

Extracted from 'The vampire, his kith and kin'

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A belief in Vampires is very firmly established among the Malays of the Peninsula, and there are a number of magic rites which must be performed to protect both women and children." Probably the spirit most resembling a European Vampire is the Penanggalan, which is supposed to resemble a trunkless human head with the sac of the stomach attached thereto, and which flies about seeking an opportunity of sucking the blood of infants. There are, however, other spectres which are dangerous to children. There is the Bajang, which generally takes the form of a polecat,³⁶² and disturbs the household by mewing like a huge cat. The Langsuir is seen as an owl with hideous claws which perches and hoots in a most melancholy way upon the roof. Her daughter, a still-born child, is the Pontianak or Madi-

anak, who is also a night-owl. The Polong is a kind of goblin, and the Pelesit corresponds most closely to the familiar of the English witches.

The Bajang is generally said to be a male demon and the Langsuir is considered as the female species. Both of these spirits are supposed to be a kind of demon-vampire, and are often handed down in certain families as heirlooms, in exactly the same way as in English trials we find that the familiar descended from mother to daughter. Thus at Chelmsford "at an examination and confession of certaine Wytches,"³⁶³ 26 July, 1566, Elizabeth Francis confessed to various "vilanies," amongst the rest that "she learned this arte of witchcraft at the age of xii yeres of hyr grandmother whose nam mother Eue of Hatfyelde Peuerell, diseased. Itm when shee taughte it her, she counseiled her in the lykenesse of a whyte spotted Catte." In 1582, during the celebrated St. Osyth prosecutions Ales Hunt confessed that she entertained two familiars, and "saith, that her sister (named Margerie Sammon) hath also two spirites like Toads, the one called Tom, and the other Roddyn: And saith further, her sayde Syster and shee had the sayd spyrites of their Mother, Mother Barnes." That a familiar should have been handed down in this manner seems to have been a well-known custom among the Lapps, for in his notes upon the De Prodigiiis of Julius Obsequens³⁶⁴ J. Scheffer³⁶⁵ quoting Tornaues says: "the Laplanders bequeath their Demons as part of their inheritance, which is the reason that one family excells another in this magical art."

With regard to the Bajang, Sir Frank Swettenham further gives the following account: "Some one in the village falls ill of a complaint the symptoms of which are unusual; there may be convulsions, unconsciousness, or delirium, possibly for some days together or with intervals between the attacks. The relatives will call in a native doctor, and at her (she is usually an ancient female) suggestion, or without it, an impression will arise that the patient is the victim of a bajang. Such an impression quickly develops into certainty, and any trifle will suggest the owner of the evil spirit. One method of verifying this suspicion is to wait till the patient is in a state of delirium, and then to question him or her as to who is the author of the trouble. This should be done by some independent person of authority, who is supposed to be able to ascertain the truth.

"A further and convincing proof is then to call in a 'Pawang' skilled in dealing with wizards (in Malay countries they are usually men), and if he knows his business his power is such that he will place the sorcerer in one

room, and, while he in another scrapes an iron vessel with a razor, the culprit's hair will fall off as though the razor had been applied to his head instead of to the vessel! That is supposing that he is the culprit; if not, of course he will pass through the ordeal without damage.

I have been assured that the shaving process is so efficacious that, as the vessel represents the head of the person standing his trial, wherever it is scraped the wizard's hair will fall off in a corresponding spot. It might be supposed that under these circumstances the accused is reasonably safe, but this test of guilt is not always employed. What more commonly happens is that when several cases of unexplained sickness have occurred in a village, with possibly one or two deaths, the people of the place lodge a formal complaint against the supposed author of these ills, and desire that he be punished.

"Before the advent of British influence it was the practice to kill the wizard or witch whose guilt had been established to Malay satisfaction, and such executions were carried out not many years ago.

"I remember a case in Perak less than ten years ago, when the people of an up-river village accused a man of keeping a bajang, and the present Sultan, who was then the principal Malay judge in the State, told them he would severely punish the bajang if they would produce it. They went away hardly satisfied, and shortly after made a united representation to the effect that if the person suspected were allowed to remain in their midst they would kill him. Before anything could be done they put him, his family, and effects on a raft and started them down the river. On their arrival at Kuala Kangsar the man was given an isolated hut to live in, but not long afterwards he disappeared."³⁶⁶

The same authority tells us: "Langsuior, the female familiar, differs hardly at all from the bajang, except that she is a little more baneful, and when under the control of a man he sometimes becomes the victim of her attractions, and she will even bear him elfin children." The original Langsuir, legend says, was a woman of the most superb beauty, who died from the shock of hearing that her child was still-born, and had taken the shape of the Pontianak. When this terrible news was reported to her, she "clapped her hands," and without further warning "flew whinnying away to a tree, upon which she perched." She always wears a robe of exquisite green. Her tapering nails are of extraordinary length, which is considered

among the Malays a mark of distinction and beauty, and which may be compared with the talons of the European Vampire. She has long jet black tresses which flow down even as far as her ankles, but these serve to conceal the hole in the back of her neck through which she sucks the blood of children. Yet her vampirish qualities can be destroyed if the right means are adopted, and in order to effect this she must be caught, and her nails and flowing hair cut quite short, the tresses being stuffed into the hole of her neck, in which case she will become quiet and domesticated, just like an ordinary woman, and she will be content to lead a normal life for many years together. Story relates that the Langsuir returned to civilization until she was allowed to dance at a village festival, when for some reason her savage nature re-asserted itself and with wild screams she flew off into the depths of the dark forests from whence she had come. Dr. Skeat says that a Malay peasant once told him how exceedingly fond of fish these women vampires are, and how not infrequently they may be seen "sitting in crowds on the fishing-stakes at the river mouth awaiting an opportunity to steal the fish." This seems completely to explain the following rune by the recital of which a Langsuir may be laid:

