RITUAL AND DRAMA IN MALAY SPIRIT MEDIUMSHIP

Phenomena identified as spirit mediumship seem to be world wide and to be recognizable from an early period in human society. Attention has been paid to them by writers of classical antiquity of whom, from an anthropological point of view, Jane Harrison was one of the most noteworthy. Influenced by Durkheim and by Rivers, she recognized the importance of collective elements in religion and of the need for a knowledge of the social structure to gain an understanding of any particular cult. Robustly she argued, “What a people *does* in relation to its gods must always be one clue, and perhaps the safest, to what it thinks.” Knowing that her attempt to build a bridge between anthropology and the classics was viewed sceptically in some quarters, she countered trenchantly “It is only a *little* anthropology that is a dangerous thing.”

*Cults of Ecstasy*

Particularly interesting to an anthropologist in Jane Harrison’s treatment of religion was her exploration of the significance of Dionysiac and Orphic cults. Emphasizing ecstasy, abandonment of the self and identification with God, these cults ran parallel to the more orthodox practices of Greek religion. With its emphasis upon the significance of what she referred to as “potencies” (*daimonones*) rather than personal gods, and of emotion rather than reason, Jane Harrison’s work may appeal once again to modern anthropological students of religion. Study of the relation of a religious system of beliefs and practices to the social structure of communities is by now a well-worn theme. Where we are much less at home, and where some of the most interesting problems seem to lie, is in the relation of religious belief and practice and of ritual more generally to the complex, non-rational elements in personality. As anthropologists we are concerned primarily not with the more purely individual aspects of this problem, but with the way in which, generated and conditioned by society, individuals in relation to one another express their thoughts, beliefs and values.

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1 This essay was given in its original form as the Jane Harrison Lecture at Newnham College, Cambridge on 19th February 1966.
3 *Themis*, 1912, p. 22.
The type of behaviour which I have taken for consideration here falls under the general heading of what Greek scholars have discussed as ecstasy (ekstasis), a standing outside oneself, perhaps a dissociation of the personality, interpreted by the person concerned and by others as entusiasmos, possession by a god or spirit. This phenomenon, in that form which I would class conventionally as spirit mediumship, I shall discuss in particular from my observations in the state of Kelantan in Malaysia. These spirit medium procedures can vary considerably. But characteristic of the more complex are elements of dance, even of drama, as well as of ritual. It is the relation between these elements that I wish to examine.

Jane Harrison, like most anthropologists of her day, was concerned very much with questions of origin and development — how one type of social behaviour, pantomimic dance, provided the base, “the root inchoate” material, out of which both ritual and art, at least in the form of drama, developed. Modern anthropologists, at least those outside the classical field, have been conventionally much less interested in such questions. But later I consider if this problem has any relevance for anthropology today.

What is clearly of concern here is the problem of the relation of personality to society, as exemplified symbolically in the theme of human struggle. We may interpret in a different sense from Jane Harrison her view that pantomimic dancing was a ritual bridge between actual life and those representations of life which we call art. But when a man as a spirit medium goes into a trance, claims to be a god and dances in the name of the god, while a sick person lies before him on the floor, we too must try to understand what is represented. For whom is the dance really performed; what is the character of what Jane Harrison has termed the “enactment”? When art and ritual are so conjoined, in what proportion are they welded, are they separable in intent or in effect, and what is the function of either in a situation of human suffering?

_A Malay Spirit Medium Performance_

Let me first describe an actual example from northeastern Malaya which my wife and I observed late in 1963. These rural Malays have some faith in Western medicine and also a little of their own folk pharmacology. But they

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6 A general account of Malay spirit mediumship has been given by Sir Richard Winstedt, _The Malay Magician, being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi_, revised and enlarged (London, 1951). For a valuable account of the phenomenon in Kelantan see Jeanne Cuisinier, _Dances Magiques de Kelantan (= Université de Paris, Travaux et Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie_, XII (1936).
7 _Prolegomena_, p. 568.
8 J. D. Gimlette, _Malay Poisons and Charm Cures_, 3rd ed. (London, 1929); J. D. Gim-
tend to think that any illness which is of a refractory kind must have a supernatural cause.

In this case a man had been ill for about two weeks, and a spirit medium performance took place in order to diagnose his illness and to attempt to cure him. The performance began at about nine o’clock at night at the sick man’s house. A special shelter was erected outside the house by stretching a sail over a bamboo frame. In one corner of the shelter gongs were hung, and pandanus mats were laid down thickly on the ground as floor covering. The performing team arrived and were given a meal inside the house. These were mundane preparations.

But from the outset it was clear that extra-human powers were expected to be involved. Offerings were prepared to spirits. A plate of rice with an egg on it was hung up for the spirit patron of the performance (Dewa Betara Guru, classically identified as Shiva). A tray with parched rice, betel materials, scented oil and other ritual elements was arranged for the spirits as a whole. A most important figure was the master of ceremonies, known as the Mindok, a specialist in the magical lore of healing and in the control of spirits. He opened the proceedings by perfuming the offerings with incense and pronouncing formulae of invocation to the gods and spirits, announcing to them the name of the patient and the purpose of the performance. After a ritual dedication of the orchestral instruments, of which fiddle and gongs were the chief representatives, the master of ceremonies began to play his fiddle in a wailing melody and to chant, with the orchestra following and supporting him. Each stage of the performance has its own melodic and rhythmic indicator or “signature tune”.

