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Shamans and Transformation in Nepal and Peninsular Malaysia

This article is dedicated to halak Macang

INTRODUCTION

This article is a preliminary presentation of the different beliefs related to shamanic transformation into animal and plant forms in Asian shamanism and in particular in the ethnic groups around which my field research has been and is currently centered: the Chepang of southern central Nepal and the Jahai and Batek in peninsular Malaysia. Despite the geographical distance and significant cultural differences between Malaysia and Nepal, it is particularly interesting to note the similar attitude towards the forest. Both the Chepang – even though they abandoned their nomadic hunter gatherer lifestyle around forty years ago – as well as the Jahai and the Batek of peninsular Malaysia are still dependant on the rainforest to a great extent. In fact, there is still one nomadic hunter gatherer group of Batek living in the large jungle – now a national park – of Taman Negara.

The theories (Hamayon 1990: 293-320, Ripinsky-Naxon 1993: 22-23, Vitebsky 1995) about how the different forms of shamanism throughout the world are intimately linked to the world of hunting, nature and the wild, at least historically speaking, are well known. Despite the necessary changes and adaptations of shamanic cultures to mutations in social, economic and political conditions, the figure of the shaman generally remains that of a “hunter of souls” even in societies no longer based on hunting and gathering.

For the Chepang, despite the fact that they have been sedenterized for several decades now, the most important deity in their pantheon is Namrung, the god of hunting. According to Chepang mythology, Namrung, believed to reside in the world of humans, was created by the other deities so he could hunt for them and provide them with fresh food every day. Namrung lives alone, surrounded only by his ‘hunters’ (Namrung *shikāri*), a pack of wolves (or wild dogs) that follow him

wherever he goes. Certain Chepang shamans describe Namrung as being a half man and half wolf (or half dog) that avoids the company of humans despite the fact that he lives in their world.

While most of the other deities in the Chepang pantheon currently have Hindu names despite the fact that their characteristics often differ significantly, Namrung has never been associated with any other supernatural being in any other religion or different ethnic group.

Chepang shamans are somewhat reticent about Namrung: in the areas inhabited by the Chepang hunting has been prohibited for many years and the Chepang believe that for this reason Namrung has turned against humans and conjures up different problems for them as he no longer receives daily offerings of blood from wild animals. The Namrung-*pujā*, a ceremony dedicated entirely to this deity and performed generally by old and expert shamans at least once a year, during which a ritual hunt takes place in the course of which at least one wild animal is killed (Riboli 2000: 213-219), is held in secret in many Chepang areas.

It is interesting to note that the Semang-Negrito of peninsular Malaysia and in particular the Jahai and Batek, who have been the subject of my research for the last three years, do not appear to have any supernatural being particularly linked to hunting activities despite the fact that hunting is still an essential component of these cultures. The Batek and the Jahai recognize the existence of one deity only, called Gobar or Karei, the irascible god of thunder that punishes humans by sending down storms. Neither the Batek nor the Jahai acknowledge the existence of other deities, only benign spirits that live in the jungle and help humans in difficulty. For the Batek and the Jahai the rainforest is a closed universe, divine and perfect, a sort of maternal uterus that is the beginning and end of everything. For this reason, as we shall see below, the rainforest is also the world where shamanic journeys take place.

For hunter gatherer populations like the nomadic Batek bands or populations that have more or less recently abandoned a regime of hunting and gathering such as the Jahai of peninsular Malaysia and the Chepang of southern central Nepal the separation of the two conceptual worlds 'nature' and 'culture' which has been the subject of many anthropological debates has no particular significance.

In the words of Tim Ingold:

...I shall argue that hunter-gatherers do *not*, as a rule, approach their environment as an external world of nature that has to be 'grasped' conceptually and appropriated symbolically within the terms of an imposed cultural design, as a precondition for effective action. They do not see themselves as mindful sub-

jects having to contend with an alien world of physical objects; indeed the separation of mind and nature has no place in their thoughts and practice. (Ingold 2000: 42)

In the Jahai and Batek of peninsular Malaysia and the Chepang of southern central Nepal the jungle represents a perfect cosmos where plant, animal and human spheres co-exist in harmony. In this sense the forest in some way represents a primordial world that reconnects with a mythical 'golden age' when there was no clear distinction between the human, plant and animal worlds and no distinction between these spheres and the supernatural world either.

