ANTHROPOS

105.2010: 393–410

Rice, Death, and Chiefly Power in Central Borneo

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Abstract. – The article concerns a description found in an early account of Central Borneo of a "rice dance" among the Kayan people, based on observations made in 1896. This ritual will be analyzed mainly as imagery enacted according to an iconic code. It explores a symbolism of evocative displays of meaning largely beyond language, making manifest other possible worlds. The celebration was connected with the sowing of rice in swiddens. At this time, the Kayan chieftaincy displayed, in a series of *tableaux vivant*, an imaginary narration of rice and divinely inspired authority as related to political power. A chief of divine descent initiated the sowing, and it was in his power to bring together the forces of Heaven, Earth, and Underworld into unity to bless the sowing and ensure the growing of rice. Finally, the article offers some brief comparative remarks in the wider Southeast Asian context, and points to similarities found in the construction of imagery of political ritual. *[Southeast Asia, Borneo, Kayan, political symbolism, rituals of agriculture, death, chiefs, comparison]*

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Some Introductory Notes

This article concerns an intriguing description found in an early account of social life in Central Borneo. The ethnography I wish to discuss was recorded by Anton Willem Nieuwenhuis, the leader of a Dutch fact-finding mission towards the end of the nineteenth century that was investigating unknown territories in the interior of the island. The remarkable description by Nieuwenhuis of a "rice dance" among the Kayan (Kajan) people, living along the upper reaches of the River Mahakam in Central Borneo, is based on observations made in October 1896, and conveys to us a lively picture of a major ritual occasion of vast importance. This particular description has not attracted much scholarly interest so far, although it is true that now and then it has been referred to and commented on it. Regarding the ritual that Nieuwenhuis saw and described it is generally accepted that it has the purpose to chase away demons. This somewhat weak explanation may relate to *prima facie* impressions in the field and local impromptu exegesis. Present-day versions have been described as carnivals (Rousseau 1998: 183 f.). Some of the distortion involved may be traced to the inclusion of Nieuwenhuis' pictures in Hose's and McDougall's (1912) early standard work on the ethnography of Borneo, but provided with new captions that are entirely misleading (Plates 61, 151, 201).

This rereading of Nieuwenhuis' material will make full use of the relatively detailed ethnography he presented. I will regard the ritual sequence described by that author as a rebus. The constitutive elements will be unpacked and their provinces of meaning suggested by juxtapositions of the various contexts in which they appear. The emerging congeries of meanings will be inserted into the rebus, now hopefully showing some sort of story line.

The ritual events are seen as a cluster of imagery enacted on the basis of an iconic code, a symbolism to be comprehended without the help of verbal exegesis. The anthropological task here is to seek a "translation" of an iconic sequence into an anthropological account that uncovers the "veracious state" of the world, which in social life is only glimpsed through indexical ritual displays. Finally, I will offer some brief reflections on regional comparison.

The anthropological apparatus favoured here[1] pays attention to human codes, each organizing its own reality by forming different but coexisting ontologies. The multiplicity of cognitive strategies in the single person makes human existence prismatic in that, in the stream of life, different realities unfold simultaneously, all in their own ways, recognized and taken possession of, and each providing its own truths. This plurality of universes forms a bundle of possibilities and offers interfaces that can be thought of in terms of some meta-ontology. There is a realist perspective in which people perform technical acts implying linear time, logic, and rationality in a real-thing world. There is also a discursive order that concerns the performative acts of men and women and their ongoing conversation about themselves and the world. People construct and construe the universe through their use of language and other language-like codes, speakers and listeners being the defining points of a communicative space. The authenticities of the world are guaranteed by speakers. In this essay, iconic constructs will be particularly prominent in the discussion. Iconic imagery forms a field of evocative displays, the expressiveness of which works outside the realms of language, logic, and linear causality, and thus without either referential meaning or truthful reporting. In the world of cultural symbolism, language and iconology are entirely different sorts of code, neither being instrumental in reaching into the other. Icons form universes that are basically separated from the world of everyday living in that, in being composed, they create their own independent realities. They are grounded only in themselves and their construction. Iconology is based largely on the making of "concrete" pictures and their combination. Compositions of the iconic order make manifest other possible worlds.

The Kayan[2] speak an Austronesian language. They are agriculturalists and riverine settlers, and live together in massive longhouses on stilts that accommodate many families. Kayan society is hierarchical in a caste-like way, consisting of supreme chiefs and aristocracy, commoners, and serfs. The Kayan population of Borneo has been studied repeatedly, resulting in a considerable corpus of modern ethnography. I will make excursions into this material only occasionally, and then solely for suggestive illumination. The Kayan are spread throughout the interior of Borneo and appear in various subgroups that display some differences. Those who live along the banks of the River Mahakam are sometimes referred to as "Bahau" or "Busang" (Rousseau 1990: 15–17). They also have a great number of features that they share with other "Dayak" groups in Borneo. References of a comparative sort are given here simply as indices to promote broader understandings.