These were preliminaries. Now the spirit medium performance was about to begin. One of the drummers left his instrument, and bare to the waist put on a new yellow kilt, and purified himself by ritual performances with incense, scented oil and parched rice. By this time the orchestra was playing in quick rhythm, and the master of ceremonies was singing vigorously. He was calling loudly in formal terms, with many honorifics, on the spirits. These, generally termed hantu, included a range of entities of various status — Arabic Jinns, Hindu and Indonesian gods (Dewa) and local sprites. Some have elaborate titles: Skeikh Triumphant Ruler, Grandsire Earth Jin; Grandsire White Jin; Grandsire Conqueror Glowing Light. It must be emphasised that the invocation is not a pagan affair; the master of ceremonies places himself, and the performance, under the protection of Allah, and cites putative leading Muslim figures — four Sheikhs, seven Saints, four Archangels — in support of his procedures.

By now the performer had his eyes half closed and was beginning to sway

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Jette & H. W. Thomson, *A Dictionary of Malayan Medicine* (London, 1939). Few of these folk remedies seem to be used in modern times.
his head and shoulders round and round counter-clockwise. He was sitting cross-legged; the fingers of his left hand resting on his right foot began to quiver rapidly. His right hand too began to quiver. Quicker and quicker he rotated the upper part of his body, his head now nodding rapidly in response to the rhythm of the drums, his hands raised alternately and then clapped. He gave a shriek of “Ais”, and threw out parched rice around him as a ritual gesture. He turned one by one to the four quarters, the east, the west, the north and the south, in ritual acknowledgement, and then began a dialogue with the master of ceremonies.

This introduced the main business of the evening. The patient sitting nearby reclined against a long pillow. The central performer, now believed to be possessed by his ancestral spirit influence, began to dance. His movements, though without the refinement with which we are familiar in Indian classical dancing, did have a certain rhythmic grace of their own, and were marked particularly by delicate symbolic gestures of the fingers. He danced for about a quarter of an hour in the small, central space of the shelter. Then to a rally of music, with his head nodding rapidly in time to the rhythm, he went into a kind of paroxysm which suddenly stopped as the music ended. Then began the diagnosis of the patient’s illness. The medium, representing a visiting spirit, undertook a rather aggressive interchange of comments with the master of ceremonies, who replied in quiet but firm tones. The medium then spread some grains of parched rice on a little cushion, and began a diagnosis of the source of the patient’s illness by an elimination technique rather like our own childhood “ickle ockle black bottle” formula. Here the reference was to a system of “temperaments” or humours: earth, air, fire, water, somewhat akin to European medieval doctrines. The broad, preliminary diagnosis was established in terms of one of the major elements, air and water being relatively benign, earth and fire relatively malignant. The medium turned to the patient, gave him parched rice to eat and chanted over him; then re-knotted a yellow scarf around his own waist and again danced. He and the master of ceremonies chanted alternately over the patient, addressing the ills in him in spirit form to emerge and so relieve him. The medium went through a “laying on of hands” on the patient, including a kind of pursuit along the length of the patient’s body, ending with a wild shaking of his feet in a last attempt to drive out the afflicting spirit. Dialogue between master of ceremonies and medium was pursued, the purpose of the master of ceremonies being to identify the particular spirit responsible for the patient’s illness, and to induce it to acknowledge responsibility, leave his body and return to its own abode. Sometimes the afflicting spirit was quiescent, sometimes he resisted violently and had to be argued into submission. From time to time the medium was possessed with violent seizures as the spirit within him or acting through him was pressed more closely by the master of ceremonies. All the time the orchestra was playing. As the night wore on people had begun to assemble
around the shelter; some quietly talking, most intently watching and listening. By about midnight nearly a hundred people were present, about half of them adults: in a village affair of this kind there are always plenty of children, so they get socialized at an early age.

At last the patient himself, ill as he was, rose and danced in the middle of the floor, the medium encouraging him and as it were instructing him. This was the sign that benign influences had come to him and that he would be better. After the patient, looking rather exhausted, sat down again the medium and the master of ceremonies alternately sang of these benign influences. Then the patient himself joined in the song, wailing out in high chant his spiritual agreement and rapprochement. Finally, after some gentle massage from shoulder to waist by the medium, the patient himself went into a brief trance state from which he was relieved by a ritual scattering of parched rice. This was for him the final rite, the “release”, as the Malays themselves express it, and he turned away, dismissed as it were from the scene. The audience began to drift away. For them the performance was over. All that was left was for the medium to recover himself and perform his final ritual obeisances, with gestures to head, face, shoulders and breast, with the orchestra giving a final rally while he unwound the yellow scarf, a symbol of his status, from around his waist.

