

# MALAY MAGIC

BEING

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FOLKLORE  
AND POPULAR RELIGION OF THE  
MALAY PENINSULA

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WITH A PREFACE

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*balei*, and all the people who were living scattered about in the vicinity were collected together and set to work on the various buildings.”<sup>1</sup>

Even in the making of roads through the forest it would appear that sacrificial ceremonies are not invariably neglected. On one occasion I came upon a party of Malays in the Labu jungle who were engaged in making a bridle-track for the Selangor Government. A small bamboo censer, on which incense had been burning, had been erected in the middle of the trace; and I was informed that the necessary rites (for exorcising the demons from the trace) had just been successfully concluded.

## 2. BEASTS AND BEAST CHARMS

All wild animals, more especially the larger and more dangerous species, are credited in Malay folklore with human or (occasionally) superhuman powers.

In the pages which now follow I shall deal with the folklore which refers to the more important animals, first pointing out their anthropomorphic traits, then detailing some of the more important traditions about them, and finally, where possible, describing the methods of hunting them.

### *The Elephant*

Of the Elephant we read :—

“The superstitious dread entertained by Malays for the larger animals is the result of ideas regarding

<sup>1</sup> *J.R.A.S., S.B.*, No. 9, pp. 85, 86. This is an extract from the Marong Mahawangsa, the legendary history of Kedah, a State bordering on Lower Siam. The name Podisat (*i.e.* Bodhi-

sattva) indicates Indo-Chinese Buddhist influence. It does not seem to occur elsewhere in Malay literature, though Buddhism flourished in Sumatra in the seventh century A.D.

them which have been inherited from the primitive tribes of Eastern Asia. Muhammadanism has not been able to stamp out the deep-rooted feelings which prompted the savage to invest the wild beasts which he dreaded with the character of malignant deities. The tiger, elephant, and rhinoceros<sup>1</sup> were not mere brutes to be attacked and destroyed. The immense advantages which their strength and bulk gave them over the feebly-armed savage of the most primitive tribes naturally suggested the possession of supernatural powers; and propitiation, not force, was the system by which it was hoped to repel them. The Malay addresses the tiger as *Datoh* (grandfather), and believes that many tigers are inhabited by human souls. Though he reduces the elephant to subjection, and uses him as a beast of burden, it is universally believed that the observance of particular ceremonies, and the repetition of prescribed formulas, are necessary before wild elephants can be entrapped and tamed. Some of these spells and charms (*mantra*) are supposed to have extraordinary potency, and I have in my possession a curious collection of them, regarding which, it was told me seriously by a Malay, that in consequence of their being read aloud in his house three times all the hens stopped laying! The spells in this collection are nearly all in the Siamese language, and there is reason to believe that the modern Malays owe most of their ideas on the subject of taming and driving elephants to the Siamese. Those, however, who had no idea of making use of the elephant, but

<sup>1</sup> Of the rhinoceros not many superstitions are yet known. The rhinoceros horn, however (called *chula*), is believed to be a powerful aphrodisiac, and there is supposed to be a species of

"fiery" rhinoceros (*badak api*) which is excessively dangerous if attacked. This latter is probably a mere fable, *vide* Cliff., *In Court and Kampong*, p. 33.

who feared him as an enemy, were doubtless the first to devise the idea of influencing him by invocations. This idea is inherited, both by Malays and Siamese, from common ancestry."<sup>1</sup>

To the above evidence (which was collected by Sir W. E. Maxwell no doubt mainly in Perak) I would add that at Labu, in Selangor, I heard on more than one occasion a story in which the elephant-folk were described as possessing, on the borders of Siam, a city of their own, where they live in houses like human beings, and wear their natural human shape. This story, which was first told me by Ungku Said Kéchil of Jélebu, was taken down by me at the time, and ran as follows:—

"A Malay named Laboh went out one day to his rice-field and found that elephants had been destroying his rice.

"He therefore planted caltrops of a cubit and a half in length in the tracks of the offenders. That night an elephant was wounded in the foot by one of the caltrops, and went off bellowing with pain.

