

# Amulets and Anthropology: A Paranormal Encounter with Malay Magic

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## SUMMARY

Many anthropologists regard personal accounts of the paranormal as superfluous because they are not scientifically verifiable. I argue, on the contrary, these accounts cut into the heart of that reality we call fieldwork. As a human endeavor, fieldwork is emotional. By describing the social context of my experience with Malay magic, I adduce the emotional intensity in paranormal encounters. It is in these encounters we gain insight into the ritual control of emotion.

There is a growing candidness in anthropological reports of fieldwork experiences. Such reports have appeared occasionally since the mid-1950s, but dating approximately from the posthumous publication of Malinowski's field diaries in 1967, there has been a steady output of writings on personal reactions to varying field conditions (e.g., Freilich 1970, Golde 1970, Beteille and Madan 1975, Lawless et al. 1983). As Nash and Wintrob (1972) suggest, these writings reflect a decline in naive empiricism and recognize the surreptitious impact of personal experiences on a fieldworker's theoretical and methodological outlook. The reports comprise unpretentious and often moving accounts of various trials and tribulations in the field; some have linked personal experiences to ethical issues, but few have attempted to evaluate the effects of the experiences on the people studied and the researcher's own professional role. Rarer indeed are accounts of personal encounters with extraordinary phenomena as these phenomena relate to an understanding of the cultural system under study and the researcher's own beliefs. A few such accounts have appeared (Harner 1980, Grindal 1983) but the controversies that the works of Carlos Castaneda (1968, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1977, 1981) have created will probably prevent a flood of similar accounts. The anthropologists who have encountered extraordinary events in the field are, one assumes, small. Being few, they are reluctant perhaps to share their experiences in print, lest they offend the gatekeepers of the discipline or risk their reputations as scientists. Those who write do so with great trepidation. Long (1974,

vii), for example, related how an eminent colleague expressed considerable anxiety over his proposed paper on parapsychology and anthropology. Grindal (personal communication, September 1983) admitted it was with some hesistance that he wrote his paper on witnessing death divination.

Yet such accounts are highly valuable in illuminating various aspects of the subjectivity-objectivity problem in fieldwork and the accompanying ethical issues. Because paranormal encounters are highly emotional events, it is important to ask how such experiences affect the self-consciousness of the ethnographer and thereby alter his trained objectivity in conducting systematic observations? Can the experiences be harnessed to advance ethnographic knowledge and practices? As relevant as these questions are to a discipline that has become introspective of its methods of data collection, before I examine them, I will briefly consider the status of the paranormal in anthropology.

## The Paranormal in Anthropology

It is probably inappropriate to say that the study of the paranormal comprises an integral aspect of anthropology. Mainstream anthropological studies of magic and witchcraft are concerned more with the social relations of such beliefs rather than their experiential aspects. While these studies provide minute details about magical practices, they avoid questions of authenticity. In fact, such questions are regarded as irrelevant, as most anthropologists perceive their task as unraveling the rules of social relationships in a particular cultural system. These works seldom indicate whether the anthropologists concerned have witnessed extraordinary events in the field and actually believe in their occurrences. A mundane focus on social structure forms an accepted language of discourse within the profession that screens out the more personal dimension of an extraordinary encounter in the field.

This professional rule was challenged in 1968 when Castaneda published an account of his initiation into Yaqui shamanism. To make his work more acceptable, Castaneda added an etic section on social structure. Readers recognize that the second section was Castaneda's forced effort to reconcile his emic approach with the etic paradigm of consensus anthropology. This book and its sequels were generally received with much cynicism and skepticism, and in the ensuing debates accusations ranged from fraudulent scholarship to a lack of cultural sensitivity. (See Wilk [1977], Beals [1978], De Mille [1976, 1980], Noel [1976], Murray [1979]). The hostile reactions to Castaneda's purported experiences provide ample evidence that a personal description of the paranormal threatens the scientific credibility claimed by denizens of the discipline (Maquet 1978).

