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Indigenous Religious Systems

of the Malay Peninsula

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

'Indigenous' here refers to those cultures which have evolved within the Malay Peninsula, viz., all the Orang Asli (Aborigine) groups except the recently in-migrated Orang Kuala and Orang Kanaq of Johor, and all the Malays except such immigrant groups as the Minangkabau and the unassimilated Javanese etc.

The problem discussed in this paper is rather far removed from the usual interactional concerns of social anthropology. Basically, it is a problem in ethnology: Malayan Aboriginal religion and Malay folk-religion ('Malay magic') are obviously ethnologically cognate in the sense that they derive, in large part, from a common cultural matrix. But these various religious systems differ in the organisation and uses made of their otherwise very similar underlying ideas, and the best way to solve the problem of this variation is to discover the independent variables that have somehow acted to 'transform' these underlying structures.

2. ANIMISM

Evans-Pritchard's discussion of the term 'animism' (1965:24-6) is enlightening. He points out that it has been employed ambiguously in anthropological writings, sometimes to refer to the belief in a pervasive life-force or personality that attaches to creatures and inanimate objects, i.e. belief in ghosts and spirits; and sometimes, more simply, to refer to the belief that creatures and inanimate objects have souls. As Evans-Pritchard reminds us, many writers have put forward the theory that belief in spirit somehow derived from belief in soul, and that ultimately spirit-belief evolved into the belief in 'supernatural beings' that Tylor took to be criterial of

religion proper. Now it is easy to agree with Evans-Pritchard when he dismisses these evolutionary guesses as 'just-so stories', totally without support. What is not so easy to agree with is his contention that these theories must be false because 'the two conceptions [spirit and soul] are not only different but opposed, spirit being regarded as incorporeal, extraneous to man' (1965:26).

The mention of corporeality brings to mind some of the most interesting of recent work on the sources of ritual power, namely Mary Douglas' insights into the importance of categorial boundaries and their transgression (1966; 1970). Even more to the point, Douglas' ideas have recently been applied to the Malay animistic system by Endicott (1971) in a study that makes it clear, for Malay beliefs at least, that souls are indeed manifestations of the same thing as spirits and ghosts. In Endicott's analysis 'essence' may be either incorporeal, in which case it manifests itself as spirit, or corporeal, in which case it forms the 'soul' of the body that houses it. Analysis of my own data on Temiar beliefs (1967; forthcoming) and careful examination of the rather sparse literature on the other Orang Asli groups suggest that the same holds true for all the indigenous religious systems of the Malay Peninsula, for which we may set up the following identities as of general applicability:

spirit = free soul
soul = bounded spirit.

But what is the nature of the 'essence' of which both soul and spirit are manifestations? The animistic worldview posits the division of the cosmos into two dialectically conjoined planes of existence: the plane of things, matter, categories; and the plane of essence, spirit, soul. Entities on the two planes are readily conceivable as independent autonomous manifestations; but

the normal 'resting' state of the cosmos is one in which for each entity on the plane of matter there is an equivalent entity on the plane of essence, and vice versa, in a one-to-one relationship. Any disturbance of this relationship, whereby essence escapes the bounds of matter, will introduce a dynamic imbalance into the system which may come to be regarded as the source of such things as power, danger, pollution, mana, and so on.

This fundamentally dynamic view of the cosmos would fit well into a more general dialectical theory, and it is not surprising that such a skilled dialectician as Simmel should, in a remarkable passage, best express the kind of relationship we are talking about here.

Life is more-life -- it is a process which pushes on, seeking to follow its own development laws. But life is also more-than-life; it is formative and produces objects that are independent of it. For life as a process to continue, it requires the aid of form, which in its stability is the antithesis of process. Hence, life as process stands the risk of being shattered on the surface of the very object it has produced. (Quoted from Murphy 1972:134.)

If for Simmel's 'process' we read 'essence' and for his 'form' we read 'matter', we have here in a nutshell the fundamental premiss of Malayan animism.

In Malayan animism this dialectic works itself out in the following manner: matter (or better: 'categories') tends to anchor essence progressively such that each category has its corresponding 'soul'; on the other hand, essence tends to break through the categorial boundaries to coalesce and form free spirit (or 'Soul'). Tightly bound soul implies health, neutrality, safety, profane-ness; free spirit implies un-health, activity, danger, sacred-ness.

