SAMPLE

The Guardian's Shadow: Orang Minyak

The Oily Man — Dark Bargains, Night Attacks, and the Monster Men Make of Themselves

Aiden Nightfall

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Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1: What Is Orang Minyak? The Oily Man of Malay Folklore Explained

Chapter 2: The Origins and History of the Oily Man

Chapter 3: The Making of the Oily Man — Craft, Pact, and the Price

Chapter 4: The Powers and Abilities of the Oily Man

Chapter 5: The Oily Man in Society — Panics, Patrols, and the Village at Night

Chapter 6: How to Protect Yourself From the Oily Man

Chapter 7: The Oily Man in Modern Media and Culture

Chapter 8: The Moral Lessons of the Oily Man

Chapter 9: Separating Fact from Fiction: The Science of the Oily Man

Chapter 10: Living with the Legend — The Oily Man in the Twenty-First Century

Glossary

References

The Guardian's Shadow

This free sample contains the Introduction and Chapter 1. The complete book contains the full contents above.

Introduction

There is a photograph from the golden age of Malay cinema that half the region can still describe from memory: a small, naked figure, glistening black from head to foot, caught in a torch-beam and grinning like a man who knows the torch-holder cannot hold him. That figure — the orang minyak, the Oily Man — is the strangest entry in this series' catalogue, and the only one that stares back.

He is not a ghost of the dead like the langsuir or the pocong. He is not a spirit of place like the jembalang or the hantu air. He is not a familiar kept in a bottle like the polong. He is a man — a living human being who wanted something women would not give him, went to the wrong teacher, made the wrong bargain, and paid the price in oil. The legend says he anointed himself until nothing could grip him, and the village says something worse: that everyone in the village already knew his name. The orang minyak is the one monster in the Malay-Indonesian catalogue who is somebody's neighbour by day.

The story is old in its parts — night-attack fears, sorcerer's oils, shame as a weapon — but the figure himself is young, as folklore goes: he erupts into the record in the mid-twentieth century, terrorising women "in Singapore and Malaysia" through waves of reported sightings that newspapers covered, villages patrolled against, and film studios monetised. And the figure has never left. He appears at girls' dormitories and village edges in every decade since; he made American news coverage as recently as 2011; and his two 1958 films — both released the same year — are among the most famous horror films the region ever produced.

Over the next ten chapters, this book follows the Oily Man from the oil- magic substrate that made him thinkable, through the bargain that made him, into the night-attack panics that gave him his career, the community's defences, the films and legends of the present day, and the very hard questions he asks of the folklore that keeps him alive. Because the orang minyak — unlike every other being in this series — is not a mystery to be explained. He is an accusation to be examined. The tradition built him out of its own magic, aimed him at its own young women, and then told the truth about him in the only way folklore ever tells truth: as a monster story with a human being inside it.

Chapter 1: What Is Orang Minyak? The Oily Man of Malay Folklore Explained

The orang minyak — "oily man" in Malay — is, in the standard definition, "a supernatural creature coated with shiny black grease who abducts young women by night." The description has been stable across every wave of the legend: a man, short in most tellings, naked or near-naked, gleaming from head to foot with a thick black oil — sometimes engine grease, sometimes coconut oil darkened with charcoal or the ashes of a sorcery, sometimes simply oil in the way dreams are simply dark. He moves at night, fast and low. He enters compounds, dormitories, and bedrooms. His target is the young unmarried woman, and his purpose, in the tellings that are told in full, is her violation.

That purpose is what places him apart from every other figure in this series. The langsuir's hunger is blood and revenge; the pontianak's is her own grief; the toyol's is your petty cash. The orang minyak's purpose is appetite, aimed at the most guarded category of person the village knows. The legend does not pretend otherwise, and neither does this book: the Oily Man is a sex-attack legend wearing a monster's costume, and every chapter that follows has to reckon with that fact.

His powers cluster around one property: the oil. An oiled body cannot be gripped — hands slide off, knots will not close, and a crowd that catches him at midnight will be holding empty air by half past. The tellings extend the physics into the supernatural: he squeezes through any gap, however small; he leaps fences and rivers; bullets and blades, in some versions, find nothing to hold. The oil is his armour, his lubricant, and his signature — and, as we shall see, it is also the tell: the trail of grease on a windowsill is the legend's own evidence that something, not someone, passed through.

The name, too, is doctrine. Orang minyak means simply "oily man" — no honorific, no mystery, no "hantu": the tradition classified him, from the first, in the human column. The langsuir, the pontianak, the hantu air: every other figure in this series carries the word for ghost or spirit in or near its name. The Oily Man carries the word for person. The village that named him chose the grammar of description — the man, oiled — over the grammar of demonology, and the choice is the legend's whole argument in two words: whatever the oil and the pact have made of him, the category he came from is orang, mankind, the same word that opens the region's proudest national phrases. No figure in the catalogue is named with more sorrow, or more accuracy. The name has been the verdict all along.

The description deserves one more note: its consistency. Across seventy years, two countries, three media generations and every wave, the witnesses agree on the same five details — short, naked or near-naked, glistening black, fast, and gone. Folklorists know how rare that is; the langsuir's description varies by state, the pontianak's by century, but the Oily Man is described in Malacca in 2011 the way he was described in Singapore in 1958. The stability has one source, and Chapter 7 names it: the films fixed the portrait before the folklore could vary it. He is the first monster of the region to be born already illustrated — his standard image a studio still rather than a village disagreement — and his witnesses, decade after decade, have been reporting a photograph they all saw at the same age. The legend's most "evidential" feature, the matching descriptions, turns out on inspection to be its most cinematic one.

Sorting him from the catalogue matters more for this figure than any other, because the sorting is the legend's meaning. He is not a hantu of the dead — no one was murdered to make him; he became what he is while alive. He is not a familiar — the polong, pelesit, and bajang of Volumes 6-8 are kept creatures that serve a living master; the orang minyak is the master who swallowed his own craft. He is not a spirit of place — the jembalang guards its ground, the hantu air its pool; the Oily Man goes where the women are. The nearest figure to him in the whole catalogue is the sorcerer who keeps the familiars — the keepers of Volumes 6, 7 and 8 — and the legend of the orang minyak is best read as what happens when that sorcerer's story is told from the front door instead of the back: not the bottle on the shelf, but the man who filled it.

And one more distinction, the modern one: the orang minyak is not a "cryptid." Nobody believes a species of Oily Men is breeding in the jungle. Every telling knows the figure was a man who chose. The legend's grammar is not "there are things in the night" but "a man can make himself into a thing" — and that grammar, as the final chapters show, is precisely why the figure remains dangerous.

One dating fact must be stated plainly, because it is what makes this figure so interesting to study: the orang minyak is young. The langsuir and the pontianak were old when the oldest recorded tellings were written down; the orang minyak erupts into the documented record essentially in the mid-twentieth century, in the newspapers and the film press of Malaya and Singapore, already fully formed — the oil, the night, the quota, the shame. The legend's parts are ancient; the legend's assembly is modern, born in the era of the printing press and the torch-patrol, and the panics it rode were reported, debated, and filmed in a way no village demon before it ever was. The Oily Man is therefore the series' best laboratory for watching folklore being born:

the exact week of a legend's crystallisation is inside living memory, on two islands, in two languages, between the headlines and the box-office.

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