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“Mixing” as an Ethnoetiology of HIV/AIDS in Malaysia’s Multinational Factories

Minah Karan, the stigmatizing label appended to Malay factory women in the 1980s, signaled a dangerous female sexuality that risked spreading beyond the factory gates and infecting Malaysia’s idea(l)s of its traditional kampung culture. This article narrates how Minah Karan, as the former antihero of development, was reconstituted in the 1990s, with the government’s labeling of factories as “high-risk settings” for HIV/AIDS. This is an ethnoetiology based not on any evidential epidemiological data but on the racial and gendered “mixing” that transpires behind factory walls: a fear that the “mixing of the sexes” means ipso facto “sexual mixing” among the races. The article demonstrates how importation of the high-risk label articulates at the local level the new and contested linkages, economic, religious, and scientific, constitutive of globalization. The pragmatic nature and imperatives of this high-risk process are discerned in factory women’s accounts of how they negotiate the interactional imperatives of factory work, because transnational structures of productivity violate the social boundaries that have long connoted political stability, moral integrity, ethnic community, and individual safety. The article concludes by questioning whether ethnoetiologies, especially when they concern sexual networks, become social etiologies, because this would locate ethnoetiologies as central to conventional public health praxis rather than as ethnographic exotica in the margins.

Keywords: [Malaysia, factories, industrialization, gender, HIV/AIDS, race]

In August 1995, at an Asia Regional Conference on Women and AIDS, the Malaysian delegation advocated intensive HIV prevention activities among female factory workers as its top priority, a quixotic decision in light of the absence of epidemiological data to support this concern and the well-documented risk among the country’s sex workers and rapidly expanding number of injection drug users. The chairperson of the Malaysian AIDS Foundation, Marina Mahathir, the daughter of then prime minister Mohammed Mahathir, expressed alarm at the rising incidence of HIV among Malaysian women, but with respect to factory women as a high risk subgroup, she equivocated: “This is a good idea but it should not mean that female

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factory workers are a particularly high-risk group” (*New Straits Times* 1995). Underlying this oblique “not really” high-risk appellation is the Malaysian Ministry of Health’s 1993 designation of factories as a high-risk setting for AIDS in a directive to district health officers around the country (Balik Pulau District health officer, personal communication, July 1993).

Ethnographic research presented in this article identifies the attribution of factories’ high-risk label as a function not of any epidemiological data, but of perceptions, held by factory and nonfactory populations alike, of the unprecedented, and presumably unprincipled, interracial, and intergender “mixing” required of industrial manufacturing processes; to wit, an ethnoetiology expressing concern that the “mixing of the sexes” is, ipso facto, a “sexual mixing” of the races.

Importantly, this operative fear of racial mixing is not of miscegenation, but of a dilution of ethnic-specific lifeworlds that will imperil the country’s social, political, and economic order; one that has long hinged on formal and informal modes of racial segregation and *kampung* protocols proscribing unsupervised social relations between men and women who are not *mubrim*. The latter is an Islamic concept with inflections of pre-Islamic, customary practices of *adat*, whereby it is deemed appropriate, moral, and therefore “safe” for men and women to interact provided they are “too close” (generally not beyond a second cousin), either through marriage or blood, to marry. *Kampung* in this sense designates both a physical geography, referencing the rural villages that have long incubated Malay ways, and a package of social structures, namely the rules and resources constituted by Malays through social interactions (Giddens 1984:258). Industrialization has effectively eliminated these modes, rules, and resources for the sake of development, rationalized as a means of maintaining political stability through the expansion and redistribution of national wealth to improve economic parity among the races.

The research presented here contributes to the recent surge in cultural analyses of sexuality, modernity, and development (Adams and Pigg 2005; Babb 2003; McHugh 2004; Povinelli and Chauncey 1999; Reddy 2005) that considers the impact of globalization on the lesser explored, nonstructural dimensions of social life. Of particular interest is how neoliberal economic policies requiring a country’s “opening up” to global capital are associated in many places with a sexual opening up as well (Babb 2004). By training the anthropological eye on the meanings of sexuality under development, in the course of economic development, the intent is not to dislocate the self or subjectivity from the manifold structural processes in play with globalization (Adams and Pigg 2005), but to show that these experiences are part and parcel of what are analytically framed, however loosely, as global structures of material, human, and ideological exchange.

Giddens’s notion of modalities of structure lends itself to this project, insofar as it captures how the quotidian practices that constitute patterns and structures assume their lived significance: “The very identification of acts or aspects of interaction . . . implies the interlacing of meaning, normative elements and power” (1984:28). Hector Carillo’s (2002) study of globalization, sexuality, and AIDS in Mexico, for example, traces the confluence of sociocultural, psychological, and structural influences to a “sexual moment” in which risk, in a more accurate representation of “outcome” (Babb 2004:227) than conventional public health discourses allow, happens or not. Such accounts show how social (inter)action reproduce the properties

of social structures, systems and relations, but also “the operation of causal loops, in which a range of unintended consequences” transform prior conditions (Giddens 1984:27).

An important corollary to these more nuanced considerations of capital, culture, and sexuality is work by anthropologists who situate the concept and consciousness of risk (Douglas 1986, 1992), not just as a *sui generis* feature of the new modernity but as grounded practices that draw on the transnational mobility of people and images to transform sexual identity and decision making (Altman 2001). Zaloom's examination of “the productive life of risk in contemporary capitalism” among floor traders in the financial futures markets, although not focused on the sexual sphere, is nonetheless relevant, as it demonstrates risk taking to be a critically important self-shaping resource (2004:365). Individual decisions, strategies, and practices render risk a contingent input (Boholm 2003a) rather than a disembodied, disembodied fate, an active but by no means autonomous engagement with multiple social networks and forms of knowledge that factor into identity, relationships, and ultimately experiences of sexuality, modernity, and development.

The value of these ethnographic accounts is that they show the embodiment of globalization to be as compelling and consequential as structural processes, given that modalities and moments, along with macrostructures, are what lend risk its highly variable sexual, cultural, economic, and political significances as well as its overdetermined nature. Importantly, this polyvalence, along with poverty, may also drive HIV's contrasting epidemiological plotlines, the comparative, cross-cultural study of which firmly establishes the indispensability of medical anthropology to AIDS research. The goal of the material presented here is thus to describe the enactment and embodiment of globalizing structures (capital, labor, commodities, services, and media) as these are manifest in women's experiences of factory work—experiences comprised of decisions, regarding finances, friendships, religious practice, and sexuality that cumulatively transform local moral worlds, wherein the meanings of modernity and the ethnoetiology of HIV risk incubate and take form.

Methods

In 1996, there were 650 factories and an estimated 177,250 factory workers, among a statewide population of 1.2 million, employed in Penang's export processing zones (EPZs). The EPZs are geographically delimited areas, surrounded by 15-foot high barbed wire fences, and managed by the state-run Penang Development Corporation. My affiliation with the only health NGO permitted on factory grounds provided access that I would otherwise never have secured, as labor agitation in the 1980s sparked a crackdown on security that complicated research efforts.