**Interpretation at the Local Level**

What is the meaning of these complex proceedings? There are several levels of interpretation. In essence, the local interpretation is that at least four kinds of spiritual powers are involved. First there is the patient’s own soul (*semangat*) which has been attacked. Then there are the afflicted spirits (*hantu*) — djinns, sprites, sea or earth spirits, one of which has found lodgement in the patient’s body. The type and identity of spirit responsible for the illness can be found most effectively through the agency of the medium in trance, a state which he can assume because of his own peculiar ancestral endowment, a hereditary disposition or humour, known by the same word as for wind (*angin*). This congenital propensity to trance behaviour is a spiritual force rather than a spirit entity. But another type of spirit is the medium’s own familiar. Sometimes this tutelary is described as a tiny spirit of a dead person — not an ancestor — known as *penggawa* (leader); it is fostered by the medium by being given periodic offerings, as of eggs. *Penggawa* are superior to *hantu*, who are afraid of them, and so they can be used to expel *hantu*. Finally there are the most powerful spirits of all, the *Dewa*, a term of Hindu origin. It is they, frequently, whom the medium represents when he dances, each of them — there are seven — shown by different gestures. *Dewa*, unlike most other spirits, are not thought to enter the body of the medium — he would die; they repose at the back of his neck and on his shoulders, and in-
fluence his actions. *Dewa* are usually benign, assist medium and patient and provide the clarifying influence which restores serenity after violence. Their function is to make the patient at ease after the exorcism. But I must point out that many of these spirits have no particular moral character; they are neither good nor evil in themselves. They act according to circumstances, and if not treated with proper deference can turn against a man instead of working for him. If I were writing in another context, indeed, I should emphasize how these various spirit forms can be taken by us to represent in a rather amorphous symbolic way, exterior projections of various aspects of human personality. In a sense *Dewa* represent existence, memory, thought, etc. If not used rightly, these aspects are destructive to the person concerned.

But in Malay eyes the spirit medium performance, with its trance and seance, was in essence a struggle for the spirit and body of the sick man, to lure out and expel the alien spirit afflicting him. When the afflicting spirit has departed the sick man is left "with his illness alone" as the Malays say. His spiritual disability has been removed; it is only the physical disability that is left, and the man will respond to medicine or get better of himself.

In the present case, enquiry revealed that the afflicting spirit (*Hantu Dewa Muda*), who was very powerful, had stricken the man because of neglect. The reason given seems trivial to us — an ancestor of the man had not made the spirit a present of a small *kēris* dagger which he had admired. But the weight of the excuse seems never to be called in question. What is important is that a reason *is* given. Moreover, the spirit reproached the patient and his relatives through the spirit medium for not having had a mediumistic performance much sooner. The spirit was angry — Why did they allow the man to be ill so long without any attempt to find the cause? The relatives replied to the medium that they didn’t know that he, the spirit, had been actually residing in the man and causing the illness. They asked would the patient recover soon or would he be ill for long? The spirit, through the medium, replied that the patient would recover quite quickly provided he complied with instructions, which included a gift of atonement, called a *balai*. In the context of a spirit medium performance this term means a frame of bamboo which simulates a royal palace or hall of audience and which serves as a stage, a few feet high, upon which offerings to the spirits can be exposed. The spirit specified also that he wanted offerings of sea creatures, sharks, stingray, and so on, made and put upon the *balai*. These, as was customary, would be made of wheaten paste, crude little models which represented the objects asked for. This stage would be constructed either by the man himself when he recovered or by his relatives, and with its offerings carried to a piece of waste land or the side of a stream near his house. This propitiation of the spirit was accompanied by a payment to the performers of the evening, but neither the cost of the propitiatory offering or of the remuneration to the performers was very high. As it turned out, the sick man did in fact recover quite soon.
Now for interpretation by the external observer. We are clearly dealing here with procedures at a symbolic level. Dispositions and forces are manifest in which individual characteristics are closely related to social relationships, norms and pressures. This is exemplified by the chants of the master of ceremonies, which embody a number of references to senses, orifices, parts of the body in metaphorical form and even symbolise them as spirit titles. This implies the relation of man to the external world, and to religious structure. Each of the Archangels, or of the Companions of the Prophet, controls an orifice and an organ of the body. Even the rebab, the Arab-type fiddle, was explained to me by one expert as a simulacrum of the human body. The scroll is the head of man, the pegs for tuning are equivalent to human ears, the strings to veins and muscles, and so on. In a way we are given a homocentric symbolic system. Symbolically, what has occurred to the patient has been an establishment of public concern in his illness, and a diagnosis of it in terms of conflict of elements in his personality. The illness has been given an aetiology not of blind fate but of human error, and certainty has been given where before was ignorance and anxiety. There is now a basis for action, and a demand for offering of atonement which can be thought to cleanse the man from guilt.

Let us focus here on the behaviour and situation of the medium. The medium in this performance is obviously a kind of bridge between the ideas, emotions and behaviour of the sick person, and those of the people who surround him. What he does, among other things, is to take the brakes off the speech conventions of ordinary social discourse. Instead of conventional expressions of concern for the sick person, in his trance state the medium can allow his ideas about responsibility or feelings of frustration, anger and aggression to come to the surface. But the words that he utters are regarded as not his own, but those of a being apart from and for the most part more powerful than he. Since he is thought not to be able to help himself, but to be merely a vehicle of communication for the spirits, any praise or blame which he may attribute to the patient, to the patient’s relatives or to persons outside is not treated as rebounding upon him. In a sense, indeed, the words he utters may not entirely be his own; they are his rendering of what he feels other people’s attitudes force him to express. Through the medium in trance then there comes to the surface what ordinary people think and feel about the case in question. The medium’s utterances can serve as a very useful safety valve for collective and individual attitudes.