The rejection of Castaneda's works by the scientific community has not prevented certain anthropologists from reporting their experiences with the paranormal. One of these reports is Michael Harner's (1980) account of his journey into the shamanic world of the Jivaro Indians of Ecuador. The Conibo Indians of Peru had introduced Harner to the hallucinogen *ayahuasca* in 1961. Three years later, he returned to Ecuador to study with Akachu, a renowned Jivaro shaman. Although his autobiographical text is not as rich as Castaneda's description, Harner highlights the problem of the formal separation of the anthropologist's subjective self from his objective, observing self. Seemingly, the paranormal experience he witnessed rendered that conventional bifurcation of roles illusory. This transformation is clearly suggested in Harner's admission that he is now a practicing shaman who seeks to disseminate his knowledge to the uninformed: "Now it seems time to help transmit some practical aspects of this ancient human legacy to those who have been cut off from it for centuries" (Harner 1980, 19).

While Harner deliberately participated in Jivaro shamanism, Bruce Grindal (1983) accidentally stumbled upon the resurrection of the dead in Sisala mortuary rituals. In a brutally frank description of his experiences in Tumu, Ghana in 1967, Grindal records his descent into the heart of Sisala culture through a particular incident in which he witnessed the raising of a corpse by Sisala praise singers. "Stretching from the amazingly delicate fingers and mouths of the *goka*, strands of fibrous light played upon the head, fingers, and toes of the dead man. The corpse, shaken by spasms, then rose to its feet, spinning and dancing in a frenzy. As I watched, convulsions in the pit of my stomach tied not only my eyes but also my whole being into this vortex of power" (Grindal 1983, 68).

In recalling his participation in this paranormal event, Grindal notes that episodes of "great passion and mystery" possess a quality that eludes their preservation on tape or film. The very act of witnessing their occurrences necessitates such intense involvement by the observer that the question of detachment recedes beyond the pale of scientific objectivity.

In these personal reports of paranormal encounters in ethnographic fieldwork, both Harner and Grindal articulate well the common theme that phenomenological subjectivity of a paranormal experience defies the canons of objective verification. Both hold back on discussing the theoretical and ethical implications of their experiences. Similarly, two earlier attempts at bridging the gap between parapsychology and anthropology (Angoff and Barth 1974, Long 1974) also bypassed these issues in favor of discussing the application of parapsychological principles to anthropological research. If the reports by Harner and Grindal suggest a reexamination of the marginal status of the paranormal in anthropology, they also suggest it is

increasingly difficult to ignore these issues or to shelve them indefinitely. Consequently, using my experiences with Malay magic as background material, I will attempt to address these theoretical and ethical concerns.

#### A NOTE ON MALAY MAGIC

The early writings on Malay magic—as exemplified in the works of Skeat (1900), Gimlette (1915), and Winstedt (1951)—treat it largely as folkloric in content. The early ethnographers of Malay magic were mainly British colonial officers, stationed on the Malay Peninsula, who were fascinated, and perhaps even charmed, by a belief system so radically different from theirs. As folklore Malay magic was perceived as an ontological reality that existed only within Malay culture. Little in these writings suggest that the authors believed in a transcendental nature of Malay magic and that its effects could be felt beyond the confines of Malay culture and particularly in theirs. In other words, Malay magic constituted a separate reality to be empirically investigated, but it did not possess an isomorphic correspondence to the belief system of the British ethnographers. Formed in this matter, these ethnographies may be exploited to explicate abstract theoretical ideas that are relevant to Western-trained anthropologists but are quite meaningless in the world view of the Malay natives.

The construction of such theoretical knowledge, based mainly on the British colonial ethnographies, has been accomplished by Endicott (1970). He employs structural analysis to map out general abstract principles that transcend what he calls the traditional order, that order which is specific to the cultural realm of the natives. The function of his exercise is to translate, or reduce, particular categories of culture, that is, elements of Malay magic, into universal categories of logic. Such theoretical efforts do not disavow the reality of the natives' belief system but subtly insist on the subordination of that belief to an overarching logical system. Thus, the contents of Malay magic are analyzed from a distance in order to extract general principles of organization that are assumed to be applicable to magical practices in other parts of the world.