Numerous mythologies throughout the continents refer to the existence of this perfect and almost undifferentiated primordial world using similar patterns. One of the most complete accounts is that narrated by Nálungiaq, a Netsilik woman, to Knud Rasmussen, according to which at the time of the myth humans lived happily and all had supernatural forces (Rasmussen 1931: 208). At that time humans were able to communicate directly with the deities and could also fly, assume any form and move freely between the three cosmic zones – the heavens, earth and the underworld – there was no distinction as death and suffering were inexistent. Freedom was absolute, animals were extremely friendly and also communicated with the human race. Humans could transform themselves into animals at will, and animals could transform themselves into humans. The same language was spoken by all, and all lived and hunted in the same way. As a result of a series of cosmic events and catastrophes this harmony was destroyed and the three cosmic spheres separated, as did the spheres of the animal, plant and human worlds. From that point onwards only shamans, despite the fact that they are often believed to be much less powerful than their forefathers, can in some way relive and re-enact the harmony of primordial non-differentiation. Those who receive the call to shamanism, which in itself for the most part pre-supposes the possibility of communication between the world of the divine and the world of humans, acquire the ability to move between the three cosmic zones. Similarly, the two worlds – animal and plant – and the animal world in particular, appear to play an extremely important role for shamans, who are in many cases attributed with the ability to effectively undergo metamorphosis.

Shamanic metamorphosis into animal and vegetal forms – in the same way as shamanic journeys – is only a re-elaboration of the pri-

mordial pattern when harmony, peace and perfection were possible due to the non differentiation-collaboration between all living beings and between the latter and supernatural beings.

Shamanic journeys and transformation into animal and vegetal forms pre-suppose an alteration of effective reality, the reality experienced by most humans. In other words, shamans overcome their limits and the human limitations of the five senses, and reacquire (recall?) the languages and abilities of other worlds, in particular those of the animal and plant worlds.

TRANSFORMATION AND ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The ability to undergo transformations is mainly only attributed to those in possession of the faculty to temporarily abandon a state of consciousness common to human beings in order to enter 'altered' states of consciousness. Though Mircea Eliade (Eliade 1951) and others have acknowledged in ecstatic journeys an essential element which should illuminate, define and distinguish shamanism from other complexes and practices, at present, also thanks to much field research and to more specific and extensive work, it is a well known fact that there are other shamanic complexes in which altered states of consciousness and ecstatic journeys are almost absent. It should be noted however that in many cases these are shamanic cultures, such as those of many Siberian groups, which have experienced dramatic historical and cultural developments. Moreover, in order to clarify the content and argument of this text, I would like to emphasize that generally speaking, despite the fact that different shamanic activities such as certain therapies appear to be performed in some ethnic groups without the assistance of altered states of consciousness and without the requirement for cosmic journeys, for shamanic transformation or metamorphosis into animal and plant forms altered states of consciousness appear to be absolutely necessary.

These states can have different natures and entities: they can take on the form of violent and apparently uncontrollable trances or can be experienced almost without any movement when the shaman (as we will see in the case of the Batek and the Jahai) leaves his sleeping body at night to send his shadow soul into an animal to which he is especially attached.

Altered states of consciousness (ASC) are one of the most studied topics in shamanism. However, what scholars simply call "trance"

or ASC is probably a much more complex cultural and sociological matter. Physical manifestations during shamanic trance states appear to be almost always identical, but what began to puzzle me during my fieldwork in Nepal with the Chepang ethnic group (1991-1999) was that not all altered states of consciousness during a shamanic séance are felt and experienced by shamans, patients and the surrounding public in the same way.

In fact, there are trance states during which shamans embody supernatural beings or ancestors' spirits – which in one of my earlier works I named “incorporatory” trances – and trance states during which the shaman's soul is supposed to journey to other cosmic zones. I named this last category “trances of movement” (Riboli 2002: 143-159).

As already indicated, the physical manifestations of both types of trances can be very similar: the shaman's body jerks and trembles and he/she begins to sweat profusely, experiencing what appears to be sensorial detachment. Both instances involve a journey. However, in the first case the journey is undertaken by the supernatural being toward the shaman, whereas in the second case, it is the shaman's soul that moves to the supernatural world.

Beside these typologies of ASCs that mostly occur during shamanic séances in public, there are more personal and secret altered states of consciousness experienced by shamans who are able to transform themselves into other entities, mostly into animal form. I decided to name this third category “trances of transformation.”

Shamanic transformation and shape-shifting has been documented and is well known worldwide, despite the fact that not much specific research has been conducted on the subject. This is probably one of the most difficult fields to investigate because – as far as we know – the majority of shamans need to be alone in order to leave their human form.

As indicated earlier, the shamans' faculty to transform themselves is quite often linked to something like a past mythological ‘golden age’ when all shamans were extremely powerful, could transform themselves at will into animal and plant forms and were sometimes even believed to live together with deities and supernatural beings.

During my field research in Nepal and peninsular Malaysia I noted that what scholars generally term trance or ACS is actually a collection of states experienced in different ways by shamans and the so-

cieties they belong to, quite distinct from the purely physical manifestations that appear during trances. I arrived at this conclusion first of all by observing that the Chepang language has no single term for the word “trance,” and according to the documents and writings of Roberte Hamayon there is no such definition in most of the Siberian languages either (Hamayon 1990: 33).

