

A review of Temiar Religion 1964-2012: Enchantment, Disenchantment and Re-enchantment in Malaysia's Uplands by Geoffrey Benjamin, with a foreword by James C. Scott (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015).

Temiar Religion by Geoffrey Benjamin is an unconventional book. The material ranges from the 1960s to the 2000s, it contains Benjamin's 1967 PhD thesis and letters between Benjamin and Edmund Leach, and it ends with the contemporary period with chapters that can stand on their own. Yet it is precisely this variety of material on Temiar religion that makes the book an insightful and compelling read. *Temiar Religion* is not only a book that discusses the religions and religious practices and beliefs of a Orang Asli community in Malaysia through the better part of fifty years, it is also a compilation of thinking about the sociology of religion, a history of anthropology of Orang Asli (the general term for Malaysia's indigenous people of which Temiar is the largest group)¹, and a document that traces change in Temiar society. It is the sort of book that professors put on their required reading list for first-year undergraduate classes on anthropology, religion and/or Malaysia with the realization that it should stand in students' bookcases at least until some of them undertake a PhD and long after. In his foreword to the book, political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott aptly describes the book as a "sustained, scrupulous, long-term observation and analysis" of religions among Temiar of Malaysia.² Scott points out that Benjamin has reformulated thinking about Orang Asli several times over: moving scholars away from thinking about the presence of different indigenous groups as due to successive migration waves (the layer cake theory) to differences brought about due to in-situ hybridisation in the Malay Peninsula;³ and from understanding labels such as "race" as primarily biological differences to more of an indication of specific lifeways and cultural matrices.⁴ The book is the earlier basis of much of his later (though earlier published) work. Benjamin's study is a thoughtful and considered study of Temiar and their religious practices and beliefs, as well as the process of studying and writing about them.

The unity of the chapters lies in the analysis of Temiar religious practices and beliefs as part of wider Malaysian society but nonetheless readers will notice the varied tone and purpose of the chapters which illustrate writings and analyses separated by nearly 50 years of research. The book may be divided into two parts: the first part comprises the 1967 PhD thesis and associated chapters based on fieldwork in the 1960s while the second part is scholarship based on newer ethnological fieldwork since the 1960s until 2012. The earlier section comprises detailed research on the underlying beliefs and practices of Temiar religion which

¹ Geoffrey Benjamin, *Temiar Religion 1964-2012: Enchantment, Disenchantment and Re-enchantment in Malaysia's Uplands* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015), 20.

² James C. Scott, "Foreword", in Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, ix.

³ Geoffrey Benjamin, "In the long term: Three themes in Malayan cultural ecology", in *Cultural Values and Human Ecology in Southeast Asia*, ed. Karl L. Hutterer, A. Terry Rambo and George Lovelace (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), 224.

⁴ Geoffrey Benjamin, "Why Have the Peninsular 'Negritos' Remained Distinct?" *Human Biology* 85, 1-3 (2013):445-484.

reflects not only the amount of time Benjamin was able to devote to the study of Temiar religion in the 1960s but also how much of his initial fieldwork was groundbreaking for trying to seriously understand Temiar animism as religion and not superstition. This first section also refers to the term “enchantment” in the book’s subtitle, referring to Max Weber’s ideas of religious change in society which I will return to when discussing the second part of the book which corresponds to “disenchantment and re-enchantment”.

Benjamin’s 1967 doctoral thesis (based on fieldwork in April 1964 to August 1965)⁵ comprises Chapters 3 to 8, ending with Chapter 9 which reproduces letters written by notable British anthropologist and Benjamin’s supervisor Edmund Leach to Benjamin. The chapters on the cosmos, species, souls, and spirit mediumship (Chapters 3 to 7 respectively) correspond to the component parts of Temiar religious beliefs which Benjamin argues link to an overall logic or conceptual system of religion in which the cosmic (Temiar ideas of a celestial axis from sunrise to sunset), mundane (everyday prohibitions and values attributed to seasonal fruits, other foods and how it links to the village and the forest), and personal levels (the emphasis on souls possessed by humans which correspond to the opposition between good and evil and linked to ideas of off-the-ground/culture and ground/nature) are intrinsically related.⁶ Chapter 8 on theology brings together the contents of the previous chapters into a unified concept of religion where Benjamin shows that, far from being discreet “superstitions”, the prohibitions, rituals, and beliefs are linked to “conceptual categories” that “mutually imply each other in a manner far from haphazard”⁷ and that links to moral categories of good and evil.⁸

