong voyueristic component with a need to obtain vicarious stimulation to satisfy his wife. There was some regressive degradation of his sexuality to a more primitive level and a connection with dirt and anality. This was seen in his concern over the disposal of the students'

soiled menstrual towels and his preoccupation with honesty.

It should be noted that the students who were possessed indicated in diverse ways that they were responding to the sexualized nature of his nocturnal visits, his peeping, his interest in dirt and cleanliness, his honesty and stealing. His concern became the students' concern as well, although in a somewhat distorted form.

His relationship with the hostel prefect caused a polarization of feelings. She developed strong sexualized feelings for him by positive identification which were perceived jealously and ambivalently by the other girls. In turn the clique of five girls, who were also vying for the headmaster's affections expressed their repressed frustrations in a socially sanctioned manner. Finally the hostel prefect, under considerable emotional pressure was seized with one episode of epidemic hysteria.

CONCLUSION

Epidemic hysteria among Malay girls' schools has been endemic in Malaysia, although there has been a spate of 17 episodes in the year 1971. Characteristically, the schools affected were chiefly rural Malay-medium schools affecting adolescent Malay school girls. Each outbreak of hysteria ranged from a few days to several months and the clinical picture invariably took a 'hyperventilation syndrome with tetany' followed by a trance-like state.

One of these residential girls' schools affected was investigated in detail. The study was conducted by interviewing all parties concerned, the affected girls were psychologically tested and the headmaster of the school underwent individual psychotherapy. Special emphasis was placed on the psychopathology of the headmaster whose personal limitations and psychological conflicts appeared to play a key role in the outbreak. The way in which his personal problems interweaved with the afflicted students was studied. In the study of social interactions, the *bomoh*, interestingly (the outsider) was most liked and the headmaster (the insider) most disliked by all parties concerned.

Two significant events contributed to the outbreak of epidemic hysteria. They were the apparent resignation of the hostel mistress and a natural disaster in the form of a flood. An attempt was made to analyse the complex variables in the outbreak.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgements are due to the following without whom this work would not have been possible.

1. The former Minister of Education, the Honorable Encik Hussein Onn, for his permission for this study to be conducted.
2. The Ministry of Education, Malaysia, for its cooperation.
3. Professor E. S. Tan, Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Malaya, for his encouragement and advice.
4. Mrs. M. Soewondo and Mrs. M. Sidharta for psychologically testing the affected girls.
5. Dr. Ernest Kahn, M.D. Instructor in Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, for his guidance in the psychodynamic formulations.
6. Dr. Kahar Bador, Ph.D., Faculty of Arts, University of Malaya, for aid in understanding the anthropological implications.
7. My research assistants, Mrs. Phyllis Xavier, Miss Chan Lay Lan and Mr. Ranjan Ariyapala for analysing many tedious hours of audiotapes and helping to formulate the raw data to its finished form.

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