In fact, after discussing this with shamans or *pande* as they are known in Chepang, it was pointed out that it would be impossible for there to be one single term to describe situations in which supernatural beings are believed to possess the body of the shaman, and therefore journey to the world of humans, and situations where the opposite is the case, when shamans undertake the journey and abandon their terrestrial bodies to travel to other cosmic zones. As mentioned earlier, I decided to name the first type of trance “incorporatory trance” and the second category “trance of movement.” In earlier works, I added the category of “initiatory trances”, or altered states of consciousness, which occur during the call to the profession and shamanic initiation, and differ from the earlier categories in that the latter are usually not controlled by the shaman him/herself, who, at least apparently, would appear to play a much more passive role (Riboli 2002:165).

There are most certainly other types of shamanic trances and other types of altered states of consciousness more difficult to document in that most occur when the shaman is alone and often occur outside shamanic séances, which are open to the public (trance of transformation). Many forms of shamanism throughout the world document the belief that shamans can transform into non-human entities, and animal forms in particular.

Aside from any eventual transformations, the link between the animal world and the world of the shaman is present and important the world over. The guiding spirits of shamans often present themselves in animal form and the ornithomorphic symbols of many Siberian shamanic costumes is a clear reference to the magic flight to the skies (Djakonova 1978: 160-161), whereas the use of skins, bones and other parts of different animals such as the reindeer and the bear in shamanic costumes is linked to journeys into the underworld (Holmberg 1922: 14-18, Lommel 1967: 108). In many cases shamanism is still linked to the magic of hunting. Many Chepang *pande* are carried to the skies during their journeys by a large bird, and journey to the underworld on a large fish. In other parts of the world it is believed that the most powerful

shamans can understand animal language and communicate with them (Stutley 2003: 16-17).

In contrast to most of the dominant religions of the planet, where the animal world is held to be inferior to the world of humans, shamanism universally believes that the animal world is powerful and close to the world of the supernatural, and it is therefore only logical that shamans in many parts of the world should be able in some way to contact and somehow encompass animal elements. It is probably not easy to investigate shamanic transformation into animal form, because in many cultures (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975: 43) shamans believe this to be a private act as some may not have total control over their instincts in animal form and could act in a manner totally contrary to the traditional ethical norms of their cultures.

CHEPANG SHAMANISM AND TRANSFORMATION

In Nepal and amongst the Chepang especially, the idea that *pande* have the ability to transform into animals is linked to a mythical time, a golden age when shamans had extraordinary powers far superior to those they have today, when the distinction between the world of humans and the world of animals was still not very clear (Riboli 2000:127-130). As in many other shamanic cultures the Chepang believe the world is divided into three zones: the heavens (*akās*) – which has nine levels - the earth in the middle where humans live, and the underworld (*pātāl*). The *pātāl* is described as being a beautiful place full of forests, rivers and animals for hunting, inhabited by the forefathers and most Chepang deities. Access to the underworld is believed to be extremely dangerous and only expert and powerful *pande* can undertake the journey there. Most journeys undertaken by *pande* are to the underworld and this is why the Chepang refer to their shamans (and very often the whole ethnic group) as ‘*tunsuriban*’ what describes this ability.

According to Chepang mythology, initially the *pātāl* was inhabited by humans as well as by supernatural beings. At that time illnesses, suffering and malign spirits were unheard of. Humans and animals spoke the same language and deities and all the inhabitants of the underworld had the ability to undertake journeys and fly to other cosmic zones. Some versions note that primordial harmony was shattered because humans had begun to spoil the underworld with their physical needs. As a result, certain deities decided to create a land far from their

own and send the humans to live there. While this intermediary land was being created two male deities – Batisé and Tiwasé – sacrificed the cow Lendemuri. Its hide became the soil of the intermediary land and its bones hills and mountains. Unfortunately, however, the two deities failed to decapitate the cow in one fell swoop and it took three attempts before they succeeded, during which the animal groaned in pain. These sounds gave birth to demons and malign spirits that had not existed up to that point. From that point onwards only the *pande* are allowed to journey to all the cosmic zones and communicate directly with supernatural beings. The more powerful *pande* are also believed to have the ability to transform themselves into animals, mainly felines.

Shamans believed to be able to undergo transformation are called *gurau*, but it would appear that there are only very few of these in existence, and in eight years of research I have never met anyone who talked about this openly. One of the clans that make up the Chepang is called *gurau*, though none appears to remember the reason for this name. All *pande* set the time of the last *gurau* as being more or less at the time of their grandparents and all agree that at the dawn of humanity all shamans were *gurau* or extremely powerful humans able to transform themselves at will into different animals, especially tigers. The nature of these first *pande* and perhaps of other men was not yet well defined and distinct from the world of animals, which would appear to be proved by the fact that the Chepang believe that at that time both men and *pande* in particular could also understand the language of animals and were therefore able to communicate with them.

