THE OVERLAPPING DOMAINS OF MUSIC AND MEDICINE


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This thought provoking ethnomusicological research of Marina Roseman, Professor of Music and of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, delineates the role of sound in the healing performances of Temiar, an ethnic community living in the Malaysian rainforest. This study is an outcome of Roseman’s twenty-month field research among the Temiars of Ulu Kelantan between 1981 and 1982. During her stay in the field she has observed, recorded and participated in numerous singing and trance-dancing ceremonies. The Temiar community belongs to the Senoi ethnic division of the Aboriginal Orang Asli of peninsular Malaysia. The Temiars speak the Austroasiatic, Mon-Khmer language of Central Asian stock. Living in small settlements of 25 to 150 inhabitants along the five major rivers, they are basically horticulturalists who cultivate tapioca, hill rice, maize, millet, and other crops. They also hunt, fish, gather jungle products for their own use and also for exchange. The relatively egalitarian Temiars live in the agamous type of villages, that is, the inhabitants are allowed to marry within or outside the village group. Marriage or kinship links the villages that consist of extended families with a core sibling group. Generally, the elders of the core sibling group play a major role as village leaders. Roseman points out that some of them even today receive additional sanction as headman from the Department of Orang Asli Affairs.

The economic system practised by the Temiars allows for generalised reciprocity in which food, manufactured implements, and labour are given to others with the expectation that other members will be equally generous in the future.

Through her research Roseman has explored not only the articulation between the Temiar concept of illness and their strategies of diagnosis and treatment but also the indigenous ideas about musical composition, performance. For her, the healing performances provided an entry point into the domain of Temiar illness and well-being, letting her understand the relations between humans and the rainforest environment, as well as the relationship of the self with society and cosmos.

Roseman has analysed the ceremonial performances of Temiars in terms of Symbolic Structure, Value Structure, Role Structure, and Emergent Structure. In order to understand the moment of articulation between medical and musical domains exemplified by healing ceremonies, Roseman has integrated theories from interpretative anthropology and performance theory with ethnomedicine and ethnomusicoology. The ethnomedical approach, which studies how particular groups of people conceptualise and deal with the concept of health and illness, facilitated Roseman to say that ‘illness experiences, practitioner-patient transaction and the healing process are sociocultural phenomena, constituting the health care system, a cultural system integrating intterrelated with local patterns of meaning, power, and social interaction.’

For the Temiars, the relationship between the detachable souls among humans (head and heart souls), plants (leaf and root souls), animals (upper and lower souls), and landforms (such as summit and underground souls of mountains) ‘enables dream and trance encounters, promoting song composition and precipitating illness.’ A major technique of healing involves singing/trance-dancing ceremonies in which mediums sing tunes and texts given to them during dream by spiritguides. They conceptualise the concept of illness in terms of the path in the jungle, that is, a lost or waylaid detached soul can cause illness is similar to getting lost or losing paths can be fatal for a person. During the ceremonial singing as a treatment, the lost soul should be shown the ‘right’ path and led it back home. This symbolic power of the image of the path arises from their daily travel along land and river routes running through the jungle and settlement. It is believed that the souls of other entities can meet the detachable soul of the dreamer and can express their desire to become the dreamer’s spiritguide. This is confirmed through the bestowal of a song from the spiritguide to the dreamer. The ceremonial performance links the person and spiritguide, which transforms the dreamer into a medium for the spirits to diagnose and treat illness. The Temiar songs are considered ‘paths’ that link mediums, female chorus members, trance-dancers, and patients with the spirits of the jungle and the settlement. Even the treatment of less serious cases, which occurs outside the ceremonial context, involves singing by the medium.