3. THE MALAYAN SYSTEMS COMPARED

The major dimension of difference between the various

forms of animism in Malaya lies in the different categorial systems that partition spirit into souls. For the purposes of exposition I will outline below only those systems that have been subjected to detailed study -- Malay, Temiar and Semang -- and hang the rest of the argument upon the contrasts that appear between them.

3.1 Malay animism: In the Malay system almost everything in the environment that note is taken of has the power to concentrate essence in itself, and hence to come to possess a soul. (In older Malay usage the word semangat referred both to 'essence' or 'spirit' in the general sense and to 'soul' in the specific sense; in modern Malay semangat has restricted its range of application to the 'spirit' of the nation and to the 'soul' of a young baby.) But the degree of differentiation and fixity of the soul depends upon the degree of specificity with which the category that houses it is known. Hence a continuum exists from the bare differentiation of the vital principle (Semangat) by attachment to nothing more concrete than the experiences that frighten the Malays, to its almost complete differentiation by incorporation within an identifiable human frame. The less differentiated forms of spirit fall into the category labelled hantu ('ghosts') in Malay, while the more highly differentiated forms are treated as the 'souls' (semangat) of the various entities containing them. Notice that in this system shamans' spirit-guide familiars occupy an intermediate position between souls and ghosts.

The full schema of spirit-differentiation within Malay culture is illustrated in Figure 1. The details will interest only specialists in Malayan ethnology, but the general pattern is significant for my argument. As one moves out from the human end of the continuum there is a progressive change in the character of spirit-

	Upper-body	Lower-body
Man, animal	<u>rawāy</u> (common Austroasiatic for 'soul')	<u>hup</u> (? Temiar 'breath', 'heart', 'liver')
Plant	<u>kahyāk</u> ('watery substance')	<u>kenoruk</u> (Malay 'enclosed space')
Mountain	<u>peteri?</u> (cf. Malay <u>peteri</u> 'princess')	<u>sarak</u> (Malay <u>sarang</u> 'nest, lair')
Spirit-guide	<u>cenoy</u> (Semang 'elf') <u>gonig</u>	<u>gonig</u> (Malay <u>gundik</u> 'concubine, spirit-guide')
Appearance to dreamer or shaman	mammikin, variously male or female	tiger (or occasionally <u>naga</u> -dragon)

Figure 2

The Temiar animistic system

underground-souls of mountains. Though the various souls of each of these classes of objects are called by distinct names (see Figure 2), their underlying homology is clearly demonstrated by the fact that they ^{are} always reported to appear in the same guise to dreamers and shamans, regardless of their derivation: upper-body souls manifest themselves as humanoid mannikins, and lower-body souls as tigers. It is these dream- and trance-based soul manifestations that constitute the spirit guides among the Temiar.

In this respect Temiar animistic beliefs are different from those of the Malays, in that 'things' do not differ in the degree to which they can fix and differentiate soul. Man's soul is neither more nor less labile, nor better known than, for example, the souls of mountains. In other words, in contrast to the Malay system, Temiar cosmic distinctions are established within man in the same way and to the same extent as in anything else.

There is no room here for any discussion of how this apparently neutral oppositional principle becomes imbued with moral and cosmological content (see Benjamin 1967; forthcoming). Here let us stress that this is not a merely dichotomous binary oppositional principle -- it is a dialectical one. To paraphrase Murphy (1972:175), the opposed entities generate each other, cut against each other, clash, and pass into each other in the process of being transformed into something else. For example, Temiar informants state quite explicitly that, though their head-souls and heart-souls are regarded as different at one level of discourse, they become identical at another level (just 'soul', using the words for 'heart-soul' or 'head-soul' indiscriminately to stand for both). The theological message carried by this dialectic is: good

and evil are immanent in everything; good implies evil, evil implies good.

3.3 Semang animism: Semang religion has been little investigated in terms of modern anthropological approaches, but there is a large body of descriptive material by Evans (1936) and Schebesta (1957). Recent fieldwork on the topic by Endicott and myself, however, does allow some conclusions to be drawn.

Just as in Malay and Temiar animism, almost everything that the Semang recognise in their environment may come to anchor spirit and possess a 'soul'. Unlike the Temiar case, however, souls in Semang ideology are never regarded as partible: souls exist in one form only (kolangs), which in man and animals is associated with the liver and heart (also kolangs, and in plants with the pith (ta?g?). Unlike the Malay case, on the other hand, Semang soul-conceptions do not imply any differences between the soul-embodying properties of men as opposed to those of plants or animals; in this respect Semang beliefs run parallel to those of the Temiar.