The impersonal character of such writings is not unique to Malay magic. Works on magic in Asia, the Americas, and Oceania exhibit a similar quality. As they are concerned with elucidating the tenets of a particular belief system or with building a broad data base for comparative purposes, I do not dispute the validity of these analyses. I argue that paranormal experiences with magic, however, should they occur, are relevant to anthropological considerations because they provide an important corrective to the abstractive thrust in theoretical endeavors and demonstrate that other dimensions of magic await our exploration.

### *A Personal Encounter with Malay Magic*

In the summer of 1977, I began research on Malay spirit possession. The Malaysian mass media referred to the phenomenon as mass hysteria. This term was used to describe the manifestations of bizarre behavior that occurred frequently among Malay females in factories and schools. The drama of spirit possession (*kena hantu* or *dirasuk hantu* in Malay) is often perceived by many westernized Malaysians as a cultural anachronism that afflicts mainly uneducated villagers or individuals trapped in their superstitions. That such unseemly, primitive behavior could occur in a modern context, such as a factory or school, puzzled those unable to grasp the significance of their cultural meanings. There was much public concern about the continuous disruption of factory and school routines.

At the beginning, I relied mainly on newspaper reports for information on incidents of mass hysteria; however, I soon discovered that I was limited to a post hoc strategy of interviewing informants after the bizarre incidents had already occurred. As my method entailed painstaking patience in obtaining leads and the cooperation of bewildered witnesses, progress was slow. After the first two months, I decided to broaden my strategy to include formal discussions with Malay acquaintances on their perceptions of spirit possession and mass hysteria.

I first approached Hassan and Yusoff (pseudonyms), two Malay graduate students in sociology in their twenties whom I had known for several years, to find out what educated Malays with social science backgrounds thought about spirit possession. Although all Malays are Muslims by birth, not all can be said to be imbued with the same degree of devoutness. During my first years of acquaintance with Hassan and Yusoff, I had not gained an impression of them as pious Muslims. Unbeknownst to me, their religious attitudes had changed radically, and they were active participants in a *tarekat*, an esoteric Muslim brotherhood inspired by Sufi teachings (see al-Attas 1963).

This change, as I discovered later, resulted partly from their personal problems. Both were worried about the progress of their theses, and lack of financial support sharpened their worry. Yusoff was particularly depressed about the loss of a university fellowship because of his alleged involvement in a campus scandal. All these events occurred during an Islamic revival in the country. Hassan and Yusoff sought to alleviate their problems through fervent participation in Islamic activities. Both of them claimed that they had chosen this path to atone for their sins. Neither displayed, however, the fanaticism said to be characteristic of Islamic fundamentalism. As members of a *tarekat*, they were more engrossed in the mystical and magical aspects of Islam. They seemed more interested in learning arcane techniques for manipulating life-forces from their guru than in converting non-Muslims. At the time I approached them, both had prac-

ticed the mystical arts for more than a year. Yusoff had also accumulated a large collection of books on Islam and Western occultism. Although they were novices in Islamic mysticism and had been sworn to secrecy by their guru, my inquisitiveness did not threaten them. On the contrary, they eagerly sought a working relationship with me. This willingness to share their knowledge may be attributed partly to their newly found sense of power.

Initially, our conversations revolved around why women in particular were vulnerable to spirit possession. Their theories did not differ greatly from the Malay folk explanations reported by earlier ethnographers, that is, women had weaker life-forces (*lemah semangat*) and therefore were more susceptible than men to attacks by roaming spirits. After several leisurely conversations on this subject, Hassan and Yusoff began to drift to topics they considered more exciting. Their discussions centered on the awe-inspiring feats by members of the *tarekat* brotherhood who through prescribed chants and self-discipline had developed sufficient inner strength to raise their levels of pain tolerance. It became clear to me that Hassan and Yusoff no longer sought atonement of their sins as a goal but were obsessed with the cultivation of mystical powers for practical purposes. Their obsession intrigued me. I had not entered into this relationship as a skeptic to expose their religious idiosyncracies but with an open mind to tap the sources of their beliefs. It was this curiosity that led me to move from my inquiry on mass hysteria to a gradual involvement with their obsession.