In the course of my research, which was centred on around thirty *pande*, I only encountered three women in the profession, though all three were considered to be particularly powerful. One of these, Dam Maya, a well-known *pande* to whom people come for advice from villages many days walk away, is one of the few cases that I suspect could be a *gurau*. Dam Maya is in fact the only *pande* I met who said that she could call up a tiger in the course of a shamanic séance, what was confirmed by the other inhabitants of her village. In fact, these were not real tigers, but a sort of smaller feline of similar dimensions to a leopard. Despite the fact that she never admitted to being able to transform into a tiger or other dangerous animal, Dam Maya freely recounted that she often transformed herself into an insect, bird or “some other animal” (Riboli 2000: 121) in order to journey to the *pātāl*.

My research in this field may well have been fairly superficial, as transformation into predatory animals is often believed to be linked to black magic. In fact, in one village I was told of a *pande* whom everyone considered to be expert in black magic who was held responsible for making a girl very ill, and was thought to be responsible for the mauling of the few animals – mainly chicken and goats – usually kept in Chepang villages. After these serious acts, the *pande* was maltreated and forced to go and live in another village. Neither the person in question nor the inhabitants of the village would confirm this story directly but everyone gave the impression that the animal predator that had killed the domestic animals was the *pande* himself transformed into feline form, as there were no animals of this type in the area where the village was located.

Almost all the Chepang believe that the souls of dead shamans can transform into different animals where the human part is still recognizable from certain physical peculiarities such as missing paws, parts of the faces or even missing beaks in the case of birds, or parts of the body which have developed irregularly.

The primordial and perfect original world of the Chepang attributed all humans with the ability to transform into tigers, and felines and other animals were believed to be able to transform into human form. At that time there was obviously no differentiation between the two conceptual worlds of nature and culture, no evil or suffering and no black magic. The natural world and its forests, courses of water and wild animals was in perfect harmony, a sort of ideal world which for the Chepang is embodied only in the underworld where the souls of worthy forefathers go to live after death. The equivalence between the natural and primordial worlds and perfection changed when at some point the world of humans was forced to separate from the world of the supernatural for different reasons. According to the Chepang, all *pande* initially remained *gurau* with the ability to transform into animal and feline forms in particular. For a certain period of time, certainly up to the point when the ethnic group was forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyle of hunting and gathering, according to sources there was an absolute permeability between the world of humans - or rather between the shamanic world - and the natural world which had extremely positive valences.

As the world of humans progressively and clearly distanced itself from nature, many began to associate the dimension of the 'wild' –

as represented by the felines – with negative connotations linked to danger and black magic. It is probably no coincidence that while many Chepang *pande* state clearly and proudly that up to a few generations ago their shaman forefathers were *gurau*, or shaman-tigers, they are reticent about their personal abilities to metamorphose into animal and feline forms for fear of being accused of dabbling in black magic.

As we shall see, this situation differs significantly from that of the Semang-Negrigo groups in peninsular Malaysia, who are still intimately linked to the rainforest and its flora and fauna.

SEMANG-NEGRITO SHAMANISM AND TRANSFORMATION

Shamanic transformation into animals would appear to be substantially more documented for South-East Asia. For the past three years I have been working on a research project in peninsular Malaysia entitled “Traditional Medicine and Traditional Beliefs among the Semang-Negrigo of Peninsular Malaysia with particular reference to the Jahai and Batek Ethnic Groups.” In Malaysia, indigenous groups are referred to with the collective term “Orang Asli”, or “Original People.” Now unfortunately making up only 0.8% of the population, the Orang Asli have been divided up into three groups on the basis of their different ethnic and linguistic origins: the Proto-Malay, the Senoi and the Semang-Negrigo, each of which consist of different ethnic groups. The first inhabitants of this area would appear to be the Semang-Negrigo, who lived in the area for at least 4000 years. Groups of Negrigo still exist in different parts of Asia, especially in the Andaman Islands and the Philippines. Unfortunately, anthropologists have not yet found a satisfactory alternative term for Negrigo, particularly offensive and reminiscent of colonial times, which translates from the Spanish as “little black man” and for this reason some of the scholars working in the area prefer to add the term Semang, another term used to describe these groups.

The term “Negrigo” was used because of the physical attributes of the individuals in these ethnic groups, who differ from the rest of the population in their very dark skin, frizzy hair and short stature, particularly noticeable in older generations.

