

**Are Demons Evil?  
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Ch 9 mentions the idea that some death is normal, appropriate (*patuud*). Tluup Semai used necronyms as Geoffrey notes that Temiar do. Talking about the dead made one man on the Tluup giggle uncontrollably, not out of amusement... Mncaak Semai did interment much like Kensiu in 1963, but had a quite complex Malay style grave mound which closed the grave after the 6th or 7th day feast.

The reason for writing up Semai funerary praxis in the form I did *kcmooc* is that I don't think an accurate acct can be merely ideological. We need also to attend to the *eidos* (I think that's the term Bateson uses), the emotional/sentimental background or framework which gives substance to the various ideas which individuals will talk to ethnographers about, and which we routinely organize into a more coherent, pseudo-authoritative and transmissible system. You'd have the same problem trying to induce Lutheranism by talking to churchgoers. As my Chinese students used to ask, how could anyone believe in the Resurrection? You need to know how it *feels*.

I think that Semai have a complex poetic idea of good and evil. Like Blake's in its poetry, though not its content. That's why Blake and people like him, people like C. K. Williams and Rumi, serve as *guniik* familiar spirits for this vision of Semai.

You remember the story about William Blake and John Milton, the Puritan divine? Milton wrote a wonderful epic poem about the Fall, and the demons have all the best lines. Blake says--admiringly--that Milton is really of the Devil's party. And Mansur ibn al-Hallaj, maybe the greatest sufi master, describes Satan as "the perfect sufi and perfect lover" (quoted in Wilson 1988:7). In Hinduism, the demons start off as pre-Aryan gods, gods of people perhaps distantly related to Semai, dark gods, and decay into merely evil beings as Aryan intellectuals rationalize them.

I completely lack religious sensibility. But I think that a serious cosmology, like that of traditional Semai, avoids simplistic formulations. That's for state religions: *Animal Farm's* four legs good, two legs bad thinking, as Orwell parodied it. Because (I think) the cosmic struggle is between chaos and order, fear and love, entropy and its opposite, Ahab and Moby Dick, and it's never clear who the good guys are. There's no reason to reduce this sophisticated Semai cosmology to good beautiful people versus bad ugly demons.

Most of the time, Semai demons *are* bad and ugly and scary and make you sick. Some of the time they are good and beautiful and scared and help you cure people. Isn't the same, in reverse, true of people? A lot of people (not all people) cross the line sometimes. The State's like that too: usually bad and ugly and scary, but sometimes helpful and protective and worthy of patriotic affection.

Now, the *symptoms* Semai give for seance trancing are pretty much the same as those they give for storm-panic or what they call "blood intoxication," *blnuul bhiib*: dizziness or nausea, which they call *lnwiik*; dissolution of the sense of self; unconsciousness. The chemical changes in the brain--oxygen starvation, norepinephrine overload and so on--are probably pretty much the same; so the sensation of being overwhelmed that Semai report probably has an ascertainable physiological basis.

But the *circumstances* are quite different. Outside the seance, fear is the precursor: thundersqualls, spilled human blood. Inside, though, love and fostering have harnessed the terror, made it *kaloo*--tame, harmless, like a child; loving. The rhythm that excites the human dancers unites them, makes them an organic strong community capable of

dealing with the wild powers. You are among friends, not isolated in a vicious cosmos ruled by monsters. And then, safe, you can see the great beauty of the *nyanii* demons, as you can see the great beauty of a dead tiger, or one in a cage. There's a beauty here that can raise you above the tedium of ordinary life, of ordinary impotence. I think it's very close to what the sufis talk about when they talk about union with the Beloved.

I've never had this experience, so it's weird to me. But it's a common one. Aldous Huxley, the great biologist's son, calls it the perennial philosophy, though philosophy may claim too much. I know people who've had experiences like this, found Jesus, had a religious experience. I mean, I wouldn't know, but do you suppose conscious contact with God is all sweetness and light?

There's a woman whom I've respected and admired for many years. She had a pretty brutal childhood she's trying to get over. She read this description, recognizes that sense of being overwhelmed, and she says that she feels that just beneath the humdrum horror that we call daily life there's a realm of ecstasy that we should try to get to. Maybe that's the Gate Semai talk about pushing through. Maybe that's what's happening here.

But I wouldn't know. I've never been there.

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*This is empirical explanation?*

No. Let me try again.

