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Taman Shamanism (Borneo)

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- Semai Shamanism; Taman Shamanism; Thai Spirit World and Spirit Mediums; Transvestism in Shamanism
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TAMAN SHAMANISM (BORNEO)

Among the Taman of Indonesia, a form of healing is still widely practiced that manifests some aspects of classic shamanism. Those who practice healing rely completely on their relationship with the spirits.

Background

The Taman are a Dayak (non-Muslim Borneo indigene) ethnic group of 5,000 inhabiting ten small villages along the Kapuas, Mendalam, and Sibau Rivers upstream of Putussibau, the largest town in the Kapuas Hulu regency in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The remoteness of the area contributes to the persistence of traditional ways of life, but its isolation has been

alleviated somewhat by the advent of a small airport in the 1970s and a paved road to Pontianak in the 1990s. With the Embaloh and Kalis peoples, the Taman form a larger ethnolinguistic entity called Maloh by outsiders, although some local scholars have recently recommended the appellation Banuaka as a preferable substitute. The Taman are believed to have lived in the Upper Kapuas at least since the seventeenth century; intriguing evidence from legends and research in the statistical study of their vocabulary suggests a much earlier link to Sulawesi, and specifically Bugis. Today, the Taman frequently interact with Chinese, Malay (Muslims, often Dayak converts to Islam), Iban, Kantu', and Bukat people.

The Taman economy is based on shifting rice cultivation, supplemented by the sale of produce and forest products in Putussibau's morning bazaar, rubber tapping, and timber cutting. Fishing, hunting, and gardening also contribute to their subsistence.

Christianity was introduced by Catholic Dutch pastors during the colonial period, and more recently through Protestant churches, notably the Evangelical Church. Mass conversions were carried out in the 1970s, and most Taman are Catholic, except in the villages on the Sibau River, which have a Protestant majority. Many Taman have converted to Islam, but with few exceptions they cease to identify themselves as Taman once they are Muslims. Relations are amicable between persons of all faiths.

The Centrality of Shamanism in Treating and Explaining Illness

Despite its heterodoxy and unflattering association with idolatry, shamanism is extremely important for the Taman, since it is the remedy both of first resort, and in some cases, last resort in treating illness. Taman shamanic curing uses no medicine—its purpose is to treat illnesses (or those aspects thereof) for which there is no medicine. More precisely, it treats illnesses resulting from the attack of a *sai* (spirit) on a person's *sumangat*. The latter term refers to a person's image, as in what one sees in a mirror, or something containing a person's identity or essence. Unlike the English word *soul*, which will henceforth be used as a gloss for *sumangat*, it does not refer to psychological processes or personality structures. A person's *sumangat* has

the same experiences as the person, but it can separate itself from the person's body, travel, and materialize.

An individual has eight *sumangat*. All but one "original" *sumangat* may leave the body, especially during sleep, as proved in dreams. The seven souls that can wander are not further individualized as to name, function, personality, or location in the body. The majority of dreams are considered harmless and normal, although all dreams are believed to contain important meanings, perhaps as omens or warnings, and are taken to emerge from actual journeys of the soul. Some dreams, however, signify special danger, such as interference with the recently deceased, and may require ritual actions or proscriptions. The further a *sumangat* wanders, and the longer it is absent, the more perilous the outcome.

A *sai* is any animal or other nonhuman spirit unattached to a body. *Sai* are believed to live an unseen world and to be found outside the village: in the forest, in certain trees, especially banyans (*Ficus*), localities in a river, grottos, and the like. *Sai* are considered typically amoral, petulant, and vicious. They act impulsively as well as intentionally and out of revenge. They can cause illness by shooting an unseen object into a person's soul. They may attack a soul by punching, spearing, biting, or clawing it. They can also cause illness by lodging themselves in a person's soul. Most simple or body part illnesses are attributed to cuts inflicted on a soul. Infections and other more serious internal illnesses are attributed to a soul being stabbed or burned by a *sai* while outside a person's body. These serious illnesses are believed to be caused out of vengeance on the part of a *sai* for some behavior attributed to a particular person. The victim of spirit attack may not have knowingly committed any action harmful or insulting to a *sai* but may innocently share the name of the offended *sai*.

Treatment by Shamans

Taman shamans (called *balien*) are able to cure illnesses caused by *sai* in part because they are the only persons who can not only see them but have ongoing relationships with them. Few non-baliens report ever having seen a *sai*.