It is with regard to their conception of the spirit-guide, however, that the Semang appear quite distinct from both the Malays and the Temiar. The Semang cosmos has three well-ordered levels of hierarchy: the mundane level of the soul-possessing entities (man, animals, plants, etc.); the celestial level of the many Nature-gods and -godlings that fill the Semang pantheon; and the intermediate level of the chenoi (properly: cenoy). These chenoi, which are functionally equivalent to the spirit-guides of Malay and Temiar shamanism, are elf-like creatures associated with various natural (especially plant) species, but conceived of as having an objective existence in their own right: they do not seem to be regarded as the manifestations of spirit set free from

natural or imagined objects, as among the Malays and Temiar. Exactly what the relationship is between essence and category in the case of these chenoi creatures, is not yet clear. It seems likely, however, that they represent a distinct class of beings, possessing both body and soul on the 'mundane' pattern, that can be cajoled by men into releasing their souls in the form of powerful free spirit which can then be used in a typically shamanistic manner.

3.4 To summarise this comparison of Malay, Temiar and Semang animism: all three cultures exhibit animistic beliefs that fit into the general model of animism expounded earlier in this paper, but there are significant differences in the ways in which they structure the cosmos and the spirit domain.

a) The Malay cosmos is structured upon an in/out (or man--world) axis, differentiation along which is in the nature of a continuum.

b) The Semang cosmic axis is up/down (or God--man), differentiation of which is into three discrete levels.

c) The Temiar cosmos is structured upon a complex in/out:: up/down matrix (as Temiar ritual makes clear), which is established within man to the same degree as it is in the rest of nature. Man, accordingly, is not differentiated to any significant degree from the rest of the cosmos.

3.5 The nature of the spirit-guide in these three animistic systems also exhibits significant differences.

a) The Malay spirit-guides (for which there is a large number of names) are drawn from the released souls of entities intermediate between man and ghosts on the in/out axis of differentiation. The spirit-guides are thus formed of the souls of species remote enough from man

to be relatively easily set free as spirit, but not so remote as to be dangerously uncontrollable.

b) The Semang spirit-guides are derived from the souls of beings intermediate between man and God on the up/down cosmic axis, and their major function seems to be to act as a means whereby God may be approached. On this argument the Semang shaman functions as a priest. (I see no reason to reject Schebesta's analysis of Semang religion as God-oriented.)

c) The Temiar spirit-guides may derive from the souls of any category whatsoever, real or imagined, animate or inanimate, human or non-human. Furthermore, shamanistic powers are ascribed not only to man but to any entity believed to possess the power of setting soul free from other entities and manipulating the resulting spirit for a specified end.

4. THE PRACTICE OF ANIMISM IN MALAYA

Whatever the structural position of the source of spiritual power within these Malayan animistic systems, use of, or operation on, the spirits must involve the freeing of essence ('soul') from the restraints of material or categorial boundaries. So long as the quiescent, one-to-one relationship between soul and 'things' remains undisturbed, no religious action is possible. It is necessary first for some imbalance to have occurred in the system (usually spontaneously, but sometimes by deliberate human intervention) so that quiescent soul is set free as potent spirit, which may then be put to use to achieve specific ends. The deliberate use of free spirit forms the basis of shamanism, which exhibits a superficial similarity in form in the three cultures discussed here.

But such a system of beliefs carries with it a darker, negative side: if with skill man can control spirits and make them his allies, with carelessness he may well find himself controlled by the spirits in turn. There are two ways in which this control may be exerted: just as soul may be lost, spirit may invade. Any 'thing' in the environment which has somehow lost soul thereby becomes powerful, through the valency of its own soul deficiency, to abstract soul from man (or, in the Temiar case at least, from any other species) in an attempt to regain equilibrium. Conversely, soul which has been set free as invasive spirit may attack man (or any other species) and cause serious disturbance of his individual body-soul balance. In man, soul-loss and spirit-attack both result in sickness, against which therapeutic action takes the form of soul-recall and spirit-abstraction rituals, respectively.

In Malayan animistic practice, then, there are two cross-cutting dimensions:

- a) soul-loss v. spirit-invasion;
- b) ritual action may be based on soul-fixing or spirit-manipulation.