For the research presented here, I used ethnography, participant-observation, semistructured and open-ended interviews, and surveys. I accompanied the NGO field staff to 18 multinational manufacturing sites, ranging from a minimum of two and maximum of five visits each, observing operations and interviewing general managers, supervisors, and workers on their perceptions of work, risk, and AIDS. I spent roughly 200 hours in factory clinics and hostels over the duration of the research (July–August 1993, August–June 1995). The objectives of the survey ($n = 101$) and formal interview schedule ($n = 51$) were to assess whether the

reality of factory women's lifestyles, as gauged through a variety of ethnographic methods, lent credence to the Minah Karan stereotype and, by extension, to the high-risk label appended to factories. Guided by these concerns, the survey and interview solicited information on women's demographics, perceptions of factory work, social networks, health status, workplace safety, race, religion, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS.

Sampling of factory women was guided in a nonprobabilistic combination of quota strategies (to emphasize the predominantly Malay production operators) and judgment strategies (to emphasize the increasing number of immigrant women). The three clusters of interest were in-station "girls" of Penang origin, out-station girls of out-of-state origin (elsewhere in Malaysia), and immigrant women. Within the latter two clusters, I aimed for geographic diversity because out-station could refer to women from as close as Kedah, a 45-minute drive across Penang Bridge, or Kelantan, a day's journey away by public transport and considerably more conservative. Immigrant women include a range of Filipinos, Indonesians, and Bangladeshis who were imported by the planeload so that the government could maintain its guarantee to multinationals of low-wage labor.

Moral Economies of Industrialization, Islam, and AIDS

In Malaysia, importation of the high-risk label, itself the cultural product of a globalizing biomedical model (Lock and Gordon 1988; Schiller 1992), provides a window onto the contested sexual meanings associated with, *inter alia*, the political-economic, religious, and scientific phenomena constitutive of globalization. A key feature of this importation is its entanglement in the country's socioreligious and political transformation (Lupton 1993, 1999) to produce a local moral economy of boundaries and transgression as the basis for stigma, risk, and prevention (Reddy 2005). It is an economy with increasing inflections of Islamicization, broadly characterized as a grassroots engagement with the Muslim side of the Malay Muslim equation in terms mostly of religious observance practices (Kessler 1980; Nagata 1995; Ong 1987), and Islamism (Noor 2002; Wilce 1998), which is, by contrast, a top-down political dynamic of expanding Islamic orthodoxies into the state's public (esp. judicial) spheres. Recent challenges to the monopoly on governance enjoyed by the long dominant United Malays National Organization, posed by the conservative Parti Islam se Malaysia as well as new alliances that crosscut race and religion, testify to the emphatic lack of consensus on Malaysia's political, economic, and social fate.

Factories themselves are not a discursive focal point of these national debates. Ambivalence and anxiety about the moral costs of industrialization are, in fact, more subtle but no less potent or consequential. The material benefits of economic growth are all too apparent and society's moral undoing both incremental and dramatic. Under the microscope, then, are the agents, and "moral" victims, of this growth and undoing: factory women. Giving voice to the petri dish of Malaysia's transformation, factory women describe how they negotiate the interactional, interracial imperatives of factory work insofar as they improvise new social and moral identities (Beck 1994:88). The practical consciousness, understood as the "reflexive monitoring of conduct in the day-to-day continuity of social life" (Giddens 1984:43-44),

suggests a pragmatics of existence constituted through factory routines and relationships with workers, peers, and associates back home. The notion of a “pragmatics of existence” has extensive intellectual roots in various philosophical streams, but is anchored here in a “theory of competency,” elaborated in linguistics, to describe the adaptive “relation of linguistic units to their users” in ways that can be “psychologically realized” (Davis 1991:4). Pragmatics has gained theoretical currency in medical anthropology as a means of conceptualizing “how globalization affects body politics,” including women’s negotiated relationships to, and utilization of, new medical technologies in ways that are phenomenologically and ontologically meaningful (Lock and Kaufert 1998:1).

By extrapolation, “the situated exigencies of the everyday worlds of informants and their relationships within families, communities, and local political groupings” (Lock 2001:482), as the basis for a pragmatics of existence, is salient in factory women’s narratives because industrial and transnational structures of productivity violate the social boundaries that have long connoted political stability, moral integrity, ethnic community, and individual safety among Malays in Malaysia. Women’s adjustment and improvisation, their construction of a pragmatics of existence in response to such startlingly different life conditions, concretize national debates over the moral costs of industrialization by signaling a pragmatics beyond the individual. As the country continues to climb the global rungs to an upper-middle income country (World Bank n.d.), with segments of its polity reengaging Islam and participating in a transnational Islam, global economic exigencies and chronic politicoethnic contingencies suggest a pragmatics of existence at every level of social organization, into which flows AIDS.

To understand any phenomenon in Malaysia, past or present, the significance of *bangsa*, a term blending race and ethnicity, cannot be underestimated, as it is the fragile house of cards in which the country’s national identity resides. Ethnic-specific life ways, and the communal structures that support them, have accrued the meaning of a kind of insurance against social instability, a connotation rooted in the racial machinations of colonial rule and bequeathed at independence (Root 2006). For this reason, current preoccupations with racial boundaries, in terms of their maintenance and dissolution, find currency in Malaysian discourse on all manner of topics. In the factories, ironically, it is not racial conflict but rather racial intimacy, a social that becomes a sexual mixing, that sparks the biggest concern. This mixing rationale is tied to globalization insofar as it literalizes how transnational “cascades” link “global politics to the micropolitics of streets and neighborhoods . . . [providing] material for the imagination of actors [to read] general meanings into local and contingent events” (Appadurai 1996:152–153).

Industrialization, AIDS, and Islamicization, as three such cascades, thus link capital, religion, and disease with the micropolitics of factories, as neighborhoods, to produce an ethnoetiology focused on the hazards of racial and gendered mixing as a “local and contingent event.” To narrate these linkages as the basis for an ethnoetiology of risk via mixing, the origins of factories’ high-risk attribution, and its attendant discourses on race, religion, gender, and class, lie in Minah Karan, the stigmatizing label appended to factory women in the 1980s. Minah is a common Malay girl’s name, a Jane Doe, and karan Bahasa for electrical current. Her “electrical power,” a lascivious spin on her work in the semielectronics industry, is amplified

to the extent that she can shock the moral body of Malay society and become both a victim and a vehicle for HIV infection (Alattas 1995).