The first stage of *balien* treatment is to rub certain stones over body parts, including but

not limited to the parts about which a complaint is made. The treatment is called *bubut*, which derives from a Malay word meaning "pluck" or "extract." Bubut is conducted to treat simple illnesses caused by the attack of a *sai*, but is also the first and last step of all other *balien* cures. Certain highly polished stones, kept in a small kit woven from thatch, called a *baranai*, are used. The stones used in *bubut* are not ordinary stones but are thought to be solidified spirits that represent the souls of the persons in the *balien's* household. Most are black, polished, and roundish (female spirits) or long and round (male spirits), in a size that fits easily in the hand. Some are oddly shaped but smooth.

Before being rubbed on the person the stone is dipped into a decoction of a crushed, freshly cut ginger plant, usually the ground rhizome of *tantamu* (*Curcuma xanthorrhiza*), though *saur* (*Kaempferia galanga*) leaves may also be used, and are preferred in treating children. The *balien* not only strokes the wet stone over the skin but deeply squeezes and sometimes blows on the patient's flesh. The cure is revealed in the removal of a small object, usually a tiny pebble, from under the stone (and purportedly the patient's flesh), which drops audibly into a bowl held by the *balien*. This object must be "fed" to the *bubut* stones to prevent the extracted disease from flying into the *balien's* body. The normal payment is a cup of uncooked rice.

The next ceremony, *mangait*, involves calling back the patient's absent soul. A *balien* is brought to the patient's house in the evening, bringing not only *bubut* stones but a much larger basket, called a *taiengen*, containing stones called *batu kait*. Also used is a wooden pole fitted with a hooked metal tip, called a *pangait*. (The word *kait*, from which the words *pangait* and *mangait* derive, means "hook"). This pole is planted in or put next to the *taiengen* and is tied at the top to a house post facing eastward (the direction of the rising sun, symbolizing the living). The *balien* wears bracelets, called *tauning*, that are covered with cast iron bells that jingle when the *balien* pulls down on the *pangait*.

In preparation for the ceremony the *balien* rubs her face and hands with a magical oil called *polek mo*, drinks a cup of palm wine that is offered to her, covers herself with a blanket or

a cloth called a *kain burih* (see illustration in Bernstein 1997, 122), and crouches while grasping the *pangait*. (The feminine pronoun is used in reference to *baliens* because about 90 percent of them are women.) As the *balien* chants, her soul is carried by the *batu kait* on a trip in a canoe manned by the *batu bubut*. She visits various spirit houses, searching for the patient's missing soul. She may find that the soul is being held by a *sai* and may plead with it to return the soul in exchange for a small figurine called a *sulekale*, which is carved into a human shape (further illuminating the *Taman* soul concept). She then must make her way back, sometimes bringing the soul with her. The entire journey is narrated, usually in an archaic dialect little understood by those who are not *baliens*.

After emerging from under the cloth, the *balien* advises the patient's family as to the cause of the illness and may instruct a family member to present a second *sulekale* at a specified location to assure the release of sick person's soul.

The next level of therapy often involves two *baliens* working together. It begins early in the morning and is not finished until late in the afternoon. Besides *baliens* and family members, many guests will attend the ceremony and must be treated with hospitality. This ceremony, called a *malai* or a *maniang*, is similar to a *mangait*, but differs in that it requires the *baliens* after locating the missing soul to travel with a number of the patient's kinsmen and supporters to the spot where the spirit has taken it. To catch the soul, they use their equipment as they did at the patient's home, but for a different purpose. In a *mangait* they use the *pangait* and stones to enable their own souls to travel, but here they summon the spirits, bringing them near so they can snatch the patient's soul from the spirit who holds it, capturing it in a vase, bringing it back, and reinserting it into the body of the patient, who has been home the whole time.

An even more advanced technique, a *menindoani*, is a further elaboration of a *mangait*, in which the *balien* works at the patient's house to locate his soul. It is the step taken after a *malai*, performed only when the patient's soul is thought to be in great jeopardy, whether from illness or an inauspicious dream or death. A *menindoani* is the only ceremony a *balien* may

perform for a reason other than the treatment of illness or to initiate a neophyte balien.

Whereas the previous two ceremonies involve travel on an earthly plane, a menindoani requires the further step to heavenly flight. A menindoani uses a specific chant, *timang manik* ("rising up" chant) and a specific stone, a *batu bau* (eagle stone), not used in previous ceremonies. The chant may last over two hours, as compared with twenty to forty minutes for a mangait. The balien performing a mangait induces through isolation under a cloth or blanket a "shamanic state of consciousness" (Harner 1990, 21–39), but in performing a menindoani the balien conforms to the defining criterion of a shaman as a person who employs "a trance state in which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld" (Eliade 1964, 5).

