

“Disreputable Magicians,” the Dark Destroyer, and the Trickster Lord: Reflections on Semai Religion and a Possible Common Religious Base in South and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Recent studies of globalization tend to stress its novelties, especially new patterns of consumption and mediated communication (e.g., Appadurai 1996). But the view from the margins and from the lowest social strata of globalizing states seems less novel. This paper explores the ways in which the impact of anciently emergent slaveholding despotisms and their colonies seems refracted in the cosmology of southeast Asian peoples as a stupid terrorist storm god, whose literally bestial power is available to humans who can surrender to it in an almost erotic ecstasy of yearning and desire. These cosmologies, the paper suggests, constitute a still relevant, nuanced critique of world-conquering globalization.

We see them only as eccentrics or as survivors ... locked into a religious fantasy-world; they are quaint historical fossils ... But where social or political assumptions or enquiries into value are at issue, then the answer must be very much more complex.

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The danger is that we should confuse the reputability of beliefs, and the reputability of those who professed them, with depth or shallowness. (Thompson 1993:107, 108)

Hinduism was thus a religious accumulation derived from all periods of India's history; primitive cults of fertility, hero reverence, and sun worship were ... overlaid with an elaborate system of philosophical speculation. Hinduism countenanced almost every level of religious belief from crude animism to metaphysical monism.

Hinduism could be transferred, therefore, only in a selective way ... During the development of Hinduism in India, Siva worship absorbed a large number of pre-Aryan spirit cults. It did the same in Southeast Asia ... (Cady 1964:36-37)

Prelude

The deluge of globalization now engulfing the world seems in some ways almost novel. National boundaries crumble. North and South cease to be cardinal points and become economic strata in a "turbo-capitalist" (Valley 2002) world system. The Second World disappears in the early 1990s, and Marx's nightmare reappears in global form (Wilson 1998:38-71). The First and Third Worlds cease to be geographical areas and become classes found in every country: an English-speaking but multiracial and multinational ruling class, increasingly dominating national governments, made up of entrepreneurs, corporate executives and corporate lawyers, comprador military officers and comprador bureaucrats, growing richer and richer; and ever more deeply immiserated workers, sharecroppers and lumpens, polyglot, unorganized, uneducated (Hardt and Negri 2001). Even the "war on terrorism" fits into this dark vision, as a technique by which emerging global Empire swallows pockets of resistance like Afghanistan.

But whether or not this is where globalization is going, where did it begin? Many scholars (and terrorists) trace it back to the expansion of the West. Under "globalization" modernizing states are now doing to their people what the English did to Scotland long ago, at the end of the eighteenth century, taking the commons from poor people who had lived there for centuries (e.g., Dentan 2001a, 2001b). The Enclosure Acts gave the land to the rich, to raise sheep for the new emerging mills. Back then, they called the process "the Clearances." The Oxford English Dictionary remembers (II:482):

Clearance ... 2. spec. The clearing (of land) by the removal of wood, old houses, inhabitants, etc.

Comments a modern author, writing about “downsizing”:

You’ll never see a clearer proof that history is written by the winners. Just think: one comma less, and the inhabitants would have fallen into the etc. (Westlake 1997:199).

But the imperialist West traced its lineage, even the word “imperialism,” to the Roman Empire. Speaking of the British at the beginning of the Christian era, a Roman chronicler saw some of the same CocaColonization which critics attribute to globalization:

Gradually [the indigenous ruling classes] succumbed to our vices ... And to that the conquered gave the label of “modernization” which was actually an integral part of their enslavement (Cornelius Tacitus [A.D. 98]: Ch 21:1–2, Dentan translation; cf. Ogilvie and Richmond 1967).

And the Romans took their cue from the Athenian Greeks half a millennium earlier, who, despite the democracy of the ruling classes in the home city, saw their imperialism as frankly despotic. Alcibiades, a general who was to betray Athens, told those who resisted the conquest:

When you speak of the favor of the gods, we may as fairly hope for that as yourselves, neither our pretensions or our conduct being in any way contrary to what men believe of the gods, or practise among themselves. For of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a law of their nature whenever they can rule they will. This law was not made by us, and we are not the first who have acted upon it; we did but inherit it, and shall bequeath it to all time, and we know that you and all mankind, if you were as strong as we are, would do as we do. (Thucydides 1951:334)

So ultimately, perhaps, scholars need to look at the very beginnings of this process, in the lands around little despotic states, for example around the trade- and conquest-states which formed about Tacitus’ time around the Bay of Bengal and down the Malaysian Peninsula, states which Alcibiades would have recognized and understood. How did the indigenous people of the Bay and its hinterlands construe these developments? What kinds of similarities were there between the Indian Motherland and the peoples of Malaysia? What ways did knowledge flow? Perhaps, in the figure of the monstrous God of Beasts, who taught humans magic, we moderns can discern the foreshadow of globalization.

The comparative method I use to address these questions is perforce

old fashioned, though it does not share the root assumption of antique comparative folklore that motifs can be divorced from their cultural contexts and compared to each other like entomological specimens. The paucity of written sources for ancient Malaysian religious beliefs, and their systematic repression by the current Malaysian regime, make their recovery difficult (Dentan, Endicott, Gomes and Hooker 1997; Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli 1983, 1989). Indeed, a subsidiary goal of this paper is to document those beliefs while documentation remains possible. But my argument is not that these elements of Malaysian belief float in the air like bugs, but that they originate as part of a recognizable, systematic and coherent intellectual response to a fairly well documented system of despotism which came into being throughout Southeast Asia and adjacent lands long ago, as a result of processes of trade and political encroachment ancestral to globalization. Like the various “-scapes” of globalization (Appadurai 1996:117), these cosmologies used both local materials and imported ones, giving them different meanings in the process (Dentan 2000b). But the underlying sense that life is under the dominion of irrational mindless destructive force like a thunder squall, to which one gains access by a kind of erotic surrender, seems both general enough (as a response to despotism) and specific enough (as characteristic of a fairly limited area) to suggest that looking at the details may (1) give us insights into the relationships between belief systems, some of which have long been presented as either quite distinct or (in the case of the Malaysian religions) as “little traditions,” no doubt worthy and creative, but ultimately secondary to the “Great Tradition” of Hinduism and (2) shed light on the formation of the “-scapes” of globalizing capitalism.

Malaysian historiography is contested. Historians argue about colonial versus Southeast-Asian-centered history, Malay-centered history versus more pluralist history that includes, say, Chinese and Indians, and so on. This struggle for a place in official representations of the past occurs among Malaysian peoples far more powerful politically than Malaysian indigenes taken altogether. A long survey of this basically political struggle makes no mention of Orang Asli at all, not even to dismiss them as “peoples without history” (Cheah 1996). It seems therefore worth remarking that there may be some reason to take indigenous Malaysian religions seriously rather than dismissing them as, to quote a Malaysian official, “mumbo jumbo stuff” (Tan 1993; Dentan 2002).

Introduction: “A Base Common to All of Monsoon Asia”

Indians were not confronted by naked “savages” but, on the contrary, by people endowed with a civilization that had traits in common with the civilization of pre-Aryan India. The speed and ease with which the Aryanized Indians propagated their culture is undoubtedly explained in part by the fact that, in the customs and beliefs of these immigrants, the natives discovered, under an Indian veneer, a base common to all of monsoon Asia (Coedès 1968:15).

This essay attempts to substantiate Coedès’ observation by examining the possibility that some pre-Hindu religions of India were cognate with religions still practiced by Mon-Khmer speaking hill peoples of in Peninsular Malaysia. The situation is complex, since the Malaysian peoples were also, a thousand years ago, affected by the presence of Saivist tradesmen and Hindu-Buddhist missionaries along the coast (Bulbeck 1998; Cady 1964:21–48; Coedès 1968:38–40, 277–278; Dentan 2000b; Thompson 1943:24; Van Niel 1963:273–277).¹ Still, their religion differs enough from Saivist practice elsewhere that there remains a strong possibility that its core developed from a pre-Aryan tradition that flourished throughout southern Asia, from India though southern China, giving rise to the dark gods and demons of early Hinduism, especially Rudra the Destroyer.

This essay thus fleshes out and modifies the old theory that Indian ideology, particularly Saivism, found an “easy accommodation” with Southeast Asian religions because of syncretic Hindu praxis back in India (Cady 1964:37, 42). The picture suggested here involves the slow internal differentiation of an unformalized and unnamed aboriginal religion which spread throughout south and southeast Asia; its resultant differentiation into diverse forms in India and (for purposes of this article) the mountainous interior of Peninsular Malaysia; and a subsequent convergence in the first millennium AD as Indian traders, princes and missionaries introduced their Hindu and Buddhist modifications of the original religions into the area. Thus Indianization “proceeded imperceptibly,” giving rise on the Malaysian coasts to “a more refined and elaborated version of a fundamentally similar religio-political system” (Andaya and Andaya 1982:15). A useful analogy might be with differentiation of Buddhism from Hinduism and, in India, its eventual reabsorption.

The essay falls into three parts. The first sketches recent Semai religious praxis. Semai are traditionally swiddeners, agroforesters and tradesmen, numbering about 30,000 today. They are one of the Orang Asli peoples, the indigenes of Peninsular Malaysia.² The detailed description

and copious footnotes are to allow readers more familiar with pre-Vedic custom to make their own judgment about similarities and differences which have escaped the present author, whose expertise is narrowly South-east Asian.

The second part of the essay draws the parallels between Hindu, Chinese and Semai ideology. The conclusion attempts to sketch the ways in which such ideologies may refract the sense of being overwhelmed that the establishment of ancient despotic states may have engendered and modern globalization produces.

