

Commentary on Temiar Dream Music.

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A casual traveller among the Temiar tribes who inhabit the jungle-covered mountains of the Malayan main range would readily observe the material side of their way of life. He would see that they planted dry padi and root crops in their clearings, and also that most of their material needs could be satisfied by collecting the natural produce of the jungle, or by hunting with the blowpipe, fishing and setting traps. It would not be so easy to find out how their interest in life is organised, or how the motives which maintain their co-operative enterprises are reinforced. In short, how there can be food for the spirit, as well as for the flesh, in such a way of living. Indeed, the routine of their workaday world is transfigured and inspired by the way they interpret the heart of reality.

Behind the material form and function of their jungle surroundings, the Temiar, like most primitive peoples, believe that a spiritual world also exists. The bare formula that the Temiar religion consists of a belief in spiritual beings, that is animism, would, however, be inadequate. Temiar religion, if it must have a label, is best described as "shamanism", a system which may be found among primitive peoples and peasants from South East Asia northwards across Siberia, and throughout North America and parts of South America. For, to the Temiar, the world of spirits is not the exclusive domain of demons, ghosts and bogey-men. There are also spirits friendly to man, willing to be guides and guardians. The Temiar shaman, or "hala" is the medium between the tribe and the spirit world. The "hala" secures his sanction during dreams. In a "hala" dream, a special relationship is set up between the "hala" and a particular spirit, who promises to become his guide. These guides may be spirits from trees, crops, stones, mountains, wild animals or even ancestors. A spirit gives a revelation, according to a traditional tribal pattern, to the dreaming "hala". A typical revelation includes a verse of poetry, music for song and dance, and an offering in the form of leaf and flower decorations to be worn by the performers. The "hala" can summon any of his spirit guides to come down and possess him by performing according to the special instructions, and during the performance he can pass on the spirit in possession to his fellow dancers.

Some spirit guides may only give advice on the hunt, others, new art patterns for wood carvings or the plaiting of mats, or new songs and dances which are particularly recreational; others again may convey special powers by transfiguring the bodies of the dancers, so that they can withstand injuries and pain, and perform extraordinary feats. A few may endow the "hala" with the power of healing sickness; again, a very few spirit guides may identify this with a messianic message affecting the welfare of the group or a tribe, or even mankind as a whole. Some of these master spirits can claim cosmic or universal significance. These spirit guide inspirations are open to most Temiar men in the tribe. There are many small "halas" who can claim a few spirit guides, and a very few big "halas" who can summon ten or a score. To communion with these master spirits many strive, but few attain.

/Religious ritual

Religious ritual among the Temiar is singing and dancing for grace, or for power to heal, help or guide their neighbours. It is worth noting that among a people so co-operative in their way of living the only original and traditional idea of rank is the title of "Tohat", an address of respect accorded by a man, who has been sick in body or soul, to the "hala" who has restored his health and peace of mind. A successful song or dance or poem was spread from valley to valley through the Temiar mountains, and each performance was given the name of the "hala" who dreamed it, suffixed by the name of the particular spirit guide.

This evening you will hear some of this music sung by a people among whom inspiration is still very much a living thing. It is night in a Temiar long-house. The house is like a whole village under a single roof; in the centre is the dancing floor of split bamboo, framed along four sides by twenty separate family compartments, each screened off and opening on to a fire hearth of beaten earth. The rhythm from the bamboos beaten by the women is taken up by the deeper notes of the drum and the gong. The dancers take the floor and the bamboos vibrate to the measured tread of their feet. The flare from a score of fires lights up the gloom and plays on the moving frieze of the dancers, wisps of fragrant lemon grass in their hands, plaited strands of gold green grass on their heads and round their shoulders, their waists and their ankles; the leading "hala" quickens the rhythm, and then he is stark in the middle of the magic circle. The spirit is in him, he stretches and bends with the power of it, like Laocoon in the coils of the serpent. He is in a state of grace, and powerful to heal.

"Ajin".

The first song was given by a tiger spirit to a chief in the Ulu Nenggiri in Kelantan. Its message led his group to make a new settlement at Ajin, just over the border of Cameron Highlands.

"Telei Bah Peb".

Next we have a song, "Telei Bah Peb", from the Ulu Telom in Pahang. The spirit of a wild bahana warns the "hala" that his group must make haste and collect the ripening fruits before the civet cats eat them.

"Siku".

While the Temiar were helping to clear the jungles for the hill station of Cameron Highlands, the spirit of the Siku mountain warned the "hala" of the possible dangers of contact. The verse of the song runs -

"White strangers come from Kuala Lumpur,
From Singapore they come,
From Ipoh in their motor cars up the Batang Padang,
But with them comes disease".

"Bah Motosh".

Up the Telom river out-board motor boats bring rice and supplies to the Chinese jelutong tappers. The spirit of the out-board motor appeared in a dream to the "hala" in that valley, and gave him a song and a dance.

"Dalam Guni".

The spirit of the hills told a "hala" in the Ulu Perak that once upon a time a sack of rice was buried in the ground, and a very rich plantation resulted.

"Bah Sain".

From Telom in Pahang comes a song given to the "hala" Bah Sain by the spirit of the wind among the bamboos. The song tells the Temiar that the wind in the bamboos is the force that moves the aeroplanes they see flying up in the sky.

"Alus".

"Alus" in the Ulu Nenggiri in Kelantan dreamed the next song, when he and his group were felling a new clearing for cultivation. The spirit of the tiger gave him a song because -- "we tigers here are amazed and not a little frightened of the power of you fellows -- you even fell the biggest trees. We leave you in peace and give you this song as a token".

"Hanjoi".

"Hanjoi" is a play upon words based on the disappearing form of a man who has dived into a pool to catch fish. His body gets smaller until it disappears. This is a variation on the higher the fewer.

"Chinchem".

The last is part of a cycle of songs which accompanies a ritual dance called "Chinchem", which is on the highest level of Temiar dream inspiration. The songs and dances were given to a chief on the Korbu River in Perak, by an ancestor's spirit. It is now the symbol of a new order of life growing out of the traditional tribal pattern.
