HANTU HANTU

GHOST BELIEFS
in MODERN MALAYA

by J.N. McHugh

with Illustrations by A.F. Anthony
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AN ACCOUNT OF GHOST BELIEF IN MODERN MALAYA

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INTRODUCTION

It has always seemed odd that in recent times there is little information available about current Malay belief in what in English are termed ghosts, spectres, spirits and sprites. These in Malay are generically termed “Hantu-Hantu.” Such ghosts and demons and their relatives are an interesting and integral part of Malay rural life, as described in the works of Clifford, Maxwell, Swettenham, Wilkinson, Skeat, Winstedt and other writers, whose material was collected during the earlier part of this century or the end of the last.

The lack of any permanent body primarily concerned with the recording and archiving of folklore and popular belief is necessarily a contributory cause of this deficiency. The Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society occasionally includes items of this nature in its journals, contributed by interested persons, but in recent years the amount is small and the conclusion is inescapable that the people's beliefs, or the amateur investigators', or both, are tending towards extinction. That is the point of interest.

As regards the investigators, the spacious days of the “Mandarin” class of civil servant, to adapt Cyril Connolly’s term, are gone. The age when the local administrator was a real part of the life of the local rural communities in the fullest sense is, with few exceptions, as far distant as when, living in close touch with the people, he had leisure to record their customs and beliefs.

The average official of the present time makes intermittent sallies into the rural areas before hurrying back in a cloud of carbon monoxide to the refuge of the paper barricade, which bureaucracy necessitates. He is unlikely to make the acquaintance of even the most genial genie,
for he is necessarily a person lacking in perception, or, as the Malays say, "whose heart lacks eyes."

It is comparatively simple to obtain a general picture of popular Malay superstition and belief some forty years ago, but the Malay Peninsula of that time was even more different from the Malaya of today than was Victoria’s England from the England of the present. Malaya’s phenomenal advance in the past fifty years has been largely due to the needs of the world for rubber and tin. Have the hantus and djinn, the Malay ghosts and spirits, the sprites and spectres, vanished for ever before the tide of materialist progress with its millions of rolling tyres and the clangour of limitless expanses of tinplate? Have they mournfully capitulated to the new cults of politics and progress, the sharp jab of the inoculator’s needle and the expansion of vernacular education? Or have they merely retreated farther into the quiet depths of the gloomy jungle, where today their only hazard is the less destructive and ephemeral reverberation of a high-explosive bomb directed against Chinese Communist terrorists?

In the past sixteen years, and particularly before the Emergency in Malaya began in 1948, I had attempted to find the answer to these questions. Through the assistance of a number of Malays throughout the Peninsula, a good deal of information as to current beliefs in hantu was collected in my spare time. To the other indignities which the ghostly hierarchy have endured in the past was added that of being listed in alphabetical order, the holding of an informal roll-call to see how many of them still survived, and a discussion of their habits and origin. It is interesting to find that not only are the Great Hantu of the past still in being, but also to have others not previously enrolled come drifting out of obscurity to join their fellow wraiths.

The Communist attack on the Malayan people put an end to the effective continuance of this hobby and investi-
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gation. Although the result is necessarily a curtailment of
the scope of the survey of hantu and their colleagues, I
feel that sufficient of interest is available to be put on
record. I have followed the method of quoting at length
from Malay accounts of their beliefs, keeping as close as
possible in the translation to their own words.

This work may perhaps serve as an outline at least for
further research in less difficult days, and possibly may
also make some amends to the Malay hantu for their gross
maltreatment in modern times. Who knows but their time
may come again; for, as the Malays say: “However deep
the water, the fish never die because of it.”

The gap between the primitive and the ultra-modern is
not as wide as one might imagine. Modern discoveries in
atomic physics have demolished the concept of the solidity
of matter. All matter now shares a common entity, the
electron, and with it the force which binds these units
together. Call the latter Power, Force, Energy, the Abso-
lute, or the Hand of God, as you like, it is not far
removed from the fundamental Malay belief in the life-
force, or vital power—the Semangat—an understanding of
which is essential for those who would know the Malay
people.

I am greatly indebted to Mr. Anthony for his drawings
of the Malay conception of the hantu in these pages; to a
number of persons who have made helpful suggestions, and
in particular to Louis Heren; to a host of Malays of all
ages and classes who have provided the material for this
brief account of the hantu-hantu.

As they themselves say: “A debt of gold can be paid,
but a debt of kindness is borne to the grave.”

J. N. McHugh

Singapore, 1954.
To the sophisticated dweller in London, New York or the cities of the West, the word Malaya stands vaguely for an obscure country of the very Far East. If pressed, your Londoner may recall the slightly embarrassing stories of Somerset Maugham which shocked suburban England—“some years ago now, dear”—with their vivid and convincing accounts of Englishmen and women behaving in a thoroughly un-English fashion as a direct result of the sinister and unfair influence of the tropics. Pressed further, your Londoner and New Yorker alike may parade for you a knowledge of the word “amuck” or amok, and deprecate the violent habits of the Malays, whom they believe to be addicted to the bloodthirsty practice of “running amuck.”

