

RECORDINGS OF PLE-TEMIAR DREAM MUSIC.

At the beginning of December, 1941, the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation dispatched its experimental mobile recording unit on its first expedition. The primary purpose of this expedition was to visit military camps in various parts of the Malay Peninsula in order to prepare recorded programmes of interviews with British, Indian and Australian troops, commentaries on their activities, and concerts and entertainments arranged by the forces. These recordings were to be used in the programmes of the Singapore broadcasting station, and were to be supplied to the Australian Broadcasting Commission and other interested broadcasting authorities. In addition, feature programmes about industries connected with Malaya's war effort, sound effects, and certain types of music were to be recorded for use in the English and vernacular broadcasts from Singapore. The tour of the recording van was interrupted by the outbreak of war with Japan, but the unit was successful in obtaining a number of the desired recordings. Amongst these were valuable recordings of nine examples of the "dream" music of the Ple-Temiar aborigines who inhabit the central mountain range of Malaya.

The idea of recording this music was born some three months earlier, when I was in camp in the Perak jungle with H.D. Noone, Field Ethnographer, F.M.S. Museums, and Protector of Aborigines, Perak. Noone had been studying the unique culture of the Temiar for many years, and he had been particularly impressed by the great part played by music and dance in the life of these people, and by the intimate connection between their music and dance forms and the shamanistic form of religion which dominated their spiritual life. He was acutely conscious of the need for a detailed investigation of their music to complement his general studies of Temiar culture, as well as of the value of such an investigation in the field of research into the primitive origins of music. Noone himself was unable to undertake any intensive work in this extremely specialised field, and the inaccessibility of the Temiar settlements and the impracticability of transporting Temiar singers to research centres made first-hand study of their music by musicians a matter of extreme difficulty. Recording was the obvious solution to this problem, and Noone had already had many requests from research workers in various countries for recordings of this music. At the same time, it was apparent that such recordings would be of value to broadcasting organisations in educational and other broadcasts. Accordingly, I suggested to Noone that I might take the matter up with the Chairman of the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation, provided that Noone would undertake to make all arrangements for gathering together Temiar singers, in the event of the project being approved by the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation.

On my return to Singapore I broached the subject to Mr. Eric Davis, Chairman of the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation, who showed much interest in the proposal and agreed that these recordings should be made, if the necessary arrangements fitted in conveniently at any time with plans for the recording of material to be used in propaganda broadcasts. During our discussion, it was agreed that, after the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation had made use of the recordings for broadcasting purposes, consideration should be given to the possibility of having them processed and distributed to interested research centres. It was also thought probable that the B.B.C., the Australian Broadcasting Commission, and other broadcasting authorities would welcome copies for use in educational broadcasts. Shortly after this discussion, the mobile recording equipment was ready for use, and plans were prepared for an extended recording tour of the Malay Peninsula. The itinerary of this tour included a visit to divisional headquarters and various army units stationed in the south of Kedah State. The route to this area passed through Upper Perak,

a district in which Noone was then engaged on duties under the orders of Malaya Command, and it was agreed that advantage should be taken of this opportunity to record Temiar music. I was able to give Noone two months advance notice of the probable date of the arrival of the unit in Upper Perak, and he immediately sent out messages throughout the country of the Temiar which resulted in the arrival of a dozen of their most famous singers at the appointed place two months later, some of the performers making journeys of over a hundred miles across jungle-covered mountains in order to keep the rendezvous.

The recording was carried out on the night of 3rd December, at Grik, a village in Upper Perak at the terminus of the road from Kuala Kangsar. This was the road-head nearest to the jungle territory of the Temiar. Mr. N.A. Ross, the District Officer for Upper Perak, took a considerable interest in the proceedings. By his orders, a long-house had been specially built for the performance and to house the Temiar. The District Officer had to make use of local Chinese and Malay labour in the construction of the long-house, but he saw to it that the result was as close a copy as possible of a typical Temiar long-house. Without these familiar surroundings, it is unlikely that the aborigines would have been willing to perform. The recording presented many technical difficulties, as well as problems arising from the psychology of the Temiar themselves. The greatest difficulty was that of persuading them to sing to order. Normally, the Temiar will only sing and dance when they wish to summon their spirit guides to come down and possess them. In addition, singing and dancing go together. For technical reasons, however, it was essential that the performers should begin and end each song on an agreed signal, and that they should not dance, since the microphone was suspended from the rafters of the long-house; the violent shaking caused by dancing would have seriously affected the quality of the recording. It can be said that no one but Noone could have persuaded the Temiar to sing under these conditions; Noone is in fact the only man in whose presence the Temiar will sing and dance willingly, and it was his remarkable influence with the aborigines that made recording possible.