Historical Structuration of Racial Mixing-as-Risk

Racial and ethnic diversity has an extensive social genealogy in Malaysia, one that traces the recursive emergence (Giddens 1984) of its variable meanings, initially as a “natural” feature of, and asset to, the region and, eventually, as a liability that in turn has become an organizing principle of economic, political, and social life. Framing the country’s racialized imagination of HIV risk as a process of historical structuration problematizes, following Sewell (1992), the relationship of agents to structures and the importance of grounding this relationship in an historical and cultural milieu. An appropriate starting point is, therefore, the 16th-century *Sejarah Melayu*, the Malay Annals, a mythohistory of the rise and decline (1400–1511) of the Malacca sultanate (Winstedt 1935).

The annals record an increasing absorption of Islamic religious and romantic themes by peoples throughout the region, especially as Muslim merchants from South (Gujerat, India) and West Asia (Baghdad) settled permanently into Malaccan life. Racial mixing, in fact, is a recurrent theme, and frequently invoked as an important part of the territory’s economically dynamic, politically well-positioned, and cosmopolitan identity, but also as a culture-specific, almost casual by-product of capitalism’s nonevolutionary logic (Giddens 1979; Wallerstein 1976). Social relations within Malaya during this early period were organized primarily around land. Chiefs secured loyalty from village commoners in exchange for protection of peasant property against neighboring attacks, a productive dialectic that ensured stability through symbolic and material reciprocity. Differences among social groups were construed in geographic and cultural terms, and by class, with relationships to land as sustenance and political affiliation the central feature of precolonial social organization.

Colonial expansion in the 16th century, however, brought increased contact with European traders whose governments would, over the next three centuries, dismantle the region’s social infrastructure. Initially, attempts by the Dutch and Portuguese to secure unlimited access to the territory’s rich mineral assets were thwarted by the social contract that had long cohered sultans and chiefs with commoners, allowing for reciprocal protection of the interests of each (Wallerstein 1976). The efficacy of this local mode of resistance, however, was eventually overwhelmed by the rising tide of British power, whose strategies of exploitation hinged not only on military attacks but on appropriation of key endogenous structures. Once a political foothold was established on the ground, with the grooming of a local Malay elite complete, the British were quick to draft extensive legislation detailing changes in land laws that successfully eviscerated traditional institutions, including the defining social contract. The result was monopolized access to the territory’s coveted resources.

Central to Great Britain’s program was the strategic delineation of three distinct “races,” a process of signification that would ultimately rewire the schemas (Sewell 1992) surrounding difference in racialized terms. Malays were portrayed as unfit for, and uninterested in, the strenuous exertion (and possible rewards) related to estate work, justifying policies that limited Malays’ educational opportunities. Chinese, in contrast, were caricatured as arrogant, well networked, and “intolerably

insolent" (Comber 1959:105), and Indians, when not indentured on sugar, coffee, or rubber plantations, sufficiently tractable for positions of midlevel civil service authority. By the end of the 19th century, the easy fluidity that had long characterized relations among the territory's numerous different groups was replaced with a fixing of ethnic boundaries among the three. Over time, this ossification of racial structures (Caldwell 1977) imprinted a paradigm of social (political, geographic, occupational) organization and stability rooted in an intransigent communalism that was both absorbed and recast at independence.

In 1957, Malaysia's first coalition government aimed to parlay the colonial strategy of racial manipulation into a fragile alliance in pursuit of national economic growth, in the process further naturalizing racial differences and segregation as foundational to stability. Backstage, parties representing the country's three main ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese, and Indian—voiced competing visions for the country's future, ranging from the emphatically separatist to the moderate integrationist.

The precarious peace exploded, however, in the bloody race riots of 1969, which expressed, among other things, outrage on the part of rural Malays at the economic advantage enjoyed by town-savvy Chinese in accessing government programs. To many observers, the riots were as much about current frustrations with the pace of development as they were the inexorable result of a postcolonial society saddled with the deadweight of multiple inequities (Robertson 1984). In response, the government sought to urgently redress the entrenched poverty that plagued its core constituency. The resultant plan, the New Economic Policy (NEP), shifted the government's priorities from financial stabilization to "growth with equity" as the central theme of its 20-year development plan.

The NEP's paramount goal, to eliminate the identification of race with socioeconomic function or geographic origin, intertwined race with economics in a manner that has come to characterize consecutive five-year plans over the past 35 years. Running parallel, and arguably contrary, to these objectives have been successive governmental attempts to promote the *Rukunegara*, a national ideology of racial unity. As a campaign to persuade citizens that the country is more than the sum of its racial parts, the Rukunegara contrarily identified Islam and adat, pre-Islamic practices embedded in kampung culture, as its core. So, when the first prime minister implored citizens to "forget" the country's racialized past, 13 years later, the Rukunegara entailed a selective act of remembering—an ideological centering and privileging of an essentialized Malay in the post-1969 era. Beneath the veneer of multiculturalism, state structures remain fundamentally communal and the national ideology itself rooted in idea(l)s of traditional kampung life.

As an economic plan, the NEP fulfilled its promise of expanded employment for rural Malays, largely through the expeditious establishment of the first tax-free zone in Malaysia, and in all of Southeast Asia, in Penang State. Located off the northwest coast of peninsular Malaysia, the island had long connoted a "wild west" culture of Chinese and European ill repute, in part because its special administrative status under the British, separate land laws, and predominantly Chinese residents distanced Penangites, economically and culturally, from peninsular Malay life ways. Not until completion of the Penang Bridge in the 1980s was the island connected for the first time, physically and symbolically, with the mainland. The link between the two has been further strengthened in recent years by the influx of many tens of thousands of

migrant workers, predominantly rural, unmarried, female, and Malay who depart their kampung for the Chinese island to staff the slick assembly lines of the factories.

Like factory workers elsewhere in the world and in history, these women risked much: separation from their families, physical exposure to hazardous industrial processes, a taxing factory routine, and diminished chances of marriage. They were labeled, with potently stigmatizing effect, Minah Karan. The tales of sexual conquests, of “quickies” in the inventory room, spread quickly beyond the factory gates acquiring a momentum and moral opprobrium all their own. Since the economic boom of the mid-1990s, however, one rarely hears of Minah Karan, a historic antihero in the nation’s development lore. A kind of modern patina is currently attached to the factories connoting purchasing power, consumption of status goods, and occasional upward mobility. But society also wrestles with AIDS, observing from a short distance the havoc it has wrought on its neighbor to the north, Thailand. Consequently, factories’ labeling as high risk involves not epidemiology but the dovetailing of three social processes—capitalistic, biomedical, and cultural. Combined, they underscore factory women’s power to transform Malaysian society, a transformation that poses a risk to the moral order that Minah Karan historically represented and that is currently manifest in factories’ high-risk labeling for AIDS.