In another ceremony, *tabak buse*, the balien chants the *timang manik* but does not use a pangait, effecting soul travel instead through the beating of a drum on two consecutive nights. No firsthand, observational accounts of this ceremony exist. Tom Harrisson, whose report was based on the testimonies of three non-baliens he interviewed in 1962, described a ceremony called *belian maniang buluh ayu sera* that corresponds with *tabak buse*, except that it was said to last for six nights (Harrisson 1965, 262–263). The name derives from the decorated bamboo poles used. Harrisson also mentioned a ceremony, no longer practiced by the 1980s, in which the provisions were doubled and two decorated bamboo poles were used instead of one.

The next ceremony, *mengadengi*, is performed when an illness that may not be severe is thought to be the result of spirit victimization and may indicate that the person treated will have to become a balien. It involves two or more baliens and requires food offerings contained either in a tray placed on the floor or a platform made from wooden boards and suspended from a ceiling rafter draped with a cloth, functioning as an offering structure. Also used is an unripe areca palm blossom (*mayang pinang*) to determine whether the person will need to become a balien. Chants are made to invite spirits from the surrounding area. The baliens, wearing special blouses and other finery, dance around the offering structure, accompanied by percussion rhythms made on

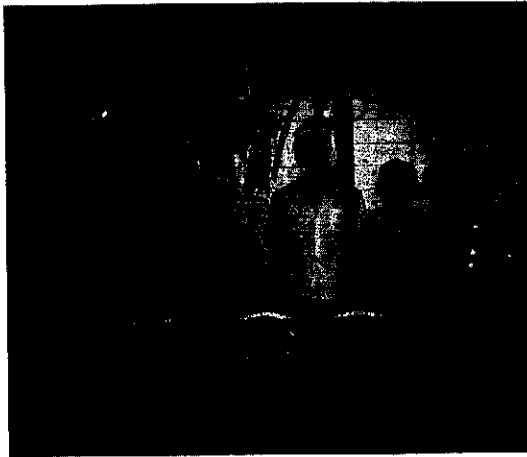
bowls, gongs, and drums. The person being treated may join the dancing if he or she wishes. While dancing, each balien carries a bundle of leaves including one from the cordyline plant, or palm-lily (*suri*), in one hand and a bowl in the other hand. The baliens see the spirits as they descend and tap them with their leaves, at which time stones drop as if by magic into their bowls. These bowls are displayed, collected, and later given to the patient. At the end of the night the blossom is stroked with *tantamu* and is cracked open and examined (see Bernstein 1993, 196–197 for illustrations). If the tips are seen to be hook-shaped, it is a sign that the person must become a balien.

The Basis of Taman Shamanism

The balien does not consciously choose her profession but is selected through a process of illness, treatment, and ceremonial induction. The process begins with an indistinct illness that could affect any person, and may include such symptoms as gastrointestinal disorders or an illness that seems to 'travel' from one part of the body to another. Over time, and as treatment continues, men and young people of both sexes usually select themselves out or get selected out of the process. Those who become baliens are mainly mature, often elderly women.

Becoming a balien is considered a fate determined by *sai*. Balien status is not only not sought voluntarily but is avoided. In fact, anyone who wanted to be a balien would be considered inauthentic. (It is possible that some people desire to become baliens but do not admit it precisely for this reason.) Baliens' intimate and familiar relationship with the spirit domain begins with illnesses and other experiences that are interpreted over time as disturbance from a spirit. Like ordinary illnesses, the balien's predisposing condition is believed to have been sent by some spirit purposely, but not in order to harm them in the more ordinary sense, even though the target may suffer and may even die if not healed by becoming a balien.

Instead, the spirit has selected the person for victimization out of a romantic preoccupation. Signs of these illnesses are recurring sexual dreams that continue to disturb and preoccupy the victim. The victim may long for the dreamed-of person or constantly see the imagi-



Baliens and candidate gathered for a group portrait during a *menyarung* ceremony, Sibau Hulu, August 1986. All women wear a *baju kalawat*, a blouse worn only by them. No such garment is worn by male baliens. (Courtesy of Jay H. Bernstein)

nary person in waking life, following it with no awareness of having wandered off. The victim may frequently faint, cry, or feel sad for no apparent reason.

The baliens' initiation is an elaborate and expensive ceremony called *menyarung*. Because of the high cost of holding this ceremony, years may elapse between the *mengadengi* that indicated the candidate was to become a baliens and the full initiation to finally resolve the condition. In the interim, the candidate cannot use the stones, though they may reveal their identities to the person through dreams.

