

## BRIDGING TO ANOTHER DIMENSION: THE RELATIONAL SYSTEM OF SHAMANISM AND RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER AMONGST THE TEMIAR SENOI OF MALAYA

**Riza Saputra**

Universitas Islam Negeri Antasari Banjarmasin  
rizasaputra@uin-antasari.ac.id

**Husnul Khotimah**

Universitas Islam Negeri Antasari Banjarmasin  
husnulkhotimah@uin-antasari.ac.id

Diterima 15 Mei 2021 | Direview 10 Juni 2021 | Diterbitkan 30 Juni 2021

### Abstrak

*Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menemukan sistem relasional, perjumpaan keagamaan, dan modernitas yang terjadi pada komunitas Temiar di Malaysia. Bentuk penelitian ini difokuskan pada penelitian kepustakaan (library research) dengan menggunakan literatur sebagai sumber penelitian. Metode yang digunakan adalah analisis dokumen dengan melakukan analisis isi. Analisis dalam kasus ini diikuti dengan analisis tematik di seluruh kasus. Pola data yang muncul dari analisis tema dalam kasus dan lintas kasus, informasi pandangan dunia Temiar dibandingkan dari beberapa dokumen. Setelah membahas sistem relasional dalam masyarakat perdukunan dan perjumpaan agama dan modernitas di antara Temiar, makalah ini menyimpulkan bahwa: Pertama. Dukun menciptakan pengalaman budaya dalam ruang inter-subyektif ritual sebagai aliran tuntunan roh melalui ritual penyembuhan. Dukun adalah medium roh, orang yang memiliki kemampuan untuk menerima lagu-lagu dari pemandu roh selama mimpi. Kedua, menyanyi dan menari adalah aktivitas yang menjembatani jurang pemisah antara dunia fisik dan metafisik. Ketiga, Temiars mulai memasukkan representasi berbagai entitas roh yang terkait dengan konversi agama dan modernisasi ke dalam kosmologi mereka.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Dukun, Temiar, Sistem Relasi, Modernitas*

### Abstract

*This paper aims at finding the relational system, religious encounter, and modernity of the Temiar community in Malaysia. The form of this research has focused on literature research (library research) by using literature as a source of research. The method used is an analysis of documents by conducting content analysis. This within-case analysis is followed by a thematic analysis across the case. The data patterns emerging from the within-case and cross-case analysis of the theme, the information of Temiar's world view is compared from several documents. Having discussed the relational systems in shamanic society and religious encounters and modernity amongst Temiar, this paper concludes that: Firstly. Shaman creates the cultural experience in the inter-subjective space of the ritual as the flow of the spirit guide through the healing ritual. The shaman is the spirit medium, a person who can receive songs from the spirit guide during dreams. Secondly, singing and dancing is an activity that in itself bridges the gulf between the physical world and the metaphysical. Thirdly, Temiars have begun to incorporate representations of varying spirit entities associated with religious conversion and modernization into their cosmology.*

**Keywords:** *Shaman, Temiar, Relational System, Modernity*

### Introduction

Shamanism is a spiritual practice found in indigenous religious cultures around the world. However, the shamans are unique since not only enhance the facilities for traveling in unusual realms but also use their spiritual connection to create changes that will manifest in the physical world, for the healing of individuals or communities. In Malaysia, shamans amongst the Temiar Senoi find their spirit guides through the dreams of association, in which they are endowed with powers, usually for healing sickness. A leading Shaman in a border group has introduced a ceremonial dance-and-song complex called *Chinchem*, obtained from a dream revelation on the tribal pattern. This has mobilized the morale of his group towards a more effective adjustment in the contact situation.

This paper tries to investigate the relational systems in the shamanic realm and religious encounters amongst the Temiar community. The discussion of the Temiar shaman and religious encounters in the Temiar community will be understood by using Hallowell's theory of worldview. Maarif (2013) explained that there are three basic questions of worldview theory: (1), who am I or who will we observe? (2) What thing do I move with or anyone who is around we observe? (3) How are their relationship or how do they treat each other?<sup>1</sup> These questions help us to get the point of the subject's worldview. Concerning the Indigenous religion, Hallowell pointed out that the "person" category of Indigenous worldview is not limited to human beings, but also includes other than a human agency, as Morrison mentioned that the Indigenous religions are identified by the context of inter-subjective or interpersonal relational systems, it conceptualizes that the other of human being has forms and roles similar to the human beings.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the interplay between each other and function as a subject.

The relational systems can be seen from three values of mutual relationships are (1) Responsible: the relation which they build has accountability for responsiveness, (2) Reciprocal: this relation may give benefits or disadvantages; it depends on how they treat their partner. (3) Ethical: the implementation, such feasible procedures. These three mutual relationships systems depict the concept of religion.<sup>3</sup> Hallowell's description of worldview makes us able to distinguish between the system of world religion and Indigenous religion, he mentions that the indigenous system is not characterized by a world of belief; he recognizes that the multidimensional character of reality proceeds in terms of social rules.<sup>4</sup> In other cases, world religions maintain the world of belief and carry the hierarchy's systems which are subdivided into three parts are nature, culture, and supernatural, as De Castro mentions that this idea suggests the possibility of a redefinition of the classical categories of religion.<sup>5</sup>

The general perspectives of the cosmos are necessary, as Woodward clarified that the cosmos of Indigenous religions generalized exchange, he subdivides the cosmos into three realms are: sky, earth, and the underworld, these divisions of cosmos refer to the role standpoint of dimensions.<sup>6</sup> Samodhaya links up this notion with the description of relational dimensions, he says, "everything is compatible and connected each other." In a depth explanation, Samodhaya appends three divvies of human beings are: *budhi* "body", *manah* "mind", and *indra* "spirit." These three sections organize human actions, perceptions, and sensations which eventually establish a reaction to someone else. This reaction comes from a gap that is connected by vibration, and therefore, it makes the reality that natures behave like a human, the reality is articulate and articulating of cosmos.<sup>7</sup> Thus religion tended to be subsumed within the world view, where spirits became one of several classes of persons with whom the self-interacted, and the soul became a particular way of conceptualizing the self.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>S. Maarif, "Dimensions of Religious Practice: The Ammatoans of Sulawesi, Indonesia," *Undefined*, 2012, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Dimensions-of-Religious-Practice%3A-The-Ammatoans-of-Maarif/81b2e6dad8c5e34cdb33aed64aff48aa0c4a0590>.