Raided by merciless human child-abusers, menaced from above and below by brutal monsters, surrounded by shapeshifting demons, traditional Semai felt powerless. Being a child is a "natural symbol" for powerlessness and its human concomitants, fearfulness and the need to be loved. That's why children keep popping up in this book, which is about powerlessness and love and fear. Part of the symbolism of these seances revolves around parents and children, seduction and fear. Whether or not Semai actually abused children sexually is beside the point. In the 1960s, adults slept with children until the children become pubescent. A mother might fondle her seven year old son's penis or testicles, making him laugh, while checking his hair for headlice. But, except for a recurrent men's fantasy about adopting a little girl and raising her "so that she will love you as a child and as a wife," Semai on the Tluup universally expressed disgust and disapproval at the idea of cross-generational genital sex, which is taboo (*tolah*).

But most Semai are powerless, even the adults, before the outsiders who dispossess and "relocate" them. In the old days, days which people remembered in the 1960s, these outsiders routinely kidnapped and sexually abused Semai children. They were capable of butchering any adult who did not flee, and sometimes did so. No wonder Semai thought the cosmos was the domain of obscene and violent Powers. People anywhere respond to such powerlessness in a number of ways. Two may be relevant here: (1) what psychologists call "identification with the oppressor" and (2) spiritual surrender.

Identification with the oppressor is a typical self-defense of battered children. Under attack, you try to preserve the self by turning it into the image of the person hurting you so badly. In your imagination you can become as powerful as the person who brutalizes you. And then, when the opportunity offers, you can act out this ersatz self and make it real: as adults, battered children often batter children. It's a sort of unconditional surrender, in which you even give up who you are. And it can have repellent consequences, as Philip Larkin says (1974:30):

Man hands on misery to man  
It deepens like a coastal shelf.  
Get out as early as you can,  
And don't have any kids yourself.

But, bad as the consequences may be for children to come, what are the alternatives for a powerless beaten child? One is the destruction of self, fragmenting into multiple personalities. However socially and morally undesirable, becoming a future child batterer is sometimes the best adaptation available.

There's another kind of surrender, too, the kind that people make after what Christian mystics call a Dark Night of the Soul, a period of despair to which the despair of abused children may be akin, or the hitting bottom of alcoholics and drug addicts. That kind of surrender involves accepting powerlessness but changing one's notion of what overpowers you. People do it all the time: they come to Jesus, they do the First Step of Alcoholics Anonymous and its offshoots. William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and Anthony Wallace, in *Religion*, do a good job of describing this sort of transformative surrender and giving it an empirical explanation. All I need say here is that it provides a relief from intolerable fear.

Maybe acquiring demonic power, *hnalaa*, is an identification with the powers that frighten Semai. Like parental power, the power of *nyanii* demons is ambivalent: it can kill you or cure you, punish you for evildoing or help others to do evil. The identification with *hnalaa* power shows up in Semai ideology in metaphors: Nkuu's gift of shamanic power to humans (perhaps by trickery), the repeated brutal humiliation of Nkuu, the Great Humiliator. With this power, Semai adepts become the rulers/paternal/fearsome ones who actually have to seduce the subservient /childlike/ timorous demonic *guniik* familiars. The people adopt the pose of sexual abusers, the seductive *guniik* of the abused, in a form of transcendence that, briefly, makes the humans and the *halaa* powers into lovers instead of brutalizers. In that moment, the fear that always echoes faintly through traditional Semai society dissolves in love. The oppressed become the oppressors, but nobody gets hurt. Indeed, in a further transformation, they do good, healing the sick. And the dancers (fainting and falling, intoxicated, *-buul*), the dancers collapse, their bodies making their surrender tangible, and become, briefly, *nyanii*: get a taste of power, and the freedom power gives: freedom from human rules, freedom from felt powerlessness, freedom from pervasive fear. It must be wonderful.

And the seance is a place where surrender is safe. That part of it is like AA. You're in a safe place (longhouse, church basement), with people mobilized to support you, a place where you can take time out from your mundane life. It's fun to go there, and feels good afterwards. But the freedom and security you feel is fleeting. The euphoria fades, the old routines resurface, the ancient fears seep back into the skull, normal anxious careridden consciousness subverts the peace. Then you need to renew yourselves, by getting together again, formally, and addressing the problem, and repeating the public temporary surrender that temporarily disempowers the demons.

*You're saying all these experiences of powerlessness, of surrender, of being overwhelmed, are pretty much the same experience physiologically; just the interpretation is different?*

Because the context is different, right. Identification and surrender manifest love, even identification with the oppressor.

*And because the interpretation is different, how the experience feels and what it does for people, what empiricists call its function , " that's different?*

Love is the opposite of fear, and sometimes wins

[t]hough all the universe's atoms move

Toward regions desolate of human love.

(Carper 1991:8)