Semai Religious Practice

“Bedlam”

A storm comes up very fast; heavy rain, hard wind, much thunder and lightning ... [Men] are out in the rain, pounding the ground with heavy pieces of firewood and shouting “go down, go down!” The headman shouts to the others “hit, hit, hit!” (They are trying to keep Ngku’s [Thunder god’s] wife ... an enormous horned dragon, from bursting up out of the ground bringing with her a torrent of mud and water that would sweep away the hamlet....) The headman comes into the house shouting “burn *kijai*”³; someone answers that there is none. Headman shouts “We are all going to die because we don’t have any incense!” Bah Bidn runs into the house bringing some incense. Headman puts it with some coals on a piece of firewood and goes outside and burns it, chanting to Ngku to go away.⁴ He shouts at kids to cut their hair. Runs back outside, pounds the ground shouting “Go down.” Bedlam; people running in and out of the house screaming at each other above the storm. Many people outside pounding the ground ... Wind increases; houses shaking ... Kning Ledn throws salt on the fire, it crackles and smokes. Shouting and screaming all around. Loud clap of thunder, more shouts: “*wee[s] ato!*” (stop it, grandfather) ... Raining a torrent. Front flap has blown loose on Bah Les’s house and rain is streaming in. Headman tells everyone to get out of the house; some do, and go underneath ... Wind abates slightly; headman still chanting to Ngku: “we’re not guilty; we’re just poor miserable people”, throws salt on the fire. Kning Ledn pounds some lemongrass with a [bush knife], throw it on the fire. Headman tells her to cut hair from all the kids and burn it. She does; pounds the hair against a log with a [bush knife], throws it into the fire.... Headman tells Ngku to take the storm to the lowlands, to the

Malays: “if you keep it up, we’ll die. Maybe we’re a little guilty, but not much; this is no way for you to treat your grandchildren; we’re just poor, ignorant people. Go down to the Malays!”⁵ (Robarchek 1979: 558).

This wonderful account of Semai religious practice during thundersqualls captures the emotional tone of the ceremonies⁶ but omits a couple of other salient features. Perhaps the most salient is the “blood sacrifice,” which has generated much scholarly verbiage.⁷ In the “blood sacrifice,” people, usually women, take a sharp splinter of bamboo and make a shallow slice across their shins, catch the blood in split bamboo ladles and throw it into the howling wind, chanting or crying out in feigned pain. Scholarly explanations focus on the Semai notion of “mockery of animals:” to mock an animal by denying its true nature (Semai are platonists), e.g. by dressing it up as a human, is an important example of how Semai, if they are not careful, may violate the natural order, in which entities of different kinds must not be conflated (Dentan 1988a; cf. Endicott 1979: 78–79). The violations may also be of cosmic (cognitive) order, by mixing immiscible things together; or of the social order, by disrespect or incest; or of the personal order, by loss of self-control. A few involve sympathetic or contagious magic. The term *trlaac* refers to any such acts, subversive of order and definition, which might bring on a thundersquall.⁸

Despite the manifestations of fear and guilt in the Semai response to storms, the other salient feature is that the rituals are not entirely placatory. Along the River Waar in 1991, for example, anti-storm exhortations reminded the Lord God, Nkuu’, how “Raman’s father” had defecated up and down His back; no one in the settlement remembered the story or who “Raman” was; but they knew the enduring shame might make the monster god flee. Asked by Schebesta why they burnt bits of roof thatch during thundersqualls, Semai apparently told him “to burn Nkuu’s arse.”⁹

For Semai despise and trick the Lord God as well as fear him.

The Lord God

Sometimes I think there is naught beyond. But ‘tis enough ... outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it ... That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning ... All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought ... no self-esteem, and no veneration. And by those negations, considered along with

the affirmative fact of his prodigious bulk and power, you can best form to yourself the truest, though not the most exhilarating conception of what the most exalted potency is. (Melville 1989[1851]: 155, 173, 307)

A fourth common feature [of hunter-gatherer bands] is the presence of the Trickster as a central feature in the myth world ... A divine figure, but deeply flawed and very human ... The trickster symbolizes the frailty and human qualities of the gods and their closeness to humans. These stand in pointed contrast to the Pantheons of state religions and their powerful religious hierarchies (Lee 1998: 827).

At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control ... he is at the mercy of his passions and appetites... possesses no defined and well-fixed form (Radin 1956, quoted in Douglas 1969: 83–84).

Apparently, Nkuu' ("Ngkuu'," in west Semai dialects) is originally a title, not a name. The word is cognate with Malay word *tengku*, "Prince" or "Lord." It does not occur in Malay literature until around 1700 AD, after the fall of the Malacca Sultanate, when the immigrant Indonesian Bugis rulers of Johore adopted it; the etymology is "uncertain" (Wilkinson 1901: I, 306 s.v. *engku*; and II, 569, s.v. *tengku*). I do not know whether the title *engku* occurs among Bugis back in Sulawesi. If not, perhaps the Bugis pirates who took over Johore and legitimated their rule by myths of marriage with Orang Asli women, took an Aslian word for Thunder God to refer to their own conquistador power.¹⁰

Orang Asli sometimes distinguish the Lord God from and sometimes conflate Him with other figures. In the lowlands of Perak there is another deity, mild-mannered, genderless and vaguely benevolent (Tijah, Shanthi and Leong 2000). Its name, *Jnaang* or *Ynang*, may come from a Malay word for the chief supporter of a ruler (Wilkinson 1901, I: 400, s.v. *jenang*) or, by nominalization, from the Semai word *jaak*, grandmother.¹¹ But the meaning is "Lord" or "Elder." An elder bird god, androgynous in at least some cases, brought arboriculture and agriculture to Semai, say mountain people along the Waar and Tluup Rivers between Perak and Pahang (Dentan i.p. (c), Dentan and Ong 1995). More widespread are tales of "Pedn" (Schebesta 1926, 1927), "Ta' Ped'n" (Endicott 1979), "Ta' Ponn" (Skeat and Blagden 1906, II: 202–225) or "Tapern" (Evans 1923:147–150), who in some cases is a High God. Semai usually call him "Bah Pent," a homonym for "Master Shorty," and tell many stories about how his stupidity and lack of self-restraint result in his humiliation (e.g. Juli 1990:86–93). "Bah" is a mildly derogatory title, used for young men, who

for Semai are stereotypically irresponsible and lacking in self-control. Thus the traditional Semai Lord God seems to have been, at least in part, what anthropologists call a “trickster”: a brutal deity, emotionally incontinent and often Himself subject to being tricked and mocked, “amoral and unselfconscious, clumsy, ineffectual, an animal-like buffoon” (Douglas 1969:84):

Although the trickster participates in the cosmic design, he is not a god or supernatural figure. His accomplishments are often due to his folly ... He tests the character of humanity at its very limits, and it is because he has the courage or the drive to go beyond those limits that he reveals so much about the nature of the world and humanity ... The reason the trickster cannot be defined is that it is his nature to test definition by violating its limits. When people laugh at him they find a way to laugh at themselves, at their own limitations and foolishness. This insight permits human beings to live with the burden of the failures and limitations which are part of human nature, yet to realize that these very constraints are part of the process of gaining self-transcendence, part of the process of coming to know the aspects of reality which are beyond human failures and limitations (Gill 1982:72).

Semai express the connection between God and self-transcendent shamanic trancing in a story:

Together with Ludat,¹² the mysterious little people of the forest, the Lord, who afflicts people with diseases, taught Humans [= Semai] to become *-halaá'*, supernaturally adept, especially at curing diseases. Ludat and the Lord told the Humans to go home and hold shamanic ceremonies, singing the melodies [that their supernatural teachers had given them, as adepts today sing the songs the spirits of their familiars give them in dreams, to summon the spirits as the adepts enter trance]. The two teachers [would serve as familiars and] come to help the singing adepts.

To settle with their instructors, the Humans were to pound eaglewood barkcloth for them.

Ludat went straight home to LmLmu' (= Lub 'Ilmu', “Mount Magical Lore,” from Malay-Arabic “*ilmu*”), upstream from Sungkeey [Malay Sungkai] in the Malaysian state of Perak. He hung up his headband. It became magical plants *bn gspees*, an epiphyte on riverside trees, *bn glpaap*, whose pretty orange flowers are used to attract familiars to seances, and *bn klooy*, “yellow magic-plant,” a wild ginger Semai use to make shamanic whisks and therefore sometimes cultivate for that purpose (Dentan 1999). [Such mutations permeate the stories of west Malaysian indigenous peoples (cf. Dentan 1988b)].

The humans also settled with the Lord, giving Him an eaglewood barkcloth turban. The Lord returned home to Dark-Cloud, Rahuu'. But the headband turned into an eyeless snake. The Lord (perhaps throwing a snit, as he often does in Semai stories) then also turned his beads into a snake and ripped off his loincloth, which became a flycatcher with a long white tail.¹³ So human adepts can now invoke those two entities, the Lord and Ludat, to serve them as familiar spirits (Waar River, 1992).

