

# EPIDEMIC HYSTERIA (A PSYCHIATRIC INVESTIGATION)

By L. P. Kok

## SYNOPSIS

A Psychiatric study of 25 cases of epidemic hysteria occurring in a television factory was carried out. All patients were female Malays although only 65% of the factory girls were Malays. The majority were from families of the lower socio-economic groups, living in Malay village settings. More than half had timid personalities. Three case histories were presented. The first was a 17-year-old timid girl, who saw a shadow laughing at her. She was taken home and a Bomoh<sup>2</sup> was consulted. She recovered but on returning to the factory had another attack. Shortly after she resigned. The second case was a 17-year old sociable Malay girl who did not believe in ghosts. After witnessing some other girls afflicted with the malady, she saw a black "thing" and went into a bizarre trance with periods of screaming, lasting about one week. The third case was a 37-year-old married outgoing and friendly woman living in a high rise flat. She presented as if she was possessed by a spirit, the Kramat<sup>3</sup>. Mass hysteria is not uncommon in Malaya. It usually affects Malay girls. This epidemic appeared to be motivated by hostility and resentment against the management and triggered off by the association of "dirt" with the menstrual pads thrown about carelessly. The attacks were mostly believed to be due to spirit possession.

## INTRODUCTION

Hysteria is defined by Fish (1964) as the presence of mental or physical symptoms for the sake of advantage, usually unconsciously motivated. Slater (1965) considered hysteria not to be a disease entity because whether it was studied from genetical aspects, personality cluster or follow-up, the syndrome fragmented. Epidemic Hysteria usually refers to a variety of irrational fear or bizarre behaviour affecting a few to hundreds of people in close proximity to each other. The clinical picture does not conform to the description of a typical hysteria and is usually transient, recovering spontaneously or responding to any form of suggestive treatment.

An outbreak of epidemic hysteria occurred in a television assembly factory in January 1973. Later it spread to 2 neighbouring factories. In the first factory there were a total number of 84 girls affected, 34 of them having "attacks" which including screaming, shouting, struggling and in 4 cases "trance states". 50 other girls were frightened, worried and anxious. The epidemiology was described in detailed by Chew *et al* (1974). All except one of the cases involved were Malays, although the racial breakdown of the

workers in the factory were Malays 65%, Chinese 25% and Indians 9%.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Using a standard interview technique, 25 of the girls who had hysterical episodes were interviewed in their homes. The rest were not co-operative. The subjects were interviewed in their homes so that the home situation could be assessed at the same time. The interview was divided into three main parts:

- (1) Background information about the girls.
- (2) Description of the attack.
- (3) Theories about the attack and any preventive measures that should have been taken.

## RESULTS

Of the 25 cases seen, all were females, and 24 of them were Malays. The solitary Chinese girl was adopted by a Malay family since young and was brought up as a Malay. The majority of them had fathers who were of the lower socio-economic group Class IV and all apparently got on well with their family members, except the adopted Chinese girl, who was very unhappy with her home situation. Although all of them had religious teaching, only 2 believed strongly in bomohs<sup>2</sup> and spirits. More than half of them were described by their family members to be nervous, timid, and easily frightened, while the

---

Woodbridge Hospital, Singapore 19.

KOK LEE PENG, M.B., B.S., D.P.M., M.R.C. Psych.,  
Acting Senior Registrar.

TABLE I  
ANALYSIS OF CLINICAL FINDINGS

Total Number = 25. Age Range 16—31. Mean Age 20·0

	High Risk Factors	No. of Cases	Low Risk Factors	No. of Cases
SEX	Female	25	Male	0
ETHNIC GROUP	Malay	24	Non-Malay	1
EDUCATION	Primary 17 } Secondary 5 }	22	No Education	3
AGE	16—24 years	21	25—31 years	4
FATHER'S OCCUPATION	Class IV	20	Class II 1 } Class III 4 }	5
HOME ENVIRONMENT	Village House	18	Flat 6 } Terrace House 1 }	7
BELIEF IN SPIRITS	No Belief	17	Strong Belief 2 } Not Sure 6 }	8
PERSONALITY	Timid or Nervous	14	Normal	11

rest did not have these features. Only one out of the 25 girls was menstruating at the time of the outbreak. About half of them felt that the outbreak was caused by spirit possession, while the rest had no theories. The majority found the preventive measures taken in the factory e.g. the broadcasting of soothing music, the presence of a bomoh<sup>2</sup> to be helpful. Of the 25 cases about two-thirds of them experienced visual, auditory and sometimes olfactory types of hallucinations.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THREE CASES