But to understand the significance of this phenomenon more fully we must lay stress upon its importance as a means of communication between individual and society about a problem of concern. This is where I think in the
past some studies of spirit possession and allied phenomena have failed to be quite clear. In many societies various forms of craziness have been interpreted as possession by spirits. But the only forms which are socially utilizable are those where the relation between society and the individual concerned can operate in some mutually intelligible way. Let me illustrate this further from the Kelantan Malay field. Among the forms of mental disorder recognised by Malays, there are four which can be fairly simply distinguished by different terms. They are:

1) The classical *amok* — a state in which a man goes into a homicidal paroxysm, killing or wounding all whom he may meet, and prepared to devote himself to death in so doing. The ostensible basis for such conduct has been to wipe out some deep affront. *Amok* seems to have been a condition to which men only were prone, and to have occurred particularly among gentry and warriors, for whom insult and honour have high significance, and for whom resort to arms was no novelty. Although well-known in the literature, *amok* has apparently had a markedly declining incidence in Malaya since changes in the politico/legal structure began to be effected in the latter part of last century. Even in 1939/40 I personally never knew nor heard of an actual case of *amok* at that time, although in the past apparently it was fairly frequent.

2) *Latah.* This is a specific reaction produced by sudden psychological shock in a naive, undeveloped or poorly endowed personality. The person afflicted can be thrown into this state by any sudden movement or sudden loud noise which startles him. The result is that the person must then engage in some form of compulsive imitation — echolalia, repeating any words uttered to him; echokinesis, imitating, it may be to an extreme, any gesture seen, as pulling a glowing coal from the fire when someone makes the appropriate gesture. Sometimes the state is characterized not by imitation but by a compulsive excess, going beyond all the normal social bounds, as by coprolalia, when a normally refined, composed Malay bursts forth with obscene phrases. *Latah*, a condition which may occur among men or women, seems to persist nowadays, and I have known of several local examples, in Kelantan.

3) *Gila.* This is a state of madness or “craziness” characterised by such socially odd behaviour as muttering or shrieking without apparent cause, depressive apathy, maniac attacks. Such conditions can occur among men or women, and have a number of colloquial terms given to them, such as the Kelantan vernacular term *gong*.10

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10 *Gong* in Kelantan means: a musical instrument of the percussive type; a rising ground or hillock; crazy or “touched”. See R. J. Wilkinson, *A Malay/English Dictionary* (Romanised) (Mytilene, 1932). I have been informed by Mr. Ronald Ng that in Cantonese *gong* means hillock and by Professor Maurice Freedman that in Hokkien it means foolish, silly.
4) *Lupa.* This term, which means literally forgetting, is applied to a condition of trance in which an individual, man or woman, takes on another personality, speaking and behaving in another guise.

Now it is important to note that of these four general categories of mental disorder recognized by Malays, only one, the last, is, as it were, convertible to social utility. *Amok,* equivalent to going berserk, may have been socially useful at an earlier stage of Malay society when nobles and their retainers might fight each other, but the condition would seem to have been too unpredictable and too much out of control to be of much value to others. Similarly, neither *latah* nor *gila* conditions are sufficiently controllable nor yield sufficiently intelligible communication to be socially useful. Out of the entire field of mental disorders only that of *lupa,* trance, can be put to social use. In this type a person who is of sufficient sensitivity, and liable to such a change of state, can induce trance in himself (auto-hypnosis) or be aided to induce it without great difficulty when required, and when in such a state is commonly capable of consistent, intelligible conversation. What is particularly striking about this condition is that in many societies it has been incorporated into a system of therapeutic aid. Because the condition allows of a freedom beyond the ordinary social conventions, and is regarded as ritually sanctioned, it can be used as a means of symbolic expression in a relation between a sick person and the community.

I have spoken so far of trance, implying by this a blurring of consciousness of the individual concerned such that the full controls of ordinary life are not operative. But it would seem that the state may also commonly be described as one of dissociation, in that the personality of the individual appears to have altered or a different facet of the personality is presented than ordinarily appears in social life. Sometimes these conditions appear to be simulated, and the social recognition and evaluation of this offers an interesting field for interpretation. But from ordinary observation of the physical effects involved and the after-reactions it would appear that "genuine" phenomena are common, and it is only those which I am considering here. Moreover, I wish to make it clear that I am not concerned with the physiological or medical aspects of the phenomena, but with their institutional functions and effects, including the interplay of social and individual elements in the relationship.