This story, in which Humans fool the Lord, and His intemperate anger makes Him behave stupidly, brings up an important point.¹⁴ Semai folk tales depict the Lord as victim to His own ludicrously clumsy lust, punished often by painful wounds more intelligent persons inflict on his penis (e.g., Baharon 1966; Dentan 1979: 23; Schebesta 1927: 25); for instance, when Nkuu' tried to seduce his little brother's wife by disguising His penis as a phallic toadstool onto which she inadvertently squatted while defecating in the river, His little brother burnt the toadstool. Other tales mock the Lord's gross stupidity: how, carrying His child to the grave wrapped in a mat, He let the corpse slip out and buried only the mat. (You can still see the corpse, a mountain along the River R'eiiis; the Public Works Department mined it for the gravel to build the superhighway that smashes through Semai settlements and orchards along the river). The God Who enforces cognitive and ethical limits on Humans exemplifies what happens when a person, even God Himself, violates them.

In summary: in tales about Lord God the vicious ludicrous monster plays out a "dark circus ... of ferocity, fear and hunger, simple stupidity and desire" (Koja 1991: 335). For this great dark monster slashed with ghastly brightness, this vast violent horror that overwhelms all human fragile intimate love, this evil ferocious destroyer God — is so grotesquely stupid, so much a prey to his own passions, as to be a figure of fun; He knows that, and is ashamed.

Affinities

Sanskrit vocabulary

Language is often useful in investigating cultural affinities. If people use a word of alien origin for a concept which resembles an alien concept, there is a reasonable possibility that they borrowed the concept and the word at the same time. The more co-occurrences, the more likely it is that the ideology the words denote is itself of alien origin.

In Semai discussions of thundersqualls two Sanskrit terms occur. The first is the word for dark cloud, Rahu’, from the Sanskrit name, “Seizer,” of the great dragon or ogre’s head which swallows the sun and moon during eclipses and brings darkness to the world. The *Mahabharata* describes this demon, whom Vishnu beheaded for trying to drink the gods’ ambrosia (O’Flaherty 1975: 278). In Malay literature, but not in my discussions with Semai, Rahuu’ is also associated with eclipses.¹⁵ The Malay idea is thus closer to orthodox Saivism. The Semai vision is of darkening, not just eclipsing, and not of dragons or ogre’s heads. Nor is the idea of Rahuu’ particularly central to Semai religion.

In the Rahuu’, said a River Waar shaman in 1991, lives a mute people about whom he knew nothing but that, on their foreheads, a single antler grows. Now, in Malay ideology, dragons sport a single horn on their foreheads, like rhinoceroses or unicorns. Thus dragons appear in the context of the first Sanskrit term, and indeed the second major Sanskrit term is the word for dragon, *dangгаа’* or *naga’*, clearly cognate with Sanskrit naga. But Semai dragons are chthonic, “wives” of the Lord God, who bring flood and chaos. From the oracle at Delphi to Korea, this connection of dragons with the Underground, however, is ubiquitous and thus may have preexisted the adoption of the Sanskrit term.¹⁶ The association with rain and flood, with water in general, may be Chinese (see, e.g., Werner 1922: 208–235). The First Emperor offended a dragon towards the end of his vicious life, prompting his advisers to warn him that “This god ought to be feared as much as the God of Thunder” (ibid., 214). And Semai dragons have two knobbed horns, unlike Malay ones. They are agents of the undifferentiated chaos which follows violating limits, and are thus central in Semai cosmology.

Hindu notions

A number of notions in Semai theology resemble early Hindu ones. Perhaps the most salient is the metaphor by which a person’s shamanic power is his “wife” (cf. Wavell, Butt and Epton 1967: 132–146). Semai adepts and successful hunters have demonic wives. The adepts’ “wives” appear in dreams and give them melodies with which the adept can later lure them in seances to become spirit guides (Dentan 1988a). After a successful hunt, Waar River hunters go through a ceremony to soothe their hunting wives, *knaah srngloo’*. The Lord from whom Semai stole shamanic power is Lord of Beasts; beasts have souls, which appear to people as demons, *nyanii’*.

Usually demons just eat your soul and make you sick. Indeed, the word *nyanii'* may come from *-nya'nii'*, to be in pain or feel sick. After all, the Lord's power, which demons manifest, is the power to hurt, sicken and terrorize. By the same token, it can heal, cure and drown one in love. Semai say deliberate contact with demons may drown a person in an experience of *hnalaa'*, what anthropologists loosely call "trance" or "possession trance."

And that is a state which some Semai, especially men, seek out, striving to connect with the fearsome demons, the strange angels of which the Lord is chief, a connection which Semai phrase as love. The demons appear in dreams, seeking people strong and beautiful enough to be their lovers, spouses, parents, children, all the forms of love. Though in the material world demons retain their fearsome or disgusting form, this deceptive dream semblance is usually a beautiful person of a sex opposite the dreamer's. A particular dream-demon gives its particular beloved a special, summoning melody. If the person accepts the melody, then he (sometimes she) becomes an adept, *halaa'*, and the demon becomes a *guniik*, from an old Malay word for "concubine," which here means something like "familiar" or "spirit guide" but connotes erotic partnership.

The relationship between adept and familiar is erotic in the sense that it produces an altered state of consciousness that resembles an erotic ecstasy. Indeed, some Semai use the Arabic word *asyik* to describe it, a word which refers to loss of self in both sexual and divine unions. But the adept-familiar relationship is more than erotic. Among Aslian-speaking peoples like Semai demons are also ancestors, in a sense. Indeed, Btsisi' call their version of the same demons *moyang*, grandmothers and in séances shamans may address the familiars as "fathers." Yet, as familiars, people say they are also adopted children who need protection and nurturance. This transformation of violence and cruelty, pain and terror, into fulfilment and all the forms of love is key to understanding Semai séances.

This rough equality of genders makes sexual metaphors less salient in Semai "constructions" of the cosmos than, for instance, in Anglophone ones. Traditional Semai rarely attribute particular characteristics to one gender or the other. The main exception is the aphorism that "men's loincloths are long, women's loincloths are short," true in terms of traditional dress and referring to the fact that women, who along with children were the preferred targets of slavers, stayed more within the confines of their settlement and thus knew less about the outside world than men. I had

difficulty, as an Anglo, recognizing this cultural differentiation. The relationship between a shaman or hunter and his “spirit wife” is explicitly (hetero)sexual; but the “marriage” metaphor refers to the relationship, not to the gender of the particular parties involved; midwives and their familiars had the same relationship, and female shamans must, people said, have “spirit husbands,” although clearly no one had thought much about that. Besides, the form a familiar takes in a dream is not its “true” form, in which gender may be irrelevant or at least not salient (Dentan 1988a).

In trying to understand Semai sèances, it is important not to think of eating and being eaten (and thus feeding), reciprocal hunting and being hunted, making love and making dead only as opposites. They are opposites, but by virtue of being joined as opposites, each implies the other. And it is, I think, this equivalence of opposites that gives Semai sèances their power as the ultimate resolution of desire and of the violence Semai think immanent in ungratified desire. Sèances bring together fleshly human men-hunters/prey-lovers with spiritual animal women-hunters/prey-lovers. Each surrenders to the other, giving up the trickery that poisons love, for the moment. All ungratified yearnings — for love, for power, for honesty, for trust, to hurt, to be cherished, to surrender, to eat, to be fed — dissolve into each other.

Similarly, the old Hindu notion of *sakti* involved

the generative or female principle of the idea embodied in the God; this female principle was personified in a corresponding Goddess, e.g. Durga or Kali as the “wife” of Siva ... Hindus believed that a certain modicum of supernatural power could be acquired ... and passed on to other persons ... An interesting passage [in a traditional Malay history] (Ht. Pasai 26) tells the story of a contest between the *sakti* of a Hindu ascetic and the *keramat* [spiritual energy, akin to anthropologists’ ‘mana’] of a Moslem king; victory, of course, went to the accepted religion (Wilkinson 1901, II:370, s.v. *sakti*).

The relation between a human and his power is the same as that between a man and his wife; the great Dragon is *knaah Ngkuu’*, wife of the Lord; a Semai adept’s familiars are *guniik*, from a Malay word for “concubine.” Similarly the Javanese term for political and state power, *kasekten* (Anderson 1990:20fn8), derives from *sakti*, power conceived of as a wife. The word *sakti* seems absent from Semai; but it occurs in Malay and in a chiefly title among a people closely related to Semai (Benjamin 1968:17n). Thus Semai may be acquainted with the old Hindu concept but do not see its relevance to their own apparently kindred construction.

The Semai connection between thunder gods and shamanism has parallels in both Chinese and Hindu mythology. A Chinese thunder deity who admitted having a “bad character” is responsible for providing the skills of shamanism to a human who became an adept, as the Semai Lord God did (Werner 1922: 201). In the Rig Veda, the “sinister” thunder god Rudra is connected with a class of shamans who “seem to have been outside the normal Aryan scheme of things” and may represent “survivors of some non-Aryan ascetic fraternity that was later loosely associated with the Brahmanic religion” (Basham 1989:15,16, 58). While Semai adepts are not ascetics, they often have to restrict their diets and behavior in order to placate their demonic wives/familiars.

An alternative but vague Semai version of how shamanic powers came to humans attributes the transmission to the seven Original Adepts, *halaa’ asal*, who often appear in Semai invocations. Similarly, midwifery comes from seven Original Midwives. Although seven occurs in a number of ritual contexts among West Semai, who are the most exposed to outside influences, it is not a traditional Semai magic number, unlike two and six. These two sets of seven figures seem cognate with the Seven Seers, *rishi*, supposed composers of the Vedic hymns, and with their “wives,” the *krtikas*, Cutters or Razors.¹⁷ As the seven Seers founded Hinduism, so the seven Adepts founded Semai shamanism. Since Semai freely add exogenous explanatory accounts of various phenomena to indigenous ones (Dentan 1979: 94–95), perhaps they just tacked the Seers and Razors onto their own ideology, without bothering with details.