HIV/AIDS in Malaysia

AIDS was gazetted as a notifiable disease in Malaysia on May 22, 1985. The country’s first detected AIDS case occurred two years later, in a 45-year-old Malaysian man of Chinese descent, with 30 years of overseas residence and a history of “multiple heterosexual” relationships. Although reinforcing the notion of AIDS as a morally insalubrious process that typifies “foreign” societies, this initial detection rendered AIDS a local (although ostensibly non-Malay) event. In 1994, the Ministry of Health, relying mostly on passive surveillance and ad hoc surveys, reported only 108 HIV seropositive cases. Since then, a much more rigorous HIV serosurveillance system has been implemented, reporting an adult HIV prevalence rate of 0.4 percent, with 16.6 percent of all HIV infections occurring among women age 15–49 (UNAIDS 2003).

The intense conviction behind the racial mixing high-risk rationale is all the more significant because this relatively lower prevalence rate (at 1.5 percent, Thailand’s is three times greater) mirrors epidemiological profiles (UNAIDS 2003) reported in countries with significantly sized Muslim populations around the world, including parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Gray 2004). Inadequate surveillance systems (Kelley and Eberstadt 2005) notwithstanding, this includes Indonesia (0.1 percent) and North Africa and the Middle East, a combined category, which, at 0.3 percent, is slightly less than in Western Europe (UNAIDS 2003), the vast majority (80 percent) of these infections occurring in the southern Sudan. Observations of differential risk rates, however, by no means validate what may well be a significant distortion of the statistical reality of HIV, nor does it diminish the tragedy they represent and the challenges ahead. But they do warrant further exploration as AIDS everywhere ignites and mobilizes very specific segments of the social imagination whereby the globalization of capital and disease loom large and uncertainty about the future is paramount.

Moral versus Economic Development: The Risks of Growth

Moral facts are phenomena like any others.

—Durkheim (1984)

“Freedom. We can do whatever, and no one will ever know.”

—Malay factory woman in Malaysia

Durkheim's verdict on the consequences of industrialization in 19th-century Europe, that a life spent “almost entirely in an industrial and commercial environment” is a life “pursued without any moral framework” (1984:xxxiv), aptly reflects social concerns raised by development policies in Malaysia a century and a half later. The decline in public morality, Durkheim predicted, would occur when the moral “disturbance [spawned by industrialized workplaces] is gradually transmitted to the common consciousness of society as a whole,” causing a sickness to pervade the social body for which the only cure is a new moral framework (1984:332–333). Segments of Malaysian society share Durkheim's anxiety, expressed through multiple forums, including governmental decrees against immorality, Islamic revivalism (Anwar 1987; Muzaffar 1987), and selective attribution of high-risk labels for AIDS.

Contemporary concerns over moral degradation via industrialization benefit by Beck's investigation of risk as a central feature of the “new modernity”; it is one beset with competing, but interdependent, claims on the reality of certain hazards—material and moral—and impelled by a social dynamic that veils at the same time as it reveals the meaning of various risks, much like the inherent ambiguity in the term high risk (1994). Importing Beck's writings into Malaysia is an opportunity to discern the cultural-specific overlap of an industrial-risk society, one that allows a policy of development to hold out many of the same utopian promises in 19th-century Europe. In light of these broken promises, the iridescent gleam of foamy effluvium atop the stagnant river that borders Penang's Bayan Lepas ETZ speaks to the state-sponsored contradictions that are sustained in the name of social progress.

In cultivating a risk consciousness, members of a risk society devise multiple interpretations of the risks in their midst and, in doing so, “seek and find symbolic places, persons, and objects for overcoming its fear,” becoming ultimately a “scapegoat society” (Beck 1994:75). The paramount goal of risk labeling is, therefore, less to meaningfully organize HIV data than to separate and distance certain groups “from the general population of the body politic,” to create a cultural Other (Schiller 1992:1338). If the factories epitomize not merely moral decay but the inexorable press of Western society on traditional life ways, the labeling of factories as high risk serves to distance their uncultured activities and marks factory women as these cultural Others, an Otherness previously effected with Minah Karan and now achieved with the label “high risk.”

Mixing: Metaphor and/of Modernity

Mixing (*pergaulan*), as an ethnoetiology of HIV/AIDS, crosscuts diverse social phenomena relating to Malaysia's reliance on foreign direct investment and the social implications of its global economic incorporation. With factories providing the primary material—diverse human relations—for all manner of mixing, it is important

to tease out its different threads to grasp the culture-specific fabric of high-risk labels. These include predominantly racial mixing and mixing among men and women who are not muhrim. A third category of mixing among local (Penang-based town Malays), out-station (rural) Malays, and immigrants is likewise a point of dire moral concern: the town girl is wise in the ways of the world, so, although vulnerable, is presumably better able to manage the liminal space between moral and productive relations at work; the rural Malay girl reputedly “explodes” in the face of new freedoms and in the absence of kampung strictures, and so is most at risk; and the immigrant woman, the Indonesian in particular, is stigmatized as just plain “wild,” and therefore a source of moral contagion.

Mixing Races as an Ethnoetiology of HIV/AIDS

In a sense, the untold history of Malaysian factories is less their success at powering the Malaysian economy than their powerful reframing of the racial order instituted by the British over a century ago—the Chinese in town, the Indians on the rubber plantation, and the Malays in the rice paddy. Answers to the central question of why factories are called high risk for AIDS served as a cultural Rorschach test on the social meaning of this undoing: “Because of the racial mixing, and mixing between men and women who are not muhrim.” Mixing in ways that are unprecedented (racial) or proscribed (gender) confirms perceptions that factories are morally suspect spaces, and therefore sources of uncertainty and risk.

Indeed, the demographics of the factories include a large, primarily young, unmarried Malay female production force and a minority male, married Chinese–Indian management and engineering staff. This demographic fact lends itself to unprecedented opportunities for proscribed social interactions and, on the heels of that, for the moral imagination of the community to run wild. For example, Tan, a Chinese male accountant at a local factory underscored the roles that race and female sexuality play as the operative subtext in AIDS discourse involving factories:

I can tell you why [factories are labeled high risk]. In a factory, you have different races, different characters. All sorts of human traits in one area. Good and bad people together. They interact with each other. Chinese women, say ten or 20 years ago, had more controlled emotions. Not so exposed to society. They were shy, controlled themselves more. Then the factories. So women go to the factories as medium and low-level workers. Then they mix-up together. All three races. Some go for foreign training to the U.S. and bring back foreign lifestyle habits—karaoke, discos. Like after rain, growing, growing all these things. Especially Malays, they explode when they come from the kampung. Away from family controls, they are looking for freedom. They don't know how to identify the correct way because they are in the lower ranks.

In addition to an emphasis on racial mixing as the cultural logic of high-risk labeling, Tan organized his answer along gendered and class-based lines, speaking initially to the effects of factory life on Chinese women, but reserving his strongest observations for the behavioral changes among rural Malay women, especially those at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy, who he says “explode” on coming to the factories, a recurrent common theme in the ethnographic study of women and AIDS (Freeman 1993; Leclerc-Madlala 2001).