I regard the aspect of *control* as very important here. For social utilization the mediumistic state must be able to be induced and not simply have to rely on spontaneous generation. Mediums must be able to go into trance when people are ill. Here the external stimuli such as music and ritualised gestures such as head swing and rhythmic alternation of arm quiver are important aids. But there must also be a mechanism for focussing the attention of the person in trance upon the matter in hand. Here the master of ceremonies, the attendant crowd, the phased climax and relaxation of the performer's movements are significant. Finally, there must be a mechanism for helping
the person in trance to return to normal when the matter has been satisfactorily disposed of. This is necessary in the interests of the person himself as well as those of his companions. There is little doubt that in some respects the trance state is looked upon as a burdensome condition, and may have attached to it unpleasant physical consequences. Yet to some degree also it provides an escape mechanism from the trammels of ordinary life. In trance the medium speaks with a different tone of voice, often much rougher and more aggressive, expresses opinions by no means complimentary to others present, is the centre of the stage and possessed of authority in dictating what a sick person must do to get well. He assumes to some degree another personality of greater power and freedom. Hence there may be satisfactions in this state and he may have to be assisted to leave it and to return to his ordinary one.

In all societies where spirit mediumship obtains there is some form of control in each of these spheres, though these controls differ from one society to another. One may assume for instance that every spirit medium has some form of internal control by which he is enabled to return from his state of dissociation to his ordinary condition. In each case this internal control has its given symbolic form. For example, in one community in which I have worked, Tikopia, each medium in the local view serves as the vehicle for several spirits, some ancestral, some not. One of these, usually the spirit of a dead father or brother, is regarded as being a "familiar" who controls the other spirits, and who may "jump into" the medium at a certain point to break the chain of spirits and so relieve the medium of their burden. This is a kind of built-in mechanism which allows the medium to emerge from his dissociated state.

The external controls in this society are unformalised. Other members of the household, neighbours, kinsfolk, sit around and by their behaviour help to channel the medium's expressions and acts in the desired direction. By their questions and comments they help to intimate when they are satisfied and so when a seance can conveniently end, but none of them is in ritual charge of the proceedings. Among the Kelantan Malays there is also the "familiar" spirit, the penggawa, part of whose job is to protect the medium. But here, however, as we have seen, the external control is formalised, and personally identified with ritual sanction. The master of ceremonies plays a leading part in questioning the medium, interpreting what he says, and by his control of the musical accompaniment stimulates and guides the medium's actions. For the most part he adopts a quiet, rather neutral position in the verbal exchanges, agreeing with the putative spirit or commenting rather drily in a kind of "so, indeed" fashion. Sometimes, however, he will cross-question the spirit closely and argue with him. Throughout he is recognised as the person having prime authority in the proceedings; at the symbolic level he is the "master of spirits", a shaman in the strict sense of the word.
Dramatic Elements

So far I have discussed this performance primarily as a therapeutic measure designed in the Malay view to elucidate the cause of an illness and produce relief or cure. A similar kind of performance sometimes takes place to exorcise evil spirits generally (*jumuan hantu*) from a village or other place where people congregate. In all cases the performance is highly ritualized, that is, regular series of actions are performed in systematic sequence, each having its validity in terms of the whole cycle, conceived as basically operative in spiritual rather than human terms. It is also a mode of communication between different social elements, especially kin and neighbours, though the communication is phrased in symbolic terms of spirit behaviour, not human actions and feelings.

But the performance is not only ritual, it has also elements of drama. It is symptomatic here that the performance is regarded by the Malays themselves from one angle as a form of recreation. In Kelantan terms it is known as *main puteri*,¹¹ which means that in general classification it is grouped together with other *main* — games, amusements, plays — including the shadow play (*wayang kulit*) known in Kelantan as *main royang*. Moreover, the links with the shadow play are more specific. Some of the puppet characters in the shadow play, such as Arjuna, may appear as powerful spirits in a spirit medium performance. Conversely, a shadow play is a ritual performance, with incense and offerings to the spirits symbolised by the puppet characters.¹² Sometimes there is also a mediumistic performance in the dawn at the end of the shadow play, with the puppet master possessed by the spirits of some of his puppets. Night after night he has manipulated them; in compensation as it were before they are shut away again they manipulate him. So violent may one or two of them become that the puppet master as I have seen may have to be restrained by his companions from devouring the offerings in the name of the spirits.

Obvious elements in which the spirit medium performance enters the recreational field are the dancing and the singing of the person in trance. That the dancing is of considerable significance in the whole performance is seen by the fact that Jeanne Cuisinier, who has given us the best analysis to date of the spirit medium performances of Kelantan, includes it under the general title of magical *dances*. In my experience, the dancing certainly attracts attention. But on the whole it seems to be considered as of less importance by the spectators than the *singing* of the medium. When a spirit medium performance is to take place, and it is known that a celebrated medium will be

¹¹ *Puteri* traditionally means princess, and the spirit medium's performance is sometimes translated as "play of the princess", with a traditional but probably apocryphal attribution to a royal lady. (See Gimlette, 1929, p. 8; Jeanne Cuisinier, 1936, pp. 94-5.)
taking part, people may come from villages several miles away across the rice fields. What they comment upon primarily, however, is not the medium’s dancing but his singing, and they compare and criticize mediums according to whether they do or do not have suara molek, fine, agreeable voices. But the whole situation is complex, with side issues. The performance is often long drawn, lasting commonly for three nights. On the second night, around midnight or later if the performance goes on till dawn, when interest may be flagging, the medium, clearly in a fairly light state of trance, may take on a comic character. He may pull his waist cloth up over his chest and purport to be a female spirit. He engages in gross badinage with the spectators, may demand bananas to eat, may comment critically on the poor hospitality offered or on the lack of proper decoration to the cloth canopy — the “sky” — over his head. In such ways, by complaint and by humour, the interest of the audience is kept alive and exchanges of chaff often take place between them and the medium.