<sup>2</sup>Dennis Tedlock, *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Tedlock, Revised ed. edition (New York: Liveright, 1992), 141–78.

<sup>3</sup>Maarif, "Dimensions of Religious Practice."

<sup>4</sup>Tedlock, *Teachings from the American Earth*, 141–78.

<sup>5</sup>Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 469, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>.

<sup>6</sup>Graham Harvey, *Indigenous Religions: A Companion* (London; New York: Cassell, 2000), 219–29.

<sup>7</sup>Maarif, "Dimensions of Religious Practice."

<sup>8</sup>Michael James Lacey, *Religion and Twentieth-Century American Intellectual Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 148.

### The Relational Systems of the Shamanism Temiar Shaman (*Halaa'*)<sup>9</sup> as the mediator

Several scholars have mentioned the shamanic role in Temiar of the Malaysian rainforest, however, the Temiar do not have a notion of headman ship. Temiar shaman (or *halaa'*) is in control of people's progress, and its function refers to advise and healing. The shamans are seen as the mediator between the people and the world.<sup>10</sup> They exemplify but are not necessarily the sole religious figures associated with the realization of cosmological power.<sup>11</sup> However, Temiars have an equal position in social relationships, the distinguishing between shamans and the other people is based on the power which is owned, the shaman can visit distant places through his control over the trance, and their element of ritual control places him slightly apart from other men. The more powerful he is as a shaman, the greater this difference.<sup>12</sup>

Referring to the shamanic role in the Temiar community, Winkleman divides it into three categories: the shaman, the shaman-healer, and the healer.<sup>13</sup> The shaman represents the original institutionalization of trancelike behavior or altered states of consciousness. Shaman/healer refers to a “group of cases which varied between the shaman group and the healer group under different measurement procedures.” The healer “shares some similarities with the shaman role but lacks major altered states of consciousness” the healing role appearance relates to the process that Max Weber termed “routinization of charisma” in its revolution from the shaman to the healer.<sup>14</sup> Shamans who have the ability and more power than other people are perceived as a healer based on voluntary. Jennings discovers that most shamans in Temiar following the guidance of dream revelation.<sup>15</sup>

Temiar shamans are ordinary persons who possess the *gunig* (spirit-guides) and knowledge of the spells known as *jemapi* and *chenagoh* for healing purposes. They become shamans in two ways: by apprenticeship under a skilled shaman and by-election through a dream, in which spirit guides abandoned by a living shaman or one who has died, comes to choose a person to be a shaman. The person is advised not to ignore the dream, for to do so will bring about illness, with the help of a skilled shaman, the chosen one establishes a

---

<sup>9</sup>The *semang*, shaman, is called *halaa'* by the temiar, Terry Miller and Sean Williams, *The Garland Handbook of Southeast Asian Music* (Routledge, 2011), 320. The term *halaa'* is spelt variously in the literature as *halaak*, *halaag*, and *halaa*. Occasionally they use the Malay words of *bomoh* or *pawang*. *Halaa'* also describes the potential for being a shaman and the meeting of an individual with a person's spirit guide in dreams (Jennings, 138). Dentan (1968: 181), when discussing the Semai, uses the word adept for shaman when he says, ‘all Temiar perceive that people may be more or less “adept” (*halaag*)’, and the word is used extensively in subsequent literature by other researcher (see for example, Benjamin 1967b; Roseman, 1984, 1993). The term *halaa'* can be used to denote the spirit-guide. By shortening the longer phrase “a person with *halaa'* the term can also be used to refer to the medium. This is good example of Temiar dialectical compression of self and other, a tendency especially pronounced in the relationship between spiritguide and medium.

<sup>10</sup>Sue Jennings, *Theatre, Ritual and Transformation: The Senoi Temiars* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315788098>.

<sup>11</sup>Mariko Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman, *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture* (ABC-CLIO, 2004), 110.

<sup>12</sup>Professor of African Anthropology School of Oriental and African Studies Paul Spencer and Paul Spencer, *Society and the Dance: The Social Anthropology of Process and Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 58.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Winkelman, *Shamanism: The Neural Ecology of Consciousness and Healing* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000).

<sup>14</sup>Hans A. Baer, Merrill Singer, and Ida Susser, *Medical Anthropology and the World System: Critical Perspectives, 3rd Edition: Critical Perspectives* (ABC-CLIO, 2013), 323.

<sup>15</sup>Jennings, *Theatre, Ritual and Transformation*, 139–40.

relationship with the spirit guides through a singing ritual known as *kebut* or *lamur*. During the healing rituals, the shaman seeks the help of the spirit guides to find and even rescue the lost soul (*ruwai*) of those people who are ill from the captivity of the bad illness and bring the soul back to them. In some communities, shamans have a considerable standing. In others, the shamans choose to be rather inconspicuous in the village.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, there are two ways of becoming a shaman in the Temiar community, either through self-teaching and the gradual building up of a reputation, or else by being an apprentice to an established shaman and working as his assistant.

Shamans amongst the Temiar Senoi find their spirit guides through dreams of association, in which they are endowed with powers, usually for healing sickness. A leading Shaman in a border group has introduced a ceremonial dance-and-song complex called *Chinchem*, obtained from a dream revelation on the tribal pattern. This has mobilized the morale of his group towards a more effective adjustment in the contact situation.<sup>17</sup> Temiar shamans are not reclusive, eccentric hermits; they are active members of the community. The shaman's ability distinguishes him or her as a person of respect and influence in the Temiar sense, that is, as coordinator and commentator. The ability of the shaman to mediate between the spirit realm and the human realm correlates with his ability to mediate between the members of his community in the everyday world of social relations. The nature of the shaman's relationship with spirit guides parallels his method of political persuasion in community affairs.

