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SHAMAN, SAIVA AND SUFI

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VI. The Ritual Of The Rice-Field

IN the magic safe-guarding rice from seed-time to harvest survives the primitive ritual of the Indonesian race. Strip away the obvious accretions, the names of Hindu deities, the thin Muslim veneer, and the essence of the ritual remains intact in Malaya to-day. It deals with the soul-substance, human, animal, vegetable, with the spirits of dead magicians, nature-spirits and Father Sky and Mother Earth. Except for Sky and Earth the spirits invoked lack the omnipresence and individuality of gods, bear generic names and are indefinite in number. Their sphere is a particular district. They inhabit the rice-field, the thick jungle, the rays of the setting sun. No temples are erected in their honour. The customary and symbolic rites that persuade them to friendly relations with man can be enacted in a forest clearing, in the corner of a rice swamp, on the floor of a village barn. No shaman or priest of Siva or Muslim elder presides. The magician has the narrow scope of the spirits he serves. He belongs to one small village or humble district. Often the rites controlling the growth of rice are conducted by an old Malay woman, relic of the far distant past when man hunted and killed, and woman, the bearer of young, delved, lending the benign influence of her motherhood to make crops prolific. Among many aborigines this older custom is observed and the rites are celebrated not by a man but by a woman, fitting midwife for the rice-baby. Still in parts of the country agricultural implements are given by the Malay groom to his bride as a wedding present.

Before starting to fell a clearing for rice, the farmer takes a lump of benzoin on a plate wrapped in a white cloth as a present to the local magician, a survivor in Malay culture whose trust is "first in God, next in His Prophet, and then in the magicians of old, the ancestral spirits who own the clumps and clods" of the locality.² This expert recites charms over the benzoin and returns it to the planter with traditional instructions. First he is to burn the benzoin in a bamboo conch and fumigate his adzes and choppers, praying to the guardian spirits, male and female, newly dead and dead long since, to be cool and propitious. Then he is to stand erect facing eastward and look round at the four quarters of the heavens; he is to notice at which quarter his breath feels least faint and begin to fell in that direction. After one or two hacks at the trees he must cease work for the day.

When the time comes to burn the clearing, the man gets more benzoin from the magician, furnigates his torches, lights them and cries thrice to spirits of all sorts, Indonesian, Indian, Persian, Arabian, to goblins with a Sanskrit name, to indigenous vampires, and goblins of the soil, saying that the magician has duly informed them of his desire to burn, that he himself has paid them due respect, and that trusting to the luck of his instructor he hopes for a favourable breeze. Very early in the morning after the burn he and his wife and children must hurry to mitigate the smart of the half-burnt clearing with water in which are steeped cold rice from last night's meal, a slice from the cool heart of a gourd, and other vegetable products chosen for their natural frigidity or appropriately cool names. Also a little maize should be planted. All this must be done before Grannie Kemang can get up and sow rank weeds that will flourish and provide hiding places for goblin pests. Before quitting the clearing, one should pile and singe three rows of the unburnt brushwood. Then one must go home and wait three days before completing the burn.

² Except where acknowledgment is made to other sources, the following account is based on two manuscripts written for me by Perak Malay headmen twelve years ago. It contains certain interesting details hitherto not noted in the Peninsula.

