

THE HANTU RAYA: A MALAY DEMON

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AS TOLD TO

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(Dedicated to Ella Young, the renowned Irish poetess and mystic — who also believed in demons.)

The *hantu raya* or Great Hantu is the most powerful of the evil spirits of the Malaysian jungle whose greatest delight is entering the Malay *kampong* (village) or city dwelling-area to torment the humans living there.¹ It has the strength to bend trees at night so that the Malay onlooker thinks they are broken, but in the morning the trees are found to be intact. The *hantu raya* may appear as a calico cat, stallion, or other animal and then suddenly disappear. If not propitiated (*bela hantu*) regularly with delicious food by a human, this *hantu* will become wild with anger and accordingly possess the body of a sick person. It will force the hapless invalid to scream out: "*Saya lapar. Saya lapar.*" (I am hungry. I am hungry.) When this happens, a *bomoh* (shaman) or *pawang* (spirit-medium) must be called in to exorcise the Great Hantu.² (Note: The Malay word *hantu* may be translated as 'ghost, spirit, evil spirit, demon').

This series of accounts begins with the year 1914. The place: Alor Setar, the capital of Kedah State in northern Malaysia (formerly part of the Kingdom of Siam).³ A mixed white-stone and red-gravel road branched off from a main city-street and ran for five hundred yards to the muddy banks of the Kedah River. On both sides of the road there were twenty-four large compounds almost facing each other. In one of those compounds stood my grandmother's huge and rambling wooden house with thatched roof, approached by a five-foot wooden bridge which spanned a deep concrete ditch in front of the compound. Tall and luxuriant fruit-trees lined one side of the white sandy trail which divided in front of the

tangga ("house-ladder") into two wide foot-paths that ran around the house to the rear fence, a hundred and fifty feet away. To the left of the house there were three small rental bungalows. To the right a flower garden stretched from the front fence for about a hundred feet and stopped at a side-door porch. Assorted fruit-trees and a sizable chicken-coop occupied the remainder of the right side. At the boundary between the garden and the orchard was a small corrugated zinc bathroom which stood against a bamboo fence, twenty-five feet away from the side-porch.

My *Ibu* (mother) was eighteen years old then. In the neighborhood there was a middle-aged Malay man who fed and took care of a *hantu raya*.

One evening at dusk, my mother was sitting out in front on the rungs of the *tangga* when she saw a giant of a man about ten feet tall standing just outside the right front corner of the compound looking in at her. She became frightened and ran up to the door, but this was locked. She then ran down and headed for the side-porch door about fifty feet to the rear of the house-ladder. As she was doing that, she glanced to her right and saw the *hantu raya* striding along the fence keeping abreast of her. She made two leaps up the eight-foot *tangga* like a star athlete and once inside peeped out from a half-closed window-shutter. The *hantu raya* was gone. It was hard to say whether the demon had moved on to scare other people or had simply disappeared into thin air. Whatever it was that happened, the common phrase "thin air" is not applicable here. The air certainly is not thin wherever the *hantu raya* is! This demon occupies space, and one can definitely "feel" its presence. Almost always one's hair will bristle on the back of the neck.

Once I personally had a unique experience. One dreary drizzling midnight in 1943, as I was walking home along a lonely country road on the opposite side of town from my grandmother's place, I felt a sudden sharp chill on my neck. It was not the drizzle that caused it. A ghostly figure wrapped in white cloth suddenly emerged from the *nipah* jungle which flanked the narrow cobblestone road. It started walking

These accounts of actual meetings with the *hantu raya* were related in Malay by Haji Zain Tajudin to his American friend Thomas Amis Lyman, who translated them.

alongside me and occasionally looked me up and down sideways. It was the most uncomfortable feeling, to say the least. Needless to say, I was scared — but not quite out of my mind. Remembering what my father had once told me, I recited a short opening sentence from the Holy Koran three consecutive times, and the demon disappeared instantaneously.

The next day I told my father about the experience and he said, "Undoubtedly, that was the *hantu raya*."

"But, how come it's not tall like the one mother saw a long time ago?" I asked.

"That's because the *hantu raya* can appear in any shape or form. It can transform itself into either a human or an animal form," my father replied.

I became fascinated by what I had experienced — the sudden appearance of the *hantu* and its equally abrupt departure at the utterance of the Koranic sentences. Now I felt I had a weapon with which to protect myself against any ghost, ghou, or demon in the broad domain of Malaysia.

One fine evening in 1944 while relaxing in the front garden of our house on the Jenan Rubber Estate, my father (the manager there) shed a bit more light on the fearful nocturnal beings (the *hantu*).

"Well," he said, "they don't always make mischief at night only; they do it in broad daylight as well."

"How, *Bapak*?" I asked.

"For instance, I remember some hunting accidents. There were known cases where the *hantu raya* transformed itself into a wild boar (*babi hutan*) and stood in line of sight between two hunters who were on each side. The hunters wound up shooting each other, not the *hantu*.

"Then there was a case where the master of a *hantu raya* died, but the man's corpse appeared to be moving. Sometimes the corpse would sit up as if it refused to die. It was the work of the mischievous demon.

"Another case I recall was similar to yours," my father continued. "One late evening, a friend of mine was driving through a rubber plantation when he saw a beautiful woman by the roadside waiting for the bus. He stopped and offered her a ride. She graciously accepted. They talked for most of the way. Then they stopped talking. Presumably they had nothing more to talk about, but my friend was very much aware that she was sitting beside him. It was now getting dark, and he turned on his headlights. The car was going down a gradual decline, and he was preparing to negotiate a sharp turn. As he completed the turn, from the periphery of his vision he saw something white where the woman was supposed to be sitting. He turned his face toward her. To his horror she had turned into a demon, all wrapped up in white cloth. Momentarily he panicked and almost ran his car off the road. Fortunately, he was able to control his emotion, and thus his car. He recited some Koranic sentences, and the ghost subsequently disappeared."