At least some sacred plants (*bòdd*; *bn-* in compound words) in Semai rituals are salient in Hindu ones as well,¹⁸ like the ginger Waar River Semai spit into storms in 1991, to drive the cold Lord God away by “heating” Him (Dentan 1999).¹⁹ The problem of religio-medical cultigens is complex, however. Medical knowledge often passes in both directions during culture contact, no matter which culture is otherwise dominant. Although the Vavilov hypothesis allows historical botanists a pretty good guess at where domesticated plants were first domesticated, the possibility of “stimulus diffusion” (in which people substitute one of their own plants for one used by foreigners) or its inverse (in which people substitute a foreign plant for one of their own) renders the problem too complex for this paper to address.

A final possibility is one which I presented to a Southeast Asianist meeting several years ago (Dentan i.p. (a)) but which struck many people in the audience as farfetched: that Semai notions of the Lord God reflect

their experience with the coastal states, whose political economy rested on slaving and a resultant “culture of state terror” (Hoskins 1996: 3). But the rulers of those states themselves made that identification:

Buddhist rulers as well as Hindu princes frequently identified themselves as agents or reincarnations of the ancient storm god Indra (derived from Rudra ...) representing kingly authority and power (Cady 1964: 37–38).

As Alcibiades said, there’s not a lot of difference between human and divine despots.

This idea is not explicit in Semai ideology, as it was during the period of Indianization among the princes and Brahmans who came to Southeast Asia, and the coastal peoples who followed their teaching and example. But it is worth keeping in mind during the discussion of affinities between Rudra and the Semai Lord God below.

Chinese affinities

Semai “blood sacrifice” rests on the counterdemonic power of blood, particularly women’s blood (Dentan 1988b). Without knowing that Semai women slash their shins and throw the “heating” blood into the rain to repel the Lord God, the following Chinese folk tale would seem inexplicable:

Lightning was about to strike a woman who had failed in her pious duty towards her aunt. She, however, covered her head with her blood-bespattered stocking, and the thunder-beast fell helplessly to earth. People who eat pork and fish together [violating a Semai tabu, *pnali*] are more likely than others to be struck by lightning [Eberhard 1986: 290].

The details and omissions here seem particularly significant. How the blood got on a woman’s stocking, if not from shin-slashing, is hard to figure. The taboo on mixing fish and pork does not seem to be particularly Chinese. Indeed, Semai say that the reason so many Chinese are bald is that they ignore food category boundaries.²⁰ For Semai, such mixtures are *trlaac*; that is, they threaten cosmic stability and can bring on thundersqualls and floods. And disrespect for one’s elders, which Semai interpret as being overly familiar, is for Semai a form of incest, of disregarding social categorical limits, precisely the sort of behavior likely to engender thundersqualls and floods.²¹

Given how anomalous this tale is in Han Chinese folklore,²² it is difficult not to see it as a “foreign” intrusion, either a borrowing from neighboring peoples or a “survival” from before the time Han invaders

overran the Austroasiatic-speaking peoples of what is now southern China. Given the similarities already noted (e.g., the origin of shamanism from a Thunder God, the connection between thundersqualls and improper decorum) and given how much the deities in the Ministry of Storms (discussed in the last footnote) resemble Indian ones, the latter seems more likely.²³

Rudra “Cruel and Wild”²⁴

the Destroyer, the Rudra of the Doomsday Fire ...
known as the Dark One throughout the Universes.
From the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* (O’Flaherty 1975: 50).

Rudra is a liminal figure in the Rig Veda, invoked with Vedic hymns but not invited to partake in the regular Vedic sacrifice; as the embodiment of wildness and unpredictable danger, he addressed more in the hope of keeping him at bay than with the wish to bring him near (a form of worship that persists in Hinduism not in the cult of Rudra’s successor, Siva, but in the cult of the Goddess [Kali]) ... Rudra is fierce and destructive like a terrible beast, like a wild storm ... Yet Rudra is not merely demonic, for he is the healer and cooler as well as the bringer of disease and destructive fever. (O’Flaherty 1981:219)

- 6 ... Have mercy on us, and on our children and grandchildren.
- 7 Do not slaughter the great one among us or the small one among us, nor the growing or the grown. Rudra, do not kill our father or our mother, nor harm the bodies dear to us.
- 8 Do not harm us in our children or grandchildren, nor in our life-span....
- 10 Keep far away from us ...

From the *Rig Veda* 1:114 (O’Flaherty 1981: 224–225).

Thunder Gods are ubiquitous among Indo-European peoples: Zeus, Thor et al. But in pre-Aryan India people “worshipped” a deity whom the Aryans named Rudra, “The Howler,” and incorporated into their pantheon as a nasty avatar of the Indo-European Indra, eventually under the euphemism Siva, “The Auspicious.” He is one of the *asuras*, “the ancient dark divinities, at first the elder brothers and then the enemies of the gods” in the Rig Veda (O’Flaherty 1981: 37n); by the later Vedas, these gods are demons (ibid. 70–71n). This “Dark Outsider” (O’Flaherty 1975: 116), also called Bhava, Existence (ibid. 50), is a tempest God older than Indra. He

has eight (or eleven) sons also called Rudras and sometimes identified with the Maruts, thundersquall gods who accompany Rudra or Indra.²⁵

Unlike the later deities, Rudra “is worshipped more in fear than in the spirit of devotion” (O’Flaherty 1975: 116; cf. Basham 1989:17), “more to be pacified than to be adored” (ibid. 118). The “typical Vedic fear” is “the fear of a personified, malevolent god” (O’Flaherty 1981: 29n). Indeed, the gods created Rudra to punish the Creator for committing incest with His own daughter, a crime for which the Semai Lord God still punishes humans: “they assembled in one place the most fearful forms, and these, assembled, became the deity Rudra” (ibid. 29; cf. 116–117, 121, 124).

To commit the incest, both the Creator and His daughter took the form of deer, *mrga*. Deer seem to be the mothers of sacred cows in India and are associated with motherhood and incest by Semai; but the Semai term *mrgaas* is a euphemism for “tiger,” the embodiment of the violent shamanic power which the Lord God stupidly gave to humans. The Rig Veda says that the mother of the Rudras who “create the power of Indra” is the dappled cow, but in other contexts they are different ruminants (O’Flaherty 1981:165, 166n, 168, 170n). All ruminants are taboo as food to highland Semai women; and everywhere in Semailand eating them is subject to more restrictions than most foods (Dentan 1965: 313–315, 333–334).²⁶

Rudra’s rage stems from his distress at the differentiation of primeval Unity into Creation, the destruction of “darkness covered by darkness” (Kramrisch 1981: 20), which he tries to recreate, as the Semai Lord God arrives in tempest and flood to sink all distinctions into a sea of mud. Rudra-Siva periodically destroys the cosmos (O’Flaherty 1975: 37–39, 126), as Nkuu’ always threatens to. And Siva’s redemptive destruction of his phallus to recreate the world seems like a literary extension of the recurrent mutilation of Nkuu’s penis as He is bested, again and again.

Rudra has especially close ties with animals (O’Flaherty 1975: 124–125; Kramrisch 1981:31). It is His tie with animals, who embody the demonic forces which Semai call *nyanii*’, which gives the Lord God the curative shamanic powers He shared with human adepts. Like the Lord God,

The sinister, wrathful, malevolent side of Rudra is complemented by a beneficent side, for he is honored also as a healer and physician, one who has a thousand cooling remedies (Knipe 1981:632).

The familiar spirits which help Semai adepts diagnose and cure people

are usually the spiritual emanations of beasts — emanations which otherwise cause disease.

Among Rudra's evil offspring are the "flesh-eaters," *pisaca*. Waar River Semai call bee-eaters, *Merops* spp., *ceep caa'seic*, "flesh-eater birds" and regard them as associated with the Lord God and shamanic powers. Another of the Dark Outsider's creations is Fever (O'Flaherty 1975: 121–122); as in the midwife's prayer quoted in the footnotes, it is shamanic supernaturals who make Semai sick.

Blood, in Rudra's context, is defiling. The Dark Outsider himself, incited by his wife, sprinkles a sacrifice with blood to make it impure (O'Flaherty 1975: 118, 121). The "blood sacrifice" is thus an act of defiance as well as of submission. Fire is also Rudra's enemy, as the Semai practice of emptying out hearth fires before a storm may attest. It is likely that the apparent teknonym "Romansfather," *Be'Roman* in Semai, is Brahman, who as the Creator defeats Rudra in Hindu mythology, although "shitting up and down" his back seems to be a typically Semai improvisation.²⁷

Conclusion

Two genealogies for Rudra and the Lord God

Below the level of those seeking Brahmanical gnosis there was a scorned substratum of disreputable magicians preoccupied with the problem of folk religiosity. However, in the interests of their power position, the Brahmins could not completely ignore the influence of this magic and the need for rationalizing it. (Weber 1967: 295)

These similarities suggest a common origin for Rudra and Nkuu'. The most obvious guess, given Indo-European prejudices, would be to attribute the commonalties between Semai and pre-Aryan theology to the same Saivist Hindu influences that affected Indonesia from the ninth to the fifteenth century (e.g., Coedès 1968:252–253). Certainly the presence of Sanskrit words testifies to Indian influences. If local people

had no equivalent terms to use in transmitting these social, moral, and religious innovations, [it] was therefore necessary to impose Indian terminology in all these domains, terminology that is still being used in Indonesia after two thousand years (Gabriel Ferrand, quoted by Coedès 1968: 22) .