The importance of this music from the standpoints of the research workers in anthropology and music resides in the fact that it is the most direct expression of the "dream culture" of the Ple-Temiar group of Malayan aborigines. These Temiar aborigines inhabit the jungle-covered mountains of the Malayan main range. They are believed to represent the easternmost extension of the "brown race", modified by admixture with mongoloid, negrito and other elements. Their tongue has affiliations with the Mon-Khmer group of languages. They form small communities living in the river valleys in the Malayan main range, occupying long-houses similar in many respects to those of the Dyaks, practising a form of shifting cultivation, and satisfying their other material needs by hunting with blowpipe and poisoned dart, fishing and setting traps for game, and by collecting the natural produce of the jungle. The material side of their life is, in its way, highly organised, and their enterprises are run on a co-operative basis. Temiar society is in fact a form of primitive communism, in which all the material requisites of living are shared by the community.

But behind the material form and function of their jungle surroundings the Temiar believe that a spiritual world exists, and it is this belief that maintains their interest in life and that reinforces the motives driving them in their co-operative enterprises. It is their manner of interpreting the heart of reality which transfigures the routine of their workaday world. The Temiar religion was at one time dismissed as a form of animism, but this bare formula has been proved

inadequate. Temiar religion, if it must have a label, is best described as shamanism, a system found among primitive people and peasants from South East Asia northwards across Siberia, and throughout North America and parts of South America. This religion postulates the existence in the spirit world of spirits friendly to man who can give him guidance; it teaches that the world of spirits is not exclusively the domain of demons, ghosts and bogeys, but contains also spirit guides of varying nature and power. In tribes dominated by this belief, there are certain individuals possessing peculiar powers and the gift of vivid dreaming; these are the shamans, who act as the link between the tribe and the spirit world. Amongst the Temiar, the shaman is known as "hala", and he is recognised as the medium through whom the spirit world communicates with the tribe. The hala secures his sanction during dreams. In the dream a special relationship is set up between the hala and a particular spirit, who undertakes to become his guide. Such a guide may be a spirit from a tree, crops, a stone, a mountain, a wild animal or even from an ancestor. In this way the hala receives a revelation from the spirit according to some traditional tribal pattern. A typical revelation may include a verse of poetry, music for a song and a dance, and the nature of the leaf and flower decorations to be worn by the performers of the song and the dance as an offering to the spirit guide. The hala can summon any of his spirit guides to come and possess him by performing according to the specific instructions received during dreams, and during his performance he can transmit the possessing spirit to the bodies of his fellow performers.

The revelations received from spirit guides vary in their nature and scope. Some spirit guides may only give advice on the hunt, others may describe new art-patterns for woodwork or the plaiting of mats or give new songs and dances, whilst others may convey special powers through the hala which affect the bodies of the performers in the dance so that they can withstand injuries and pain and undertake extraordinary feats, such as the eating of fire. Some spirits may endow the hala with healing powers; in rare cases this may be identified with a messianic message affecting the welfare of the tribe or even mankind as a whole. Such rare master spirits can claim cosmic or universal significance. In a tribe there may be many small halas who can commune with a few spirit guides, and a few important halas who can summon ten or a score, but to communion with the master spirits few attain. Thus, religious ritual among the Temiar consists in singing and dancing for spiritual grace, or for power to heal, help or guide one's neighbour. It is noteworthy that these primitive communists know only one original and traditional conception of rank; this conception is embodied in the title of "tohat", an address of respect accorded by anyone who has been sick in body or soul to the hala who has restored his health and peace of mind.