O ye mosquito-fry at the river's mouth
 When yet a great way off, ye are sharp of eye,
 When near, ye are hard of heart.
 When the rock in the ground opens of itself
 Then (and then only) be emboldened the hearts of my foes and opponents!
 When the corpse in the ground opens of itself
 Then (and then only) be emboldened the hearts of my foes and opponents!
 May your heart be softened when you behold me,
 By grace of this power that I use, called Silam Bayu.

The "mosquito-fry at the river's mouth" is no doubt an allusion to the Langsuir who were swarming round the fishing-stakes, endeavouring to devour the fish.

Sir William Maxwell in the Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Singapore (1878-1899), No. VII, p. 28, thus describes the Langsuir: "If a woman dies in childbirth, either before delivery or after the birth of a child, and before the forty days of uncleanness have expired, she is popularly supposed to become a langsuayar, a flying demon of the nature of the 'white lady' or 'banshee.' To prevent this a quantity of glass beads are put in the mouth of the corpse, a hen's egg is put under each arm-pit, and

needles are placed in the palms of the hands. It is believed that if this is done the dead woman cannot become a *langsuyar*, as she cannot open her mouth to shriek (*ngilai*) or wave her arms as wings, or open and Aut her hands to assist her flight."

The *Penanggalan* is a sort of monstrous Vampire who delights in killing young children. One legend says that long ago in order to perform a religious penance (*dudok bertapa*) a woman was seated in one of the large wooden vats which are used by the Malays for holding the vinegar which proceeds from draining off the sap of the *thatch-palm* (*menyadap nipah*). Quite unexpectedly a man came along, and finding her seated there, asked: "What are you doing here?" She replied very shortly: "What business is that of yours?" But being very much startled, she leaped up and in the excitement of the moment kicked her own chin with such force that the skin split all round her neck and her head with the sac of the stomach hanging to it actually became separated from the body, and flew off to perch upon the nearest tree. Ever since that time she has existed as a malignant and dangerous spirit, brooding over the house, screeching (*mengilai*) whenever a child is born, or trying to force her way up through the floor in order to drain its blood.

Among the Karens of Burma we meet with the *Kephn*, a demon which under the form of a wizard's head and a stomach attached devours human souls.

Mr. Hugh Clifford in his study *In Court and Kampong*, London, 1897, speaks of "The *Penanggal*, that horrible wraith of a woman who has died in childbirth, and who comes to torment small children in the guise of a fearful face and bust, with many feet of bloody, trailing entrails in her wake."

The following description which is almost entirely parallel to that of the most deadly European Vampires is quoted by Dr. Skeat in his *Malay Magic*, London, 1900, p. 328, n.1.:

"He" (Mr. M.) said, "Very well then, tell me about the *penanggalan* only, I should like to hear it and write it down in English so that Europeans may know how foolish those persons are who believe in such things." I then drew a picture representing a woman's head and neck only, with the intestines hanging down. Mr. M. caused this to be engraved on wood by a Chinese, and inserted it with the story belonging to it in a publication called

the Anglo-Chinese Gleaner. And I said, "Sir, listen to the account of the penanggalan. It was originally a woman. She used the magic arts of a devil in whom she believed, and she devoted herself to his service night and day until the period of her agreement with her teacher had expired and she was able to fly. Her head and neck were then loosened from the body, the intestines being attached to them, and hanging down in strings. The body remained where it was. Wherever the person whom it wished to injure happened to live, thither flew the head and bowels to suck his blood, and the person whose blood was sucked was sure to die. If the blood and water which dripped from the intestines touched any person, serious illness followed and his body broke out in open sores. The penanggalan likes to suck the blood of women in child-birth. For this reason it is customary at all houses where a birth occurs to hang up jeruju [a kind of thistle] leaves at the doors and windows, or to place thorns wherever there is any blood, lest the penanggalan should come and suck it, for the penanggalan has, it seems, a dread of thorns in which her intestines may happen to get caught. It is said that a penanggalan once came to a man's house in the middle of the night to suck his blood, and her intestines were caught in some thorns near the hedge, and she had to remain there until daylight, when the people saw and killed her.

"The person who has the power of becoming a penanggalan always keeps at her house a quantity of vinegar in a jar or vessel of some kind. The use of this is to soak the intestines in, for when they issue forth from the body they immediately swell up and cannot be put back, but after being soaked in vinegar they shrink to their former size and enter the body again. There are many people who have seen the penanggalan flying along with its entrails dangling down and shining at night like fire-flies.

"Such is the story of the penanggalan as I have heard it from my forefathers but I do not believe it in the least. God forbid that I should." (Hikayat Abdullah, p. 143.)