

**The Sarawak Museum Journal****Vol. XLI No. 62****December 1990****ISSN: 0375-3050****E-ISSN: 3036-0188**

Citation: Robert L. Winzeler. (1990). Report on *Latah* in Central and Southwestern Sarawak. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XLI (62): 1-8

REPORT ON LATAH IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHWESTERN SARAWAK**Robert L. Winzeler**

(University of Nevada, Reno)

Latah is a predominantly female behavioural phenomenon occurring mainly in the Malay archipelago. It is characterized by echolalia, echopraxia, and command automatism, taking the form usually of a brisk explosive verbal outburst usually following an exciting 'happening'. Precipitating stimuli range from unexpected gestures of another person or slight unexpected physical contacts to severely frightening events such as the sight of a snake. The response of the *latah* subject may be the repetition of the word she was uttering at the time or she may repeat whatever words she heard at the time. She may also, during the excited state, perform simple or complicated tasks initiated or commanded by someone else (Chiu, Tong and Schmidt 1972: 155)

REPORT ON *LATAH* IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHWESTERN SARAWAK

by

Robert L. Winzeler
(University of Nevada, Reno)

Latah is a predominantly female behavioural phenomenon occurring mainly in the Malay archipelago. It is characterized by echolalia, echopraxia, and command automatism, taking the form usually of a brisk explosive verbal outburst usually following an exciting 'happening'. Precipitating stimuli range from unexpected gestures of another person or slight unexpected physical contacts to severely frightening events such as the sight of a snake. The response of the *latah* subject may be the repetition of the word she was uttering at the time or she may repeat whatever words she heard at the time. She may also, during the excited state, perform simple or complicated tasks initiated or commanded by someone else (Chiu, Tong and Schmidt 1972: 155)

INTRODUCTION¹

In the late 1960's T.L. Chiu, K.E. Tong and K.E. Schmidt carried a psychiatric survey in Sarawak and, subsequently, published a report on *latah* from which the above passage is taken. As one of a few substantial articles of Malayan *latah* outside Malaya or Java, it has been a valuable item in a rapidly growing body of literature that is very long on argument and speculation and very short on new information (Winzeler 1984). Yet while detailed in some respects their report is, to an anthropologist at least, as intriguing for what it omits as for what it includes. The article states that *latah* in Sarawak occurs among Iban as well as Malays but makes no mention of particular areas or subgroups, except to note that the Iban who were affected were from villages near those of Malays with whom cultural interchange had taken place (Chiu, Tong and Schmidt 1972: 63). The matter of which areas or sub-groups were involved is perhaps not of great importance in regard to Malays but it is of some significance regarding the Iban for there are substantial differences between the Iban in some areas and those in others. Nor does the report mention whether or not *latah* may occur among any of the many other indigenous ethnic populations of Sarawak.

Published information on *latah* elsewhere in Borneo is fragmentary and of little help with such questions. On the basis of a survey of physicians, F.H. van Loon (1924: 311) reported that *latah* occurred among Malays, but not among Dajak (Dayak or interior native), Buginese or people from Batjan. While the survey was limited to Kalimantan, that is the three quarters of Borneo controlled by the Dutch, the location of the areas in which instances of *latah* were noted was not indicated. Van Loon did report that *latah* in Borneo was called *gigiren* but did not discuss the ethnic origin or meaning of this term.

Following an investigation of *latah* in Kelantan (West Malaysia) and prompted by what Chiu, Tong and Schmidt had (and had not) reported I sought to learn what I could about the pattern in Sarawak. Specifically I was able to spend a number of months surveying the distribution of the pattern among the main ethnic groups in the central and southwestern area of the country. These groups included Malays, several different Iban and Land Dayak groups, and pagan, Christian, and Muslim Melanau populations. What I found was that *latah* does indeed occur among Iban in some areas but not in others – specifically among those in “down-river” areas but not in “up-river” ones. My efforts also showed, however, that in the present *latah* is by no means limited to Malay and down-river Iban populations.

The present report is thus based upon information gathered by myself in the First, Second, Third and Seventh Divisions between December 1985 and June 1986 and in July and August 1987. Systematic inquiries were made at thirty nine scattered Iban longhouses located mainly on the Saribas, the Rajang, the Oya, the Igan, the lower Baleh and Mujong Rivers. Among the Sebuyau Iban detailed information was collected in two villages in Lundu, while more limited inquiries were made in several villages around Kuching. Information concerning Land Dayaks was gathered among Selako in Lundu District, in greatest detail in four rural villages situated from five to eight miles to the west of Lundu town. More general information was gathered concerning Selako in Pueh, Lara in Lundu District and Bukar Sadong in the Mongkos area of Hulu Sadong. Information on Malays was obtained in the Lundu area and in the main interior Rajang River towns of Kanowit, Song, Kapit and Belaga, while detailed information was collected in Betong, Saribas District, in the Second Division. Information on the Melanau was gathered especially in the Dalat area on the Oya River and through visits to the towns of Mukah and Oya and to all of the eighteen villages on the Oya and Kut Rivers. I was also interested in the question of whether *latah* occurred among any of the Chinese of Sarawak, as it does among long-settled “peranakan” Chinese in Kelantan. In Lundu my Selako assistants told me of several *latah* Chinese, but of these I was able to locate and interview one who turned out to have had a Selako mother who was also *latah*. Chinese informants in Kuching told me that *latah* did occur among *nonya* or *peranakan* Chinese but I did not contact any.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF LATAH

It is useful to begin here with some brief comparisons with the occurrence of *latah* in Kelantan, West Malaysia. *Latah* is by all indications more common among Malays in Kelantan than it is among Malays or any other group in Sarawak. The rural Malay village in Pasir Mas District in which I did a detailed