All the Semang-Negrigo of peninsular Malaysia have very strong ties with the world of the rainforest and, as noted earlier, some groups of Batek still lead nomadic lifestyles in one of the oldest jungles

in the world. Though it is not known exactly how many nomadic Batek there are, numbers could be estimated at something between 400 and 500 individuals.

Many Orang Asli groups experienced a rapid abandonment of nomadic life at the end of the 1940s, during the so-called “Emergency,” when the British colonial empire, concerned about the uprising of communist guerrillas using the jungles as a base, and even more concerned about possible collaboration between the former and the Orang Asli, decided to relocate many indigenous groups out of the jungle. Many Orang Asli and most of the Semang-Negrto still live in villages allotted to them by the government.

For centuries Malaysia has been a multiethnic country. Malay Muslims, who currently hold the political power, make up around 60% of the population, with around 30% Chinese, who are generally in control of the economy, 8% Tamil from southern India and the remainder representing the Orang Asli and other minorities. A few years ago a project was introduced for the Islamisation of many Orang Asli groups based on what has been defined by the government as “positive discrimination,” which provides material goods and better opportunities for education and employment for those who convert to Islam.

However, in many aspects Islam is poles apart from the traditional cultures of most Orang Asli and this is also reflected in the different considerations that Muslim Malays and ethnic minorities have about the rainforest and animals.

For the Malays the world of the jungle is dark, wild and terrifying, and populated by malevolent spirits and ghosts, in total contrast to the ideas of progress and modernity favored by the dominating class. For the Orang Asli and the Semang-Negrto in particular, the jungle represents a comforting maternal uterus, being there to satisfy all the primary requirements of its inhabitants or of those who respectfully turn to her for help (Tuck Po 2004). Despite all the dangers that the jungle undeniably presents, the Semang-Negrto and Batek in particular with their nomadic life based on hunting and gathering have no fear of it, and most supernatural beings believed to live there are considered to be friendly towards humans. Most friendly of all are the poetic *cenoi*, something like our fairies, described as tiny beautiful perfect men and women who live inside flowers and offer help to humans in distress.

The animal and plant worlds hold particular importance for the Semang-Negrto. One of the most powerful taboos, the breaking of

which can bring extremely serious consequences, is to laugh at animals or subject them to ridicule.

Though shamanism amongst the Semang-Negrato seems to be in decline, until not long ago the most powerful shamans were believed to be able to transform themselves into plants, animals and tigers, the biggest felines in the rainforest, in particular, and this belief may still be encountered today.

Though tigers are feared, the nomadic Batek still identify with them in some way. As pointed out by Tuck Po, tigers have many characteristics in common with the Batek. As part of the animal world, tigers should belong to the category of game, instead they are predators, not hunted by humans or any other animal. Tigers inhabit the Batek's favorite habitat: they move following courses of water, enjoy playing in the water, and belong to the foothills (Tuck Po 2000: 174). Their habits and environments are fairly similar, though it is very important that there be reciprocal respect and that a certain distance be kept between the two. The analogies appear to have remained unchanged since the primordial period when there was no differentiation between humans and animals, but following the separation of the two spheres, as there was no longer any possibility of direct communication, any close contact between the two would be dangerous.

According to many Batek and Jahai sources, tigers and elephants have abilities which are superior to those of other animals. Most importantly, tigers possess the ability to see potential prey in red even at night and elephants see anything that can be consumed in green. Apart from the chromatic distinction linked to the search for food, these animals and tigers in particular are attributed with a sort of second sight. When tigers encounter humans, the feline immediately sees a form of x-ray image that can distinguish bones and all internal organs. This second sight is also associated with the ability of tigers to 'instantly read' the hearts of humans, their morality, good nature and generosity. Many Jahai and Batek believe that good humans have nothing to fear unless starvation forces animals to attack immediately.

Some Jahai and Batek elders, one of whom is the old shaman Macang referred to in detail below, believe that ordinary human beings can also communicate with the big cats. When asked what course of action to take in a close encounter with a tiger or elephant, the old men explained that it was usually better to stay still. One should try not to feel fear (the smell of fear will incite the tiger or elephant to attack) and

look the animal in the eye in a gentle and friendly fashion. An old Jahai man recounted that many years ago when he was out hunting one day he found himself a few meters away from a large female tiger and felt no fear. He crouched down and looked the tiger gently in the eyes, reassuring her that he would not disturb her and excusing himself for inadvertently entering her territory. The conversation with the animal continued for some time as the man explained he was searching for food for the many children he had left behind at the camp. He told the tiger he had three children and found out that the tiger was also hunting for food for her cubs. When asked what language was used for this communication between himself and the cat my informant was unable to explain exactly. He said he spoke Batek with the tiger and that she replied simply by looking at him and communicated her thoughts to him by what I would call telepathy. The man later added he suspected this was no ordinary tiger but a shaman in tiger form. In any case what is interesting is that there is still, albeit limited, communication between humans and animals.