4.1 Soul-loss is an important cause of illness in all three systems, and the ordinary healer (Malay: bomoh; Temiar and Semang: halā?, which also means 'shaman') spends much time in finding and returning souls. If he does this by means of power gained from some aiding spirit he is employing shamanistic methods; but the methods employed are frequently non-shamanistic, involving magical procedures only. (The Temiar also have to watch that their actions do not cause non-humans, such as fruit-trees, to lose soul.)

4.2 Spirit-invasion is regarded as a more serious cause

of disease in all three systems, and the healer must exert much effort to identify and 'fix' the invading spirit. In the Temiar case, however, the aetiology of such diseases is immensely complex, as the number of possible combinations of invading spirits and attacked souls is very high: an invading spirit may derive from disembodied upper-body souls, lower-body souls, or plain undifferentiated soul, acting variously upon man's head-soul, heart-soul, or undifferentiated 'soul'; the same applies, but in reverse, to cases of soul-loss or -abstraction. To complicate matters further, simultaneous spirit-invasion and soul-abstraction may occur, to generate monstrous composite soul-manifestations the material embodiments of which the Temiar regard as particularly dangerous. The majority of the recognised soul-hazards and transactions involve man, as one might expect, but there are a considerable number that involve non-humans only. So far as I know, Malay and Semang animism is spared this extreme florescence of spirit-based conceptions, probably for two reasons: they do not regard the soul as partible; and they focus all their attention on man alone as the object of spiritual attack.

4.3 Soul-fixing is the major element in Malay magical practices, involving the use of spells and magical substances. The former are uttered to specify, make 'known', and hence to place bounds around, the disturbing spirit; the latter are used to harden boundaries to prevent soul-escape, or sometimes to soften boundaries across which a spirit straddles ambiguously, and hence dangerously. These practices, however, play little part in Temiar religion, and not very much more in Semang religion. (It is interesting to note, though, that members of all three groups hold the shamans of the other two groups in especially high regard when it becomes necessary to undertake soul-fixing magic.)

4.4 Soul-manipulation is the basis of shamanism in all three groups, and there is a great deal of similarity in the surface form that this shamanism exhibits. But the details diverge considerably; and this is even more true of the aims of shamanism in the three groups.

a) Malay shamanism is rarely employed for any other function than to relieve individual suffering, usually sickness. The Malay shaman is a professional whose identity is public knowledge, and whose patients come to him as clients. Only very rarely (as in the bela kampong ceremony) does the Malay shaman undertake ritual action to ensure the well-being of the whole community. It seems to be well authenticated that Malay shamans are also employed as sorcerers to put their powers to nefarious use (Gimlette 1929).

b) Semang shamanism seems primarily to have a priestly function, in which the shaman serves as the intermediary with God for the whole community. Though the Semang shaman also acts as a healer in cases of individual sickness, his main function seems to be to use his power over the chenoi spirits so that they will intercede with the deity in ensuring continuity of the seasonal cycle of thunder, flood and (plant) fertility. The Semang deity either is, or is closely associated with, thunder; it is believed that men's sins against him can be expiated by a human blood offering, which the deity then stores up and transforms in due course into the blossoms of the seasonal fruit trees. Blood in Senoi and Semang symbolism very clearly stands for 'soul'. Hence Semang religion seems to be concerned with maintaining a proper circulation of the vital essence between the celestial and mundane levels of the cosmos, through the joint mediation of the chenoi and their earthly representative the shaman. Failure to carry out these observations would

lead, they fear, to a failure of the natural seasonal cycle upon which Semang life so closely depends. Schebesta makes a very strong case (1957:134) for the interpretation of Semang shamanistic ceremonies as a form of prayer, in the true sense of the term.

c) Temiar shamanism is neither primarily concerned with therapeutic action nor at all with the deity. Rather, the Temiar cultivate the spirit-guide relationship as a self-sufficient religious activity in which they enter into highly personal mystical relationships with the disembodied souls of various natural species and of other entities. These relationships range in degree from mere receptivity towards the advances made by spirits in dreams, to full-scale intense public shamanism. There is, then, a gradation from the private and slight degree of 'adeptness' (halā?) that all Temiar are believed to be capable of, to the public declaration by an acknowledged full shaman that he is prepared to make the power-for-good of his many spirit-guides available to the whole community. The Temiar shaman's duty is neither towards a clientele nor towards a deity, but to his own personally revealed spirit-guide (gonig, cənōy). What this intense cultivation of the spirit-guide achieves, in Temiar belief, is the maximisation of the influence of Good over that of Evil within a cosmos in which, as we have seen, the one is part of the other. (The full development of this argument must await the publication of my book Temiar Religion: the Dialectical Animism of a Malayan Hill-tribe.) It is striking that among the Temiar, but not among the Semang and Malays, shamanistic seances are held just as frequently when circumstances are perfectly healthy and untroubled as when there is disease or misfortune.