"Day broke and Laboh set off on the track of the wounded elephant, but lost his way, and after three days and nights journeying, found himself on the borders of a new and strange country. Presently he encountered an old man, to whom he remarked 'Hullo, grandfather, your country is extraordinarily quiet!' The old man replied, 'Yes, for all noise is forbidden, because the king's daughter is ill.' 'What is the matter with her?' asked Si Laboh. The old man replied that she had trodden upon a caltrop. Si Laboh then asked, 'May I see if I can do anything to help her?'

<sup>1</sup> *J.R.A.S., S.B.*, No. 7, pp. 23, 24.

"The old man then went and reported the matter to the king, who ordered Si Laboh to be brought into his presence.

"[Now the country which Si Laboh had reached was a fine open country on the borders of Siam. It is called 'Pak Hénang,' and its only inhabitants are the elephant-people who live there in human guise. And whoever trespasses over the boundaries of that country turns into an elephant.]

"Then Si Laboh saw that the king's daughter, whose name was Princess Rimbut, was suffering from one of the caltrops which he himself had planted. He therefore extracted it from her foot, so that she recovered, and the king, in order to reward Si Laboh, gave him the Princess in marriage.

"Now when they had been married a long time, and had got two children, Si Laboh endeavoured to persuade his wife to accompany him on a visit to his own country. To this the Princess replied 'Yes; but if I go you must promise never to add to the dish any young tree-shoots at meal-time.'<sup>1</sup>

"On this they started, and at the end of the first day's journey they halted and sat down to eat. But Si Laboh had forgotten the injunctions of his wife, and put young tree-shoots into the dish with his rice. Then his wife protested and said, 'Did I not tell you not to put young tree-shoots into your food?' But Si Laboh was obstinate, and merely replied, 'What do I care?' so that his wife was turned back into an elephant and ran off into the jungle. Then Si Laboh wept and followed her, but she refused to return as she had now become an elephant. Yet he followed her for a whole day, but

<sup>1</sup> Young shoots of bamboo are eaten by Malays with curry.

she would not return to him, and he then returned homewards with his children.

"This is all that is known about the origin of elephants who are human beings."

A Malay charm which was given me (at Labu) to serve as a protection against elephants (*pěndinding gajah*) gives the actual name of the Elephant King—

"O Grandfather Moyang Kaban,  
Destroy not your own grandchildren."

Ghost elephants (*gajah kramat*) are not uncommon. They are popularly believed to be harmless, but invulnerable, and are generally supposed to exhibit some outward and visible sign of their sanctity, such as a stunted tusk or a shrunken foot. They are the tutelary genii of certain localities, and when they are killed the good fortune of the neighbourhood is supposed to depart too. Certain it is, that when one of these ghost elephants was shot at Klang a year or two ago, it did not succumb until some fifty or sixty rifle-bullets had been poured into it, and its death was followed by a fall in the local value of coffee and coffee land, from which the district took long to recover.<sup>1</sup>

A ghost elephant is very often thought to be the guardian spirit of some particular shrine—an idea that is common throughout the Peninsula.

Other general ideas about the elephant are as follows :—

"Elephants are said to be very frightened if they see a tree stump that has been felled at a great height

<sup>1</sup> The skull of this elephant, riddled with bullets, was sent to the Government Museum at Kuala Lumpor, in Selangor. It had, so far as I remember,

one stunted tusk. The present State surgeon (Dr. A. E. O. Travers) can speak to the facts.

from the ground, as some trees which have high spreading buttresses are cut, because they think that giants must have felled it, and as ordinary-sized men are more than a match for them they are in great dread of being caught by creatures many times more powerful than their masters. Some of the larger insects of the grasshopper kind are supposed to be objects of terror to elephants, while the particularly harmless little pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*) is thought to be able to kill one of these huge beasts by biting its foot. The pangolin, by the bye, is quite toothless. Another method in which the pangolin attacks and kills elephants is by coiling itself tightly around the end of the elephant's trunk, and so suffocating it. This idea is also believed in by the Singhalese, according to Mr. W. T. Hornaday's *Two Years in the Jungle*.<sup>1</sup>

The foregoing passage refers to Perak, but similar ideas are common in Selangor, and they occur no doubt, with local variations, in every one of the Malay States. Selangor Malays tell of the scaring of elephants by the process of drawing the slender stem of the bamboo down to the ground and cutting off the top of it, when it springs back to its place.