But, by the same token, it is odd that, if borrowed, the crucial elements

in Semai theology (like the Lord God and demonic power wives) do not have Sanskrit names, while peripheral ones like dragons, “Romansfather” and Rahuu’ clouds do. Similarly, in Semai sacred botany, it is mostly indigenous plants with indigenous names to which people attribute magical powers. And the more obviously Indian cultivars and related plants for which Malays use Sanskrit names, are peripheral or absent in Semai magic, as are the associated rituals (Dentan 1999). Indeed the Saivist pantheon (see, e.g., Covarrubias 1937: 316–319) is absent among Semai, though present in scattered form among traditional coastal Malay peasants (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 14). Even Rudra-Siva, if that is who the Lord God is, goes under an alias which seems to be of neither Malay or Sanskrit origin, and his demon wives are storm birds rather than the terrifying Kali and Durga. Similarly, the asceticism so important in acquiring *sakti* in Hinduism is not salient in Semai shamanic praxis, although after receiving a demonic wife the adept may eschew foods unpleasant to his new spirit-helper. In other words, although there are filigrees of Saivism in Semai theology, its core seems indigenous.²⁸ Still, Saivist thinking could make an “easy accommodation ... to various [indigenous] expressions of supernatural malevolence,” so that “Vishnu found less wide acceptance than Siva among the peoples of Southeast Asia” (Cady 1964: 37).

The history of Semai theology is impossible to resuscitate. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that it is simply a melange of half-digested Hindu and Chinese mythology, the way scholars used to assume that Southeast Asian cultures in general were (e.g., Coedès 1968). Dragons and thunder gods are ancient throughout eastern and southern Asia, and in India predate the Vedas. The Chinese folk tale about lightning fits no Chinese cosmology I know of, but fits neatly into Semai ideology. As noted, most Semai *bòdòd*, sacred plants, seem to be Southeast Asian cultivars than Indian ones (Dentan 1999). Among Semai, these elements are not scattered but form part of an integrated and coherent religion that deserves more respect than it gets (Dentan i.p.(a), i.p.(b), i.p. (c)).

Reciprocally, it seems possible that the Aryan Brahmins, confronted with indigenous religions of this sort, sought, as Weber suggests in the epigraph to this section, to consolidate their rule by first incorporating and then devaluing and denigrating or euphemizing its more alien components, transforming Rudra’s minions into demons and the dark destroyer Lord into the auspicious Lord Siva who destroys only to create. The crude and laughable sexual excesses of the trickster thunder Lord would mutate into the perpetual love-play of Siva with his own *sakti*, which generates the

Tantric energies that maintain life. The deserved and ludicrous mutilation of the trickster Lord's penis would become the creative sacrifice of Siva's lingam. In short, it may be that the theological meditations of the nineteenth-century American novelist Melville are more germane to the origins of Semai religion than the idea that it is either a kind of primitive animism or a reflux of the Indianization of Southeast Asia. The dark construal of the cosmos as the playground of a stupid violent Trickster Lord God may in fact be the religion which early Hinduism confronted; at least partially incorporated and downgraded; and then spread back to an otherwise surprisingly receptive Southeast Asia.

A hypothesis

The reconstruction that seems most likely, on the basis of the evidence gathered here, is that Rudra and Nkuu', rather than being respectively ancestor and descendent, are cousins, developments of a primordial religion that stretched at least from eastern India to southern China. The salient elements in this religion may have been a high storm God feared but not worshipped; a notion of shamanic power embodied in demon wives; the use of blood to counteract that power; a congeries of particular sacred plants; and huge chthonic serpents or dragons associated with water. Possibly God was connected with animals and with punishing incest; and ruminants with motherhood. In short, if students of Hinduism and Buddhism want to familiarize themselves with pre-Aryan religion, it might be useful for them to spend some time with the indigenous religions of Malaysia, which, rather than being "primitive" may represent a parallel development from a common base; and be closer to that base thanologies elaborated by generations of professional theologians.

Summary and a final word

No matter where this complex of beliefs arose, the question of how it arose remains open. I suspect that it constitutes a nuanced and subtle symbolic interpretation of the impact of despotic states on relatively powerless egalitarian indigenes. The great French sociologist Durkheim argues that a people's theology reflects their social situation. In this case, the social situation involved unpredictable raids by slavers from Hinduized states which represented themselves to their subjects as embodiments of a Hindu God, Siva the Destroyer. Theodore Adorno regarded the rise of such states

as a primordial catastrophe to which human beings are still trying to adapt (e.g., Wilson 1998). Such experiences produce “learned helplessness,” the (1) sense of generalized powerlessness that follows experience of (2) uncontrollable, often traumatic events, e.g., when armed outsiders routinely steal one’s children for physical and sexual abuse (Peterson, Maier and Seligman 1993: 228–229). Abused wives and children often manifest “learned helplessness,” (Gelles and Straus 1988:141–143; Walker 1979).

A person need not actually experience repeated [uncontrollable] events in order for them to produce [learned] helplessness. All that is needed is for the person to expect that events will be uncontrollable.... This expectation may come from a variety of sources besides induction: for instance, observation of others, cultural stereotypes, specific information ... (Peterson, Maier and Seligman 1993:147).

The Hinduized coastal states of medieval Malaysia were mostly oriented towards trade, towards the ocean and India. Even the Malay word for “west” comes from the Sanskrit word for “India.” But when the states turned towards their hinterlands, they manifested themselves as agents of Siva the Destroyer, after whom the founders of dynasties named themselves, whose lingams (phallic megaliths) dotted the landscape, whose destructive power brought fear and death to those who resisted state power (Coedès 1968:23–24, 58, 64–69, 85, 110–129, 174, 187–188, 212, 249, 275n3).

Buddhist rulers as well as Hindu princes frequently identified themselves as agents or reincarnations of the ancient storm god ... representing kingly authority and power (Cady 1964:37–38).

For a thousand years these petty despots showed off their power by killing and slaving (Coedès 1968:58; Maxwell 1996), creating a “culture of state terror” (Hoskins 1996:3).

The slaver state rested on a notion of power unfamiliar to Westerners. In that conception, power exists independently of the people who wield it; it is like electricity or gravity (Anderson 1990:22). Unless you have power of your own, the intelligent thing to do, confronted with a person who has power, is to submit or flee, as Semai did (Anderson 1990:74). As long as state penetration of the hills was only sporadic, by slave raids and kidnapping, a pervasive nonviolence was adaptive: flight, not confrontation; and, when flight was impossible, submission (Adas 1992:89–90; Dentan 1992, 1994; Trankell and Ovesen 1998:12–13) . For irresistible

power of this sort is not subject to control by the governed, any more than a child can control its abuse by a parent. The question of legitimacy does not arise.

The resulting social relations work like patriarchy or protection rackets, in which subalterns “often feel bound to those they serve through misplaced gratitude for a ‘protection’ that is mostly only a withholding of abuse” (Card 1996:7,10). The Semai response to the slaver state, their general deference to Malay culture, for example, makes sense in these terms. The impact of despotic slaver states on their hinterlands could produce such an effect. People who suffer “learned helplessness” often “identify” with the power that makes them helpless, which the religion described above would codify. Psychoanalysts call the resulting behavior “identification with the oppressor” (cf. Dentan 1992, 1994; Scott 1985: 327–328). Semai shamanism may embody that response.

Students of globalization recognize that the people it affects conceive of it in ways which differ from those of the globalizers. They emphasize its novelties, its ubiquity (Hardt and Negri 2001), the new technologies of communication and repression (Appadurai 1996). But these students’ imaginings are of globalization fulfilled, of where it is going, not where it is now. The agents of globalization by contrast remain remarkably provincial and parochial: rich nations still rule over the process and get most of the benefits, their leaders still caught in a web of pre-global ideas (e.g., Amsden 2002; Schememann 2002). The most radical shifts in social life take place within constraining historical contexts that make continuity almost always as salient as novelty (e.g., Dentan and McClusky 1993; Dentan 1997). As a result, the experiences of the people encountering globalization for the first time often involve a familiar sense of irresistible incomprehensible power and the dissolution of everything safe and familiar (Dentan 2001a). People’s reaction to it involves a complex of yearning and horror. Who would not want that sort of power? Who can bear that sort of loss?

And that is not very different from the experiences of which Semai religion seems to be a product. From the underside the fundamental processes which foreran globalization and which continue today must often generate the image of a stupid monster God/Demon, like “America the Great Satan” in the minds of many Salafist Muslims, and of a dissolution which allows access to that alien power, a sort of *asyik* or erotic/religious transport — to use an Arabic word that men on their way to supposed martyrdom share with Semai shamans on their way to union with their familiar spirits.

Notes

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1. This problem has little in common with the problem of disentangling Buddhism and animism among mainland Southeast Asians (e.g., Tannenbaum 1989: 68–69). If anything, it has to do with the historically common practice of dismissing the contributions of currently despised peoples to the achievements of one’s personal ancestors. Thus you could read reams of European history without understanding that “Western science” is almost entirely of Arabic origin; of Chinese history, without discovering that the glories of the Tang Dynasty stemmed from openness to central Asian influences; of American history, without understanding the contributions of Indian philosophy to the “flowering of New England” in the mid-nineteenth century. If the peoples involved had had no written history of their own, they might have been dismissed as peoples without history.

