SAMPLE

The Guardian's Shadow: Mambang

The Elder Gods of the Malay World — Spirits of Sun, Moon, and Sea

Aiden Nightfall

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The Guardian's Shadow

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Introduction

Before the Malay world had ghosts, it had gods.

The beings of the earlier volumes of this series — the pontianak, the toyol, the polong, the jembalang — are fearsome, but they are junior. The mambang are the old order: the native divinities of the Malay peninsula, spirits of the sun and the moon, of the sunset glow and the mid-current, of the wind and the eddy and the deep sea. Walter Skeat, who documented them in 1900, called them "inferior Malay divinities" — inferior only in relation to the great Hindu gods the Malays imported, because the mambang were not imported at all. They are the surviving pantheon of the Malay world's own religion: the gods that were there before the traders brought Vishnu and Shiva, before the scholars brought the Quran's jinn, before anyone thought to write the stories down.

And they are still, faintly, in service. The sunset that turns the western sky yellow still has its name in Malay: mambang kuning, the Yellow Divinity, the glow that is dangerous to children. The sea invocations of the fishermen still salute the god of the mid-currents, Mambang Tali Harus, who dwells — in the old cosmology — at the navel of the seas, where the magic tree grows and the giant crab's movements raise and lower the tide. The pawangs and bomohs of the east coast still open their charms with the salutation of the White Mambang of the sun and the Black Mambang of the moon. A pantheon does not die quickly when it is written into the language itself.

This is the eleventh volume in The Guardian's Shadow series, and it is the volume that changes the scale of everything. The earlier beings were individuals — a vampire, a thief, a plague. The mambang are a class: a whole stratum of the supernatural order, the departmental gods of a pre- modern world in which, as Skeat put it, "each department of nature, however small, has its own particular godling or spirit who requires propitiation, and influences for good or evil every human action." To study the mambang is to study the religious bedrock under all the beings of this series — the native cosmology from which the hantu, the jembalang, the puaka, and even the badi of the next volume descend.

The primary source for this book is Skeat's Malay Magic itself, which documents the mambang in unmatched detail: their place in the Malay cosmogony (born, in one account, from the blood of the primordial being — the blood becoming Mambang Kuning, the glow of the blood Mambang Sina); their immortality ("they are called dewa and mambang because they do not die," says the old text); their departments (the White Divinity in the sun, the Black

Divinity in the moon, the Yellow Divinity in the sunset glow "always considered most dangerous to children"); and their working life in the invocations of fishermen, healers, miners, and rice-farmers, recorded charm by charm.

The mambang reward this attention better than any being in the series, because they answer the deepest question the series poses: where did all of this come from? The answer the old Malays gave is stranger and more beautiful than the later ghost stories. Before the world was haunted, it was governed — by elder gods who did not die, who kept the sun and the moon and the currents of the sea, and who asked of humanity only what every government asks: notice, courtesy, and the tribute of being remembered at the hour of their power.

Chapter 1: What Is Mambang?

The word mambang names not one being but a rank of beings. Skeat's gloss, in his own footnote to Abdullah Munshi's famous list of the demons of the Malays, is exact and compact: "The Mambangs are inferior Malay divinities." The qualification "Malay" is the load-bearing word. Skeat's great argument, running through the whole early stretch of Malay Magic, is that the Malay pantheon had two floors: the upper floor of the great gods — Shiva, Vishnu, the Hindu trinity under their Malay names, Batara Guru and his kin — was borrowed, imported with the Hindu-Buddhist centuries; the lower floor, the mambang and the native godlings, "are native to the Malay religious system." The mambang are the Malay world's own.

They are "inferior" only in rank, never in reach. Skeat again: "each department of nature, however small, has its own particular godling or spirit who requires propitiation, and influences for good or evil every human action." A mambang is the department head of a piece of the world — the sunset glow, the mid-current of the sea, the eddy in the estuary, the wind that carries the fish to the net. The world of the mambang is not a haunted world but an administered one: nothing in nature is unowned, and every owner can be addressed.