4.5 If we now take an overall view of the pattern of variation revealed by the above analysis, some interesting

paradoxes emerge.

a) The Temiar and Semang religions share a greater superficial similarity of form than does either alone with Malay spirit-religion. Nevertheless, when their theologies are compared it becomes apparent that the Temiar and Semang religions are fundamentally different in structure. An argument could be made out, following Schmidt, that the Semang have a primitive monotheistic religion (though admittedly overlain with a surface polytheism) which is, in Malayan terms, sui generis and remarkably resistant to change -- just like the rest of Semang culture (Benjamin 1974). If so, it seems likely that many of the constituent elements of Temiar religion -- but not its underlying structure -- have diffused from the Semang.

b) Even though Temiar religion appears superficially to have much less in common with Malay spirit-religion than with Semang religion, I believe it is possible to show that Temiar and Malay spirit-religions are nevertheless 'transforms' of the same basic religious system, and that they represent two poles of the same continuum. To demonstrate this, let us now turn our attention to the socio-political context of these cultures, to see how far it will serve as the independent variable we initially set out to look for.

5. THE SOCIETAL DIMENSION

5.1 The most obvious contrast between the Malay and Temiar patterns of animism lies in the differing characters of their religious representations: Malay animism is 'sociocentric' in structure while Temiar animism is 'egocentric'. This contrast may be tabulated as follows:

a) Malay animism is based on a fixed number of nationally known spirits (McHugh 1955); Temiar animism is based on an infinitude of personally revealed spirits.

b) Malay cosmology sets man apart from the rest of the cosmos; Temiar cosmology establishes exactly the same distinctions within man as in the rest of the cosmos.

c) The Malay shaman manipulates 'society'-given spirits for the benefit of a private client; the Temiar shaman uses his own personally revealed spirits for the benefit of the community.

d) In Malay cosmology the major axis of spirit differentiation is divided into discrete categorical units; in Temiar cosmology the major spirit-differentiating oppositions are dialectically part of each other.

These marked differences in character imply a difference in the degree of differentiation acknowledged by the two cosmologies. Malay cosmology views the individual as differentiated from, and acted upon by, the rest of society, and it views man as sharply differentiated from the rest of creation. Temiar cosmology, while acknowledging that the individual has a degree of personal autonomy from society, and man from the rest of creation, makes it clear that that autonomy represents no more than a muddled, dialectical pattern of differentiation between the major elements of the cosmos. (Various theories of religious evolution make much of this notion of differentiation, but I will not discuss the point here.)

5.2 Translated to a political mode of expression, these differences imply that whereas Malay cosmology sees man as acted upon by society and nature, Temiar cosmology sees man as freely participating in society and nature. It is this contrast that provides us with a clue to the independent transforming variable we set out to look for. The most

obvious contrast between Temiar and Malay socio-political organisation is that while the former are segmentary and egalitarian in structure (Benjamin 1966), the latter are centralised and hierarchical. Now from the point of view of the local (village) community, centralisation implies that power will be perceived as extrinsic in character, deriving from a locus outside of the villagers' control. Segmentary organisation, on the other hand, implies that power will be perceived as intrinsic in character, being in the hands of the villagers themselves. This is precisely paralleled in the two cultures by their differing perceptions of the nature and source of spiritual power: in Temiar animism spiritual power is intrinsic, deriving from personal revelation and being used at the individual's own discretion, while in Malay animism spiritual power is extrinsic, deriving from socially maintained spirit knowledge and being used at the behest of others.

What, then, of my claim that Temiar and Malay animism form the two poles of a chain of cultural transformations? To clinch this argument it will be necessary to show that as the degree of centralisation and hierarchy increases in the socio-political domain, so also does the degree of 'sociocentricity' in the religious domain. Full documentation of this possibility must await the results of ethnographic research now being undertaken by several workers among a variety of Malayan Aboriginal groups. Nevertheless, I believe that it is possible to provide some evidence for this argument from the meagre data so far available from some of the more southerly Aboriginal groups.