As they steered my attention to their experiences in the *tarekat*, they divulged various techniques for entering other dimensions of consciousness. One concerned projecting one's consciousness outside the body during sleep—they even used the parapsychological term, out-of-body experiences. This could be accomplished, they told me, by focusing one's awareness on the critical moment of transition from wakefulness to sleep. They claimed they had mastered this technique but were still in the experimental stages of projecting their consciousness beyond the confines of their bedrooms. They also suggested how to effect subtle shifts in visual focus so as to see beyond the normal human range.

It was never clear who had taught them these techniques—their guru or someone else—but I did not probe for fear of breaching their trust in me. When they were convinced that I was not a skeptic, they offered to introduce me to a colleague who allegedly possessed powers more advanced than theirs. Their friend, Abdullah (a pseudonym), was also a social science graduate and *tarekat* member and a bank officer. He claimed the ability to cure headaches with his hands. I was told that in one incident he treated a fellow bank officer by literally pulling the pain out of her head and in the process caused paper clips and

other metallic objects to fly off the desks. Several bank employees witnessed this event. Abdullah also could project his consciousness a considerable distance. It was alleged that on several occasions he had frightened his wife at home by projecting his astral form from his office.

When I met Abdullah, his first question to me was, "Do you have a headache?" Although he was eager to demonstrate his powers, he was reluctant to discuss their sources. As a stranger, I felt it was improper to ask him too many questions about his techniques. The meeting with Abdullah was unfruitful. Years later, I learned that he had stopped practicing the mystical arts. A practitioner of these arts is always instructed to develop and maintain sufficient powers to keep malevolent spirits at bay. Abdullah had not been able to fulfill this requisite. Abdullah's presence had attracted strange forces that disturbed his wife and family. In the end he had no choice but to terminate his mystical practices.

It was in this beguiling atmosphere that I found myself drawn deeper and deeper into Hassan's and Yusoff's obsessions. A die-hard positivist would have asked them to produce concrete proof of their claims, but I intuitively sensed that all rapport would be lost if I demanded such proof. My inquiry could only be maintained by an unqualified acceptance of their beliefs. I knew I was straying from my research goals, but I saw my association with Hassan and Yusoff as part of my effort to understand the more recondite aspects of the Malay religious world view. However, I did not request an introduction to their guru or participation in their tarekat because that would have entailed my conversion to Islam, a step I was unprepared to take. At the same time, if I did not take that critical step, the scope of my inquiry would remain limited. Hassan and Yusoff sensed my dilemma and graciously avoided pressuring me to become a Muslim. They occasionally tempted me with subtle hints about the advantages of conversion, but I was resolute in my decision to remain a non-Muslim.

Hassan and Yusoff continued to provide me with information concerning their mystical sojourns. As an outsider, I was unable to evaluate the authenticity of their claims. Acting as if they wanted to dispel doubts about their abilities, Hassan and Yusoff encouraged me vigorously to practice what they had taught me. Initially, as I was concerned about violating the rule of objectivity in fieldwork, I felt awkward getting personally involved in their mystical practices. As my association with them became more intense, however, so did my curiosity. After a month, and having only their verbal instruction, I made some attempts to imitate their practices at home. As they had not offered it, I was reluctant to request personal assistance. Since I lacked patience and the proper mode of concentration, I had no initial success. I soon discovered it was extremely difficult to maintain a state of alertness at

transition between waking consciousness and sleep, and consequently, I kept failing to achieve an out-of-body experience.