But there is another element of greater importance, though not given such overt weight. This is the dramatic tension that exists and mounts during the course of the performance until towards the end it is resolved. The performance begins on a quiet note — a little instrumentation, a long chanted invocation. The early spirit representations of the medium are relatively quiet also. But as the night wears on, especially if the illness is severe, stronger — one might say darker — forces begin to emerge. The medium may present himself as opponent of a fierce demon or the dreaded tiger spirit (hantu rimau). As antagonist to the demon, he may grunt and growl, spring from side to side on all fours, worry at the body of the patient and generally behave in a violent manner. This is the performance known to the Malays as main kuat, playing in a powerful way. The onset of such a mode is usually anticipated well in advance. If the performance lasts three nights, it is usually known that on the last night there will be violent struggles with spirits. The performer who is to play this part is usually well prepared. I remember one occasion on which he borrowed a pair of long trousers so that, if he engaged in violent contortions and exposed himself more than usual, he would be decently covered. Sometimes in such scenes the forces controlling the medium seem to take charge completely and, unknowing of what he does, he is hurled to and fro, as it were in the grip of powers unseen. On one occasion I saw a medium, in such a condition, roll over and over in a ball along the floor of the house, down on to the platform near the doorway; unless he had been seized by the bystanders he would have shot right out on to the ground six feet below. In such scenes is great dramatic effect, heightened by the audience’s view that what they are seeing is not just a man exhibiting aspects of his own psyche, but a spirit, aggressive and powerful, struggling either to express itself or to be free. This is where the function of the mindok, as controller, comes to the fore. By comment, by formula and by ritual actions
such as pelting with parched rice, he acts as it were as a spirit daunter, calming, subduing and guiding it into more socially acceptable channels. From the Malay point of view he is performing his job as a master of spirits. From our point of view he is a master of men, using traditional techniques to facilitate and control the expression of forces which, uncontrolled, might damage physically and psychologically the personality of a man. For this violence has in a way its own rationale. On the one hand it releases forces in the medium which have been stirred up by his passing into a state of dissociation and the subsequent searching and challenging of mental and emotional issues. On the other hand it serves as a visible expression to patient and to audience of the gravity of these issues and of the affliction from which the sick person is suffering. It is a cathartic mechanism.

There is drama then to be seen in the interrelation between the different facets of the medium's personality, in the relation between the medium and his human controller, and in the bringing to the surface issues in the life and behaviour of a patient which may relate to his illness. In all this tension is first laid bare, indeed generated, then brought to a crisis and a resolution achieved. The patient is led to elicit the reason for his own condition and is given a means, however simple and crude it may seem, of doing something to relieve it.

**Ritual and Drama**

I think that to understand spirit mediumship we must examine more generally the human dilemma which lies behind these performances. What dilemma? — that of the logic of human action as compared with the arbitrariness of external events. We are accustomed for the most part to conceive these external events as the development of uncontrolled movements in the physical world — e.g. the behaviour of bacteria in generating illness. What the Malay or other spirit medium performance does is to identify them as the uncontrolled movement (initially at least) of spiritual powers. But the spirit medium performance, though lacking in medical knowledge and skills, is not simply to acknowledge defeat but to exercise control and to assign responsibility nearer home. The arbitrariness of the external world is translated into terms of the logic of human acts or relations, though these are expressed in metaphorical form.

From all these angles, then, one can see how a ritual performance can also be a dramatic spectacle. In a strict sense, of course, all this is not drama, it is dramatic material in the raw. Not that it lacks so much the vision and imagination or the tension of art; nor indeed are elements of patterned handling of action absent. But it is still ritual rather than drama. By ritual I mean a formal set of procedures of a symbolic kind, involving social communication, and believed to possess an efficacy of themselves in *changing* the tech-
nical or social conditions of the performers or other participants. Spirit medium performances aim to change rather than represent a situation in aesthetic and moral form, which is what I take it drama primarily attempts to do.

Now I am going to ask a rather unorthodox question for a modern social anthropologist. What would be needed to convert this ritual performance into dramatic art? I would say two qualities, which are present only in embryo in the spirit medium performance as it stands—a sense of general statement about human experience and the human condition; and a more deliberate focus on the development and unity of the form of statement. The content of the spirit medium performance has dramatic potential. Its aesthetic development would demand more attention to the patterning of relationships between the various elements, including a more economical use of time as well as of other resources.