##### Case 1

Miss R. aged 17 years was the index case of this episode of mass hysteria. She was educated in Malay till Pr. 6 and stopped schooling because she failed the Pr. 6 examination. She started work in the present factory about a month prior to the incident. She came from a harmonious and closely knit family and stayed in a complex household, a "pondok" made up of 10 families, all related to one another. She had a strict religious upbringing, but did not believe in ghosts or bomohs. Her premorbid personality was described as that of a timid, nervous girl who was scared of the dark and of being alone and who never went out unaccompanied. She was seldom sick and had no history of past hysterical be-

haviour. When ill, she sought treatment from western trained doctors rather than Malay bomohs. She often day-dreamed a lot though she refused to reveal the contents of the fantasies she had.

On 13.1.73 she went to work as usual in the afternoon. She felt well, and a little excited, as the following day was Hari Raya Haji. She worked as usual with a break from 5-6 p.m. At 7 p.m. she suddenly saw a shadow in front of her, about 1½ metres away, silhouetted against the wall. This shadow started to laugh in a low gruff frightening male tone. R. felt terrified, tense and confused and started to run and shout for help. She fell many times, but picked herself up and continued running. All this while she heard the sound of laughter and felt someone chasing her. She was brought to the nurses' room, but was unaware of what was happening. After some time she was sent home.

On reaching home she did not recognise anyone. She screamed and laughed continuously. Her father burned incense and read a passage of the Koran to her, after which she went 'soft'. Half-an-hour later she regained consciousness and was herself again.

She rested at home over the next 2 days. On 16.1.73 she returned to work though she was

apprehensive. At the factory she started crying and suddenly heard the same laughter ringing in her ears again. She was carried to the nurses' room where she lost consciousness.

She resigned shortly after this incident.

## Case 2

Miss A.S. aged 17 years, a Malay girl like Miss R., came from a harmonious family consisting of her parents and 5 siblings. She was the youngest in the family. Her father was a pensioned driver. She was educated in Malay till Pr. 6 and also had some English education. In contrast to Miss R. she had many friends of both sexes and she attended parties occasionally. She was described as a nervous girl who was afraid of the dark and of watching ghost films. She also was prone to anxiety and worries. She was moderately religious and did not believe in bomohs or jins.

On Tuesday 16.1.73 while in the factory she heard from some girls that the 5th floor of the factory was haunted but she did not believe then. She did not hear of any incidents on her own floor. Suddenly she saw two girls fainting. One after another and she went to their aid. She helped to carry them and tried to calm them down. She was not frightened or anxious then. Later, she went to the toilet and met a friend who appeared tense. A.S. tried to reassure her. She was aware of the smell of incense in the toilet and noticed that it was dirty—littered with menstrual pads and 2 panties. She developed a headache and went to the nurses' room for some tablets. There she fainted. On awakening she saw a tall black 'thing', the head of which was not visible. This vision waved a black hairy hand and beckoned to her. She fainted again. Later she was told that she shouted and screamed and struggled with the men who were grappling with her. She ran to the toilet and was dragged away, crying loudly. She was given an injection of Valium and then was brought to her brother's place. She started screaming and shouted that a black figure was calling out to her. She insisted on going back to the factory and warned her family not to detain her. Her voice appeared strange—like that of a man. She informed her family that she was the son of a jin and wanted to rejoin her family. Her father called a bomoh who told them that the factory was haunted and that a jinlet was possessing her.

A.S. remained in the trance-like state for a week. One moment she was quiet and still and

then she started shouting and screaming and threatened the family in her strange voice. She affected her sister-in-law who also went into a trance after helping her and they had alternating episodes of screaming and shouting. The bomoh prayed and gave them a belt to wear and water to drink. He told the family that the jinlet required an offering of the head of a goat, but later settled for 14 eggs, 7 for each girl. He had initially wanted to put the eggs at the factory but later placed them on the road and offered them to the jinlet. After this, the girls recovered.

## Case 3

Mdm. S.O. aged 31 years was a married woman who was staying with her husband and son in a Housing and Development Board<sup>1</sup> flat. Her husband was a scriptwriter in Radio Television Singapore and she had a good relationship with him. She was said to be a friendly, outgoing woman who mixed easily and had many female friends at work and in the neighbourhood. She was not afraid of being alone, and was not known to be neurotic. She was fairly religious and did not believe in jins or treatment from bomoh<sup>2</sup>.

On 16.1.73 she was informed that a distant relative had died, but she did not attend the funeral. She was not upset or depressed by the news as she had not been close to this person.