Up to ten baliens participate (see photo) in a *menyarung*, at least one of whom must be a man. It lasts for three days and nights, followed by a day and night of rest and a final night and day. The ceremony involves dancing and stone-catching as in the previous *mengadengi* ceremony, but is far more elaborate in its provisioning. It is a public event, attended by as many as one hundred guests at some times. The candidate must participate in some dancing and must catch a stone on the last night of the ceremony. All the stones collected become the property of the neophyte, for whom they become occult instruments for treating patients. The candidate is further initiated through the (symbolic) piercing of the fingertips with fish-

ing hooks (*rabe*), which are then embedded in the flesh to enable the novice to feel and remove *sai*, and similar piercing (though not embedding) of the outer eye tissue, to "clean" the eyes and enable the person to see *sai*.

After the ceremony is complete, the person is formally authorized to be employed as a baliens, though in practical terms she learns the various techniques one by one through apprenticeship, starting with the simplest, *bubut*. Practicing healing activities enables baliens over time to resolve their own difficulties.

Since much of the baliens' work, including all of that performed by less experienced persons, involves no soul flight but only extractive magic, the baliens does not fit the classic, primal model of the shaman embodied in Siberian, Inuit, and Central Asian practitioners. Indeed, only the most experienced baliens are able to execute the *menindoani* ceremony, which best satisfies the prototypical criteria of shamanism. The existence in many societies of healing regimes that include both shamanic and nonshamanic techniques led Michael Winkelman to introduce the term *shaman/healer* (Winkelman 2000, 73), which succinctly characterizes the baliens.

Baliens work together in certain ceremonies and are associated loosely through their traditions, but they have no other common interests binding them together. The origin of the whole baliens tradition is attributed to Piang (Grandmother) Siunsun Amas, an ancestral goddess who had the power to revive a person who had died, and who guides souls to the land of the dead. She was the first baliens and is said to have dictated the rules, methods, and customs followed by baliens to the present day.

The domination of shamanic healing work among the Taman by women is intriguing to anthropologists, since it is not a peripheral cult of rebellion organized by a subaltern category of people, which is the usual explanation of such phenomena. It is possible that the key lies (at least in part) in the experiences of the sexual longing and sense of victimization often described as harbingers of their destiny by those who subsequently become baliens. It would be worthwhile to explore more deeply and compare mythologies about the origins of healing traditions among the Taman and other peoples to determine whether this female domination is part of a larger pattern.

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See also: Indonesian Shamanism; Murut Shamanism; Semai Shamanism; Southeast Asian Shamanism

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THAI SPIRIT WORLD AND SPIRIT MEDIUMS

Thailand is a Buddhist country. The people of Thailand, like other Southeast Asian peoples, also practice an additional religion or ritual system that is centered around spirits. These spirits can be powerful protectors, and people go to them for protection from danger and help with worldly matters with which Buddhism does not much concern itself.

This ritual system has its roots in indigenous religions predating Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Having their roots in different societies, these religions were not identical to shamanism of the classic type found in Siberia. Nevertheless, in their dealings with the spirit world, Thai spirit mediums employ methods similar to those of the Siberian shaman, such as inviting the approach of the spirits and altered states of consciousness.

Spirits (*phi*) are often the ghosts of dead humans, but they can also be the spirits of natural phenomena, such as trees and streams. Important spirits are usually the ghosts of known people, either historical or mythological, and stories are told about their histories. Indeed, the more important spirits can legitimately be called divinities. Sometimes the Vedic gods of India, such as Indra and Brahma, who are important in Buddhism, are installed as protective spirits. The Erawan Shrine (more properly the Brahma shrine) in Bangkok is a well-known example. The four-faced Vedic god Brahma is installed there as the protective divinity for the site of the Erawan Hotel and has become very popular with the public as a divine patron who can grant wishes.

The spirit world is, from an orthodox Buddhist point of view, an ambiguous and potentially dangerous thing. The Thai have historically defined themselves as a Buddhist people, and Buddhism defines the spirit religion as morally troublesome, for it involves the killing of animals and is addressed to amoral supernatural forces. For instance, it is explicitly and strictly prohibited to make sacrifices to spirits during Buddhist Lent. The spirits of socially acceptable cults are thus generally said to be Buddhists or protectors of Buddhism. These spirits observe the Buddhist sabbath, defer to monks, and cannot receive sacrifices during Buddhist Lent. Furthermore, many of the important tutelary spirits of the traditional Thai state were said to be the spirits of deceased princes, whose political legitimacy rests in part on their personal religiosity.

The Thai spirit hierarchy structurally parallels the traditional social hierarchy. Under the traditional system there was a global integration of state, territorial, and domestic cults within a single ritual-cum-political framework.

Spirits can be classified by the type of thing they protect or rule. A preliminary classifica-