### 1. Tiger Shaman

Temiar differentiates between greater shamans and lesser shamans, the greatest shamans usually take the form of a tiger. These shamans, by their experience, power, and control, can have the tiger as their spirit guide.<sup>18</sup> This characteristic is related to Temiar cosmos that tiger is perceived as all power full and so much to be feared. Tiger shamans are more power full than other shamans and they are characterized by no dancing at all and complete physical control. These shamans involve trancing in the center of the dancing area. There is no lightning when they are trancing, Temiar perceives that the shaman changes at least partly into a tiger while in trance and is convinced that they have seen claws disappearing from the fingers as the lights come up.<sup>19</sup>

Spencer mentions that the tiger has direct relevance to the shaman. The tiger perhaps dominating the ground and the jungle, other shamans may not have the excessive power of the tiger shaman or the control over such awe-inspiring metaphysical forces, but they have nevertheless developed skills in this direction, and these are exercised through their ability to control the trance dance. Thus, one may regard this dance as a step tinged with danger which leads logically towards the realm dominated by the violence of the tiger.<sup>20</sup> Higher grades of shaman have spirit guides from on the ground species. it is the major and great shaman that can accept power not just from the head-souls of off the ground and ground species, but also the heart/blood-soul, the lower body soul, of species on the ground.

Usually, people come and ask for advice and healings from the shaman, in healing procedures shaman asks ordinary people for dancing and following the song. After the patients have done this procedure, they begin to trance, and then the spirit guide comes into their body.

---

<sup>16</sup>Walter and Fridman, *Shamanism*, 829.

<sup>17</sup>H. D. Noone, "55. Chinchem: A Study of the Rôle of Dream-Experience in Culture-Contact Amongst the Temiar Senoi of Malaya," *Man* 39 (1939): 57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2793037>.

<sup>18</sup>Spencer and Spencer, *Society and the Dance*, 61.

<sup>19</sup>Spencer and Spencer, 61.

<sup>20</sup>Spencer and Spencer, 61.

The spirit guide gives the shaman the power to heal the people who seek treatment. This healing ritual depicts how each of the agents interrelates in giving benefits. Thus, dance is an activity that in itself bridges the gulf between the physical world, to which the body is tied, and the metaphysical, through which the head soul is released.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. Spirit-guide (*Gunig*)

Spirit-guides are referred to as *gunig*, a term that may derive from the Malay *gundik* 'consort'. The relationship between shaman and spirit-guide counterbalance one another, both of them have the same level, however, the spirit-guide is the child of the shaman, who is the father. Yet the child spirit-guide is the teacher to the shaman, who is the student. The term of child and teacher combined in the spirit guide and father yet student combined in the shaman. The structure of the spirit-guide and shaman relationship is ambiguous concerning power.<sup>22</sup>

The path or way of particular spirit-guide connects with the shaman refers not only to the melody and song but also involves in shaman's dreams and the elements within, such as during his dream, he receives particular rhythms, dance steps, from the spirit guide.<sup>23</sup> Thus, when the healing ritual establishes, the choral respondents do not follow the shaman, but they follow the path described by the spirit guide through the shaman. The shaman is a conduit, his vocalization a thread that connects the patient and spirit-guides in song.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Shaman is the spirit medium, a person who can receive songs from the spirit guide during dreams and later on with the ability to manifest those spirit guides when singing the songs and trancing during the ceremonial performance.<sup>25</sup>

The spirit guide is imbued in the voice and singing, singing is a medium for patients to gain healing. This singing medium can seek out lost souls as the spirit guide soars above the forest canopy.<sup>26</sup> Then by conducting a healing ceremony, the patient's wandering soul can be back into his body, and by singing the patient will be guard by the spirit guide. The spirit guide responds to the request and demands of the patient who articulate themselves through ordinary speech or songs. This procedure indicates an ethical manner to correspond the spirit guide. Demmer mentions that this method signifies a dialogical interaction, it consists of manifold communication between spiritual beings on the other.<sup>27</sup> The *bala* (shaman) creates the cultural experience in the inter-subjective space of the ritual as the flow of the spirit guide through the song.

---

<sup>21</sup>Spencer and Spencer, 58. In the Temiar community everything has a soul: humans have head and heart souls; plants have leaf and root souls; mountains, summit and underground or cave souls (see Benjamin 1979: 13-14) unlike the head soul, which is labile and can leave the body, the heart-soul is enclosed inside the body and only leaves it at death. Severe sickness in either soul can cause death. See. Jenning sue, *Theatre, Ritual, and Transformation: The Senoi Temiar*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 62

<sup>22</sup>Ellen Koskoff, *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (University of Illinois Press, 1987), 137.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 137

<sup>24</sup>Koskoff, *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 137.

<sup>25</sup>Arthur Kleinman, *Writing at the Margin: Discourse Between Anthropology and Medicine* (University of California Press, 1995), 218.

<sup>26</sup>Linda H. Connor and Geoffrey Samuel, eds., *Healing Powers and Modernity: Traditional Medicine, Shamanism, and Science in Asian Societies*, Illustrated edition (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 119.

<sup>27</sup>The healer are supported by rhythmic songs of a female chorus, verbally interacts with the spirits through sung and conversational speech where obviously persuasion is a vital concern. Thus he variously "directs the actions of the spirit-guides, or requests its assistance. Sometimes, directing his speech toward the illness agent, he speaks harshly to frighten it away. Ulrich Demmer, *The Power of Discourse in Ritual Performance: Rhetoric, Poetics, Transformations* (LIT Verlag Münster, 2007), 27.

### **Illness is the sign of Imbalance**

From the shamanic perspective, any illness is a sign of imbalance in the individual, in society, and the cosmic order. There might be one of them who disrupted or got careless treatment, so it results in growing disunity each other. Thus, a healing ritual is needed to fix this condition. Samuel adds in shamanic visionary there is no real distinction between society and cosmic order, and the mechanism for restoring balance likewise is thought of as operating in all these spheres.<sup>28</sup> The shaman's functions are primarily as a medico-religious practitioner, religion, and medicine, they help these relational systems and partnerships, and they become as a mediator between the society and cosmic order.