The story of the "pangolin" is also told in Selangor with additional details. Thus it is said that the "Jawi-jawi" tree (a kind of banyan) is always avoided by elephants because it was once licked by the armadillo. The latter, after licking it, went his way, and "the elephant coming up was greatly taken aback by the offensive odour, and swore that he would never go near the tree again. He kept his oath, and his example has been followed by his descendants, so that

<sup>1</sup> *Sel. Journ.* vol. iii. No. 6, p. 95 (quoted from Perak Museum Notes by Mr. L. Wray).

to this day the 'Jawi-jawi' is the one tree in the forest which the elephant is afraid to approach."<sup>1</sup>

The following directions for hunting the elephant were given me by Lĕbai Jamal, a famous elephant hunter of Lingging, near the Sungei Ujong border:—

"When you first meet with the spoor of elephant or rhinoceros, observe whether the foot-hole contains any dead wood, (then) take the twig of dead wood, together with a ball of earth as big as a maize-cob taken from the same foot-hole (if there is only one of you, one ball will do, if there are three of you, three balls will be wanted, if seven, seven balls, but not more). Then roll up your ball of earth and the twig together in a tree-leaf, breathe upon it, and recite the charm (for blinding the elephant's eyes), the purport of which is that if the quarry sees, its eyesight shall be destroyed, and if it looks, its eyesight shall be dimmed, by the help of God, the prophet, and the medicine-man, who taught the charm.

"Now slip your ball of earth into your waistband just over the navel, and destroy the scent of your body and your gun. To do this, take a bunch of certain leaves<sup>2</sup> (*daun sa-chérek*), together with stem-leaves of the betel-vine (*kérapak sirih*), leaves of the wild camphor (*chapa*), and leaves of the club-gourd (*labu ayer puteh*), break their midribs with your left hand, shut your eyes, and say 'As these tree leaves smell, so may my body (and gun) be scented.'

"When the animal is dead, beat it with an end of black cloth, repeating the charm for driving away the

<sup>1</sup> *Sel. Journ.* vol. i. No. 6, p. 83, where this note is given. Probably "armadillo" is a mistake for "pan-golin."

<sup>2</sup> These leaves are such as are used

by the medicine-man for his leaf-brush, i.e. leaves of the *pulut-pulut*, *selaguri*, *gandarusa*, and the red dracæna (*lén-juang merah*).

‘mischief’ (*badi*) from the carcase, which charm runs as follows :—

“ Badiyu, Mother of Mischief, Badi Panji, Blind Mother,  
 I know the origin from which you sprang,<sup>1</sup>  
 Three drops of Adam’s blood were the origin from which you sprang,  
 Mischief of Earth, return to Earth,  
 Mischief of Ant-heap, return to Ant-heap,  
 Mischief of Elephant, return to Elephant,<sup>2</sup>  
 Mischief of Wood, return to Wood,  
 Mischief of Water, return to Water,  
 Mischief of Stone, return to Stone  
 And injure not my person.  
 By the virtue of my Teacher,  
 You may not injure the children of the race of Man.”

The perquisites of the Pawang (magician) are to be “a little black cloth and a little white cloth,” and the only special taboo mentioned by Lĕbai Jamal was “on no account to let the naked skin rub against the skin of the slain animal.”

Before leaving the subject of elephants, I may add that Raja Ja’far (of Beranang in Selangor) told me that Lĕbai Jamal, when charged by an elephant or rhinoceros, would draw upon the ground with his finger a line which the infuriated animal was never able to cross. This line, he said, was called the Baris Laksamana, or the “Admiral’s Line,” and the knowledge of how to draw it was naturally looked upon as a great acquisition.

<sup>1</sup> “The Malays believe that the power to inform a spirit, a wild beast, or any natural object, such as iron rust, of the source from which it originates (*usul asal ka-jadi-an-nya*), renders it powerless.” H. Clifford in No. 3 of the Publications of the R.A.S., S.B., *Hikayat Raja Budiman*, pt. ii. p. 8. This belief is found among all tribes of Malays in the Peninsula. Possibly the idea was that knowledge of another

person’s ancestry implied common tribal origin. For the explanation of “Badi,” *vide* Chap. IV. p. 94, *supra*, and Chap. VI. p. 427, *infra*.

<sup>2</sup> “Rhinoceros” should be substituted for “elephant” *passim*, if it was the object of the hunter’s pursuit. This particular line should probably come at the end of the charm instead of the middle.