The strong tie between tigers and humans is also illustrated in many stories related to were-tigers. In the words of Tuck Po:

A number of myths posit the problems of were-tigers: sometimes a human is revealed to be a tiger in disguise, at other times, a tiger longs for human relationships and assumes human form to achieve it. It is one thing, as with shamans, for the Bateks to appropriate the tiger's power for benign purposes; it is quite another when the tiger turns that power against people. For then the control is coming from the tiger: the more or less equal co-existence – the partnership between people and tigers – is upset. Things become upside down. The general problem then is that the boundary between human and tiger societies is extremely thin. (Tuck Po 2000: 175)

Generally speaking, it is preferable for the worlds of felines and humans to remain separate despite and perhaps due to their similarities, though in certain cases there would still appear to be some form of communication between the two. This certainly does not apply to Batek and Jahai shamans who instead mainly transform themselves or send their shadow-souls into plants and animals in a return to the harmony of their origins.

According to documentation collected by Kirk Endicott at the end of the 1970s, the Batek believe that certain especially powerful shamans have tiger bodies that they can use at night in the forest (Endicott 1979: 132-141). At night, while the shaman is sleeping, his shadow-soul abandons his body to enter the body of the tiger. At sunrise

the shadow-soul returns to its human body, and the tiger goes off to sleep in the depths of the forest. The function of these tiger shamans would appear to be linked to positive acts and they are believed to be able to protect humans from attacks by real tigers during the night. Once the shamans take on their tiger forms they run the same risks as the real felines, the difference being that in the event of illness or non mortal injury, as their animal body was guided by the shadow-soul, the shaman may know the cure. However, if they fall into a trap their destiny will be the same as that of a real tiger. For this reason tiger shamans stay as far away as possible from groups of humans and hunters in particular. Despite the fact that the tiger shamans retain some of their human features even though this may not be very evident and consists mainly of resemblance to physical traits of the face of the shaman with the muzzle of the tiger his shadow-soul has entered, hunters might not realize this and could proceed with a kill. When a tiger shaman is killed in his animal form by mistake, the same destiny will face the sleeping shaman immediately. Similarly, when the shaman dies in his human form the same destiny applies to his tiger-body.

Though I have noted a decline in many of the shamanic practices described by Endicott in the 1970s, I can however confirm, contrary to the beliefs of certain scholars, that despite the strong pressures and tensions they are continually subjected to, both Batek and Jahai forms of shamanism still survive today. As mentioned earlier, part of my research is centered round groups of Batek who are still nomadic, and another part is being conducted in a village of Jahai who have been sedenterized for around thirty years. Shamans are known by the Batek as *halak* and by the Jahai as *jampi*. In fact, it should be noted that certain Jahai use the term *jampi* to indicate shamans with lesser powers, similar to herbalists, and the term *halak* to refer to real shamans.

Batek *halak* and Jahai *jampi* do not appear to experience trances with very evident external physical manifestations. All knowledge and songs, especially those of a therapeutic nature, are received in the course of dreams, which are very personal and in many cases kept secret. In fact, for these ethnic groups dreams and trances are considered to be almost the same, which probably also explains the fact that tiger shamans only abandon their human body for the body of one of the big cats which mainly move about and hunt at night when the shamans are sleeping and probably dreaming.

To indicate the state of trance and its experience, both *halak* and *jampi* use the Malay expression '*berjalan dalam mimpi*,' or 'walking in your dreams'. Thanks to the clearly therapeutic songs they receive, shamans can carry out spirit journeys, which mainly take place in the realm of the earth.

In the course of field research carried out in the jungle of Taman Negara in 2005, I had the opportunity of meeting and working with one of the oldest and most respected Batek *halak*: Macang. Macang was probably already very ill with tuberculosis and died in June 2006. His death appears in some way to have been a form of encouragement for the younger generations rather than another blow for Batek shamanism.

One day, when I was walking with Macang in the thick jungle in search of medicinal plants, the old *halak* asked me to stop and rest a while. After we had sat down, slightly apart from each other, he began to sing quietly and move his arms about almost as if in a dance. Later on he explained that the very act of walking in the jungle corresponded to a shamanic journey; only his body was walking with me, but his soul was flying from a mountain to a river to rest on a tree or flower.

When he was younger, Macang was able to transform into a tiger during these states, but given his venerable age, he no longer had the strength and preferred to transform himself into a tree or flower. In any case, whether in the form of tiger, tree or flower, the need to become part of the lush vegetation the Batek live in is evident. This is no longer, as in many other forms of shamanism, a journey to the heavens or the underworld, but a form of return to that mythical age when all beings lived in harmony and the boundaries between the worlds of humans and animals and even plants were still not clearly defined.