Roseman describes the performance of healing by the Temiar, along with the cosmological aspects of the music, in addition to the local etiology of illness.<sup>29</sup> She describes the intimate relationship between the Temiar and their living environment. For example, in Temiar etiology, illness often results when a person's detached head soul and leading it back home. Because healing songs in Temiar are called "path" or "way" and other causes or mistakes that result in illness are called "losing the path."

For temiar, illness is understood as dislocation, a condition where one has lost one's way, but songs provide paths that lead to known places. The temiar have begun to incorporate representations of varying spirit entities associated with modernization into their cosmology. Potentially disruptive social, political, and ecological forces are configured into spirit entity song pathways. By positioning "foreign" illness agents and new concepts, like statehood, within repetitive rhythms conjoining forest and body, past and present, the temiar cope with adversity by encompassing it and reorienting the self in a changing social and environmental order.<sup>30</sup>

Part of ritual healing, trance dancing among the Temiar in Malaysia commands attention with its narrative, sensory embodiment. Issues of health well as colonialism and modernity (deforestation, Islamic religious evangelism, economic transformation) create a schism in personal and community life. Ritual healing deals with the distress of individuals and mitigates the effect of contact with foreigners as it helps to reestablish cultural integrity and resolve new types of illness/soul loss associated with disruption and dislocation.<sup>31</sup>

The Temiar perceive that a healthy person is protected from harm by the universal spirit that dwells in all creations and the inner winds governing the individual talent and personality inherited from his or her parents. However, if strong winds are not expressed, they accumulate in the body and cause physical and emotional pain, and even an imbalance of humor, leaving the person vulnerable to the depredations of spirits. Thus, This requires illness to be exorcised through a séance during which shaman and patient sing and dance in a healing ritual.

### **Dreams as a Way to Communicate**

Dreaming for the Temiar is a state in which it is possible to communicate with the spirit world. All Temiars perceive to have the ability to do this to some extent, but some have much more than others, and these people, mainly adult men, take a leading role in the community in

---

<sup>28</sup>Geoffrey Samuel and Samuel Geoffrey, *Mind, Body and Culture: Anthropology and the Biological Interface* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19.

<sup>29</sup>Marina Roseman, *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine* (University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>30</sup>Margaret Lock and Mark Nichter, eds., *New Horizons in Medical Anthropology: Essays in Honour of Charles Leslie* (London: Routledge, 2002), 15, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203398517>.

<sup>31</sup>Judith Lynne Hanna, *Dancing for Health: Conquering and Preventing Stress* (Rowman Altamira, 2006), 60–61.

consequence of their ability, which is called (with some variants) *halaa'* "shamans." People who have spirit guides or are *halaa'* are good at establishing communication with the spirit world in the dream state and can derive healing powers from the spirits. One of the main things that the spirit guides do is taught songs and dances to the people they favor. That is, the dreamer is taught a song and the dance that goes with it. While these dance songs are a form of entertainment for the spirit guides.<sup>32</sup>

All of Temiar's vocal music and most of the instrumental flute repertoire have their source in songs received from spirit guides during dreams. Dreams are thus a primary source of musical composition. As dream song composition and ceremonial song performance show, spirit mediumship and musical competence are aligned in the Temiar concept of *halaa'*. Jennings mentions Temiar understanding the dreams have taken on a life and meaning of their own, Dreams are seen as sources of prophecy, resolution, and a means of gaining access to the hidden dark regions of unconscious experience. As Moss concludes that:

"For people who live close to the earth, like the Temiar, dreaming is a way to communicate with the world and all shares life on it. Everything is alive. Everything will speak to you- and speak through you if you will pay attention. Dreaming is not only about what goes on in the night; it is also about being attuned, at every turning, to the speaking land."<sup>33</sup>

Temiar generally categorizes their dreams as true or untrue. True dreams include those containing symbolic omens that are subsequently proved correct, dreams about contemporary social relationships, and dreams involving illness agents or spirit familiars. Dreams containing any of a series of encoded items including, for example, tobacco or bamboo poles, are interpreted as omens foretelling events related to the next day's hunt or travel. Some dreams, particularly those involving living human beings, act as a barometer of social relationships: after waking from a dream involving a person who turned away from the dreamer, the dreamer might approach that person and gently question whether there was a misunderstanding to be mended. Many dreams are interpreted inversely: a dream in which one's mother appeared ill would indicate her good health. Dreams may also contain important information about illness diagnosis and treatment.<sup>34</sup>

When Temiar people sleep and dream, their head soul temporarily leaves the body. In its travels, it meets with similarity detached head or heart souls of other entities such as trees, flowers, tigers, deceased humans, and living humans. Some dreams, including many nightmares, are disregarded as "confused", unimportant, or untrue; such dreams are often said to have been caused by eating meat before retiring. Other nightmares, however, bespeak meetings with illness agents or tiger spirits. One man, clearing his fields in the presence of a large rock, returned home to dream the spirit of the rock, who emerged in giant form as an illness agent. His consequent struggle with the illness agent, during which he finally freed himself from the beings stranglehold, was discussed informally the morning as waking household members gathered around the hearth to discover why he had called out in his sleep the night before. Some applauded his victorious struggle; others remarked he should have stayed limp and silent until the illness agent spoke about its intentions.<sup>35</sup>

To become a shaman healer, the most important dreams are those that involve meetings with the unbound spirits or interactive selves of entities who express their desire to enter into

---

<sup>32</sup>Samuel and Geoffrey, *Mind, Body and Culture*, 114.

<sup>33</sup>Moss, *The Secret History of Dreaming*, 4.

<sup>34</sup>Roseman, *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest*, 56.

<sup>35</sup>Roseman, 56.

a familiar relationship with the dreamer. The link between familiar and dreamer is established and maintained when the spirit guides give a song to the dreamer. This quintessential moment within dream encounters marks the turning point in becoming a medium empowered to heal with song.<sup>36</sup>

### **Singing and Trance-Dancing (*Sise*)<sup>37</sup> as an Ethical**

Temiar singing and trance dancing ceremonies are entertainment for the spirit guides, for the Temiar, this ceremony is the way for them to be moved from illness to be health. The shaman opens the séance by singing and then invites the patients to lie in the center of the room under the cluster of leaves. Through singing and movement, the shaman himself goes into trance and starts to dance slowly around the patient, using elongated walks and angular arm gestures, touching the edges of the sick person's body with his whisk.<sup>38</sup>

Dance and trance belong to the cultural world in terms of their location, and would thus not occur on the ground. Although singing can take place in anyone's house there is usually one house in the village where dancing occurs. If the village is a single longhouse with discreet family units, these are built around a large central area where dancing takes place. Where a village is made up of separate houses, it is usually with the largest central area that is used for dancing. They make sure that the supports underneath the house are strong enough for what will be an energetic session.<sup>39</sup>

Trance is a state of disassociation, often resulting in unconsciousness, and is a central feature of most of the Temiar séances. During trance or sleep, the Temiar believe that a person's head soul, located on the crown, is free to leave the body, and it leaves permanently at death. During the healing sessions, the shaman does not always trance. I was told that he needs to go into trance when the patient's head soul is very weak so that the shaman's head soul can find that of the patient and presumably strengthen it. For minor ailments in the village, the shaman uses the technique of sucking and blowing but does not embroider it with dancing, trancing, or singing.<sup>40</sup>

Spencer reports that at the end of a morning period there is also a special séance before the village returns to normal life. During the morning there is no dancing or singing, no wearing of new clothes, little moving in and out of the village. The séance lasts for at least three nights. On the first night, there is a special meal, and new sarongs are given to those who are not of the village and not connected with the deceased. Relatives still wear the old clothes that they were throughout the mourning period. After gifts and presentation, the shaman leads the singing and asks the dead spirit to leave them in peace and not to bother them. The songs are all sung in a minor key and are considered the most beautiful of Temiar music. Close relatives spontaneously trance and express strong emotion, stumbling and calling out.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup>Roseman, 56.

<sup>37</sup>The temiar word for dancing is *sise*, although they occasionally use the Malay word *joget*. *Sise* is the word used for dance per se, when there is not the intention to enter trance. Dance with trance is usually termed *pechneeb* and, when coupled with the word *jehmah* (play, playful), indicates that there is no intention to seriously call down the spirit guides and *leslaas* (transformation: often used to describe a trance state). However, the Temiar word for community singing, *genabag*, also includes the activities of dance and playful trance. Thus the boundaries that we maintain in the west by the terms of dance, music and drama do not apply in the way that the Temiars talk about expressive activities. Spencer and Spencer, *Society and the Dance*, 55.

<sup>38</sup>Spencer and Spencer, 55.

<sup>39</sup>Spencer and Spencer, 55.

<sup>40</sup>Spencer and Spencer, 55.

<sup>41</sup>Spencer and Spencer, 56.



Stewart says that the shaman progress through different dance styles in their advancement to attain recognition. He describes a dream revelation whereby an ailing shaman was taught this new dance, together with various new food prohibitions and changes in dress style. In his summary Stewart says:

“Dream character gave him a song while he slept and assumed control over him in the public dance, he became expert in using his dream forces to promote the social life of the group and take responsibility for various group projects.”<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, I observe that there is no doubt that for the Temiars, original choreography of dance comes from dream revelation and new dance patterns are taught to people by aspiring or established shamans at the séance. Acceptance of a new dance or song of healing helps to establish the reputation of a shaman.

Temiar singing ceremonies are similarly structured, alternating high and low pitches in a continuous rhythm. Spirit guides in dreams bestow a song on the dreamer: “singing that song during the ceremonial performance, the person becomes imbued with the voice, vision, and knowledge of the spirit-guide. Transformed by the spirit into a medium, the guided person or healer can diagnose and treat illness.

In the Temiar imagery, songs are paths. Choruses’ singers follow the path as they sing contrapuntally with the mediums. Mediums sing of the route traversed by the spirit guide during its travels. Knowing the real path in the jungle, of course, can be the difference between life and death. Illness is said to result when the person’s head soul gets lost. Treatment is the singing of a way of finding the head soul and leading it back to the settlement. The key metaphor in song involves travel along paths between two different domains of knowledge: music and healing.<sup>43</sup>

As Temiar singing and trance-dancing ceremonies progress from evenly pulsing rhythm to the swirl of rapture through the shock of rupture to rhythm restored, a patient is brought forward to be moved from illness to health. If strong enough, the sufferer is invited to sit or lie beneath the central hanging leaf ornament, where spirits first alight upon entry into the human realm. Here, in this space of difference stated and undermined, a medium sings and ministrations to a patient, withdrawing an intrusive component or returning a lost head-soul, infusing the patient with the cool, strength liquid spirit that flows from spirit along with their songs.<sup>44</sup>

## Temiar Cosmos, Religious Encounter, and Modernity

### 1. Temiar Cosmos

The behavioral environment which is explained by Hallowell gives hypotheses that the self-awareness of humans is not only a social product but also culturally constituted. Most Temiar villages are built on the banks of the river and of course the river is the main line of communication between villages. People will travel out of preference on the river rather than take dangerous routes through the jungle. Temiars mentions that “the river is the mediator through which the Temiar fix themselves in their physical world.” If one takes a Temiar away from the river, he becomes disoriented in space and becomes anxious. When talking about where people are, they will use river terms to give a sense of direction, upriver, downriver, across the river. However, the cosmological perception of the Temiar community about the river constitutes an anomaly. The river is both of the village and jungle in that it flows close to

<sup>42</sup>Jennings, *Theatre, Ritual and Transformation*, 277.

<sup>43</sup>Kleinman, *Writing at the Margin*, 220.

<sup>44</sup>Lock and Nichter, *New Horizons in Medical Anthropology*, 128.

both, and it is neither quite on the ground nor off the ground, but somewhere in between, but Temiar community more identical to call their homes as the river.<sup>45</sup> This Temiar's worldview of the river as their homes gives an understanding of the effects of environmental roles on the perceptual processes.

Referring to Hallowell's theory of the "behavioral environment," we acquire information that the Temiar relations with their environment constitute meanings, values, feelings, and motivations in their perception of the river. Hallowell states that the behavioral environment is not merely the generalized physical or geographical environment, but rather that culturally ordered environment that is experienced by an individual social actor.<sup>46</sup> Human cognitive orientations are derived from to a considerable extent from cultural symbols systems, and because perceptions are shaped by these orientations, the human behavioral environment—the environment that they perceive, and therefore the river to which they respond is "culturally constituted."<sup>47</sup> This cosmos has led to the perception of the importance of the river in the Temiar community.

The Temiar social world consists not merely of interactions with humans, but with the upper and lower-portion souls of all entities. Temiars conceptualize the world around them as having forms and functions similar to those of their bodies.<sup>48</sup> The social relations that occur within it, are the direct experience that individual human beings take as its starting point the very mutuality of self and other.<sup>49</sup> The multidimensional character of Temiar reality proceeds in terms of social rules that defy the ontologically differentiated principles of supernaturalism, as in Hallowell's perspective of the Ojibwa system, Hallowell mentions that the Ojibwa do not need to appeal to a factor of belief or faith to explain their apprehension of reality. We recognize that the multidimensional play of the Temiar cosmos transpires in terms of the mutually motivated actions of both human and other than human persons. Plants and animals are thought to partake in this interplay just as fully as human beings.<sup>50</sup>

The Temiar see themselves as peaceful people living within a world that is hostile and chaotic. Possibly they see peace and order within their villages and the distancing of danger as the best guarantee for survival. Spencer states "the most striking characteristic of Temiar society is the emphasis on the opposition between violence and nonviolence."<sup>51</sup> Temiar perceives that violence is a quality that belongs to foreigners, outsiders, and the malevolent deity Thunder.

Each person of Temiar people has their own properties.<sup>52</sup> Violence and anger belong to the malevolent Thunder, who is to be avoided and not provoked. Conversely, the spirits, who have a benevolent attitude towards the Temiar and bring their positive power to help the shaman in trance and healing, are small, shy sprites who need to be coaxed into the village and

---

<sup>45</sup>Spencer and Spencer, *Society and the Dance*, 58.

<sup>46</sup>Philip David Zelazo, Morris Moscovitch, and Evan Thompson, *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 641.

<sup>47</sup>L. Bryce Boyer and Ruth M. Boyer, *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society, V. 17: Essays in Honor of George D. and Louise A. Spindler* (Routledge, 2020), 4.

<sup>48</sup>Roseman, *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest*, 24.

<sup>49</sup>Roseman, 125.

<sup>50</sup>"Religion and Expressive Culture - Temiar," accessed September 11, 2021, <https://www.everyculture.com/East-Southeast-Asia/Temiar-Religion-and-Expressive-Culture.html>.

<sup>51</sup>Jennings, *Theatre, Ritual and Transformation*, 58.

<sup>52</sup>Dominant themes that recur throughout the Temiar cosmology are tiger, thunder and blood, the epic metaphors which are constant reminders of Temiar identity. Tiger is thought to be a manifestation of evil, and the other dominant symbol of aggression and anger, see Jennings, 1.

are easily frightened away. Temiar sees thunderstorms as Thunder's punishment for the breaking of certain rules. Therefore, the Temiar shun violence and any direct attempt to impose their will on one another, consistent with their outwardly peaceful, generous, and nonviolent way of life.

As we have explained in the first chapter, the Temiar shaman usually took the form of a tiger.<sup>53</sup> Tiger is so much to be feared that it will not be referred to by its real Temiar name, and instead a euphemistic term or the Malay word will be used. The greatest shamans of all and the temiar say that there are very few left now, are the tiger shamans. These shamans, by their experience, power, and control, can have the tiger as their spirit guide. The tiger perhaps dominates the ground and the jungle, and the thunder the air.<sup>54</sup> Among the temiar of Malaysia, persons are composed of both life and conceptualized as a tiny manikin or cool flowing liquid, while the latter is the seat of thought and feeling, and is manifested as a tiger or odor or shadow; both souls can separate from the person while dreaming or ill.<sup>55</sup>

Temiar people don't want to call themselves as the forest people or the owner of the forest, but they assume that the forest is owned by all creatures in this world. Temiar's concept of being is all entities must be respected in this world and has the right to life. Temiar may take the plant on the land, but they do not perceive as the owner of the land, they try to be apart from the destruction of the earth. When Temiar cut the trees, they leave the main rod of the trees, to grow the new trees. The Temiar self can be perceived and discussed not as an autonomous entity but only in ways that also implicate the other (and vice versa).<sup>56</sup>

## 2. Religious Encounter

The officially supported Malaysian view, applied to all citizens, including Orang Asli, is that it is desirable to belong to one of the recognized *sab* (authentic) religions. The holder's religion is stated on Malaysian national identity cards. Islam is the preferred religion; according to the Constitution, it is Malaysia's sole official religion. Section 11 of that same Constitution, however, guarantees citizens freedom of religion, and (except for those born as Muslims or converted to that religion) Malaysians will not normally meet with problems if their identity cards label them as Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, etc. as long as the religion in question possesses the criteria properties of a proper religion (*agama*), it will qualify as *sab* authentic. The criteria include a name, a founding prophet (which is a problem for Hinduism), Holy Scriptures, formal places of worship, and a body of clergy – all of which are characteristic features of Islam, which provides the ideal-type model of religion.<sup>57</sup>

If the state says that Islam is a necessary ingredient of being modern, then how is it that the Temiars have managed to modernize without becoming Muslims?<sup>2</sup> However, on the few occasions when the Federal Parliament has discussed Orang Asli issues, the Temiars have been seen merely as one among several, not necessarily Malay,<sup>58</sup> Malaysian Islamic closely policed for signs of deviation. But the other religions are allowed a considerable range of manifestation and run their affairs with little governmental interference. Christianity among the ethnic Chinese, for example, is notably more variable in Malaysia than it is in Singapore, where it has been subject to some degree of constraint. In recent years it has also become possible to have

<sup>53</sup>Sarvananda Bluestone, *The World Dream Book: Use the Wisdom of World Cultures to Uncover Your Dream Power*, Original ed. edition (Rochester, Vt: Destiny Books, 2002), 154.