Two Aboriginal groups, the Mah Meri and the Jah Hut, have become famous in recent years for the high quality of their wood carvings (a fine permanent display may be

seen at the National Museum, Kuala Lumpur). Although the techniques of Mah Meri and Jah Hut woodcarving are the result of their deliberate introduction to foreign art styles in the past few decades, the subjects of their carvings derive from wholly indigenous symbolism and ritual practice. All the carvings represent spirits of disease or misfortune, and they are all characterised by visual attributes that immediately identify the spirit for anyone versed in the relevant culture; this holds true whoever was the artist who produced the carving. In other words, the Mah Meri and the Jah Hut possess a developed, 'sociocentric' iconography (see Werner 1973; in press.) In this respect they contrast strongly with the Temiar, whose spirits' attributes are a matter of great mystery, but align themselves with the Malays (and Negritos, for that matter), whose spirits' attributes are a matter of public knowledge (McHugh 1955). In socio-political organisation the Mah Meri and Jah Hut (along with most other central and southerly Aboriginal groups) have long been reported to possess an institutionalised system of political ranking (which, despite earlier doubts, does seem to be more genuinely indigenous in character than similar structures further north (cf. Benjamin 1968); and it is a matter of simple observation that their economies are much more closely tied in to the outside world than that of the Temiar. They are not Muslims, however, and therefore bear a much less central relationship to the traditional state than the Malays. They appear, therefore, to occupy an intermediate position on both the religious and socio-political continua between the Malay and Temiar poles.

5.3 We have yet to fit the Semang into this picture. In fact, as I suggested earlier, the Semang do not really fit at all onto the Temiar--Malay continuum we have just been

discussing, but sit disjunctly apart from it. However, a few relevant points can be made. Semang deities and chenoi-spirits have a considerable degree of objectivity about them, as Evans' and Schebesta's accounts make clear: their identities and attributes are well formulated (though very complex), and are known to all. In that sense, Semang religion qualifies as 'sociocentric' in structure. In terms of their experience of power, however, the Semang diverge significantly from both the Temiar and the Malays, in that their conditions of life (Benjamin 1974) lead them to perceive power as not deriving from any human agency at all, whether within or outside the community. Since their relationship to the human societies around them is wholly opportunistic in character, they have never (until recent military influence, that is) felt constrained by human agencies. Rather, the constraints on Semang behaviour have always been seen by them as deriving from the forces of nature, especially as manifested in the deity. Hence it is possible to maintain for the Semang that they too illustrate the correlation between sociocentric religious representations and the experience of power as extrinsic; the difference here is that it is God they fear, not man.

A few ethnological points may be made here. It makes sense in terms of the foregoing analysis that the main cosmic axis should be vertical (man--God) among the Semang and horizontal (man--world) among the Malays. The point of interest here is provided by the Temiar, whose ritual organisation makes a very rich usage of a combined vertical/horizontal matrix. I suggest that we have here two source-traditions (the 'Austrian' and the 'Negrito?'), the Temiar and Malay systems deriving from the one and the Semang system from the other. The Temiar, however,

(as in other domains of culture, such as language and kinship) have been in a position to borrow a large number of cultural elements from their Semang neighbours, but putting them to different uses. To some extent the Malays too have borrowed elements of religious culture from the Semang, including many features of their tiger-shamanism (belian), and the blood-thunder-mockery complex (chelau). This pattern of cultural relations--two source cultures, one highly conservative and the other undergoing continuous differentiation in step with social evolution -- seems to hold for the ethnology of indigenous Malaya in general. As my papers on the prehistory, linguistics and kinship patterns show (Benjamin 1973b, 1973c, 1973d) there is an essential homology between the patterns of differentiation in all these domains.

6. MALAYAN ANIMISM AND WORLD RELIGIONS

Several universalising or world religions have been present historically in the Malay Peninsula: in chronological order, Brahmanism, Islam, Christianity, and recently Baha'i have all had some influence on one or other of the indigenous cultures. Of these, only Islam requires any detailed discussion, as it is the only one of the above-named religions to have maintained a close syncretism with animistic religion in Malaya for any length of time.