Macang, now at the end of his life, recounted that he had found it particularly pleasant to transform himself into a flower. For Batek culture, like that of the Jahai, flowers have a strong symbolic significance and are closely linked to the world of the supernatural. As observed by Kirk and Karen Endicott:

During all-night singing sessions, which might culminate in trancing and communication with the superhuman being, both men and women donned bandoliers of fragrant leaves, mainly wild gingers, and wore flowers or fragrant leaves in their waistbands and hair. People said these decorations were pleasing to the superhuman beings because they are what the superhumans themselves wear. The good smells of the flowers and leaves were also thought to attract the superhuman beings to come down and listening to the singing. (Endicott, Kirk and Karen, 2008: p.32)

In many of the therapeutic songs received during dreams by Macang, names of plants and flowers with extraordinary powers are repeated. The *halak* himself told me that the very act of knowing and repeating a particular melody (kept a secret from most people) and chanting the names of two specific plants bestows the ability to fly anywhere on earth to any destination.

In a way the jungle and all its creatures are considered to be closer to the sphere of the deities and are certainly in themselves divine. This concept is probably what makes the Batek pantheon appear to be so lacking in supernatural beings.

As already noted, most Batek and the Jahai believe in only one god¹, known as Gobar by the Batek and Karei by the Jahai. Despite the fact that neither Batek nor Jahai speak willingly of this divinity, it is still greatly feared and respected. Gobar-Karei would appear not to be particularly interested in human affairs and usually manifests himself in the role of punisher. In any case, most Batek and Jahai appear to believe that the god of thunder does not live in the heavens, as one would naturally presume, but on the earth, alongside the *cenoi*, the spirits which guide and help humans and shamans in particular. During one of my last periods of fieldwork in Malaysia from July to September 2006, I met more groups of Batek and Jahai and discovered that a few of them believe that Gobar-Karei probably lives in the sky.

Gobar-Karei is also believed to live in the depths of the jungle, probably on a mountain, in complete isolation and solitude. The rainforest is again centre of the universe, in some way all-encompassing so that anyone becoming part of it comes closer to the world of the divinities. With this assumption it would be easy to understand how shamanic journeys correspond to journeying through the forest-universe, even better if in the form of a tree, flower or animal, and especially in the form of the tiger, the most powerful, most respected, most mysterious and feared feline of the jungle.

When I learnt of Macang's decease, believed by many to be the last of the great *halak*, I was afraid that a significant part of traditional Batek culture and beliefs had also been lost. Towards the end of his life,

¹ During the seventies Endicott collected many testimonies about the existence of other Batek deities (Endicott 1979:161-190). The Batek and Jahai I have encountered to date only mention the god of thunder and very rarely the existence of the wife of this divinity who in any case is described as a sort of double of the latter.

the Batek and nomadic bands of Taman Negara with whom the old *halak* lived appeared no longer to have complete faith in his abilities despite their respect for him. However, after his death, his knowledge and powers would appear to have been passed on to a new, very young generation of shamans. On the first day of my return to Taman Negara months later, I was immediately informed that after the funeral ceremony Macang's shadow-soul had entered a tiger that had often visited the different Batek camps at night without ever attacking any humans. The tiger had calmly entered the camp I had visited a couple of nights earlier and everyone said they had recognized the features of Macang's face on the tiger.

In this way Macang had regained full vigor, the strength of his youth and his powers. Despite their great fear, also considering the increase in the number of attacks against humans, the Batek appeared to find the presence of the big cat near the camp reassuring. Macang in tiger form would be able to protect humans from eventual attacks by other wild animals and was somehow a living testimony to the 'force of the jungle' many young people had begun to lose faith in. That same evening, while discussing the event, a group of youngsters little more than adolescents enthusiastically declared that this appearance clearly demonstrated that the Batek were still able to 'receive' and 'use' the force of the jungle, which would soon once again re-invigorate their ethnic group so threatened by a multitude of external problems and in particular by the radical change of customs proposed by the official culture of the country.

While continuing my research I learnt that many young people had begun to receive dreams in which Macang taught them about the shamanic profession. Thus, in the course of the last few months, completely unexpectedly, a new generation of *halak* appeared to be forming, though it is still too early to arrive at definitive conclusions given that the future shamans, many of whom are little more than adolescents, confess that Macang himself had explained that it would be years before their knowledge was complete and they would be able to celebrate ceremonies.

Of the many young persons selected to become future *halak*, one of the most mature candidates, who confessed he had received the call before Macang's decease, is a young man who for the moment prefers to remain anonymous and whom I shall refer to simply as B.

B. believes he is a scorpion-shaman, as he feels strong ties to this animal. Almost every night he sends his shadow-soul into the body of a large scorpion and pushes his way to the river to catch crabs. For B. this transformation is an extremely satisfactory experience. As soon as he finishes his favourite food, he allows himself to be transported by the waters of the river to the bank and crawls back into the foliage of the plants and large trees.