In the afternoon she went to work. She heard from her colleagues that many girls had attacks of screaming and shouting and had fainted. She could not understand this and felt mildly apprehensive. At about 8 p.m. she suddenly felt a pain in her left upper arm, as though someone was gripping her. She started crying and saw a yellow object, like a human figure in a shroud next to her. The face was covered. Her vision blurred and she fainted. She was revived and brought to her mother's place. She fainted several times there and cried loudly on awakening. A few hours later her husband returned from work and came to her mother's place. She insisted on going home as she said that the place was dirty. She talked irrationally and her voice appeared strange. She told him that she was a kramat<sup>3</sup> and insisted on getting some yellow cloth. She fainted several times on the way home. On arriving home, she took out a piece of yellow material, spread it on the floor of the living room and slept there. The next day she was visited by many neighbours and continued to talk strangely. Her husband did not call in any

bomohs but read Koran verses to her, and she gradually became herself again that day.

## DISCUSSION

Mass hysteria is not an uncommon occurrence in Malaysia and Singapore. It was first reported by Tan (1963) in a Malay school in Malaya. Teoh and Tan (1973) reported that outbreaks of mass hysteria took place in a total of 27 schools between 1970 and 1971. In Singapore, in 1973 three factories and a nightclub had such outbreaks. In most cases, the attacks of mass hysteria have been confined to those of the Malay or Boyanese ethnic groups. Teoh (1973) in his description of an episode of epidemic hysteria affecting eight girls in a school in a town in West Malaysia postulated that the psychopathology of the headmaster who had disguised voyeuristic and sexual tendencies towards the girls, was a key feature in the causation of the epidemic.

In the present episode hostility and resentment towards the management of the factory was not overt. The first case, a nervous, easily excitable girl did not appear to have been suffering from any specific stress. It was interesting that one of the other girls affected on the first evening, had asked the management for half-a-day off as it was the eve of Hari Raya Haji<sup>4</sup>. Her request was refused, but she denied feeling resentful. She had always been a model worker before this. Many of the girls affected had felt that the factory had been dirty, especially the toilets and many commented on the fact that menstrual towels had been thrown about although only one girl was menstruating during the attack. To the Malays "menses" has two levels of meaning—the first being physically dirty and the second means spiritually unclean and therefore offensive to the spirit. Though 66% of those interviewed did not believe in the supernatural, yet all had heard stories about them and about half of the 25 cases felt that the episode was caused by spirits. As possession by spirits resulting in mass hysteria is an acceptable form of behaviour in the Malay culture, especially in females, perhaps this behaviour is only an expression of fear, which was triggered off by the first case. Alternatively it could have been the

disguised expression of hostility towards the factory and the non-Malay employers. Hari Raya Haji is an important religious festival to the Malays and not being granted a half-day on the eve of this holiday could have caused resentment among the workers.

The acceptable cultural interpretation of the events was that the jin or spirit of the toilet was offended by the dirt and thus had possessed the girls as punishment. More than two-thirds of the girls had found the preventive measures in the form of piping music, and engaging a bomoh<sup>2</sup> to rid the place of the jin helpful.

## CONCLUSION

This study showed that young Malay females of immature and neurotic mental constitution were susceptible to hysterical trance-like attacks or a fear reaction during an outbreak of "mass hysteria" which could be motivated by unconscious hostile feelings and resentment towards authority. The affliction was transient and responded to spiritual treatment by native healers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to thank Dr. W.F. Tsoi, Medical Superintendent, Woodbridge Hospital, for his encouragement and advice in the preparation of this paper.

## REFERENCES

1. Chew, P.K. and Phoon: "Epidemic Hysteria Among some Factory Workers in Singapore" to be published in *Sing. Med. J.* 1974.
2. Fish F.: *An Outline of Psychiatry*, 64, Wright & Sons; Bristol 1964.
3. Slater E.: "The Diagnosis of Hysteria" *Brit. Med. J.*, 1, 1395 1965.
4. Tan, E.S.: "Epidemic Hysteria" *Med. J. Malaya* 28, 72-76 1963.
5. Teoh, J.I.: "An Outbreak of Epidemic Hysteria in Malaysia"—personal communications 1973.
6. Teoh, J.I. and Tan, E.S.: "The Sociology of an Outbreak of Epidemic Hysteria"—personal communications 1973.

## EXPLANATORY NOTES

1. Housing and Development Board Flats are low cost flats built by the Singapore Government.
2. Bomoh is a Native Spiritual Healer.
3. Kramat is a local spirit.
4. Hari Raya Haji is a Malay Religious Festival.