The Malay spirit medium performance as spectacle lacks some of the characteristics of drama in the more specialised or strict sense in which we are accustomed to think of this art form. Drama involves tension or suspense, and development of a theme to a resolution. The phenomena of amok and latah, with their suspense and development, may be termed drama without ritual, though the drama is of a relatively underdeveloped kind, and elements of routinisation and convention are present. There can presumably be also some simple forms of ritual where the dramatic elements are minimal, where the resolution of a situation is so well-known or guessed in advance that suspense and development are almost completely lacking. But drama also involves both a formal or stylised character and some power of abstraction, so that the situations to which it refers are not merely empirically descriptive but have a more general quality and as such some explanatory value. In these respects the spirit medium performances of Kelantan are rather deficient in dramatic character. The language is stereotyped and follows conventional formulae; the expository dialogue is also stiff and formal for the most part. But it is relatively unstructured, of narrow range, concerned with immediate circumstance rather than with more general problem. The patient, the master of ceremonies, above all the medium, each offers a special presentation of the self, a facet of his own personality which is not shed completely when the show is over. The audience, too, though spectators, are themselves for the most part directly involved in the situation, as relatives, friends, neighbours, and may be personally concerned in the outcome. The situation is not a constructed one, conceived with any representative character; it deals with real people here and now. The plot is not worked out in advance but allowed to evolve as the action proceeds. The end is not known at the time of the beginning. Actors, spectators and patient all have a fairly clear idea of the general plan of what is about to occur, but their speculations as to the exact resolution of the situation may vary widely. It is like a scene in a theatre workshop where the play is allowed to develop freely out of the reactions
between the actors. There is lacking what Virginia Wolf has called the “single vision” of an author.

Now I revert to Jane Harrison. One of the points which I have found of great interest in her analysis was the significance she attached to the role of the spectator in this developmental theory of the evolution of drama from ritual. She distinguished very clearly between participants and worshippers acting and dancing out the ritual, and spectators “watching, feeling, thinking, not doing”. She emphasized how it is in this new attitude of the spectator that we touch on the difference between ritual and art. “The dromenon, the thing actually done by yourself, has become a drama, a thing also done but abstracted from your doing.” 13 Without necessarily subscribing to such a theory of development in Greek aesthetic history, I can note its relevance at the present time, in Kelantan. In the small household where a simple rite is performed over a sick person with a formula or two and some incense, perhaps also a mild act of spirit mediumship without orchestra or controller, the spectator element is minimal. The people are assembled to do a certain job and few come to watch. The dramatic element is at a low level. But for the full village performance of the main puteri scores of spectators may assemble, attracted as much by the spectacle as by the interest in a cure. They assemble particularly of course also when the performance has a general exorcising effect for the village.

I want to elaborate a little this point of spectator role. In non-literate communities such as those of which I have spoken, art is used commonly to make statements about religious values — these religious values themselves being symbolic conceptualisations of human problems. This has significance in modern conditions. During much of this century the main puteri performances in Kelantan have been under some fire from the modernists on the one hand, especially the medical men, who think this a backward peasant custom, and from the Muslim orthodox on the other, who regard it as a challenge to the purity of Islam. The spirit medium experts themselves defend their position. They are good Muslims, performing all their religious duties at least as well as do their neighbours, and they regard themselves as invoking their spirit aids through the help of Allah for the repelling of evil spirits who otherwise would afflict true believers. But among Malays, followers of Islam, graphic religious art involving portrayal of the human figure is forbidden — there are in a mosque no images or pictures of saints or angels, let alone of God, which would be a terrible offence. From the point of view of an orthodox Muslim dignitary, an Imam or other leader, the Kelantan spirit medium performance is suspect, I think, on two grounds. Firstly, it ascribes validity to jinns and other spirit beings who, while not figments of the imagination, are given a role far exceeding anything allowed them by the Koran, which recognises them but lays the direction of human affairs in the hands of Allah.14

The spirit medium then is trafficking with powers which he should leave alone or to which he should deny potency. Unless he is careful, he comes close to being accused of the prime heresy of "giving God a partner" — God who is One only, without associate. Secondly, (though I do not remember to have heard this stated) he may be thought to be giving these powers a material form, a human figure, which is against the spirit of Islam.

Now for the spirit medium performance to be envisaged as drama rather than ritual, what is required is a detachment of the participant, or at least those who attend to watch, from a personal involvement in the issues portrayed. Drama has moral as well as aesthetic values. But such detachment allows the tension-pattern of what is being performed to be viewed as non-representational, as a general statement about human values and actions and not a specific statement of the here-and-now kind. But for effective conversion of ritual presentation to drama another change may be necessary — a change in the validity ascription. Those who attend the spectacle in Kelantan village circles ordinarily believe in the overt truth of what they see and hear, in the sense that they credit the speech and action of the spirit medium and his companions as being correct portrayals of what they claim. But more sophisticated Malays, more highly educated, or more pious, or more committed to the Muslim theocratic system, either deny the reality of what is being claimed and done or admit its reality and deny its propriety.

This illustrates the two alternatives that commonly face a ritual performance which is in danger of becoming outmoded. If belief in its truth and validity remains, but its propriety is questioned, then in the long run it will tend to be abandoned. Two parallel ritual systems are in conflict and one must give way. Historically this has happened with many spirit medium cults when confronted by Christianity. In the Malay Muslim field it happened already to such spirit cults — at least those with orchestral accompaniment — in the highly pious Muslim state of Trengganu, adjacent to Kelantan. But a process of secularisation, of "de-mythologising" of the spirit medium phenomena, may take place instead with the growth of education and general sophistication. If such a change of belief has taken place — if the performance be no longer regarded as a portrayal of actually existent spirits — then a way is open for the survival of it as drama rather than as ritual.