Chapter 9 features a collection of correspondence between Benjamin and Leach on the subject of Temiar religion and origin accounts where both scholars attempt to make sense of Temiar stories through anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’ then newly-published structuralist framework. Both Leach and Benjamin are not convinced about Lévi-Strauss’ application of structure onto ethnographic details⁹ but notes that the Temiar case lends itself well to Lévi-Strauss’ ideas to the extent that Leach comments that “the Temiar could have been invented by Lévi-Strauss” as the ethnographic material collected by Benjamin conforms well to Lévi-Strauss’ ideas of the oppositional structure of society.¹⁰ Yet, in 1967, Leach says that a more complex analysis would be better for Benjamin’s material than simple binary oppositions by Lévi-Strauss.¹¹ In footnotes added for the 2015 publication of the thesis, Benjamin reminds the reader that he no longer agrees with his characterisation of Temiar religion as a “calculus”, “system” or “structure” even though the PhD clearly bears the imprint of Lévi-Strauss’ ideas and is thus also open to similar criticism levelled at Lévi -

⁵ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 41.

⁶ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 189-92.

⁷ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 210.

⁸ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 195.

⁹ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 219 fn 5.

¹⁰ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 221.

¹¹ Edmund Leach, “Introduction,” in *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, ed. Edmund Leach (London: Tavistock Publications, 1976), xiv.

Strauss-like analyses.¹² Yet I do not find the attempts to understand Temiar religion using structuralist ideas to be reductive or simplistic because it is refreshing to have a thorough analysis of Malaysian indigenous religion when, historically, indigenous people's religious activities were seen as less complex and unimportant compared to other religions practices in the Malay Peninsula. Approached from this aspect, Benjamin's analysis is far from restrictive since it takes Temiar religion seriously and also not as a pre-developed form of religious sensibility as was the implicit assumption of many a previous anthropological work especially just prior to the 1960s and in the British colonial period of Malaysia.¹³

The remaining chapters in this section touch on various issues brought up in the PhD. Chapter 10 discusses mediumship among the Temiar and explores the "theory of other minds" in relation to the performance of the trancing medium. Benjamin states that what is unique about Temiar mediumship is that they perform both their subjectivity as well as the subjectivity of the spirits.¹⁴ This indicates that Temiar, and by extension organised animism, must have a theory of mind, in particular, that of other species' minds.¹⁵ Chapter 11 takes a comparative look at the practices of animism among three groups on the Malay Peninsula (Malay, Semang and Temiar) that are "ethnologically cognate in the sense that they derive in large part from a common cultural matrix".¹⁶ In this chapter and the next, Benjamin makes use of Kirk Endicott's ideas concerning Malay animistic beliefs and explores the connection between "spirits", which may be explained as free souls and unbounded, and "souls" which are bounded spirits.¹⁷ The reclamation of Malay animistic practices as part of a peninsula-wide religious system is interesting as it is rarely talked about nowadays with the present-day connection between Malays and Islam. Lastly, Chapter 12 discusses how the soul is divided between mother, father and child as the child matures in what Benjamin terms a "soul economy".¹⁸

The second part of the book brings the study of Temiar religion into the present and looks at Temiar interactions with world religions. It begins with Chapter 13 and the short period of some Temiar conversions to the Baha'i religion followed by Chapter 14 that discusses Christianity, Islam and Baluj Selamad among Temiar.¹⁹ The adoption of these religions is mapped onto the changes in Temiar society in the 1970s, namely, the inroads made into Temiar country by logging and plantation companies and changes in Temiar society to a cash-based way of living away from subsistence on the land. Benjamin asserts that these larger contexts prompted changes in the religious needs of a younger segment of Temiar society which sought new religions in a desire to be accepted by mainstream Malaysian society and to match their new identity.²⁰

¹² See, for instance, Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, p. 48 fn 10, p. 54 fn 14, and p. 188 fn 1.