The other young persons who have received the call more recently have stated they belong to the category of *halak*-butterflies. They frequently enjoy flights through the jungle in the form of butterflies though their knowledge is still limited and sometimes confused. Both B. and these young people recount that when they venture out into the jungle alone, at some point, apparently without meaning to, they lose the sense of perception of their surroundings. For many hours they are not aware of what is happening to them and usually, after these states are over, awake at a location in the forest, they have no recall of having journeyed to. For the moment no-one has the ability to send their shadow-souls into tigers or elephants, and in fact, this form of transformation requires full knowledge and awareness.

The increase in shamanic vocation and generally speaking the current status of Semang-Negrito shamanism could well reflect a certain more or less conscious resistance to the propagation of the dominant Islamic religion. During my fieldwork with a group of Jahai sedenterized around thirty years ago I came across several shamans, whose powers were considered to be inferior to those their colleagues had been attributed with in the past.

The Jahai village is located in the north of Malaysia, close to the borders with Thailand, and is surrounded by jungle. Though the consumption of game and wild boar in particular is prohibited in Islam, the Jahai diet is still mostly based on the products of the jungle. The jungle is missed, respected and loved, and though it is feared much more by the Jahai than the Batek nomads, even in this case it continues to be the centre of the universe.

Jahai *jampi* also 'walk in their dreams,' receive magic chants and fly to beautiful and mysterious places in the forest. For the moment, only one of the *jampi* I have had frequent conversations with has said he himself cannot transform into tiger form, but has a tiger-spirit whom he can call on at will to defend the village in the event of danger and espe-

cially if there are real tigers roaming in the area at great peril for village inhabitants.

This tiger-spirit is perfectly visible, but never attacks human beings, and at night it even engages in fierce battles with real tigers that come too close to the village. The similarities with evidence collected by Kirk Endicott are numerous, though at this actual stage in my research, this tiger-spirit would not seem to be hosted by a human shadow-soul. The same *jampi* said he was sure there were still many Jahai shamans who could transform themselves into animal forms such as tigers and elephants, and plant forms such as flowers and trees.

Both Jahai and Batek also believe that in most cases, as noted with the decease of the old *halak* Macang, once the souls of deceased shamans have abandoned their human forms, they enter the body of a tiger to continue living in the jungle, a form of reversion to the primordial situation.

Participation in the world of the rainforest is clearly evident in the deep respect and knowledge Jahai and Batek have of the jungle, and even in simple everyday gestures such as the adornment of hair and body with flowers and leaves which the women in particular undertake long and tiring expeditions to collect. The jungle provides food, shelter and medicinal plants for a whole multitude of illnesses. It is a perfect, autonomous universe that has no need of any help from the outside. And it is for this reason that the forest is in a way used for dressing: it may take hours to find a rare flower to wear in one's hair, but all efforts are rewarded in the end because in some way the sublime beauty and perfection of that flower will transfer to the person wearing it.

Transformation into animal and plant forms of Batek *halak* and Jahai *jampi* is experienced as a form of return to a natural state perceived as supreme and perfect, in exact contrast with the Malay perception where nature is diametrically opposed to culture. In its quality as a perfect and supreme state, nature is always perceived in a positive fashion, and metamorphoses into dangerous animals are never interpreted as expressions of black magic, in contrast with the gradual change in perception in the Chepang of southern central Nepal.

The Malays and many environmentalists would prefer the nomadic Batek to abandon their way of life and would like the jungle to become a mere destination of great interest for tourism. But for the Batek and in a way also for the sedenterized Jahai, a jungle without human presence is a dead jungle, because in order for the universe to

maintain its equilibrium all its creatures should be present and in continuous exchange. Betraying the jungle by abandoning it or repudiating it would correspond to the loss of a culture and identity, the consequences of which would be very serious.

Though the Batek nomads fear the tiger, as we have seen, they do not feel particularly threatened by it. In fact, in the jungle where they live, which is part of the national park, there is still sufficient space to allow the big cats plenty of hunting grounds, and it is only on extremely rare occasions that there have been reports of tigers attacking humans.

The situation is somewhat different for the sedenterized Jahai, as the tropical forest area they live in has been dramatically reduced to create space for oil palm plantations. It is no longer rare for there to be occasions when starving tigers, confused by the continuous and brusque changes in territory, enter villages and attack humans. This situation is extremely stressful for the Jahai, who interpret it as a form of vengeance wreaked on them by Mother Forest, who has been betrayed and wounded. For this reason in particular the role of the *jampi* is more important than ever, as he can still communicate with the jungle and can even, in the form of an animal or by calling on the assistance of the spirit-tigers, control this justified rage.

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