CHAPTER 2

Malay Magic and Divination

The Malay Spirit World

Malay history, culture and art need to be placed against a background of the wider region of Southeast Asia.¹ A belief in the spirit world remains strong, and the environment is believed to be populated with numerous kinds of spirits (hantu). These include nature spirits such as the Earth Spirit (Jembalang Tanah or Hantu Tanah), as well as familiars that help magicians carry out their work such as the tiger spirit (hantu belian) that assists the shaman in a séance, and the bajang (a vampire that takes the form of a pole-cat) which is used for more nefarious purposes. There are also ghosts of those who died a ‘bad death’, such as the langsuir and pontianak (vampires of a woman who died during childbirth and her baby, respectively; Figure 11), fairies and elves like the orang bunian, creatures such as were-tigers, and many others.² Malay magic and divination manuscripts often contain talismanic drawings of some of the more malevolent spirits, and these are discussed in Chapters Five and Six. Additionally there is also the concept of the semangat, which is “an impersonal force vital to the well-being of men and things.”³ It is found in everything, i.e. not only in living beings such as humans and animals, but also in inanimate objects such as rocks, metals and even constructed structures such as houses. A lack of semangat leads to a person being vulnerable to attack by spirits, and as such medical treatment entails not only expelling the spirits but also restoring the semangat.⁴

¹ For a general overview of Southeast Asian history, ethnography and ethnology, see Winzeler 2011; for art see Kerlogue 2004; Maxwell 2010.
² For a general survey of Malay spirits and supernatural beings, see Skeat 1900, pp. 83-106, 112-120, 160-166, 320-331.
³ Mohd. Taib 1989, p. 79.
⁴ Endicott 1970, pp. 51-52; Laderman 1993, pp. 40-44.

Trading links between Southeast Asia and India were established from around the fourth century BC, and from the early first millennium AD Indian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), languages and various other elements of culture began to be adopted by polities and kingdoms in Southeast Asia – the so-called ‘Indianisation’ process.⁵ Possibly also from India, Islam was formally adopted in the courts of northern Sumatra from the thirteenth century and from then onwards expanded throughout the region, with contacts being maintained with the Middle East through pilgrimage and scholarly activities.⁶ The introduction of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam introduced a further pantheon of supernatural beings into the Malay belief system. These include not only common spirits but also deities to be invoked for help and protection. Yet it must be emphasised that any outside influences coming into Southeast Asia have been redefined and given local meaning, a process known as ‘localisation’.⁷ Thus as Mohd. Taib Osman has argued, Hindu and Islamic supernatural beings have been added into the Malay system not as who they are, but “... for the power that they are believed to possess.”⁸ For instance the Prophet Khīḍr, who in the Islamic tradition is associated with the Fountain of Life,⁹ is invoked as the guardian spirit of water, and appears in spells used to capture crocodiles and for setting offerings (limas) on the river.¹⁰

⁵ For early contacts with India, see Bellina & Glover 2004.
⁶ For an overview of Islam in Southeast Asia, see Johns 2005.
⁹ Wensinck “al-Khāḍir (al-Khīḍr)”.
¹⁰ Skeat 1900, p. 99; Mohd. Taib 1989, pp. 107-108; the spells are found in Skeat 1900, pp. 297, 423.
These supernatural beings, spirits and forces affect human lives in many ways, such as in economic activities (for instance in agriculture and hunting), health, the human life cycle (such as births, marriages), building or construction, entertainment (for example in shadow plays and animal combat) and personal matters such as love and quarrels. They possess power and are thus sought, controlled and manipulated using magical rites and divinatory techniques.

**Figure 11** Models of the spirits penanggalan (left) and langsuir (right). After Skeat 1900, pl. 7.

**Magic and Divination**

Defining magic is not an easy task, the discussion of which still continues today. One approach favoured in recent scholarship on magic is to define and categorise it within a cultural and historical context, i.e. determining what the society in question regards as magic. Similarly divination is also being studied from the point of view of a particular society. In terms of Malay terminology, the English term ‘magic’ is usually translated into Malay as *hikmat*, which Richard Wilkinson has defined as: “wonder-working magic; cf. *ahli h.* (dealers in magic, sorcerers). It is magical procedures whether with or without appliances...” The word *hikmat* derives from the Arabic *ḥikma*, which although usually means ‘wisdom’ also encompasses the sciences, including that of medicine and magic. It is perhaps through this latter meaning that the word derived a magical connotation within the Malay context. Certainly in Malay literary works this term is employed to describe powers and action in a magical sense. A search through a corpus of traditional Malay texts using the Malay Concordance Project reveals that the word *hikmat* is used in the late fourteenth – early fifteenth century texts of the *Hikayat Raja Pasai* (‘The Tale of the Rajas of Pasai’) and the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* (‘The Tale of Amīr Ḥamza’). In the latter, *hikmat* appears in a number of episodes, such as when a king uses his *hikmat* to set fire upon Amīr Ḥamza’s army: "Maka Raja Arikhu pun dengan hikmatnya menjadikan api pada empat penahap." ("King Arikhu with his *hikmat* conjured fire on all four corners.").

*Sihir*, another term that is used to describe magic, is derived from the Arabic *siḥr* which encompasses “black magic, theurgy and white or

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12 For recent discussions on magic and its definition, see for instance Stark 2001; Middleton 2005; Hill 2005; Bailey 2006; Guiley 2006, s.v. “magic.”
13 Bailey 2006, p. 5. For how this approach is applied to medieval Europe, see Kieckhefer 2010, pp. 8-17; and for the problems of defining Malay magic, see Winzeler 1983, pp. 436-439.
14 For an overview of divination, see Zuesse 1987.
15 Winstedt [n.d.], s.v. “magic”.
16 Wilkinson 1932a, s.v. “hikmat”.
17 Goichon “Ḥikma”.
19 A. Samad 1987b, p. 683.