The songs recorded by the mobile unit were not, of course, of recent inspiration. It would have been out of the question to wait for days or weeks until a hala received a new revelation. The recorded music consists of songs, originally derived from the dreams of halas, which have become part of the traditional culture of the Temiar group. Many of these "dream" songs, dances and poems caught the imagination of the people as a whole, and were spread from valley to valley through the mountains occupied by the Temiar tribes. In most cases, the creation was given the name of the hala who had dreamed it, suffixed by the name of the particular spirit guide who had granted the revelation. The nine songs recorded are among the most famous of these traditional pieces of music; each of them is normally sung in accompaniment to a dance form revealed by the spirit guide

at the same time as the song was given to the hala.

The scene at a Temiar dance is a striking one. The dance takes place at night in a long-house. The house is in effect a whole village under a single roof. A typical long-house may be fifty yards long and twenty yards broad; it is raised perhaps fifteen feet from the ground on tree-stumps and heavy timbers, and is constructed of timber and bamboo, the roof being thatched with palm leaves. The gable ends are left open to let out the smoke from the numerous fires and to admit the light of moon and stars. In the centre is the spacious dancing floor of split bamboo, framed along the four sides by a score of separate family compartments, each screened off and opening on to a fire hearth of beaten earth. The blowpipes and spears of the hunters stand in deep baskets along the walls. The rhythm of the dance is first quietly given out by bamboos beaten by the women, and is then taken up by the deeper notes of the drum and the gong. Then a dozen dancers take the floor, and circle round in the measured steps of the dance. The springy bamboo floor yields to the leaping and stamping of the dancers, and the entire long-house quivers with the rhythm of the dance. The dancers wear loin-cloths of tree-bark, crowns of grass and flowers on their heads, plaited strands of gold and green grass round their shoulders, waists and ankles, and long stiff leaves project from the girdles of grass round their waists; they carry wisps of a fragrant grass in their hands. The flare from a score of fires on the family hearths lights up the gloom and plays on the moving frieze of the dancers. The hala who is leading the dance increases the tempo and then suddenly leaps and stands stark in the centre of the entranced circle of dancers. The dance has been performed according to the dreamt instructions of the spirit guide, and the spirit has come to possess the hala. He stretches and bends with the power of it; he is in a state of grace, and is powerful to heal, or to pass on the spirit to the other dancers.

The dancing often goes on all night. It is recreative. The Temiar, after a hard day of hunting or working in their jungle clearings, will often begin dancing soon after the evening meal and continue until dawn, and yet be fresh for another day of arduous work. When they performed for the recording unit, they started singing at eight O'clock in the evening, and then danced from midnight until nearly six the next morning. In one of the dances seen by the recording unit, the leading hala went into a trance, for some minutes remaining in a kneeling position; he then leapt up, rushed to one of the fires, and picked up glowing embers which he put in his mouth; he then rejoined the dancers, and danced round for some moments with the red-hot embers between his lips. When thoroughly worked up by certain dances, the Temiar are able to put watchers into a state of trance; I have known them to work on Malays and even Europeans in this way, the persons so affected being compelled to carry out any orders given to them by the Temiar.

This is a people amongst whom inspiration is still very much a living thing, and in nothing is this more apparent than in the music of the Temiar. Unlike so much of the music of the races of South East Asia, which has either become bound within rigid traditional moulds or has been corrupted by contact with Western idiom, the music of the Temiar is a vital part of their culture, intimately bound up with their religion, and constantly refreshed by the inspirations received by the halas and even by less gifted members of the community. For centuries the Temiar have been living in their isolated forest settlements, little affected by culture contact, and their songs are probably one of the most primitive expressions of the musical instinct to be found in the world to-day. In this respect, a study of that music should be of value to musicians in reaching an

understanding of the origins of musical forms. In the field of anthropology, an appreciation of the form and function of Temiar music should do much to throw light on the elements which have combined in the past to produce the Temiar race and culture. It is for these reasons that the recordings made at Grik are so valuable, and their value is enhanced by the fact that it may be some considerable time before Temiar music may be studied or recorded again. The Temiar may not remain unaffected by the impact of the temporary Japanese occupation of Malaya. Most serious of all in this connection is the fact that H.D. Noone was reported missing in the early days of the Japanese invasion, and Noone is the only white man who has had the confidence of the Temiar in sufficient degree to persuade them to share their music with observers of an alien race.

Delhi, 3rd October, 1942.

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