6.1 Brahmanism was associated with the advent of Indian people and Indian patterns of political organisation to the Malay Peninsula. The extent to which these influences spread among the indigenous populations is still a matter for debate. It seems probable, however, that Brahmanism as a functioning religious system did not spread far beyond the boundaries of Indian settlements or beyond the courts of the simple states that later developed in the region.

(This is not to say, however, that component elements derived from the Brahmanic complex did not diffuse out and form part of the practices of non-metropolitan populations. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that this happened to early Malay culture, and surprisingly (according to Schebesta 1957:116-9) to Semang culture also; but neither the Malays nor the Semang could be said to have been Brahmanists in any overall sense.) If it is true that Brahmanism in the Malay Peninsula was closely associated with the development of the state, then it would hardly be surprising that it remained closely associated only with the political centre. Heine-Geldern in a germinal paper (1957) has pointed out that Brahmanic religion implies that the here-and-now is a microcosm of the cosmos (as is evidenced by the cosmological underpinnings of such architectural complexes as Borobodur and Angkor Wat). In terms of the argument presented in this paper, the Brahmanic world-view would therefore imply a geographically 'intrinsic' model of the source of power, which would be very unlikely to be taken up by people dwelling beyond the pale of the court and its immediate environs, whose experience of power would be 'extrinsic' in character.

6.2 It is this last point which provides the major clue as to why Islam was so much more widely adopted than Brahmanism had been. Like Christianity (which in the Southeast Asian context is relevant to a discussion of the Philippine situation), Islam is centred organisationally quite away from the local scene, and thereby, in terms of the present argument, it may serve as a further analogue of the 'extrinsic' model of power that I earlier claimed was embedded in Malay culture. However, matters are not so straightforward as they might seem. Whereas the ancient spirit-religion provided (and presumably continues to provide) a perfectly good analogue of 'extrinsically'

experienced power at the level of the local village community, the fact that Islam was adopted by both the rulers and the ruled (replacing the Brahmanism of the former, but syncretising with the animism of the latter) suggests that a further level of analysis must be pursued if we are to understand why the Malays (and one or two other groups) adopted Islam and why most other indigenous Malayan groups rejected it. Obviously, there is more to this question than the mere presence or absence of the centralised state.

Viewed historically, the most significant change that Malay society has undergone parallel to its adoption of Islam, is its progressive peasantisation. By this I refer to the socio-economic situation whereby the ordinary Malay feels himself not only under the political sway of the rulers of his own state, but also under the sway of indirect and only vaguely understood economic forces emanating from the world at large. If we accept the standard version of Malayan history this would have started with the establishment of Melaka as an international trading post. I am suggesting, therefore, that Islam was, through historical accident, the first religion to arrive on the Malayan scene that could provide an adequate cosmological analogue to the socio-economic circumstances that were developing at the 'real world' level. (That Catholic Christianity, centred as it is in Rome, could equally well have served the same purpose is indicated by the closely similar historical and ethnological situation of the Philippines, where Islam and Christianity now survive each in those areas where they were the first such religion to arrive on the scene -- with the exception of a band of disputed ground along their border.) A closely similar argument has also been put forward by Geertz (1956:90-1) and Wheatley (1964:185).

In order to clinch this argument we must (1) demonstrate that the spread of Islam went hand-in-hand with the spread of the economic system that defines the 'peasant' social type, and (2) explain why many Malayan societies have never accepted Islam. The first of these is a problem for the historians to work on, and I bow myself out of the field. The second problem is the subject-matter of the next section.

6.3 I shall deal only briefly with the reasons why the Temiar and Semang have rejected Islam, despite many continuing attempts to convert them to that religion.

a) The socio-economic situation of the Temiar and the Semang does not bring them so fully into the wider world system that they would be predisposed to seek a world religion. They remain even now substantially in control of their own day-to-day economic undertakings, through the ease with which they can fall back on traditional, non-cash, 'subsistence' methods of livelihood. They do not, in other words, feel more swayed by extrinsic forces than by intrinsic ones.