The following are two *hantu*-related stories:

It was in 1938 during Ramadhan, the Moslem month of the Great Fast. A younger brother of mine was coming home from the community *madrasah* or Islamic religious school just after dusk, carrying in one hand an empty *mangkok tiffin*

(five-tiered metal food-carrier). As he approached the bamboo thicket in my grandmother's compound, he was blasted repeatedly by sand. He yelled at the top of his voice. I rushed out to him and asked him the direction from which the sand came. He pointed to his left where there was an even denser bamboo thicket than the one in my grandmother's compound. Just behind it was a *jambu* tree. On one of the thick branches I could see the silhouette of what appeared to be a small man. Instinctively I knew it was *not* the *hantu raya*. I suspected it was one of our friends, a neighbor prankster named Abdullah. I picked up a few loose stones and threw them in his direction purposely missing him. "No, Zain! No! It's me," came a scream. Abdullah then burst out laughing; so did my brother and I.

A few years elapsed. One mid-morning at breakfast, the elder of my two younger sisters, who was about ten years old, had an abrupt and violent tantrum. She picked up plates of food and started throwing them in all directions. One of them almost hit my father, who had just entered the dining-room to investigate the commotion.

"Stop it!" my father ordered her. With lightning speed, she jumped at him. Quickly *Bapak* gave her a "bear-hug." But with unbelievable strength for a ten-year old, my sister broke loose and with relative ease hurled my father to the floor!

It was then that my father became convinced that *ashaitan* had entered her body and her soul. (Note: although etymologically an equivalent of the English word Satan, *Malayshaitan* more commonly refers to the *hantu* or demons who plague people with madness.)⁴ Hurriedly my father got up and left the room while my sister confirmed her violent behavior, clawing the straw floor-matting, kicking, yelling, and throwing more glasses and chinaware on the floor and against the wall.

A few minutes later my father returned with a very dark middle-aged Malay neighbor whose aged mother was a Thai from Haatyai. This man was a *bomoh* or shaman. He had almost unblinking eyes, which were fixed on my agitated sister the instant he entered the room. My father held out for the *bomoh* the traditional *sireh* and *pinang* metal tray. Without taking his eyes off my sister for a second, the *bomoh* plucked off a green *sireh* leaf (betel-leaf) from the tray and smeared one side of it with white *kapor* (lime) from a small brass cup. Then, his nimble fingers reached for another somewhat bigger container for small chunks of the *pinang* nut (areca-nut). He placed these in the middle of the *kapor*-smeared side of the leaf. Expertly he folded the *sireh* leaf single-handed into a square and then put it in his mouth. The *bomoh* started to chew it. In less than a minute his mouth became red with "betel-nut" juice, which began to drip from both corners. The *bomoh's* cheeks ballooned out, and his unblinking owl-like eyes remained forever on my sister. He could have been mistaken for the Devil himself.

The *bomoh* then approached my sister slowly, bending slightly forward (presumably to prevent the bright red juice from staining his shirt). Suddenly without warning, he began to spray the betel-nut concoction on my sister from head to toe.

My sister's stiffened body began to relax, and her rebellious expression vanished. Her face returned to normal as her head sagged to one side. Docility had replaced defiance. The *hantu raya* had left her body and released her soul. Later, I asked my father, "Are you sure it was not the shock from the *bomoh's* foul-smelling spray that awakened my sister to reality?"

"No, no," my father laughed.

"Perhaps it was the awful betel-nut stench that scared the *shaitan* out of her," I suggested.

One late evening, some time in 1982, the husband of a cousin of mine was driving home from a long trip along a mountainous jungle road. At a safe spot he stopped to relieve himself — a few feet away from the road — into the thick tropical foliage. All of a sudden from behind a tree, there emerged a ten-foot tall *orang putih* (white man), just a few feet away from him. My cousin's husband became rigid with fright, his feet glued to the slimy jungle floor. The *orang putih* beckoned to him with a menacing look. The Malay began to tremble and with difficulty steadied his knees, turned around,

and made a quick labored run to his car. He frantically fumbled with the ignition key and took off.

When he arrived home, his wife was shocked to see her husband so pale. He had difficulty speaking but was able to mumble a few words about what he had just seen in the jungle.

A sudden *demam panas* (high fever) overtook him that night. His wife tried in vain to bring the fever down. The next morning at sunrise he died. Was it the *hantu raya* he saw, or was it the *malaikat maut* (Angel of Death)?

Years later I learned that Anwar Yahya, the man who treated my sister, was himself the "owner" or master of *ahantu raya*. That was his con man's way of earning a living. He would regularly send his demonic emissary out to possess someone. Then under the guise of being a *bomoh*, Anwar would treat the poor tormented person for a fat fee. What an evil way to make money! The Malays of Alor Setar refer to such an evil-doer with the pejorative phrase *orang bela hantu* (person who propitiates a demon).⁵

ENDNOTES

1. Cf. Skeat, Walter William. 1984. *Malay Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
2. Cf. Werner, Roland. 1986. *Bomoh-Poyang*. Kuala Lumpur: Department of Publications, University of Malaya.
3. Cf. Nagata, Judith A. 1979. *Malaysian Mosaic*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
4. Cf. Koentjaraningrat, Raden Mas. 1975. *Introduction to the Peoples and Cultures of Indonesia and Malaysia*. Menlo Park, California: Cummings Publication Co.
5. Cf. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. 1983. *Kajian Budaya Dan Masyarakat Di Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia.