

Spare Copy

Commentary on Temiar Dream Music

By H.D. Noone,

Field Ethnographer and
Protector of Aborigines, Perak.

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

Behind the material form and function of their jungle surroundings, the Temiar, like most primitive peoples, believe that a spiritual world also exists. The bare formula that the Temiar religion consists of a belief in spiritual beings, that is, animism, would, however, be inadequate. Temiar religion, if it must have a label, is best described as "shamanism", a system which may be found among primitive peoples and peasants from South East Asia northwards across Siberia, and throughout North America and parts of South America. For, to the Temiar, the world of spirits is not the exclusive domain of demons, ghosts and bogey-men. There are also spirits friendly to man, willing to be guides and guardians. The Temiar shaman, or "hala", is the medium between the tribe and the spirit world. The "hala" secures his sanction during dreams. In a "hala" dream, a special relationship is set up between the "hala" and a particular spirit, who promises to become his guide. These guides may be spirits from trees, crops, stones, mountains, wild

animals, or even ancestors. A spirit gives a revelation, according to a traditional tribal pattern, to the dreaming "hala". A typical revelation includes a verse of poetry, music for song and dance, and an offering in the form of leaf and flower decorations to be worn by the performers. The "hala" can summon any of his spirit guides to come down and possess him by performing according to the special instructions, and during the performance he can pass on the spirit in possession to his fellow dancers.

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

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

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

the material form and function of their jungle surroundings, the Temiar, like most primitive peoples, believe that a spiritual world also exists. ----- The basic formula that the Temiar religion consists of a belief in spiritual beings, that is, animism, would, however, be inadequate. Temiar religion, if it must have a label, is best described as "shamanism", a system which may be found among primitive peoples and peasants from South East Asia northwards across Siberia, and throughout North America and parts of South America. For to the Temiar, the world of spirits is not the exclusive domain of demons, ghosts and bogey-men. There are also spirits friendly to man, willing to be guides and guardians. The Temiar shaman, or "hala", is the medium between the tribe and the spirit world. The "hala" secures his sanction during dreams. In a "hala" dream, a special relationship is set up between the "hala" and a particular spirit, who promises to become his guide. These guides may be spirits from trees, crops, stones, mountains, wild