This is a hypothesis but not mere speculation since the present-day situation in Malaya offers a test case.

From time to time it has happened that a spirit medium performance, in common with shadow play and other entertainments, has been offered as part of the celebrations on some public occasion in Kelantan, such as the Sultan's birthday. Again, such a performance has sometimes been staged in order that visitors could make a film record. Here the *main puteri* is admitted

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14 See Koran, Sura LXXII, Djinn (Rodwell transl.) Everyman ed. (London, 1909); also p. 326.
as a cultural rather than a ritual spectacle. It entertains both those who believe in the reality of the spirits conjured up and those who do not. This is the precedent for translating private into public spectacle. No sick person is needed as a subject; the performance can always be thought to have the effect of clearing away undesirable spiritual influences from the public place.

But the absence of a patient creates a problem: where is the drama without a central figure who can suffer and who can be cured? And what is to take the place of the unity of theme ordinarily enforced upon the action by the logic of the therapeutic diagnosis and treatment? And can such generalised recreational performances be thought really to command the attention of spirits?

Here two thoughts come to mind in a move from ritual to drama: one of content, the other of form. As regards content, it would be possible to create a purported performance, with a mock patient and a mock cure — perhaps even a mock trance, which is not unknown in the ordinary spirit medium display. It would not just be a bogus imitation, but a serious illustration of the village cult, an indication of how in less enlightened and less well-endowed times, the villagers met the problems of evil and human ills. As regards form, for dramatic effect the performance should obviously be enormously curtailed and the action tightened up. Moreover, the title might be taken out of Jeanne Cuisinier's book, and for aesthetic purposes these cult performances be regarded primarily as dances. One can envisage how they might be treated choreographically, with a good deal of miming, with development to climax and release, assisted by the orchestra in much the present style. What about the reluctance of ritual specialists to lend themselves to such public mime and to such modifications? Here is one great persuader — money. The sums which these spirit mediums get from their performances are not large, but they are keenly sought, in view of their low peasant incomes, and they are always eager to put on what is primarily a recreational show in a village when requested. Indeed, what I miss perhaps most in Jane Harrison's reconstruction of how ancient Greek ritual gave birth to drama is any reference to the place of economic factors in such a transition.

But there are several elements which may militate against the success of such a translation from spirit medium performance to secular drama in Malaya.

The first is the attitude of the Islamic authorities. If they continue to regard the main puteri as dealing or purporting to deal with real spirit presences, instead of merely being vaguely symbolic of human suffering and its folk treatment at the village level, then their opposition may well stifle its development as a dramatic form. The second element is competition from other forms of art and recreation, principally of course the cinema. In the village the main puteri still attracts an audience who look for thrills and amusement.

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I remember seeing at least one example of performance of main puteri as part of the Ruler's Birthday celebration at Pasir Puteh in 1940, and saw the preparations for filming one at Bachok in 1963.
as well as for therapy. But what the Malays call the "image play" (wayang gambar),\(^{16}\) that is the cinema, and not the puppet play, is a terrific magnet, especially for the young, and for this they are willing to pay whereas the spirit medium performance is free for onlookers. Clearly, for a successful translation of spirit medium rite into drama the financial structure of the whole situation would have to be re-ordered, and also the career structure for the performers.

Finally, there is the question of belief and incentive. With detachment of performance from its basic objective, relief from affliction and suffering, the basis of credence is likely to alter. The performers may still believe in spirits but not in their presence on this occasion. If their belief in its extra-human validity disappears, then this may rob the presentation of much of its vivid quality.

But there is one possible stimulus to the creation of a new dramatic form, that is the influence of developing cultural nationalism. The new nations of today are keenly searching among their traditional practices for elements that can be adapted to modern needs. They want cultural background, historical respectability, unifying mechanisms that will help them to get more effective cooperation from their people, material to build up a more striking public image. Some of them have discovered in their rustic songs, dances and ceremonies, as also in some of their more abstract folk concepts, material for which they can claim the dignity of tradition, a cultural individuality and an aesthetic appeal. Re-worked to fit the requirements of the stage such material, some of it formerly of ritual character, has been presented by national theatrical and dance troupes all over the world during the last twenty years. It is an ironic thought that the politician and his even more alert rival the public relations man are now discovering virtues in customs which previously only the anthropologist was prepared to defend!

The future of folk rituals is a question of much broader relevance than in the context of Malaysia. But it is a problem well worth investigation. It is too early yet to say what will be the future of the Kelantan spirit medium performance. It could be that the modern values of cultural nationalism will enter to replace those of traditional belief, that the state and not the local community will provide a career structure, and assist in the conversion of a ritual into a dramatic spectacle, with aesthetic and recreational interest, if not moral force. But one question will still remain: who in the village, when Western medicine has full sway, will give that psychological release and reassurance which the traditional therapy helped to provide?

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\(^{16}\) Wayang seems to have originally meant "shadow" and later from the "shadow play" to have been applied to all forms of theatre.