This is about as far as you are likely to get. If you stimulate their reflexes further with the word “Singapore,” it spreads like oil on water the calm of superficial enlightenment. Singapore—the Japanese conquest of 1942—Stamford Raffles—Raffles Hotel—the mysterious Orient—vice and the furtive movement of slippered feet—all is suddenly clear. To the British, the good old days of pioneering
adventure and the past glories of Colonialism; to the American, the tedium of a pretentious façade behind which he suspects dust, boredom and carefully-negotiated commercial monopolies.

Which makes it difficult to clear a little common ground on which to explain something of the Malay people and their beliefs. For Singapore, the small island at the tip of the Malay Peninsula, is an island populated by the Chinese. On the mainland, too, the Malay people themselves are slowly but surely in danger of being swamped by the irrepressible Chinese, who have flocked from China along the golden causeway built with Western capital and their own lithe energy.

But in much of rural Malaya, as in Central Sumatra, it is still a Malay country. Here is supported a life of simplicity, of peasant farming and of fishing. It is a colourful sunny land of blue, jungled hills cradling fleecy clouds, of sky reflections in the brown water of the bright green paddy fields, of leaning coconut palms, of brightly-coloured sarongs and the slow, graceful movement of brown limbs in easy harmony with nature and the fertile earth. It is, in short, the complete antithesis of the life of Western towns and cities.

Against such a distinctive background the culture and concepts of the Malay people themselves are necessarily in contrast with the European or American. They have reached an interesting stage, having almost passed through the first long-enduring phase of wholehearted admiration for the Westerner’s methods and system. They now begin to assess and to compare. In Indonesia and in Malaya the slanting Eastern eye has a quizzical air as it surveys the Westerner after two world wars and watches him unhappily prepare for a third.

If one were to select the most modern of the scientific concepts and developments of the West, it would un-
doubtedlv be the discovery of atomic energy and the new atomic age. Thanks to Press and radio, knowledge of the atomic forces, which Western science has discovered and used with such devastating effect, has spread in one form or another amongst the Asian peoples.

The Malays borrowed the old Arabic word “zarah” for “atom,” and the echoes of the terrifying explosion in Hiroshima have reached towns and kampongs. At first sight it would seem that this ultra-modern discovery of the materialistic West could well serve to epitomise the vast gulf that exists between East and West. Yet oddly enough it is not so. There is a factor in the modern concept of atomic physics which has a remarkable relation to an age-old Indonesian theory as to the nature of the physical world. This belief is still of major importance to the Malay people. It is believed that everything that exists in the contemporaneous world, whatever its form, shares a common life-force, or semangat. This is possibly the most important surviving indication of ancient Indonesian belief. It is older than the importations of Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam which form a mosaic in the pattern of Malay folk-belief and custom. All living things have a semangat, but so, too, have inanimate objects, minerals, metals, “sticks and stones, weapons, boats, food, clothes, ornaments and other objects.” The term is difficult to define in English. It is not a soul, nor a spirit. It has been described as a vital force. It is a phantom of the mind, like Bohr’s electrons, intangible and impossible to observe directly. Just as the path of the unseen electron may be assessed in a cloud chamber through its effect on its surroundings, so the effects of damaging or uncivilly treating the “semangat” of material objects are assessed by the evils and mishaps which inevitably follow. Because of the semangat, one must be circumspect in one’s methods of dealing with things.
Recently a Malay driver, whose car had broken down, said to me, "I must examine the engine carefully. It cannot talk or tell me what ails it. I must treat it like a small child who is ill. Slowly, little by little, we must try each possibility. Then it will be well again." Somewhere in the background, although he would probably have denied it, one could glimpse the basic belief in the spirit common to all material and growing things—the semangat, the same semangat of the metal iron to which in the past those skilled in making the wavy-bladed Malay krises were accustomed to make offerings. It is to this belief that much of the softness and lack of violence of the Malay character may well be due; their innate regard for manners and behaviour; the neat, clever approach rather than that of the bulldozer. It is a creed which makes for tolerance in dealing with humans and hantus alike.

This Malay belief in a common power or vital force shared by vegetation, minerals and living creatures is not unique. There is reference in Frazer's "Golden Bough" to a similar belief amongst certain American Indians, e.g., "The Indians of Guiana do not see any sharp line of distinction between man and other animals, between one kind of animal and another, or between animals—man included—and inanimate objects. On the contrary, to the Indian, all objects, animate and inanimate, seem exactly of the same nature, except that they differ in the accident of bodily form." Similarly amongst the Cherokee Indians, who deem "all animated nature, including trees and plants, as forming a great whole from which they do not dissociate mankind."

The belief in the common nature of things and in the strange unseen power which is shared by animate and inanimate creation alike must surely find an echo in the mind of the sophisticated Westerner in this atomic age.