At any rate, “Hinduism” itself only emerges as a more or less coherent category of beliefs under British colonial investigation, as the name suggests. And parts of Semai religion — e.g. the notion of an androgynous Bird who institutes aboriculture, agriculture, time and work — seem to have more Bornean affinities than Indian ones (Dentan i.p.(b), Dentan and Ong 1995), while others reflect contacts with Mon, Khmer, Malay and Arab influences. This article is part of a longer investigation of the relationship between Semai and Hindu — and other — religions (e.g., Dentan 1999, 200b).

2. For sketches of Semai life, see Dentan 1963, 1979 and 2000a; and the web sites <<http://www.noogenesis.com/malama/bood.htm>> and <<http://wings.buffalo.edu/academic/department/AandL/ams>>. For Orang Asli, see Dentan et al. 1997; Evans 1923. I have sketched Semai religious practice elsewhere (1983, 1988a, 2000b, i.p.(a), i.p.(b)). Robarchek provides an excellent psychological analysis of Semai religion (e.g., 1977, 1979; Robarchek and Robarchek 1995), treating it as an indigenous phenomenon.
3. *Kijaay* is any fragrant oleoresin (cf. Gianni 1990: 68, 95, 116, 180, for the term among a related people for trees rare or absent in the Semai area). Originally

the Semai term probably referred to *Santiria* (= *Trigonochlamys griffithii* and *S. rubiginosa*) but now includes the imported *Canarium commune*, which produces a fragrant resin from wounds around the base of the trunk (cf. Skeat and Blagden 1906, I: 322 and II: 694).

4. The chant is *cntòh*, from *-ctòh*. A prayer is *cnagòòh*, from *-cagòòh*; a spell is *jnampii'*, from Malay *jampi* (most spells are in Malay).

The following Waar River Semai chant reflects an influx of Malay notions (boldface) and the local sense that the dead play a part in storms:

<i>Hòònd 'a hoot 'a buka' a traak</i>	Want to dry out to open to clear
<i>Bloo'd' glaap bloo' d' j'aar 'a hoot</i> <i>'a laaw</i>	Where there's darkness where there's threatening weather [want it to] dry to brighten
<i>Ng-hòònd ki-tolok dulat maay daad</i> <i>maay rooc</i>	I want help from the power of the dead, the lost wanderers without guidelines
<i>Nkei' juk ku shurga' kei'-printah ku</i> <i>hit-hoot</i>	You-all return to heaven you order to dry out
<i>Jangan ki-'òòk ku pvvs ng-hòònd</i> <i>ki-'òòk ku hit-hoot</i>	Don't give wind I want [you to] give drying out
<i>Jangan kei' printah ku malang</i>	Don't administer misfortune
<i>Jii' hòònd kee' rzekei' a nyurvah baik</i> <i>a duit baik i ca'naa' baik i knaya'</i> <i>a lrkaad a ramah</i>	We want to make a living [want you to] command good money good food good wealth for perpetuation for amity
<i>Jangan ki-'òòk malang</i>	Don't give misfortune
<i>Ji-hòònd kee'nòng ca'naa' ku prook</i> <i>ku mnhar</i>	We want to seek the trail of food, rodents, meat
<i>Bloo' bloo' dv nkei' krek dv nkei'</i> <i>tanya' ku maay jaa' diil maay</i>	Wherever you alert [them] you ask them leave their tracks
<i>Hòònd neng ha dunia, ha lnggrii'</i> <i>nyaat rvv'</i>	Want to see the world, the country far and near
<i>'A brcahaya' loh ku dalam i brcagòh</i> <i>j'aar pvvs</i>	[Want] illumined by the prayer [against] storm, wind
<i>Adeh lah i jamu' ca'naa' jun</i>	These are the foods to host you [polite form]
<i>I kijaay sungkooc kasaay</i>	[Types of incense burnt during storms; see below]
<i>Jangan jvvn ngmpar libiih</i>	Don't mess around any more

Kasaay is usually a small tree, *Pometia pinnata*, which Waar Semai cultivate and weave into shamanic headbands, *pnangkòòd*, and other Semai use medicinally (Lim 1994: 395). Cut, the tree produces a copious red exudate

which Semai associate with blood and thus with the supernatural (Dentan 1988b). *Sungkuuc*, a domesticated elsewhere in Semailand, may be a *Diospyros* sp. with faintly aromatic roots. For reasons discussed below, it is significant that these plants are native to Southeast Asia, not India.

Evans (1923: 204–205) gives several anti-storm incantations from Jeram Kawan in upriver Sungkai, in Perak state. His texts suggest that people there used the power of shamanic leaf whisks against the storm. A puzzling storm prayer that Schebesta (1927: 26) recorded among Serau Semai seems to urge God to “open the egg of your wife, make clear the sky, make clear the earth.” The chant, in Schebesta’s Semai and my literal translations of his German (in bold face) and Semai (in italics) texts, runs as follows:

Buka peenglug konkena he terang langit, terang tanah, egn mai bor,
 Open ? ? you shine firmament, shine earth, I person obedient,
 Open egg for [?] wife [?] your make-clear sky, make-clear earth, I person good
egn mai senang, egn mai betul. Upaha he, he djog.
 I person happy, I person straightforward. Tribute your, you forgive.
 I person you can live with, I person of my word. Fee your, you go-home.

The “egg” may refer to the sun, as it does in the *Rig Veda* (O’Flaherty 1981: 40n), whose relevance (and the relevance of the “wife”) is a subject of the next part of this essay. More likely, however, it refers to the cosmos, as it does elsewhere in the Vedas and in ancient Chinese mythology (e.g., Carmen and Narayan 1989: 199). The egg metaphor is not salient in Semai cosmology.

5. Sending storms out of one’s own district is common. “Go rain on those Malays in Mncaak,” Semai on the Tluup River in upriver Pahang state chanted on a tape I made, making Semai from Mncaak in Perak smile, and comment that they sent the storms to afflict “those Temiar on the Tluup.” (Temiar are another group of Orang Asli)

There are rainmaking rituals throughout Semailand, but people are wary about using them. There’s a Tluup plant, whose name I wrote as *jalaay*, a couple of fathoms tall, about a fathom across where it enters the earth (apparently counting adventitious roots or suckers). Anyone, not necessarily supernaturally adept, cuts off a piece with a couple of stems on it and takes it to a stream, not a big one since the amount of wind released seems proportionate to the size of the stream involved. He cuts up the stems and root, throws the pieces in the water, goes home and waits a couple of days. The plant is probably *jalaas*, a term for some of the plants Malays and Temuan call “Ali’s cane,” *Eurycoma longifolia* (Adirukmi and Md. Noor Saleh 1992b, 1992c, 1994; Ang et al. 1992; Burkill and Haniff 186; Dzulkifli 1991; Foo 1972: 71–72; Latiff 1992: 7; Lim 1994: 395; Muhamad dan Mustafa 1992: 19, 75; Ong 1986: 512–513). Malays use their phrase also for *Smilax myosotiflora* (Sinlette and. Burkill 1930:411, 414–415, 438, 470; cf. Ong 1986: 549–550), but Semai have a

different name (*cook masow*) for that vine (Burkill 1936: 2075). Tapah and Mncaak Semai used the bitter *Eurycoma* bark as a poultice for wounds, and along the R'eis to ease childbirth. In Malay ethnomedicine, the plant is associated with sexual prowess, which may also be relevant here, since Semai theology suggests that sexual incontinence, being *trlaac*, also brings on thundersqualls. Neither Malays nor Semai should name the plant while pulling up the root, a taboo unusual for plants though not for animals. More relevantly, they still use it as dart poison (Burkill 1936: 1000–1001); putting dart poison (or menstrual blood) in a river is *trlaac* and produces thundersqualls (Dentan 1988a).

Mncaak and R'eis Semai would cut up the leaf and stalk of a tree fern, *cabeew*, *Angiopteris erecta*, and soak the pieces in a river to bring on rain.

6. For other accounts, see, e.g. Blust 1981; Evans 1923: 151–154; Freedman 1968, 1987; Kroes 1997; Needham 1967; Robarchek 1987a, 1987b; Schebesta 1927.
7. *-Siwaac* in Semai is “to throw blood toward the skies to stop thunder” (Diffloth 1976a: 243). The whole ritual is *-ctòðh*. For rather heated discussions of the connections Semai and related peoples make among blood, thunder and the mockery of animals, see Freeman 1968 and 1987; Needham 1967; Robarchek 1987a, 1987b; Schebesta 1927. For the Semai connection between women and blood, see Dentan 1988a. One euphemism for menstruents is *maay crntòðh*, “people constrained to *-ctòðh*,” i.e., to make the “blood sacrifice.”
8. The term *trlaac* is far too complex a topic to consider here in detail (see Dentan 1979: 23, 60; 2000b; Evans 1923: 199–207; and, for cognate beliefs, Endicott 1979: 68–79; Schebesta 1926b and 1927). It carries some of the anxiety associated with the English term “unnatural,” as in “unnatural acts.”
9. This is my gloss of Schebesta’s (1927: 26) transcription of the Semai answer. His translator, perhaps out of politeness, gave a more pious gloss.
10. See Skeat and Blagden (1906, II: 737, s.v. T118). Morphologically, the word could be a nominalization of a presumably extinct verb *-kuu’* (cf. Benedict 1975: 368 s.v. “rumble” [1]). Skeat and Blagden (1906, II: 299) discuss this term among Btsisi’, a people who speak of being driven to their present location by Indonesian incursions but also to have legitimated Bugis rule by marrying the invaders (Nowak 1987: 30–3; cf. Williams-Hunt and Hasan 1993: 6–7). Btsisi’ referred to this deity as “Gaffer Engkoh,” says Blagden, the term translated as “gaffer” being a gloss for a Btsisi’ title for elders, *ta’*, which could have supplied the “t” in *tengku*. If this speculation is correct, the slavocratic pirate sultanates themselves recognized the similarity between their behavior and that of Nkuu’ and chose His name to describe themselves. It would be an appropriate title for the rulers of Hinduized statelets which, quite self-consciously, regarded themselves as embodiments of Siva/Rudra the Destroyer and were, according to Nicolo Conti in 1444:

more inhuman and cruel than any other nation....They exceed every other people in cruelty. They regard killing a man as a mere ... jest, nor is any punishment allotted for such a deed.... If any one purchase a new scimitar or sword, he will thrust it into the breast of the first person he meets, neither is any punishment awarded for the death of that man [presumably a commoner or serf]. The passers by examine the wound, and praise the skill of the person who inflicted it [quoted in Rush 1996: 2, 4].