The masquerade that occurred as an essential part of the Kayan celebration Nieuwenhuis witnessed was connected with the cultivation of rice and correlated with the fact that rice was being sown in the fields at about this time of the year. The annual agricultural calendar in this area was construed as a series of practical stages: two moons for the sowing, five moons for ripening, and two moons for harvesting, leaving another three moons before starting another cycle (Nieuwenhuis 1904–07/I: 317).[3] The Kayan were slash-and-burn farmers cultivating dry rice. The rice fields were situated on the slopes or summits of surrounding hills, which had, therefore, become deforested. An agricultural field often could be found as high as 200 meters above the River Mahakam (I: 319).

Nieuwenhuis' account from more than one hundred years ago provides us with a detailed description of a sequence of several separate episodes, following one another closely in what appears to have been a set liturgical order, placed in turn within another liturgical series. The timespan of sowing was conventionally split into three separate periods, each of nine days. Each of these periods was introduced by an initial day of offerings, and then extended to the following eight nights (I: 322).

Drawing on his vast field experience, Nieuwenhuis notes that much the same ceremonial rules that were followed in general among the Kayan in Central Borneo also applied to those living along the banks of the Mahakam, although he also points to some differences in their understanding of valid *adat* conventions. In this article, I will focus on the ethnography from Long Blu-u, where Nieuwenhuis

1 I have discussed my theoretical concerns in some detail elsewhere; see Aijmer (2001b).

2 The various peoples known conventionally in the literature as Kayan do not seem to refer to themselves by this term, but use other names.

3 Henceforth references to Nieuwenhuis' work of 1904–1907 will consist of the volume number (I or II) and page number.

made his headquarters during his expeditions. This does not mean that other contemporary data will be entirely excluded.

Episode One: The Sowing of Rice

The Mahakam Kayan were organized as a chieftaincy under the leadership and protection of a chief, a position of supreme authority allocated according to descent within an ambilineal kinship constellation. The chief of Long Blu-u had a ritual responsibility for agriculture. On the first day of the first sowing period, he and his family, together with other families, went to the rice fields to provide offerings (*murang*) to the spirits. Every year one day was officially selected for the first sowing of the rice, determined on astronomical grounds according to the position of the sun (I: 317). This was the only festive day in the Kayan calendar, which was selected in this way by a "priest."

Who the "priest" (*dajung*, meaning "to sing") was remains a little uncertain, but we know that there was no special class of priests, in the sense that they carried out the same everyday occupations as most people do in order to make a living for themselves.[4] Most of them were women who acted as intermediaries between people and the world of the spirits. In this way they engaged in many life situations that were characterized by bad dreams, illness, death, and accidents but also in the various phases of agriculture (I: 117, 119). During their rituals, they used an archaic language (known as *dahaun to* or "spirit language"), which was different from that of everyday use. On occasion, they went into trance, and from the moment they took up this career they were possessed by a specific benevolent spirit (I: 110f., 130).

In connection with the sowing of rice, there was an introductory period of generally recognized prohibitions ("Verbotszeit" or *lali nugal*), which was lifted by Chief Kwing Irang on 13th October 1896. In this period of prohibition, people refrained from all work and movement in the landscape, and generally just hung around their residences. On the day that was thus proclaimed, most family members, who were fit enough to undertake work, took themselves off in the early morning to go to their rice fields and to perform the necessary ceremonies there, and then to start the work of sowing (I: 138). At this sort of sacrifice, a meal was made twice in the course of the morning. After this beginning, the Kayan had to *melo*, or withdraw into passivity, for eight days (I: 323).

Excursus One: Some Notions of Rice among the Kayan

Nieuwenhuis reports a Kayan myth, which he actually recorded in the River Mendalam area, that deals with rice. Briefly, it concerns "old times" when the Kayan still lived in their original habitat of Apu Kayan in the mountains close to the Sarawak border. At this pristine time, there was a married couple, Batang Timong Nangei and his wife Uniang Bulan Batang Ngau Ingan. We learn that the name Nangei means the "Celebration of the New Year after the Harvest of Rice" and Ingan "A Basket of Rice." The couple were anxious because they had no children. Spirits advised the man to search in the forest for a special kind of rattan. After more than a year of exploration the man returned home, with no result and totally exhausted, only to find that, while he had been away, his wife had died because she had twice violated the periods of taboo over rice cultivation. A needle falling from Heaven, which had penetrated the roof of the house and hit her little finger, had killed her. The bleeding thus caused could not be stopped and she died. However, from her blood emerged rice (*parei*), and parts of her dead body were transformed into other edible plants (I: 157). As it has often been noted by anthropologists, the sequencing of events in a myth may not always follow discursive logic. In this case, the woman broke prescribed taboos in the sowing period apparently before rice had come into existence. What is of interest here is that rice emerges from the early death of a woman, and female blood is the result of a union between some celestial force and a terrestrial woman.