<sup>54</sup>Spencer and Spencer, *Society and the Dance*, 61.

<sup>55</sup>David N. Weissstub and Guillermo Díaz Pintos, *Autonomy and Human Rights in Health Care: An International Perspective* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2007), 241.

<sup>56</sup>“Religion and Expressive Culture - Temiar.”

<sup>57</sup>Benjamin, 10.

<sup>58</sup>Benjamin, 129.

the labels *tiada beragama* (no religion) or *agama animism* (animist) inscribed on one's identity card.<sup>59</sup> As we shall see, however, the situation of the Temiars and other Orang Asli in this regard is not so straightforward, State agencies have strongly supported pressure for them to convert to Islam.

The transformation of the cosmological perception of Temiar can be seen in their practice after conversion into Islam, for example, the Muslim Temiars who died must now be buried according to Muslim rites, in an authorized Muslim burial ground, presumably alongside the Malay graves. The graves will therefore be permanent, rather than left to be overgrown by resurgent forest, as was the historical Temiar practice. Non-Muslim Temiars in the more permanent settlements has recently, of their own accord, begun to bury their deceased relatives in permanent graves, covered by cement. But the new requirement for a formal Muslim burial will presumably mean that future generations of Temiars will be urged to see their buried ancestors as Muslims – and probably also as Malays.<sup>60</sup> However, there are signs of the lack of Islamic practice among the converted Temiars, they are not ready to practice five times prayer in the *surau* prayer halls, consequently, and the *surau* is unused and falling into disrepair.

### 3. Modernity

Temiar see themselves as people who live in cleared spaces that happen to be surrounded by forest,<sup>61</sup> and they of course are geographically isolated and have comparatively few contacts with the outside world. However, nowadays, Temiar people have been affected by social changes and economic to some extent. For example, the Malaysian government has offered medical treatment to the Temiar community, and some of the Temiar people are now expensive transistor radio sets and are in general well aware of main events taking place in the outside world.

Temiar communities find themselves surrounded by huge numbers of the paraphernalia of modern life.<sup>62</sup> Attention had turned to the differences between the various religions of the world, although it was assumed that all such religions had similar functions, Missionary activities have also affected the Temiar community, according to the information, Most Temiar people have converted into Islam and Christianity, although these people are Muslims and Christians, but they still cherish most of their traditional customs and in the great majority of cases marry only within their tribe. The experience of modernity, broadly defined as a consciousness of being part of a changing worldview.

Temiars have begun to incorporate representations of varying spirit entities associated with modernization into their cosmology. Potentially disruptive social, political, and ecological forces are configured into spirit entity-song pathways. By positioning “foreign” agents and new concepts, like statehood, within repetitive rhythms conjoining forest and body, past and present, the Temiar cope with adversity by encompassing it and reorienting the self in a changing social and environmental order.<sup>63</sup> Roseman provides us with a detailed analysis of the coping concepts employed by the Temiar when confronted by global forces that stretch

---

<sup>59</sup>Benjamin, 10.

<sup>60</sup>Benjamin, 16.

<sup>61</sup>Jennings, *Theatre, Ritual and Transformation*, 25.

<sup>62</sup>Roseman analyzes the way healing rituals are employed as a therapeutic means of mediating traumatic cultural change secondary to encounters with deforestation, world religions evangelism, and economic transformation. Another example, Giddens (1990) mentions that the term modernity understands as an epoch that began with the emergence of capitalism, industrialism, rational-legal bureaucracies, and state control of military power and surveillance. Lock and Nichter, *New Horizons in Medical Anthropology*, 15.

<sup>63</sup>Lock and Nichter, 16.

the horizons of their local cosmology. Thus, it is obvious that the new concepts of outsiders have affected the indigenous people of Temiar's life.

Very few Temiars had received secondary education or gained employment in the modern sector, however, nowadays most of them have experienced considerable change in their economic and social circumstances. Temiar community has mostly made a relationship with wider Malaysian society, they have altered this relation from apart from that society to become much more a part of it.<sup>64</sup> In the past, Temiars could remain relatively unconcerned with outsiders' opinions, for they could always pull themselves further back into the forest. Today, many other people and agencies have an interest in the Temiars and their territory. Increasing literacy, economic peasant nation, and improved health have therefore brought the Temiars face to face with the evaluations that outsiders hold of them. The opinions of these outsiders have much influence on the various policies and plan now affecting their lives.<sup>65</sup>

In the 1960s, in contrast, weeks could pass in a typical Temiar village before anybody from elsewhere made an appearance. The people, therefore, went for long periods without news: there were no roads, no telephones, and no letter-writing – just several hours of a jungle-bashing walk between villages. According to Benjamin, until the 1970s, most Temiars were tribal in social organization, subsisting by swidden farming, hunting, fishing, and the trading of forest products in some of the most isolated parts of the Peninsula, but the majorities have had to face the encroachment of broader Malaysian society. This has led to an increasingly imposed permanency of settlement, widespread access to primary and secondary education, alienation of their land and forests for logging and mono-crop non-food plantations, and exposure to modern patterns of political activism. These changing circumstances have led the Temiars to become increasingly dependent on cash, even to obtain food. Consequently, The increasing differentiation exhibited by Temiar society means that most of them are now better thought of as peasants, rural proletarians, or petty commodity producers.<sup>66</sup>

The physical circumstances of Temiar life have changed too. The government, the modern houses are increasingly being supplied with electricity, which allows for greater illumination at night and electric fans during the day. It also enables the people to run radios, video players, and television sets – the latter fed by satellite dishes. It also allows them to recharge their mobile phones; many Temiar settlements are now within range of newly built communications towers. Motorcycles are widely owned and are used on the unsurfaced tracks in the village areas. This has made it much easier for younger Temiars to commute to cash-based jobs while continuing to live in their settlements. Some Temiars own cars, though these are frequently in too poor a state of repair to be allowed on the public roads.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Our discussions can be concluded as the following: Firstly, Shaman creates the cultural experience in the inter-subjective space of the ritual as the flow of the spirit guide through the healing ritual. Shaman is the spirit medium, a person who can receive songs from the spirit guide during dreams and later on with the ability to manifest those spirit guides when singing

---

<sup>64</sup>Geoffrey Benjamin, "Temiar Religions, 1994–2008," 2011, 3, <https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/handle/10356/106142>.