Pirates continued this weapons-testing procedure in the Riau Islands into the nineteenth century, and performed similar weapons tests on refugee “boat people” in the twentieth (cf. Dentan 1997; Endicott 1983).

11. Btsisi’, a related people of the Selangor coast, use the Malay word *moyang*, (great)grandmother, to refer to both ancestors and demons (cf. Wilkinson 1901, II: 147).
12. Malay *orang bunyi*, Semang *cinoy* (e.g., Evans 1923). Semai is less rigorous than English about specifying number. The term *Ludat* (cf. Juli Edo 1998:200, 217n27) sometimes refers to a category of beings, as a plural noun; but this story seems to personify the ideal type of this category as a single figure (for a discussion of ideal types in Semai categorization, see Dentan 1970, 1988a).
13. The vocabulary of the story, which is obscure, may be of interest. The word *-carak* refers to transmitting shamanic skills; cf. Malay “carak,” to drink by letting water flow into the mouth or to suck out, as the contents of an egg. Sucking is a Semai shamanic technique for removing the cause of a disease. One of the most salient magical plant (*bòdd*, bn in combinations) in the extensive Semai list is bn carak, fireweed, *Celosia argentea*, which people plant with rice to keep the head-soul of the rice from straying, in garlands to attract lost human head-souls or familiar spirits; and, mixed with the leaves *slbòk*, *Orchidantha longiflora* (cf. Dentan 1999; Skeat and Blagden 1906, I: 149), to bathe shamans and midwives (see Dentan 1978: 104, 136, and Dentan 1999 for other ingredients). Training shamans is a west Semai custom, found along the Waar and R’eiis rivers, at Mncaak and, before the people’s conversion to Methodism, at Kuuy Grntòòb.

An informant told me that *-tgaas maay bicarak* meant to “reach a settlement with those who teach shamanism.” The word *tgaas*, however, may be cognate with a Javanese/Malay term (*tegah*, *cegah*) for taboo or prophylactic. I have never heard it in other contexts. The payment is a recompense (*brnliis*). The shamanic melodies are *jnolaak*. To hold a shamanic ceremony is *-(br)kbvt*. Eaglewood includes several species of *Aquilaria*; the barkcloth is the best kind, white, soft and without the gaping holes of the commoner sorts. *Bn glpaap* includes the wild streamside *Saraca declinata* (= *triandra*), probably also the wild *S. indica*, and the sometimes cultivated *S. thaipingensis*, which Semai sometimes call *gapeh*, from Malay “gapis.” The

flycatcher is the Asian paradise flycatcher, *Terpsiphone paradisei*, Malay “*murai ekor gading*;” the male’s tailfeathers are up to 16 inches long, in flight “a most surprising sight, with the long flexible streamers fluttering like ribbons in its wake” (Madoc 1956: 193). This word for shamanic headband comes from Malay “*serban*;” the Semai word for a shamanic headband is *pnangkòdd*. A Semai man from Krikal who knew this story and the bird’s name said that, in fact, the bird represents the loincloth rather than the headband of Nkuu’.

The snakes in this story are the the “bead snake,” *tiji*’ or *taju’ manik*, and the “sun’s eclipse,” *mluur mad’ari*’ or *mluur mad jiis*, *jluud mat’ari*’, eyeless blind snakes, especially *Typhlops diardi muelleri* but also *Ramphotyphlops braminus*. Waar River Semai say the blind snakes enter your body between your toes, burrow through your flesh and eat your heart. They make you *-shuur*, shudder, and you kill them right away if you encounter them. People on the Tluup River in Pahang would not approach a drowned one I found but stood staring at it, patting their chests in astonishment. People on the R’eis River in Perak said that if one bit you you died before sunset. They called it *jngraak mad jiis* or *jrnglaak mad jiis*. (Waar River Semai said it had no mouth). A truly *trlaac*, storm-tabu, creature.

14. It is tempting to see this folktale as a variant of the Javanese one (Benedict 1990: 56) in which a hero seeking “the secret of life” confronts a dragon, *naga*, and, having won, meets a tiny divinity, an image of himself, not unlike the homunculus Semai head-soul, *ruwaay*, which is one agent of Semai trance (Dentan 1988a). The Javanese hero reaches nirvana through entering the divinity’s ear.
15. “*Bulan dimakan Rahu*”, a moon devoured by Rahu, is a traditional Malay metaphor for pale beauty, or a woman swooning in her lover’s arms (Wilkinson 19011, II: 300 s.v. Rahu). In 1962 a Semai adept from Teiw Tluup had *rahuu*’ as a familiar “concubine” (*guniik*); in his dreams, it looked like an old woman from “the mountains above the sky.”
16. Wilkinson (1901, I: 239–240 s.vv. *chula*, *chulak*; II: 160 s.v. *naga*). The etymology of the Sanskrit term is unclear. Most Indian scholars think *naga* ideology is “associated with a Mongolian or Tibeto-Burmese people who occupied Northern India before the entrance of the Aryans... The cult is so widespread in India that it must have begun as an aboriginal cult” (Minor 1982: 519). Thus the Semai use of the Sanskrit term need not indicate that the Semai concept is of Sanskritic Indian origin but perhaps vice versa.

The heavenly Chinese Ministry of Thunder and Storms, whose officials correspond to the Vedic Maruts, is led by Wen Chung, who has “three eyes, one in the middle of his forehead, from which, when open, a ray of white light proceeds to a distance of more than two feet” and rides a black unicorn (Werner 1922: 198). It is easy to see the relation of the third eye and its laser to the single horn of Malay dragons.

Another three-eyed deity in the Ministry is more like Nkuu’. Ma Yuan-shuai, known for excessive cruelty, is a shape-changing student of “wind, thunder, snakes, etc.” who owns a “triangular piece of stone which he could change at will into anything he liked” (Werner 1922: 207). The stone resembles the paleolithic handaxes which Semai regard as thunderstones (cf. Robarchek 1987: 298, n18).

But paired antlers properly characterize Chinese dragons (Eberhard 1986: 84). (Note the prominence of antlers, *pangkooh*, in how Semai perceive ruminants [fn 26 below].) Thus, despite the Sanskrit terminology, the Semai version of the Dragon seems a hybrid of Chinese and Indian notions; but it could also be the less differentiated model from which Chinese and Indian intellectuals elaborated their more distinctive ideas. Wilkinson (II: 160 s.v. *naga*) suggests Chinese influence on Malay notions of dragons. Dragons are associated with floods in Chinese mythology, although they may actually help heros negotiate floodwaters (e.g., Birrell 1993: 148, 241–242) and are likely to be associated with ending drought (Birrell 1993: 132–133, 241). In general, dragons in China are a lot nicer to have around than Semai dragons (Eberhard 1986: 83–86)

Despite the salience of Sanskrit terms in Balinese religion, the Saivist underworld dragon there has a number of names other than Naga (Covarrubias 1937: 317). The *naga banda* in Bali is a serpent which carries the soul to heaven, a thoroughly unSemai notion [ibid. 55, 387–388]. For Southeast Asian dragons which differ significantly from Semai ones, see McNeely and Wachtel (1988a: 6, 17, 38, 41–42, 63, 68–69, 71–83, 99, 102, 115, 121, 322).

17. Although most Semai use a form of the Malay word *bidan* for “midwife,” there is a Semai word *caca’* with roughly the same meaning (e.g. Means and Means 1986: 24), used along the Waar in the early 1990s for a midwife’s assistant, usually her daughter. The equivalent of an adept’s familiar spirit is Wa’ Gan, “Grandmother Midwife,” also called ‘Ajo’ Langit, “Grandmother Sky,” who live(s) in the moon. For detailed descriptions of Semai midwifery, see Dentan (1978, 1988b).