Excursus Two: Chiefs and Chieftaincy

Limiting ourselves to the old ethnography, we may note that the Kayan chieftaincy was established around a conventional political position, and the chief (*hipui*) was always recruited from a particular family of the highest rank (I: 58). We learn that a chief's reputation generally depended on high birth, and that the social rank was always inherited. Succession was a matter of choice from among the children of the last ruler and a decision was taken dur-

4 Hose and McDougall (1912/I: 106) report in a general way (but on the basis of the Sarawak Kayan) that a ritual specialist could not take part in agricultural activities but was given rice by others. Nieuwenhuis' Mahakam data on this are quite clear, however.

Fig. 1: Episode 2: The landing of the visiting spirits (Nieuwenhuis 1904–07/I: Taf. 58; facing p. 326).

ing the lifetime of the predecessor. Daughters also could inherit the office even though sons were preferred, but if a woman took on the chieftainship, she enjoyed all the respect and privileges that went with the position (I: 59). Male Kayan chiefs had several wives (I: 289), but it is said that along the Mahakam only a few chiefs practiced "polygamy." Nieuwenhuis assumes that they had taken over this habit from the coastal Malays (I: 86). Chiefs were somewhat special also in death: they were given new names and buried in a special small and decorated house resting on top of a high pole (I: 76, 89f.).

A chief lived together with his (or her) followers at the centre of a longhouse that sheltered the whole local community. He represented the interests of the latter in both practical and spiritual matters. That is why he led all religious ceremonies connected with the agricultural festivities (I: 157). Every new phase in the cultivation of rice called for a religious celebration, and it was the chief, who indicated the beginning of each such period. The chief seems to have played an important part in all sorts of ceremonies, including individual's life cycle rituals (I: 74f.).

As already mentioned, there were "periods of prohibition," each introduced by taboo-like nonaction. Although the chief was not a member of the "clergy," like the priests, he or she had fully to respect all avoidances and prohibitions that went with such periods (I: 59f.).

Chiefs were extraordinary people, and their backgrounds and pedigrees were linked with divine beings.[5] Nieuwenhuis provides us with an example of a chief whose worldly origins were in the Mahakam region, but whose pedigree included the good spirits of the mythical land of Apu Lagan. For instance, Ledjo Aging, the chief of the house of Uma-Aging, situated in the upper reaches of River Kayan, was married to a female spirit from Apu Lagan. She was a woman called Mang, with long beautiful hair and a pale skin. She had been captured by the chief and had consented to marry him. Mang became pregnant and gave birth on a pebble bank in the river. Her child was a daughter called Do Nema, which means "pebble bank."

When Do Nema grew up, Mang could no longer restrain her longing for her land of origin, the realm of Apu Lagan. Do Nema married Tigang Aging and gave him a son, Batang Huwang. The story continues with Do Nema's death. The villagers did not welcome the child, but left him in the forest to perish. No one dared to have anything to do with the newborn infant, but in the end, one "good woman" took care of him and brought him to the banks of the River Kaso Zog. Batang Huwang decided to remain there, and his descendants also remained in the Mahakam region with one exception: the father of Akam Igau journeyed into the Mendalam area, where he married Uma Aging of the Ma-Aging tribe.

The mixture of mythical narration and historical account, which is long and elaborate, provides Chief Akam Igau with a line of descent stemming