The notion of explosion among Malay factory women elaborates her original significance. The very meaning of the label Minah Karan is that she, her body, is easily “turned on” by virtue of her sociophysical participation in the culture of multinational electronics manufacturing. Her “electrical power” is amplified to the extent that she is endowed with the potential to undo the entire moral fabric of Malay society.

This imagined trait was enacted by a government researcher and graduate of the Islamic University in Malaysia, who made clear the term's subtext, of easy arousal in an after-hours conversation in her office. This woman, her face framed in the tightest of *tudung* (Islamic headcovers), mimed the meaning of Minah Karan. She reclined to the point of being almost horizontal in her desk chair and simulated a body-shattering orgasm: “She just explodes!” Then she leaned in and said gleefully, “My Islamic friends just would not believe it if they heard me talking this way.” Explosion—sexual, social, and moral—is inextricably tied to a newfound freedom among married and unmarried Malay women; it is a freedom on which the nation's economic success depends and, as a consequence of this frustrated dependency, constitutive of factory women's prior stigma and factories' current risk label for HIV/AIDS.

The shift to factory work is a baptism into a multiracial environment for many workers. Nearly one-third of the women surveyed had never had a friend of a different race before coming to the factories, with the majority (69 percent) reporting neutral feelings about working with members of other races, nearly 17 percent enjoying it (*seronok*), and 10 percent feeling discomfort (*tidak selesa*). Asked whether they were comfortable talking with friends about interracial dating, two-thirds of survey respondents answered that they were not, with 63 percent indicating that it was not permissible (*wajar*) to date across bangsa. In other words, although cross-racial interaction at work is deemed, on the whole, acceptable, intimacy of a variety of degrees is significantly less so and correlated with increasing social discomfort and strategies for dealing with it.

Pinning down the nature of these wide-ranging sentiments is difficult because government rhetoric actively promotes “racial harmony” as a value-added feature of Malaysian society. For example, in asking whether there were any *bahaya*, dangers, in the factory, Hamidah, a 23-year-old Malay woman, revealed the social at the heart of subjective experiences of risk:

RR: What are your feelings when you work with people of other races?

Hamidah: *Biasa*, normal-usual.

RR: Are there any dangers in the factory? [I had switched topics to elicit a response on occupational health hazards.]

Hamidah: No, there aren't. In our factory, they are all Malays. Many Malays, they are the majority.

The sequence of questioning, from feelings about the racial composition of the work environment to possible material occupational hazards, unwittingly elicited the racial subtext of risk, a subtext that would have gone undetected with direct questions about race relations eliciting a banal *biasa* (normal, no big deal).

Instead, as a taboo topic of conversation, social discomfort with racial mixing finds potent expression in discourses surrounding AIDS and strongly influences factory women's perceptions of HIV/AIDS. The frequent reference to racial mixing in the factories as a meaningful but imprecise risk for AIDS was concretized in an interview with 34-year-old Suriyani, an Indian Muslim factory worker and mother of two, with 19 years employment in the same U.S. electronics factory. Describing what sounded initially (to my ears) like some semblance of a biomedical explanation—from the “mixing of blood”—she explained that it was the mixing of blood through sex between Malaysia's different races that causes AIDS:

RR: In your opinion what is AIDS?

Suriyani: There is a kind of drug use that if you inject blood that is not the same, maybe you'll get AIDS. You're mixing them together.

RR: Can sexual intercourse transmit AIDS?

Suriyani: Yes, it can. If a person has too many [sexual] relations. An Indian person may have different blood, a Malay another kind of blood, and Chinese yet another. So when you mix all three of them together, a person can get AIDS. That's my opinion.

RR: If you only mix around within the same bangsa, can you get AIDS?

Suriyani: Perhaps not.

RR: Are Malays at less risk?

Suriyani: No, now it's almost all the same. Because Malays mix with drugs. Maybe blood Type A mixes with blood Type B. Type A cannot blend with Type B. I am afraid [of this].

Suriyani went on to describe a man in her factory who, she said, suffered from AIDS. When I asked how she knew he had AIDS, she replied: “He slept with many girls, regardless of their bangsa and belonging to all *kaum* (lit., groups). His skin was poisoned, pus filled, and broken out. At first he said he had a skin sickness. We asked the nurse, though, and she said he had AIDS.” Beyond demonstrating the infamous inability of many factory nurses to maintain workers' confidentiality, Suriyani's statement speaks in a profound and salient manner to the social implications of racial mixing in the factories. In doing so, it resounds of another kind of mixing, this one cognitive: the mixing of biomedical models of contagion, involving sex, blood, and drugs, with a cultural reliance on conventional paradigms of risk involving racial mixing, not just as a metaphor for illicit relationships but as a material event posing a “real” risk.

Mixing Men and Women Who Are Not Muhrim

Within a few hours travel, women as young as 16 years depart their kampung and leave behind a social framework that has long governed interactions among men and women and generally did not involve other bangsa. The operative principles of this

framework are derived from adat, pre-Islamic traditions that are central to Malay identity and to notions of social stability. On arrival at the factories, these women enter an entirely new environment, characterized by an intersexual and interracial workforce, where speed and time are of the essence and profit and productivity the highest good. Attempts by factory management to bridge these two worlds by setting up hostels with wardens to replace parents, older siblings, and village elders are only partially successful at reining in young women's desire to *hidup berdikari*, to live independently.

Whether mixing between the sexes leads inexorably to sexual mixing, meaning conventionally risky sexual behaviors, is intimated but by no means evidenced in women's self-reports and speculations on other women's behaviors. Forty percent of the women indicated that they had a current boyfriend. Asked to estimate what proportion of unmarried factory women are involved in sexual relations, 43 percent of survey respondents indicated "none," 35 percent "few," and 15 percent "most." By comparison, 35 percent of respondents felt that most unmarried factory men are involved in sexual relations, a surprising 31 percent indicated none, and 28 percent speculated a few. On the whole, these reports paint a portrait of first-time romance for the majority and an experimental sexuality for the minority, numbers that speak to the profound psychosocial and psychosexual transformation that factories and their hostel quarters might precipitate in the absence of kampung oversight. One young woman observed nonchalantly, "Sure, most women have sexual relationships. I don't think all the girls want to be innocent. Nowadays, it's a modern world. Only thing is, I don't know how they will take care to protect themselves."

