SAMPLE

The Guardian's Shadow: Polong

Malay Folklore, the Bottled Spirit, and the Blood That Binds

Aiden Nightfall

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The Guardian's Shadow

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Introduction

You will not see it coming. That is the first thing the old people will tell you about the polong. It does not announce itself like the pontianak, whose cry echoes from the trees. It does not lurk at the doorstep like the toyol, whose small footsteps patter in the night. It does not hover above the roof like the penanggalan, whose trailing organs catch the moonlight. The polong is invisible. It is a spirit that lives in a bottle, fed on blood, and sent out to destroy — and by the time you realise it has found you, it is already inside.

The polong is one of the most feared spirits in the Malay folkloric tradition, and yet it is rarely the first spirit people think of when they think of Malay ghosts.

The pontianak gets the films. The toyol gets the comedy. The penanggalan gets the horror novel covers. The polong gets something else: a quiet, uneasy recognition — the kind reserved for things that are not just frightening but personal. The polong does not haunt forests or graveyards. It haunts people. It is sent by someone who knows you. Someone who hates you. Someone who has decided that you deserve something worse than a scare.

What makes the polong different from every other spirit in the Malay pantheon is that it is entirely man-made. It is not born from death, like the langsuir. It is not inherited, like the hantu raya. It is not a wild predator, like the pontianak. It is manufactured — created through a deliberate, dark ritual that requires a murdered person's blood, a bottle, and two weeks of incantations. The polong is a weapon, and the person who makes it is the one who pulls the trigger.

This book is the sixth volume in The Guardian's Shadow series, an educational guide to the supernatural entities of Southeast Asian folklore. Each volume asks the same question: what does this tradition teach us? Not "is it real?" — that is a question for science, and we will get to it. Not "is it scary?" — that is a question for cinema, and we will get to that too. The question is: what does the polong reveal about the people who tell its story?

The answer, as you will see, is something more human than supernatural. The polong is a story about revenge — about the desire to hurt someone from a distance, to strike without being seen, to make someone suffer without lifting a hand. It is a story about the cost of that revenge — the blood you must give, the spirit you must feed, the bond you can never fully break. And it is a story about the bomoh — the healer who must face the polong, coax it into speaking, learn its master's name, and force the attack to stop. The polong is not just a ghost story. It is a story about the dark side of human relationships, and the rituals a culture develops to contain that darkness.

You will not see it coming. But by the end of this book, you will understand why it comes — and what it costs the one who sends it.

Chapter 1: What Is Polong? The Bottled Spirit

of Malay Black Magic Explained

The word polong has no direct translation into English. It is not a descriptive name — it does not refer to an animal, a sound, or a physical characteristic. It is simply the name, and it carries the weight of centuries of fear. Some scholars have suggested a connection to the Malay word pulang (to return), implying a spirit that returns to its maker. Others trace it to dialectal terms for confinement or enclosure, reflecting the spirit's home in a bottle. Whatever the etymology, the name itself is spoken quietly in Malay villages — not shouted, not joked about, the way a pontianak might be. The polong is taken seriously.

The polong is one of the most physically unusual spirits in Malay folklore, and accounts of its appearance vary significantly. In older sources — particularly the work of Walter Skeat, whose Malay Spiritualism (1955) remains one of the most detailed colonial-era compilations — the polong is described as resembling "nothing in the animal world." Its head is said to be shaped like the handle of a kris (the wavy-bladed Malay dagger), with eyes at either end of the cross-guard, the upper part of the blade representing the neck, and two leg-like processes branching from its spiralling, thread-like body.

Modern depictions are simpler and more common: the polong appears as a miniature woman, no larger than the first joint of a finger. She is tiny, red, and vaguely human — a homunculus of blood and rage. Some accounts say she is beautiful in a reduced, uncanny way; others say she is formless until fed, taking shape only after she has tasted blood.

The variety of descriptions is itself significant. Unlike the pontianak, whose appearance is consistent across tellings — long black hair, white dress, overwhelming beauty — the polong resists clear visualisation. It is a spirit you feel rather than see. You know it by its effects: the sudden bruises, the rambling speech, the descent into madness. The polong is an invisible weapon, and its physical form is almost beside the point.

The polong's home is a bottle. Not just any bottle — traditionally, a small, narrow-necked flask, often described as spherical or cylindrical, with an opening just wide enough to admit the owner's ring finger. This is not incidental. The bottle is the polong's prison, its sanctuary, and its feeding vessel. When the polong is not out attacking someone, it lives inside the bottle, and the bottle is kept hidden — in a corner of the house, behind a shelf, wrapped in cloth.

The bottle must be sealed. If it breaks, or if the owner neglects to feed the spirit, the polong will escape — and a starving, escaped polong is far more dangerous than a controlled one. It will turn on its owner, draining blood until

the owner becomes the next victim. The bottle, in this sense, is the entire relationship between owner and spirit: a container that holds something dangerous, fed by the person who made it, opened only when the weapon is needed.

The polong rarely works alone. In most accounts, it is paired with a second spirit called the pelesit — a creature that takes the form of a cricket or grasshopper. The pelesit is the polong's scout, its advance guard, its homing device. When the owner commands an attack, the pelesit is sent first. It finds the victim, enters their body — usually through the mouth while they sleep — and begins to chirp. This chirping is a signal, a beacon that calls the polong to the target.

Without the pelesit, the polong struggles to locate its victim. With the pelesit, the attack is precise, coordinated, and almost impossible to prevent. The two spirits function as a team: the pelesit is the guiding system, the polong is the missile. Together, they represent one of the most sophisticated attack mechanisms in all of Malay folklore — a two-stage spiritual weapon that mirrors, in unsettling ways, the logic of modern targeted systems.

- Origin — Polong: Murdered person's blood + ritual; Toyol: Dead child/ fetus; Hantu Raya: Inherited or summoned; Pontianak: Woman dying in childbirth; Langsuir: Woman dying in childbirth - Container — Polong: Bottle; Toyol: Jar; Hantu Raya: None (bound to owner); Pontianak: None (wild); Langsuir: None (wild) - Fed by — Polong: Owner's blood (ring finger); Toyol: Milk, sweets, blood; Hantu Raya: Owner's energy; Pontianak: Self-feeding; Langsuir: Fish blood - Primary function — Polong: Attack enemies; Toyol: Theft; Hantu Raya: Protection, authority; Pontianak: Predatory vengeance; Langsuir: Vampiric feeding - Can be tamed? — Polong: Yes (created tame); Toyol: Yes (created tame); Hantu Raya: Yes (inherited); Pontianak: No; Langsuir: Yes (nail- cutting) - Has companion? — Polong: Yes (pelesit); Toyol: No; Hantu Raya: No; Pontianak: No; Langsuir: No - Can be inherited? — Polong: Sometimes; Toyol: Sometimes; Hantu Raya: Yes; Pontianak: No; Langsuir: No

As you can see, the polong shares characteristics with other kept spirits — particularly the toyol, which is also bottled and fed. But the polong is unique in its function. The toyol steals. The hantu raya protects. The polong attacks. It is the only major Malay spirit whose sole purpose is to harm a specific human being at the command of another.

The polong is not a ghost in the conventional sense. It is a created spirit — a weapon forged from blood and incantation, kept in a bottle, fed by its maker, and deployed against enemies. It works with a companion spirit, the pelesit, which marks the target and calls the polong in. Together, they form the most

deliberately weaponised supernatural entity in Malay folklore — and that deliberate, human-driven violence is what makes the polong uniquely disturbing.

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