Using another technique, however, I was surprised that I quickly developed an ability to shift my visual focus to see what appeared to be my own aura in the mirror. I was thrilled to be on the threshold of discovering other levels of consciousness. My friends had not lied. I became convinced that the essential requirement for further progress was the right attitude toward the paranormal.

As I continued practicing these techniques, I suddenly became aware that I was leaving behind a familiar, taken-for-granted world. My exuberance gave way to darker emotions, and I realized that, unprepared, I was venturing into other dimensions of consciousness. I became terribly frightened.

For nearly a week, I fluctuated between the ecstasy of my new experiences and the fear of the unknown. These conflicting emotions tore at my sanity, and I came to have a sense of desperation that I had never felt before. One evening I went in search of Hassan and Yusoff. I told them I was losing control of myself and I needed their guidance immediately. Hassan gave me a quizzical look, "You know," he said, "a few nights ago I had a strange dream. I dreamt that it was raining heavily outside my house and I was fast asleep. Suddenly, there was a loud knock on the door. I opened it and in the shadows stood a person pleading for help. I couldn't see his face. Then the dream ended. Now I know what that dream meant."

I did not know what to make of Hassan's interpretation of his dream. Did he possess powers of precognition? I was too confused to consider that question. Yusoff assured me that my sense of desperation was not unusual. "Many of us were like you," he emphasized. "When we were beginners, we were overcome with awe and joy. Then we became afraid of the unseen powers. But we had our guru to help us." He disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a glass of plain water. He handed me the glass and instructed me to drink the water quickly. No sooner had I drunk it than I felt a strong force penetrate my palate and in seconds reached my head. A strange warmth spread over me. I was stupefied and wondered aloud whether there was something in the drink. "There's nothing harmful in the water," Yusoff reassured me. "I didn't put anything in it. All I did was say a short prayer." I had heard of charmed water—what the Malays called *air jampi*—but until that night, its meaning had no empirical impact.

After a while I felt more at ease. It was not so much the drinking of Yusoff's air jampi that calmed me; rather, it was the company I had that night and the sympathy I received. We talked about emotions and magic, how it was impossible to practice magic without experiencing fear and later mastering it. Yusoff reiterated the importance of religion, of Islam, in es-

establishing the psychological parameters for controlling fear. Stressing the beneficial effects of Islam on my mental well-being, he again invited me to become a Muslim. I told him this was a serious commitment that required careful consideration. He said he understood. Yusoff then gave me a bottle of air jampi and instructed me to sprinkle the water around my bedroom for protection during sleep. He also handed me a circular, metal amulet, which contained Islamic inscriptions. The amulet was attached to a black string with an intricate knot. "Before you sleep, undo the knot and tie the amulet around your neck. It will protect you throughout the night." With those final instructions, Yusoff and Hassan bade me goodnight.

At home, I felt like a scientist stripped naked of his objectivity and exposed to the powers of his subjects. I did exactly what Yusoff had told me.

Troubled by the events of the past weeks, I broke out in a sweat. I could not sleep. It was past midnight when I heard a high pitched sound, like a distant police whistle. I tossed and turned, but I could not shake off the sound. Then I realized that it was coming from the amulet, which was also emitting heat. Unlike the air jampi that I had drunk, this warmth did not spread over my body but was localized to the amulet. If the sound and the heat of the amulet were indicative of certain powers, what were they and where did they come from? I had no answers. Nor do I have now. In the early hours, I finally fell asleep. When I awoke, I removed the amulet, placed it on a table, and went into the bathroom. When I returned, I picked up the amulet and was astonished to discover a large knot on the black string. It was the same intricate knot that I had undone last night. When I left the room, the amulet was lying with its inscribed side faced upward and the black string bunched around it. As the black string was made of smooth material, it did not get entangled. When I returned from the bathroom, the position of the amulet and string had not changed. But how did the knot get there?