The extent to which this freedom, and its association with "unrestrained interaction" (Ong 1987:185), is a function of some pseudosexual liberation agenda is challenged by reports of how men in and outside the factory view the female factory population as their sexual playground, a situation that suggests a structured vulnerability based on gender, age, and to some extent geography, because "outstation" girls from rural areas lack virtually any elder oversight. Twenty-eight percent of those surveyed indicated they felt pressured by men to have sex. An almost equal number (24 percent) indicated pressure by women to have sex with women. Yatie, a 36-year-old divorcée from the fishing village of Langkawi, is a factory veteran. She spoke vividly of the young workers who surround her in the factory and the risky relations they have with, or resist from, male superiors. I asked whether they seemed aware of AIDS:

I don't know. Half of those who have sex don't necessarily talk about it. If they start talking dirty, I scold them, "My word! So young and talking so crudely!" The young ones come ask me questions, but they've never asked about AIDS. When we joke around, I say to them, "If you all are horny, you're gonna get AIDS." My male supervisor is very horny. I ask him, "What? You want to get AIDS?" The technicians assume that factory girls are easy to lay. That's just what I'm telling you. Half the technicians are Chinese, and they have sex. They go after the really young ones. They're always asking me, "Hey? What about her, over there?" Most of the technicians are already married, but they still go looking for sex. They're no good. The girls are

young. They're naive. When they come to work, they have love bites all over their necks. The girls who are not yet married, these are the serious cases.

Such accounts suggest a factory-based social network and environment lacking the censorious oversight long operative in the kampung that could, over time, become an active sexual network posing an empirical HIV risk. Confirmation of this social-sexual mixing overlap, however, can only be secured if and when sexual infections take hold, begin circulating, and are diagnosed and reliably reported. In the absence of such confirmatory data, it is important to discern how women construct risky and risk-mitigating relations amid the social milieus and networks attendant on the country's industrial and Islamic transformations. This is a significant medical anthropological project that benefits by Zaloom's (2004) framework of risk taking as a self-shaping resource, unique to capitalist processes of work and identity formation. It speaks also to Lock and Kaufert's (1998) highlighting of bodily praxis and a gendered pragmatics of existence to negotiate the diverse processes of medicalization, experienced among factory women more specifically as a pragmatics of risk taking that draws on both biomedical and Islamic models of HIV infection.

The primary means of negotiating the quotidian pressures, including new opportunities for sexual and other intimacy, that constitute the imagined risk of HIV risk was conveyed in interviews as being or becoming *beragama-beriman*: be religious and pious in one's demeanor and one can avoid the social situations, as opposed to the sexual behaviors, that lead to HIV/AIDS. The imperative to recast old rules governing appropriate male-female interactions, however, is a function not just of living away from watchful kampung eyes. More, it is the social fact that factories, by enclosing all manner of people within a confined space, and necessitating these people interact with one another on daily (and nightly) basis, have transformed the larger interactional conventions that long served to bracket and contain the moral chaos of unmonitored relations. In fact, the gap between the rules against mixing and the reality of extensive mixing is suggested by women's self-reports that, although religious precepts prohibit being alone with a man who is not muhrim, it is wajar to go out with a boyfriend (41 percent), especially if it is to "talk about the relationship."

In this vacuum of kampung-based external constraints, the tudung becomes an important means of demarcating moral space, functioning as an important boundary that falls saliently along bangsa-based lines. A woman is challenged, from the moment of arrival, to discern from among the hordes of strangers who surround her, those who are *orang baik* (good, moral people), in other words, to avoid mixing. And although the tudung projects a moral identity, it leaves room for negotiating new ways of being and interacting. For example, 19-year old Norhaslindah used to meticulously apply her make-up and studiously arrange her tudung before heading off for her shift. She waxed eloquent on the importance of religiosity to protect oneself against AIDS and viewed her own behavior as falling perfectly into line. After our interview, Norhaslindah shyly showed me a photograph of herself alongside her boyfriend's motorcycle: "We just go out to have fun and discuss our relationship."

For many, the manner in which one practices and expresses religiosity is critical for self-protection and self-definition. On the surface, whether a girl wears the tudung, and what length of tudung, is an important convention indicating potential

compatibility between two women; it may also ward off the advances of ill-intentioned men. In contrast with Judith Nagata's observation that "dress styles and commitment to *dakwah* [proselytizer] social status . . . is conspicuous for its rarity within the growing contingent of young urban women factory workers" (1995:114), 74 percent of factory women reported always (47 percent) or sometimes (27 percent) wearing it. Seventy-two percent indicated that their tudung habits had not changed on coming to the factories, 19 percent said it had declined, and 6 percent said it had increased; these data suggest a regional variation in different facets of Islamic revivalism around the country. Even more, they speak to the tudung as an "emotive anchor" for many women in the sea of diverse social practices that is factory work (Giddens 1991:36).

Mixing Others: In-Station, Out-Station, and Immigrants

In light of the globalization of capital and disease, the idealized boundaries between the Malaysia's three main ethnic groups, derived from colonial times, are no longer sufficient for constructing perceived differences. Mass hiring by the factories has spawned an entirely new lexicon, reflecting both the dramatic demographic shifts of the past two decades and concerns over the consequential threats to society's moral well-being. Production operators, as factory women are termed, often spoke obliquely of the dangers of *hubungan sosial* (lit., social relations) that obtain between factory women and *orang di luar* (outsiders), loosely equated as being overly social with sexual relations. I asked my Punjabi housemate, educated in the United Kingdom, the meaning of *hubungan sosial*: "That means the mixing of the races . . . social interactions in general with outsiders." Determining the meaning of outsiders, however, proved much more of a semantic conundrum than pinning down "social relations."

The human resources (HR) officer of a large factory intimated how this new taxonomy of race-based morality structures perceptions of risk. Most of her time was spent managing the company's factory hostels, a massive undertaking as they housed over five hundred women. When I inquired generally about the social lives of the hostel residents, her response, like Tan's, was structured around the morally deviant details of women's behaviors, according to *bangsa* and nationality. Indonesians, she said, were the most likely to engage in the sexual behaviors that could lead to AIDS because they were more desperate to make money. When I asked about relations between the Malay and Indonesian women who stayed at the hostels, she described vicious in-fighting among Indonesian women. She also speculated that AIDS might become a problem in the factories because of the "young, immature ones" who come to have fun, and added, "Indonesians." A focused question about whether Malays were at risk led to a request for further clarification: "In-Malay or out-Malay?" In-Malay (or in-station) refers to locally hired Malay women versus out-Malay (out-station), Malay women from other parts of Malaysia. With 30 years' history on the island, many of the first wave of factory women to arrive in the 1970s are now considered in-station, having long ago acclimated to the island's town ways. The social connotation of out-Malay is one of lesser experience with life outside the *kampung*, and therefore at greater risk of "exploding" in the absence of *kampung* oversight. In the classification scheme of

the new moral taxonomy, it is the hostel-bound, out-Malay girl who sits riskily midway between this savvy, self-controlled in-Malay and the incorrigibly immoral immigrant.