After asperging her equipment, which includes a beautifully decorated ritual bathing tube [*pancuur*] filled with a decoction of fragrant leaves and flowers, a midwife treating a sick child prays to the Original Midwives, who live in the uppermost of the seven cosmic tiers, then the midwives in successively lower layers, finally invoking the Midwife among Teachers, as follows:

Ku bloo’ jun gooy?
Ku padak bunga’, ku padak bn
buus, ku padak kralaa’?

where do you (respectful form) reside?
 in the Field of Flowers (where super-
 natuals live) the field of sweet basil
 [*Ocimum sanctum*], the field of
 [possibly =*kalaa’*, a wild ginger,

- Ku bloo' jun br-jjy-jaay?*
Ku pancuur gadiik, ku pancuur knundang, ku pancuur pira'?
- Ng-'òr cluh ku pancuur bunga'.*
- Ng-ha-bla' caca' jun adeh.*
- Ng-'òr kisar.*
Ng-'òr crngai~
Ng-'r nyòng skoo' pera'. Skoo' bunga', skoo' slbò', skoo' cincook.
Adeh edn n-'opah.
Ng- hònr a' b-lngaap a'b-lngoop 'òr'een skoo' bunga' adeh.
- Ng-hònt a' 'umòr a' slamat ku caca' jun adeh.*
- Edn 'opah edn 'uju' skoo' pira', skoo' bunga', skoo' bn buus, skoo' slbò', skoo' cincook, skoo' pmoleeh.*
- Edn hònt a' poleeh puja' ku krana' edn ku sngrook 'n.*
'Agoò ' 'òk nu bngkeet b-png hònt ku brook edn.
Edn hònt a' sngée' a' dīngin ku lyluy ku kòon cn'ò'.
Edn hònt a' 'umòr 'a slamat.
- Etlingera elatior*, with 6' stems and leaves which resemble those of the plant called "supernatural coolness," *Im'aam*]?
- where are you standing?
 At the ivory bathing-tube, at the festive bathing-tube, at the silver bathing-tube? [The "silver" refers to a shiny silver coin in the tube]
- I adjure [you] come down to the flowered bathing-tube.
 I am going to care-for this your midwife.
 I adjure turn [your wheel?]
 I adjure listen.
 I bring the aura of silver, of flowers, of *Orchidantha longiflora*, of magical vines.
 This I present.
 I want supernatural coolness, supernatural shading [from heat], I adjure [you] take the aura of this flower.
 I want long-life I want safety for this your midwife.
 I present, I offer the aura [gleam] of silver, the aura [fragrance] of flowers, the aura of *Ocimum sanctum*, the aura of *Orchidantha longiflora*, the aura of magical vines, the aura of *Filetia ridleyi* or *Justicia gendarussa* [magical plants in the bathing tube].
 I want vivification strengthening for my body my heart.
 Don't give heat [or] agonizing to my body.
 I want chill cold for myself for my children and grandchildren.
 I want long life [and] safety.

[Here she bathes the child with water from the pancuur. The mother then bathes the midwife with the same water, while the midwife continues praying]

- Edn smaañ nu jvyn bidat asal bidat* I implore you original midwives seven
tujuh ng-ha-bla' nramee' jun. midwives I am going to care for your
 victim [*nramee'*, effect of evil-doing,
 derives from *namee'* or *damee'*”, for
 which, see Means and Means (31 s.v
damei, 66 s.v *namei*, 166 s.v. *sin*)]
- Ng-hònt a' b-lngaap dan b-lngoop* I want supernatural cooling super-
ku sngrook nramee' jun. natural shading for the heart of your
 victim.
- Ya m-bayar skoo' slbò' skoo'* Already I've paid the aura of sacred
bunga' skoo' pancuur skoo' pira'. leaves, aura of flowers, aura of
 bathing tube, aura of silver.

Ng-hònt ['a] b-sara' ku sngrook ... I want will for the heart ...

18. Perhaps the most notable is *bn buus*, sugarcane [i.e. sweet] sacred-plant, sweet basil (*Ocimum sanctum*). This cultivated much-branched shrubby plant smells good, like cloves but more pungent; it may cause giddiness, a quality Semai associate with trance and thus the supernatural (Cf. Utusan Konsumer 1995; Burkill 1936: 1602; Castleman 1991: 94; Gimlette and Thompson 1971: 214; Aspollah, Omar and Md Shukar 1989). Malays, for whom the plant also has magical uses, talk about being *mabuk selasih*, “basil drunk” (cf. Muhamad dan Mustafa 1992: 115).

The importance of sweet basil in Hindu medicine (Castleman 1991: 93) need not suggest that the use is of Hindu origin; sweet basil occurs from Arabia through Polynesia, and, although the Malay name is of Sanskrit origin, the Semai name is not. *Srey*, lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*), also important in the rituals of Semai and other Malaysian indigenes, is a Malaysian cultigen (Burkill 1936: 735–736; Foo 1972: 50–51; Gimlette and Thompson 1971: 29, 222; Muhamad and Mustafa 1992: 67–68; Ong 1986: 497–498; Skeat and Blagden 1906, II: 2, 109). On the other hand, the fragrant *C. nardus*, which Semai call *bn srey*, is probably of southern Indian or Sinhalese origin (Burkill 1936: 737–738).

Turmeric, *Curcuma domestica*, Semai *rmed*, ritually important to Chinese, Hindus and Malaysian indigenes (including Semai), is definitely a southeast Asian cultigen (Burkill 1936: 716–722; Castleman 1991: 514–515; Foo 1972: 56; Gimlette and Thompson 1971: 131–133; Ooi 1963: 271; Muhamad and Mustafa 1992: 7, 16, 66; Ong 1986: 496; Skeat and Blagden 1906, II: 25; Tilaar, Sangat-Roemantyo and Riswan 1994).

For other magical plants and a description of midwife ceremonies, see Dentan (1978, 1999). It should be noted all of the plants cited in the River Waar adjurations of Ngkuu' are Southeast Asian cultigens. Semai folk botany is less affected by Hindu influences than Malay folk botany is (Dentan 1999).

19. The relationship between Indian, Malay and Semai magical-medical uses of gingers (Zingiberaceae) is complex and interesting (Dentan 1999: 15–16).
20. Going bald is *-laac kuuy*, “head devastation,” a term cognate with *trlaac*, bring on the destruction of a thundersquall. *-Lc-lacc* is to “throw a snit.”
21. For details of Semai tabus on food mixing and incest, see Dentan 1965, 1970, 1988b, 2000b; cf. Nagata 1995. The notion that flippancy in general — laughing loudly for example — is *trlaac* resonates with Chinese praxis: “when thunder rolls, one should sit fully clothed, wearing a hat, and taking care not to be flippant” (Eberhard 1986: 290).
22. Most Chinese thundersquall stories reflect “typical” Chinese concerns (e.g. see, e.g. Rugoff 1949: 186–189, Werner 1922: 198–207).
23. The Semai *trlaac* taboo on flashing mirrors outdoors recalls the Chinese “Mother of Lightning,” usually depicted as “holding in either hand a mirror from which proceed two broad streams or flashes of light” (Werner 1922: 203). At least three Austroasiatic peoples survive in southern China. Their official ethnonyms are Va (over 100,000 people), Benglong (about 10,000) and Blang (between 50,000 and 100,000) (China Handbook Editorial Committee 1985: 7, 32, 34). “Va” are probably kin to the people elsewhere called Khua, Wa or Lawa (for bibliography, see Lebar, Hickey and Musgrave 1964: 121–126). The Munda and Nicobarese peoples of India represent the surviving Austroasiatic-speakers there (for ethnographic summaries and bibliography, see Parkin 1991: 11–39; for distribution, Singh 1996: 698). A final possible connection is that Han Chinese used to think that such southern tribesmen had the power to turn into tigers, as the most powerful Semai shamans reputedly can, in life and after death (Eberhard 1986: 291; Dentan 1988b: 55–56).
24. Kramrisch (1981: 21).
25. The Esa Dasa Rudra, translated as the “Eleven Powers,” is one of the most important Balinese world-maintenance ceremonies; it ends in a holocaust of living things (for an evocative film, see Gartestein 1980). Robarchek suggests that Semai demons, *nyanii*’, which Perak Semai sometimes refer to by a variant of the Sanskrit word *maraa*’ (“death,” “killing”), represent the Maruts, themselves avatars of the little Rudras. The notion of *maraa*’, however, probably represents early Buddhist influence, a topic too complex to broach here.
26. The species involved are as follows:

Linnean Name	English Name	Semai Name	By Name (Bah X)
<i>Bos gaurus</i>	gaur	sladaak*	Cemcaak
<i>Capricornis sumatrensis</i>	serow	mòr	Tangiis (pun on tangaas), Latvnb, Mò’
		tangaas	Lvnb (mountain) Lataa’ (waterfall, wet cliff)
<i>Cervus unicolor</i>	deer	kronoow?*	Pangkooh (antler), Tabaa’ (tine of antler)

		rusaa’*	
<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>	barking deer	poos	Pangkoooh (antler)
		pòòs	Gadik (ivory = tooth)
<i>Tragulus napu</i>	mousedeer	bicook, napvh	
<i>T. javanicus</i>	mousedeer	bicook	

* = Malay name. ** Swettenham (1880: 135). For details on names, see Dentan 1967.

The danger of eating them, especially for women, is of epileptoid fits. Semai regard such seizures as akin to trance and thus as potentially manifesting dangerous contact with *hnalaa*’ supernatural power. Tluup River people said that menstruents may also “become” the ruminant they eat (cf. Dentan 1988b). In Semai oneiromancy, ruminants suggest motherhood.

27. There is a famous battle between Rudra and Brahman in Vedic literature, which Rudra loses (see, e.g., Biardeau 1993b, Carman and Narayan 1989: 72). Besides mutilating their penises, there’s some shitting on deities in Semai mythology. Thus a famous folktale about Pent, who appears in the religions of other Malaysian indigenes as an equivalent of the Lord, relates how macaques, who found him cleaning out the intestines of their child and then lying about it in a rhyme hilarious to Semai listeners, tied Him up under their house and pissed and shat upon Him (Juli Edo 1990: 86–94).
28. Other Malaysian indigenes akin to Semai have quite similar belief systems. See, e.g., Jennings 1995, Roseman 1991 and 1995. Both authors treat the religion as indigenous (although a significant part of the latter’s CD presents sèance music of admittedly Semai origin).

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