¹³ See Sandra Khor Manickam, *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015), Chapters 5 and 6.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 240-3.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 259.

¹⁶ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 260.

¹⁷ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 261.

¹⁸ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 280.

¹⁹ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 303, 339.

²⁰ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 307.

In these chapters Benjamin engages with sociologist Max Weber's ideas regarding "disenchantment" with the world as societies engage in religious activities that change from "many-stranded" to "single-stranded" as argued by Ernest Gellner. Benjamin states that Temiar religion as he studied it during this PhD was a "many-stranded" activity while in the second part of the book, Benjamin highlights Temiar religious practices and beliefs that are instead more "single-stranded."²¹ Benjamin glosses the brief period of Temiar conversion to Baha'i "disenchantment" and "rationalisation of Temiar religion" which, due to the Baha'i religion not being sustained, was followed by a "re-enchantment" in other religions including one based on the many-stranded religion practiced in the 1960s.²² The appendixes are equally valuable comprising accounts of H.D. Noone's work never before published, ethnographic details about the dances, songs, burial practices and dreams of children. Further gems can be found in the detailed footnotes that accompany all the chapters, which indicate changes in the author's thinking from the time the material was written to more recently added information.

I found the book rich in interesting details about Temiar religion but crucially how those details relate to scholarship on religion and on the development of society in the Malay peninsula. As a historian of Malaya, I was pleased that the book encourages a reading of it as a historical document. This is particularly the case for the first part of the book which maintains the original PhD thesis and adds footnotes detailing changes in the author's thinking since then. Treating the book as a historical work, *Temiar Religion* coincides with an argument I have made elsewhere: that the study of people from the Malay Peninsula is not only part of the history of a particular area (a limited and limiting understanding of "area studies") but of the history anthropological study in general.²³ Thus, I found it exciting to learn that Benjamin was Leach's student and that both men were thinking through Lévi - Strauss' ideas using the case of Temiar ethnographic details. Similar to when cutting edge physical anthropological methods were applied to fieldwork in the Malay peninsula in the early 1900s and were localised in the process, the PhD thesis illustrates the stimulating interaction between new scholarly ideas and ethnographic fieldwork in trying to understand Temiar religion. Such interaction forces scholars to reinterrogate Lévi -Strauss' structural analysis of culture in light of the Temiar case.

Towards the second half of the book, the material reads more as contemporary scholarship and it is here that we see the complexity of Benjamin's analysis of Temiar religion as dynamic and changeable. By studying the changes using Weber's ideas, Benjamin implicitly critiques Weber's linking of rationality and modernity with disenchantment by showing that animism, at least in the Temiar case, could be termed hyper-rational and that subsequent engagements with other religions cannot be easily mapped onto developmental frameworks such as increasing rationality or technological advancement. While other scholars have also

²¹ Benjamin, *Temiar Religion*, 305.

²² Richard Jenkins, "Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium", *Max Weber Studies* 1 (2000): 11-32.

²³ Sandra Khor Manickam, "Situated Thinking: Or How the Science of Race was Socialised in British Malaya", *Journal of Pacific History* 47, 3 (2012): 283-307.

launched such a critique of a simplistic reading of Weber,²⁴ Benjamin's analysis of Temiar religious change in light of Weber's ideas is insightful in that the Temiar are not thought of in isolation either in relation to other groups in the Malay Peninsula or in the wider fields of anthropology or sociology. Such a comparison offers new insights into Temiar way of life and thinking as well as processes of religious change in general.

Temiar Religion was a long-awaited book in which the reader is now treated to rigorous scholarly analyses of the topic in addition to fieldwork notes, personal observations, newspaper reports and personal interviews. Still, it seems as though Benjamin has much more to say on other aspects of Temiar life that warrant a similarly comprehensive and varied treatment. I, for one, will be waiting eagerly for another volume from Benjamin on the Temiar to add to my bookshelf.

Sandra Khor Manickam
Assistant Professor
History Programme
Nanyang Technological University
August 2015

²⁴ Jenkins, "Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium", 11.