The legal importation of factory women from Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, combined with extensive illegal entry by immigrants to serve other low-wage sectors, feed the public's dread of an imagined Other from whom all manner of disease and immorality might be caught. A feature article in a national English-language newspaper, for example, titled "Checking on an Unhealthy Trend," reported that "the increase in the number of tuberculosis, malaria, leprosy and AIDS cases . . . is believed to be related to the influx of foreign workers" (*Star* 1995). Factories, as bounded social spaces, condense these macrolevel sociodemographic trends and fuel fears of an immigrant Other who could negatively impact Malaysian (moral) health. For their association with immorality and disease, foreign workers in Malaysia represent the new Minah Karan, with the term "outsiders" functioning as the catch-all "racial" category for any individual who does not fall neatly within Malaysia's sociopolitical construction of its three main ethnic groups.

The indeterminacy of this old racial-moral taxonomy was intimated by many women to be a source of confusion in the context of AIDS.

RR: Why might factories be high risk for AIDS?

Dalih: In my factory nothing. I never heard about AIDS. Maybe 'cuz they're from Indonesia, Burma, Pakistan. All come here. Indonesians can do *ubat*. They can do something with words. Maybe your friend can change [as a result of spells]. With a kind of potion that you drink. [Even though] you hate a boy, the potion will make you love him. Indonesians are especially good at this.

RR: How do you know?

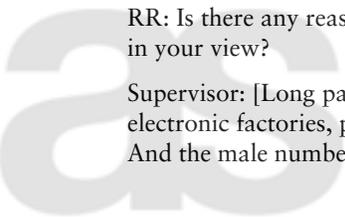
Dalih: It's just general knowledge. That's why my sister told me to be careful of Indonesians. Now they start to resemble Malays.

For 19-year old Dalih, fear that one day she will not be unable to distinguish between morally "correct" Malays and deviant immigrants, that these seemingly fixed social-geographic-ethical boundaries would be blurred, was at the forefront of her mind.

A senior supervisor, a Malay male in his early thirties, articulated a common view on the association between factories, risk of HIV, and out-station girls. First, though, he assessed the female-male ratio, determining that it was too high to cause sufficient risky behaviors. Second, he speculated whether the high-risk label was a function of the factories' physical space, in terms of its actual layout (dark corners). Only then did he proceed to speculate about factories' social effects on young women, as the most likely basis for their risk labeling.

RR: Is there any reason why factories might be high-risk settings for AIDS, in your view?

Supervisor: [Long pause] Well, it's just the factory confinement, alright, electronic factories, probably not. Because 80 percent of our staff are female. And the male number are very small. And, um, we're pretty open here, it's all



clean environment. There's no, you know, corners that, you know, people can get around.

RR: You hear these stories of [sex in] inventory rooms.

Supervisor: Yeh, so we don't have that. But, outside the factory, yes, it's possible. Yeah, because, um, most of the factory workers, the operators, are from out-station. They're from Alor Setar, the northern region. Basically villages. And they are away from the family and they're independent, and the freedom of going out with guys is there.

The restated cause of these mixing behaviors, presumably engaged in to varying degrees by women according to their ethnicity, regional origin, and nationality, is the freedom provided by factory work, a fact not lost on factory management, which went to great lengths to discipline women's labor and extracurricular activities, especially of those residing in factory hostels.

Hostels: another word referencing a physical place where factory women reside that has immediate moral (risk) resonance. As extensions of factories, they were generally regarded as havens of sinful behavior, the result of the freedom from family strictures and structures they permit. Factory women themselves described this freedom as double edged: on the one hand, they relish the opportunity to develop income generating skills, establish financial independence, and postpone marriage; on the other hand, they have to vigilantly protect themselves from losing control and falling into nonreligious behaviors. Evidence abounds of out-station Malay girls who are transformed within months of their arrival at the factories. Supervisors describe how they castrate the long manes of hair they wrap in tight buns under their tudung. The pivotal moment in many women's factory transformations, in fact, is the decision to cut off that mane and "open" (remove the tudung). Such a gesture not only dramatizes but also publicizes the changes young women go through, changes that are nervously attributed to mixing in factory environments.

When I asked 34-year-old Saalma what the difference was between in-station and out-station girls, she explained that, "Outstation girls have no *kawalan* [protection-guard]. They are free of rules." Similarly, when I asked an Indian female trainer, a position of some authority on the assembly line, why factories might be high risk for AIDS her answer, like many, was framed in terms of factories' racial labor composition the lines of factories' labor composition:

Because here [in factory] a lot of different types of people are here. [You] can see a lot of workers, got different type of attitude, got different places they are from. Penang, now, people come from more places, like out-station. And now we have Indonesians also working here. Maybe have good and the bad. All focused in the factory already 'cuz they are in groups here. So maybe it will spread to those around here in a bad way. It can spread around. That is only what I think it could be. Other than that, maybe local people can also be affected. So those things will be based in the factory.

The salient theme of this trainer's explanation is "difference," first between locals and nonlocals, and then between out-station and Indonesian. Her moral-risk

taxonomy, like others, suggested degrees of immorality and risky behavior that flow outward from a local Malay, to outsider Malays, to Indonesians.

The degree to which this risk narrative, of paradigmatic good (local, Malay) versus evil (outsider, foreigner) people, has been internalized is reflected in the concerns of Indonesians themselves who tried to mold the local logic of risk and race into a prevention strategy that would also protect them. When I (as one genus of outsider) asked 28-year-old Juwita, from Indonesia (another genus of outsider), what she felt were the most important threats to women's health, she linked in a seemingly random fashion AIDS, racial mixing, outsiders, and migration in a profound statement on the nature of perceived health threats that, in fact, were not at all random. They were direly implicated in women's frustrated search for a reassuring knowledge to deal with these threats:

Juwita: Like, here in Malaysia, the sickness that is most feared is AIDS. Here, there are many races.

RR: Have you heard of HIV?

Juwita: No.

RR: You said in Malaysia there are many races, that this has a connection with AIDS. What is the connection?

Juwita: According to me, I don't understand the problem this sickness poses. But from my friends, many people say if you get to know a foreigner, be careful otherwise later you'll get this sickness. That's the connection. They speak like that, but I want to know. I ask you, Sister, who has so much knowledge, to please clarify this to me.

RR: What is the meaning of foreigner?

Juwita: I don't know. In fact, all races.

RR: All races?

Juwita: Yeh, maybe Indonesian race also. And the Malay race also. I don't know. But between this sickness and other races—I also don't understand whether, in fact, there is a connection. I was hoping you, Sister, would know. Maybe everyone wants to know, but I want to ask you. You said you would explain. That would be best. You know more. I want knowledge.

The fact that her peers warned her of these unknowns speaks to the fears harbored by many factory women of an Other that they, as immigrants, epitomize. Where Juwita initially wanted clarification on the threat posed by foreigners, her request became a clarification of the actual meaning of a foreigner. Operationalizing the Malay model of risk, based on the diffuse threats of interracial interaction, was indeed confounding.