Two possibilities flashed in my mind. Either someone had walked in unnoticed and cleverly knotted the string without changing its position, or some yet-to-be explained force was responsible. I had to rule out the first answer as everyone in my house had left for work. Quickly, I changed and rushed over to see Yusoff. I gave him the amulet and pointed to the knot. "The powers of the amulet are limited to a fixed number of hours. When they end, the knot returns of its own accord," Yusoff explained nonchalantly. I had no desire to probe further.

I knew that I had merely scratched the surface of a vast store of secret knowledge. The charmed water and the amulet were only an introduction to a body of beliefs and practices that now took on a different perspective for me. I could have become a Muslim, joined the tarekat, and experienced the enchantment of Malay magic, but for me the price was too high.

In Malaysia, Islam is seen as the religion of the politically dominant Malays, which demarcates them from the non-Malay populations, principally the Chinese and Indians. There are Malaysian Chinese and Indians who are Muslims by birth, but they are a minority. Those who convert to Islam often do so for political and economic reasons, and they frequently suffer ostracism from their ethnic communities. As a Malaysian Chinese, I felt that such a conversion not only implied a severance of my ethnic ties but also raised serious ethical questions concerning my motives. I weighed the consequences and found them too heavy.

After the episode with the amulet, I saw little of Hassan and Yusoff. Years later, I learned that they had become inactive in mystical practices. Hassan dropped out of school and got a job in a government department. Yusoff finished his thesis and became a government researcher. More than a year go I ran into Yusoff. We said hello and made small talk. There was no mention of Malay magic. That belonged to the past.

## CONCLUSION

Almost a decade has elapsed since the occurrence of those events. I have made no attempts to further understand them. The answers remain shrouded in mystery. Yet, I have not blocked them from my memory. They remain firmly etched in my mind and have indelibly changed my attitudes toward the practice of Malay magic. I can no longer treat Malay magic as merely a social and cultural practice. Its paranormal affects have an ontological basis that is not easily denied or explained away.

This does not necessarily imply that the social structural aspects of Malay magic are any less real or important than the paranormal. These two aspects are complementary. Unless we understand the sociocultural context\* or historical origins of particular magical chants, we are unable to grasp the relevance of their paranormal applicability. Because of the hard-nosed empiricist attitude, paranormal experiences among anthropologists are not frequent, however, and are not widely reported.

A consequence of the conventional attitude is the denial or repression of the overpowering emotions associated with the experience of paranormal events. These emotions provide important data; they are not only individually experienced but also the recipient and those around him interpret the emotions in particular ways. This interpretation of emotional states and the subsequent attempts at their management provide an important link between the phenomenology and the sociology of magic (see Winkelmann 1982).

There is a qualitative difference between anthropological reports that rely on native, in-group members for information on magic and those that rely on the ethnographer's direct experience of magic. The

information that local informants present may not necessarily stem from direct experiences and in fact may be many times removed from those experiences. On the other hand, an ethnographer's experience of intense emotions in paranormal encounters may provide direct glimpses into the affective core and, possibly, origins of particular magical rituals.

On the bases of my experiences, I argue that the juxtaposition of *awe* and *fear* in paranormal encounters contains such an overwhelming sensation that individuals seek its containment through the development of special ritual techniques. It is plausible that some magical rituals have evolved from highly motivated attempts to control spontaneous emotions arising from paranormal encounters. Over time, these attempts have become institutionalized into standardized ritual forms, which now conceal the emotional occurrence that gave them birth. To recover those original emotions requires a subjective approach.

There are currently no prescribed techniques on how such a subjective approach may be developed and utilized in the field. Ethnographers who encounter paranormal phenomena in the field are unprepared to deal with them. Consequently, the ethnographer's perception of certain events is unclear, and he is not alerted to the various dangers involved in his research. Anthropologists have to depend on their own resourcefulness or even seek the tutelage of traditional practitioners of magic for guidance into uncharted ethnographic realms. If anthropology is truly a science of human cultural experiences, however, then it must give unprejudiced consideration to the impact of the paranormal on people's lives. With such consideration, anthropology will have taken steps toward seeing the human side in the paranormal.

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