



**Archipel**

Études interdisciplinaires sur le monde insulindien

91 | 2016

Varia

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/archipel/329>

DOI: 10.4000/archipel.329

ISSN: 2104-3655

**Publisher**

Association Archipel

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 15 May 2016

Number of pages: 281-283

ISBN: 978-2-910513-74-0

ISSN: 0044-8613

**Electronic reference**

Bernard Sellato, « Temiar Religion 1964-2012: Enchantment, Disenchantment and Re-enchantment in Malaysia's Uplands, Geoffrey Benjamin », *Archipel* [Online], 91 | 2016, Online since 01 May 2017, connection on 25 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/archipel/329> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/archipel.329>

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This text was automatically generated on 25 September 2020.

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# Temiar Religion 1964-2012: Enchantment, Disenchantment and Re-enchantment in Malaysia's Uplands, Geoffrey Benjamin

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## REFERENCES

Geoffrey Benjamin, *Temiar Religion 1964-2012 : Enchantment, Disenchantment and Re-enchantment in Malaysia's Uplands*, foreword by James C. Scott, Singapore : NUS Press, xix+450 pages, index, ISBN 978-9971-69-706-8 (paperback)

- 1 I discovered Geoffrey Benjamin's work in the mid-1980s: first, a seminal paper delivered at the 1985 IPPA Conference, and later circulated by the National University of Singapore as a Working Paper titled *Between Isthmus and Islands: Reflections on Malayan Palaeo-Sociology* (1986). At about the same time, I came across his remarkable "In the Long Term : Three Themes in Malayan Cultural Ecology" (1985). Benjamin's way of weaving together various disciplines to make sense of history within a broad regional scope immediately appealed to me, and his later works articulating ethnohistory and archaeology contributed to set me on a track more or less parallel to his (see his studies on Kelantan, 1987 and, more recently, Pahang, 1997).
- 2 The volume under review, however, focuses on religion, the religion of the Temiar, an Orang Asli group of the central northern part of the Malay Peninsula. It was constructed upon and around Benjamin's PhD thesis, *Temiar Religion* (Cambridge, 1967), which had remained unpublished, and another important early paper, *Indigenous Religious Systems of the Malay Peninsula* (1974, 1979). The thesis forms the core of the volume (Chapters 3-8, pp. 41-211). Almost fifty years down the road, this thesis had become "truly historical in both content and approach," and the author chose to

publish it as it was, “warts and all,” and to include a number of extra chapters, some being revised reprints of published articles, such as “Indigenous Religious Systems” (Chapter 11), and others based on lectures or conference papers.

- 3 As the volume’s main title indicates, Benjamin’s aim was to make available the data from fieldwork traversing five decades and to summarize, and at the same time update, a half century of acquaintance with the Temiar people and research on their religion. Despite its heterogeneous construction and overall “slight lack of tidiness” (p. 384), some degree of redundancy in the chapters, as well as unavoidable, though rather heavy, cross-referencing between chapters, the book is an impressive achievement. It appears to have been meant as the first of a set of two, as another, simply titled *Temiar Society*, is listed as “forthcoming” – yet another volume, also forthcoming, under the title *Between Isthmus and Islands*, is a collection of revised papers focused on the Peninsula’s cultural history. Both of these will, of course, be waited for with much interest.
- 4 The set of chapters of the original thesis is introduced by a brief discussion of the local physical context of the fieldwork and the general intellectual context of the thesis, including an interesting bout of “how would I write this thesis today.” Also preceding the thesis is a twenty-page summary (Chapter 2) on the Temiar and their religion, revisited in the light of later fieldwork and new concepts.
- 5 The six chapters are remarkable in themselves: “Preface and Introduction,” “The Cosmos,” “Species,” “Souls,” “Spirit-mediumship,” and “Theology.” While the original text bears witness to the author’s very careful and meticulous way of handling the raw data, numerous new footnotes, dated “2014,” present updated information or report about shifts in his understanding of the data, as well as on possible new analyses and revised interpretations and conclusions.
- 6 The area was rather isolated in the 1960s, and transportation was a serious problem. However, the author took the pains to widely travel around the Temiar territories, and beyond to visit other Orang Asli groups and Malay communities. This allowed him to envision variation – areal, temporal, and individual – as fully constitutive of Temiar religion, and to establish the existence in the Malay Peninsula of three distinctive indigenous religious systems, actually three forms – Temiar, Semang, and Malay (Chapter 11) – of animism (“a label for any religious orientation that sees the world as populated with entities possessing communicable-with subjectivities,” pp. 10-11). Most interestingly, Benjamin links these three systems to historical, economic and political patterns.
- 7 Benjamin’s “long-term” approach of his topic enables him to offer a diachronic view of religious change among Temiar, covering various, if brief, episodes of acquaintance with the Baha’i religion, Islam, and Christianity, and the very recent development of the endogenous ‘Aluj Selamad cult (Chapters 13, 14). Here, again, variation is rampant among and within Temiar communities.
- 8 Other sections include a correspondence with Edmund Leach touching, among other topics, on the then emergent Lévi-Straussian structuralism (Chapter 9); a study of Temiar mediumship (Chapter 10), and another on Temiar childhood, which appeared in J. Massard & J. Koubi’s *Enfants et sociétés d’Asie du Sud-Est* (1994; here, revised as Chapter 12).

- 9 Four short appendices “present material that does not fit easily into the main text, but which throws further light on topics discussed there” (p. 14): H.D. Noone’s Temiar fieldwork in the 1930s; Temiar dance types and spirit-guide song genres; more on burial practices; and children’s accounts of their dreams.
- 10 Finally, what of the book’s enchanting Weberian subtitle? After becoming disenchanted with rationality and “development,” which had failed to lift them above their low economic condition, (some) Temiar chose to re-enchant their own lives through small-scale revivalist and syncretic religious cults (p. 339).

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