<sup>65</sup>Mohd. Razha b. Hj. Abd. Rashid, Wazir-Jahan Begum Karim, and Malaysia) Academy of Social Sciences (Pulau Pinang, *Minority Cultures of Peninsular Malaysia: Survivals of Indigenous Heritage* (Penang: Academy of Social Sciences, 2001), 127.

<sup>66</sup>Benjamin, "Temiar Religions, 1994–2008," 3.

<sup>67</sup>Benjamin, 5.

the songs and trancing during the ceremonial performance. Secondly, Illness is understood as dislocation, a condition where one has lost one's way, but singing and trance dancing provide paths that lead to known places. Singing and dancing is an activity that in itself bridges the gulf between the physical world and the metaphysical.

Nowadays, Temiars have begun to incorporate representations of varying spirit entities associated with modernization into their cosmology. Thus, it is obvious that the new concepts of outsiders have affected the indigenous people of Temiar's life. The situation of the Temiars in these regards is not so straightforward; State agencies have strongly supported pressure for them to convert to Islam and other official religions. However, there are signs of the lack of religious encounters among the converted Temiars, they are not ready to practice other religious practices.

### References

- Baer, Hans A., Merrill Singer, and Ida Susser. *Medical Anthropology and the World System: Critical Perspectives, 3rd Edition: Critical Perspectives*. ABC-CLIO, 2013.
- Benjamin, Geoffrey. "Temiar Religions, 1994–2008," 2011. <https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/handle/10356/106142>.
- Bluestone, Sarvananda. *The World Dream Book: Use the Wisdom of World Cultures to Uncover Your Dream Power*. Original ed. edition. Rochester, Vt: Destiny Books, 2002.
- Boyer, L. Bryce, and Ruth M. Boyer. *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society, V. 17: Essays in Honor of George D. and Louise A. Spindler*. Routledge, 2020.
- Castro, Eduardo Viveiros de. "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 469–88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>.
- Connor, Linda H., and Geoffrey Samuel, eds. *Healing Powers and Modernity: Traditional Medicine, Shamanism, and Science in Asian Societies*. Illustrated edition. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001.
- Demmer, Ulrich. *The Power of Discourse in Ritual Performance: Rhetoric, Poetics, Transformations*. LIT Verlag Münster, 2007.
- Hanna, Judith Lynne. *Dancing for Health: Conquering and Preventing Stress*. Rowman Altamira, 2006.
- Harvey, Graham. *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*. London; New York: Cassell, 2000.
- Jennings, Sue. *Theatre, Ritual and Transformation: The Senoi Temiars*. London: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315788098>.
- Kleinman, Arthur. *Writing at the Margin: Discourse Between Anthropology and Medicine*. University of California Press, 1995.
- Koskoff, Ellen. *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Lacey, Michael James. *Religion and Twentieth-Century American Intellectual Life*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Lock, Margaret, and Mark Nichter, eds. *New Horizons in Medical Anthropology: Essays in Honour of Charles Leslie*. London: Routledge, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203398517>.
- Maarif, S. "Dimensions of Religious Practice: The Ammatoans of Sulawesi, Indonesia." *Undefined*, 2012. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Dimensions-of-Religious-Practice%3A-The-Ammatoans-of-Maarif/81b2e6dad8c5e34cdb33aed64aff48aa0c4a0590>.
- Miller, Terry, and Sean Williams. *The Garland Handbook of Southeast Asian Music*. Routledge, 2011.

- Mohd. Razha b. Hj. Abd. Rashid, Wazir-Jahan Begum Karim, and Malaysia) Academy of Social Sciences (Pulau Pinang. *Minority Cultures of Peninsular Malaysia: Survivals of Indigenous Heritage*. Penang: Academy of Social Sciences, 2001.
- Moss, Robert. *The Secret History of Dreaming*. New World Library, 2010.
- Noone, H. D. "55. Chinchem: A Study of the Rôle of Dream-Experience in Culture-Contact Amongst the Temiar Senoi of Malaya." *Man* 39 (1939): 57–57.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2793037>.
- "Religion and Expressive Culture - Temiar." Accessed September 11, 2021.  
<https://www.everyculture.com/East-Southeast-Asia/Temiar-Religion-and-Expressive-Culture.html>.
- Roseman, Marina. *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine*. University of California Press, 1991.
- Samuel, Geoffrey, and Samuel Geoffrey. *Mind, Body and Culture: Anthropology and the Biological Interface*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Spencer, Professor of African Anthropology School of Oriental and African Studies Paul, and Paul Spencer. *Society and the Dance: The Social Anthropology of Process and Performance*. Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Tedlock, Dennis. *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*. Edited by Barbara Tedlock. Revised ed. edition. New York: Liveright, 1992.
- Walter, Mariko Namba, and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman. *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*. ABC-CLIO, 2004.
- Weisstub, David N., and Guillermo Díaz Pintos. *Autonomy and Human Rights in Health Care: An International Perspective*. Springer Science & Business Media, 2007.
- Winkelman, Michael. *Shamanism: The Neural Ecology of Consciousness and Healing*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000.
- Zelazo, Philip David, Morris Moscovitch, and Evan Thompson. *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.