Minimizing Mixing to Mitigate Risk

Factories are the only employers to blanket entire sections of Penang Island with hiring notices; they are stuffed in mailboxes, strung along fences, plastered in

shopping malls, and are the only employment notices to direct themselves exclusively to women. Women's employment outside the home, their working hours, including night shifts, and wage scales are all very public information. As part of the public sphere, factory women's lifestyles are easily subject not just to public debate but social surveillance, with HIV prevention focused on controlling the freedom that women discover on commencing factory work, especially if they are non-town kampung, primarily through strategies of religiosity that proscribe certain mixing.

One means of grasping the extent of mixing among the sexes, and the symbolic potency of its attributed risks, is through the disciplinary strategies established by factory management to protect women's "moral welfare." "Counseling" (*kaunseling*) and "punishment," often combined as if they were one word, were the disciplinary catchwords du jour. From AIDS prevention, to police handling of apprehended sex workers, to the management of mass hysteria, to the supervision of women workers at factory hostels, it seemed there was no problem for which *kaunseling* could not be applied. Factory women generally encountered counseling at the most literal level as *bagi nasihat*, to get advice.

I asked the warden of a hostel housing over 400 women to describe the contents of this counsel. First, the warden waits at the hostel gate late at night to see who returns at what hour. She checks their necks for "love bites" and if there are any, she sits them down and "counsels" them. The lack of control that Maira has over factory women is especially acute when women first arrive. During this vulnerable period of social liminality, which managers describe with sensitivity and concern, factory girls are described as "losing their moral bearings," or, as another manager put it, becoming "mentally unstable." This loss of moral bearing is used to justify the warden's vigilance. "I'm a real busybody," she tells me proudly. "I sit out there at the front gate and check their necks and then I counsel them. Sometimes I'll call one for a talk and she'll try to cover the marks up with powder. I say 'What happened, eh, you were frying fish and you splashed your neck?'" One HR manager explained that it was important to act like the girls' parents because they are far from their families, and because after all, factory girls "are not slaves."

The disciplinary underpinnings of counseling and *bagi nasihat* (giving advice) did not escape most workers. Jasmin, a 22-year-old Kadazan Catholic from Sabah, was an astute observer of the Malay girls around her. When I pressed further to understand whether the abundance of rules in the hostel was at all stressful (*stress akibat peraturan-peraturan*), she described these external constraints as natural extensions of the discipline that would have been exercised over her peers had they remained in their kampung: "No, [no stress], because we're already used to it. Even at home there are rules. For example, in the morning we have to make breakfast and then later lunch. So this discipline is already inside of us (*sedia ada di dalam diri*), but we ourselves, on our own, sometimes we forget or could improve on it."

Although the rules of the factory and hostel were not always as harmoniously intertwined as they were for Jasmin, women's complaints of hostel rules were often followed with rationalizations of their necessity. Nineteen-year-old Norhaslindah, with her husky voice and perfect maquillage, commended the religious class that hostel girls were required to attend: "Youths only think about recreation and having fun. Teenagers are [often] willing to exchange the afterlife for the thrills of this world. So the religious classes are aimed at educating and bringing us closer to the true path

of Islam.” She and her *member-member* (friends) came from Kedah together to *cuba hidup berdikari*, to try and stand on their own two feet, and had initially planned to rent a bungalow together. Instead, they opted for the factory hostels because of the many advantages, including “a warden who guards—protects us by way of fixed limitations.”

Conclusion

Risk, abstracted in myriad disciplinary discourses, is a fundamentally situated phenomenon, representable through ethnography and productively theorized within anthropology (Boholm 2003b). Social mixing, as the operative ethnoetiology of HIV/AIDS in the factories of Malaysia, describes and expresses the dramatic reorganization of race and gender, a transformation in social situations of every order, engineered by governmental policies in pursuit of stability and growth over the past three decades. Responses to the mass recruitment and relocation of unmarried Malay factory women, alongside immigrant women from Indonesia, Philippines, and Bangladesh, however, are rooted in historical processes of the past three hundred years; a shifting paradigm of race relations and racial interactions that attributes safety and stability to the segregation of ethnic lifeworlds, and therefore risk to their dissolution.

The structure of social interactions that factory women engage on arrival at the factories, and the newfound freedom that some women explore, threatens to undo this history, thus posing a risk to the larger society, metaphorically captured in an ethnoetiology of racial mixing as the basis for factories’ high-risk label. This freedom is ironic in light of the highly precarious position factory women hold in a global economy where downturns are inevitable and their labors expendable. Regardless, the experience of freedom in terms of “unconstrained interaction” (Ong 1987:185), both as an opportunity and as a source of dread, constitute the “situated exigency” that women face, as do the communities from which they depart and where they settle. Factory work is seen to be a social process diffused with risk, such that the relative independence it affords married and unmarried women will continue to challenge kampung values and racialized notions of social stability at multiple levels.

The jingle to a popular TV piece celebrating Malaysia’s race toward modernity expressed this broad-based confusion over women’s idealized roles. Sung to the tune of “We are the world, we are the people,” it boasted, “Women, you are the poison (*racun*), you are the cure.” It was taken off the air almost immediately and replaced with something more benign—and far less revealing. In keeping with the theme mixing-as-risk discourse in Malaysia, the jingle’s “mixed” message points up the mixed intentions, governmental and social, behind incorporating women into the industrializing labor force. As factories have demonstrated, becoming part of the labor force means more than expanding revenues; it means expanding opportunities for mixing with people of a different race and with men who are not muhrim.

With Malaysia becoming ever more integrated into or, as detractors aver, ensnared in, heterogeneous global spaces, sociomoral universes will combine and collide with uncertain, palpably risky, results in the process of producing a “new modernity.” The ethnoetiology described in this article constructs factories as inexorably high

risk not because of any evidential HIV epidemiology (yet), but because the cultural improvisation required of shifts in roles and relationships puts local moral worlds in jeopardy.

Whether this interpretive moral framework of social mixing among the races augurs ill for a future epidemiology of HIV based on sexual mixing, in which factories become vectors of material infection as opposed to moral contagion, can only be known over time and through reliable reporting mechanisms. Regardless, the meaning of "true risk" and "vector of infection" will continue to provide moments of contestation, as long as globalization's manifold meanings are subject to strenuous moral and political debate. Until then, it is important to track the initiation and expansion of social into sexual networks and to understand whether moral imaginations of risk eventually intersect structural drivers of risk (esp. transient, low-wage labor forces), to produce an epidemiological portrait in conventional high-risk terms; a portrait reducible neither to inexorable economic forces nor to isolated cultural narratives, but that explores the roles of both political economy and cultural transformation through the inter- and intrasubjective negotiation of risk under conditions of profound social, political, economic, and viral change.

Notes

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1. All names of informants presented in this article are pseudonyms.

2. Quotations presented in this article, when not originally in English, have been translated by the author from Bahasa to the nearest equivalent in English.

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