The mambang that individuals bear names are organised by colour, and the colours are mapped onto the great lights of the sky. The old texts, as recorded by Skeat, are precise:

- 'Toh Mambang Puteh — the White Divinity — who dwells in the Sun. - 'Toh Mambang Hitam — the Black Divinity — who dwells in the Moon. - Mambang Kuning — the Yellow Divinity — who dwells in the Yellow Sunset- glow, "which latter is always considered most dangerous to children."

The triad is the mambang's most personal face — the three beings a kampung family actually knew, because their hour came every single day. The sun's mambang presides over the day; the moon's over the night; and between them, at the dying of the light, comes the Yellow Divinity — the one the tradition treats as the dangerous one, the one whose ritual is still remembered, and the one whose origin-story (as Chapter 2 will show) ties the whole mambang order to the birth of the world.

The greatest of the named mambang is the sea god: Mambang Tali Harus, "the God of Mid-currents," whom Skeat in one aside calls the Malay Neptune. His is the fullest portrait in the tradition: a pre-Hindu sea deity whose "powers are less extensive" than the imported Shiva of the Sea, and who dwells at the pusat tasek — the Navel of the Seas, the central whirlpool from which springs the magic tree Pauh Janggi, where the roc (garuda) of fable perches and at

whose foot dwells the Gigantic Crab whose exits and entrances displace the water of the world and so make the tides. He is "yang berulang ka pusat tasek" — who returns to the navel of the seas — and in the fishermen's invocations he serves as the great relay: the pawang addresses him as "my friend Mambang Tali Harus," and asks him to carry a message onward to Dato' Rimpun 'Alam, the lord of the sea's depths.

The old cosmogonic text preserved by Skeat makes the mambang's defining theological claim in a single line. Of the beings born from the lightning-moment of the world's making — the mambang and the dewa — it says: "they are called dewa and mambang because they do not die" (tiada mati). The mambang are not ghosts; ghosts are what death makes. The mambang are the undying — the permanent staff of the cosmos, in office since the making of the world.

This is the line that separates the mambang from every other being in this series, and the series has waited ten volumes for a category that could contain it. The polong is created; the pontianak is born of a death; the jembalang may be appeased but is bound to its patch of ground. The mambang were never born of human affairs and never die into them. They are the only beings in the Malay spirit world older than humanity — and the tradition, accordingly, gives them the honours due to elders.

- Origin — Mambang: Native, pre-Hindu; born with the world; Dewa (great gods): Borrowed Hindu divinities; Hantu: Deaths, wild places, creations; Jembalang / Penunggu: Earth and site spirits - Rank — Mambang: Inferior divinities — departmental; Dewa (great gods): Supreme pantheon; Hantu: Common spirits; Jembalang / Penunggu: Local spirits - Mortality — Mambang: Immortal ("do not die"); Dewa (great gods): Immortal; Hantu: Various; many born of death; Jembalang / Penunggu: Tied to their ground - Domain — Mambang: Phenomena: sun, moon, sunset, currents, wind; Dewa (great gods): Cosmos as a whole; Hantu: Haunts, wilds, boundaries; Jembalang / Penunggu: Specific sites and soils - Temperament — Mambang: Neutral-administrative; propitiable; Dewa (great gods): August; supreme; Hantu: Predatory or restless; Jembalang / Penunggu: Territorial - Ritual mode — Mambang: Salutation, offering, invocation by name; Dewa (great gods): High ceremonial; Hantu: Exorcism, appeasement; Jembalang / Penunggu: Site-payment - Modern survival — Mambang: Sea invocations, dusk custom, charms; Dewa (great gods): Absorbed into Islamic cosmology; Hantu: Fully alive; Jembalang / Penunggu: Construction ritual

The mambang are the native divinities of the Malay world — the pre-Hindu, pre-Islamic departmental gods of nature, organised by colour across the great

lights of the sky (White in the sun, Black in the moon, Yellow in the dangerous sunset glow) and by function across the sea (Mambang Tali Harus, the god of mid-currents, relay of messages to the lords of the deep). They are defined against everything else in this series by a single trait: they do not die. The mambang are the cosmos's permanent staff, the elder order beneath all the later hauntings — and the sunset's yellow glow still carries the name of the eldest of them.

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