b) Those Aboriginal groups who have become peasants do indeed show a tendency to seek membership in a world religion -- which is precisely what the above argument would lead us to expect. However, exactly which world religion they choose is the result of a variety of factors, some historical and some structural. In the north, where there is a long history of animosity between Aborigines and Malays (resulting mainly from the callous slave-raiding which went on until well into the 1930's in some areas) such peasantised Aborigines as the lowland Semai have almost completely rejected Islam, even though in almost every other respect they are now barely distinguishable in life-style from their Malay neighbours. Instead, they have taken readily to the Baha'i religion and to various

forms of Christianity: there is some evidence to suggest that, in addition to the reasons expounded above, they have done this as a deliberate attempt to protect themselves against pressures to convert them to Islam. Furthermore, they are strongly resistant to circumcision and to the giving up of pork, a major item in their diet. In the south, however, where there is a far higher degree of cultural and social-structural continuity between the Aborigines and the Malays, the former seem much more ready to accept Islam and even to seek conversion without being pressured into it. (A European ethnographer working among Aborigines in the south has reported (personal communication) that his (non-Malay) informants spend as much time in urging him to become a Muslim as they do in answering his ethnological enquiries.)

c) The Semang still have an essentially unitary world-view despite having long had relations with the outside world, and despite the fact that this contact has expressed itself in the details of their social organisation (Benjamin 1973b, 1974). Unlike the problem that peasants have of finding a balance between the pulls of the Great and the Little traditions (see below), the Semang have an essentially opportunistic 'foraging' approach to all their contexts of activity. On settling down, then, they are unlikely freely to take up a world religion. Those Semang who have nevertheless adopted a world religion have become Muslims, which suggests (correctly, I believe, for most cases I have examined) that they have done so as a result of forced enculturation rather than through the choice implicit in the Christianity and Baha'i of the lowland Semai.

6.4 Malay religious syncretism. One problem still remains: As in the rest of Southeast Asia, almost all the communities that claim allegiance to Islam, Christianity

or Buddhism also have recourse to animistic beliefs and practices. Why is it, in Malaya, that Islam did not oust the spirit-cults?

Here we may follow a clue provided by studies in Burma and Thailand and look for internal contradictions of the theodicy kind in the theology of the world religion. Buddhism, of course, has its own peculiar theological contradictions, and the specific details of the arguments that have been developed to explain syncretism further north in Southeast Asia will not help us in looking at the Malay case. Nevertheless, I believe that Islam contains at least three internal contradictions of the theodicy kind that might have relevance to the retention of animistic religion among the Malays.

a) How are the declared omnipotence, omniscience, and all-benevolence of Allah to be maintained in the face of the ordinary peasant's experience of daily suffering?

b) How is the conflict to be resolved between the doctrine that every Muslim has direct, unmediated access to Allah (there is no priesthood), and the doctrine that it is the duty of the State to organise the Islamic church? (cf. Gellner 1971).

c) Islam imposes organisational responsibilities (such as the forty adult men needed for the Friday mosque service and the obedience to rational bureaucratically maintained laws) that are only fully to be satisfied in an urban sophisticated milieu (cf. Hassan 1972). Malay culture is still essentially rural in its orientation, and the maintenance of Islamic practice among them is therefore likely to be strained.

In a manner parallel to what has been observed in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, these theodicies can be resolved, or at least made less apparent, by recourse

to the animistic system. For example, a Malay has only to declare that suffering derives from the action of the spirits for the all-benevolence of Allah to remain unchallenged; if then he still has qualms about having thereby challenged the omnipotence of Allah, he can ease the situation somewhat by declaring (as Malays nowadays frequently do) that spirit beliefs have nothing whatever to do with 'religion' (agama), but are simply 'beliefs' (kepercayaan) deriving from the domain of 'Malay culture' (adat). The way in which the second of the two theodicies is resolved by appeal to the spirit-cults requires a far closer examination of the sociology of Malay life than it is possible to undertake here: the close relationship between Islam and Malay ethnic identity in modern Malaysia would play a large part in such an explanation.

As to the mechanism of syncretism between Islam and animism, two points are of relevance. Firstly, the power of the Word in Islam is much the same as the power of the word in semangat-based spells, which would allow of easier syncretism between the two in practice. Secondly, the use of the Arabic language in spells and in talking about religion prevents the explicit use of the semangat soul-concept, but this does not mean that rituals (especially those surrounding life-cycle transitions and crises) are not structured 'as if' the semangat beliefs held true.

Lastly, a parenthetic point. A further reason why the Temiar and the hill Semai resist Islam even when they are drawn into the world cash economy, may well be that their religion obviates the need for theodicy-resolution because it makes the dialectical confrontation of Good and Evil the very centrepiece of the theology.

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