5 A survey of Kayan and other Dayak chieftaincies is found in, for instance, King (1993).

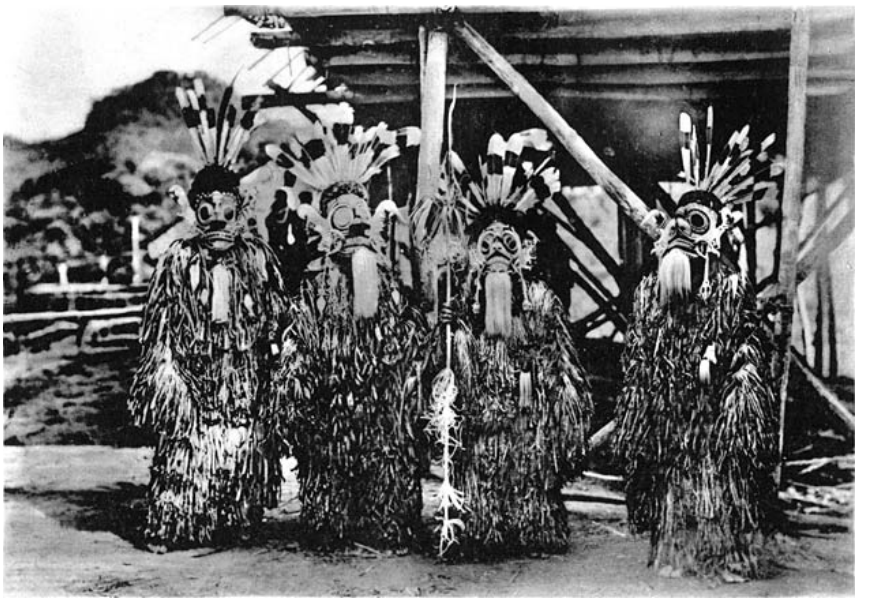

Fig. 2: The spiritual guests and their leader with soul-catching hook, arranged for a group photograph (Nieuwenhuis 1904–07/I: Taf. 56; facing p. 324).

from the celestial spirits as well as a connection with the chiefly family of Uma-Aging (I: 67 f.). The settings for mythical events are two: the banks of the river and the deep forest. I shall return to the significance of this later.

Episode Two: The Visit of the Spirits

On the first day of the second nine-day period, the masquerade of the "rice dance" took place. This second ritual episode brought the action back to the chiefly settlement, the main feature of the event being that a number of masked and dressed-up men arrived at the village's landing place by the river in longboats paddled by young boys. A full ethnographic account follows.

The masks carried by the impersonators of the spirits were somewhat cranium-like, with very large eyes, but also with ears and beards. Their heads sported "war hats" decorated with the long tail feathers of the hornbill bird (I: 325). These hats were made in the form of round baskets of plaited rattan and were crafted by women with pearl embroideries and other decorations. At the front there were glittering pieces of metal or small animal masks. Besides the hornbill feathers, there were feathers from the Argus pheasant and cocks. The broadtail hornbill feathers with black stripes were worn only by persons of rank or recognized warriors, and only a selected few would wear a row of eight such feathers fastened from the front to the back (I: 138 f.; see also Hose and McDougall 1912/II: 18, 59, 88). The designs of the actual performers' hats all seem to have included a magnificent plumage of hornbill feathers (see Fig. 2).

A great deal of effort went into the making of these special masks (*hudo kajo*), which were crafted out of a kind of light white wood. The ears of the masks were often beautifully carved and consisted of flat pieces to which leopard's teeth had been attached in an artistic way. At the lower end there were long bands, depicting the extended earlobes in common Kayan fashion to which pendant eardrops were attached. We learn that the patterns of the ears were copied from old models, which were kept as "antiques." Whether these preserved items were just the carved ears or complete old masks is not known. The masks had beards of, whenever possible, white goat's hair (I: 325). The wearer of a mask saw through the nasal openings or through special holes placed between the nose and the eyes.

Among the Kayan, these artefacts were of a particularly high quality and displayed very careful artistic carving. Generally, each young man produced his own mask, but there were some men of special skill, who helped the others with the final touches. The patterns employed were both clear and symmetrical. The face of the mask was carved in one piece, but the lower jaw was made separately so that it could be used in the dance to produce a clattering noise. Both the upper and lower jaws were equipped with big tusks fastened by wooden nails. The eyes of the masks were made of the lids of mirror boxes whenever possible, otherwise lids of betel boxes made of copper were used (I: 325).

The bodies of the impersonators were covered with dresses of banana leaves, each of them split into cord-like frills, with the central leaf stalk being used as a band to tie the treated leaves around the body to transform it into a shapeless green mass. The intention was to produce a "hairy" appearance. The impersonators also carried swords (I: 325).

The participants got dressed upriver on a pebble bank.[6] They then embarked in their longboats, rowed by young boys. The boats seem to have been ordinary riverboats made from one log and had raised sideboards. Along the Mahakam, boats were only sparsely decorated. Sometimes the largest versions had a carved mask inside and outside on the prow and stern. It may be mentioned that among the Kenya in the Apu Kayan region, boats were usually more richly carved, with the heads of dragons at the front and back (II: 222).[7]

The wild-looking party paddled downstream in order to arrive at the landing place, where other men were meeting on the shore. These men were newly bathed and dressed in their most beautiful loincloths (I: 326).

The men on the longboats disembarked, silently climbed the steep riverbed, and proceeded to the open space before the chief's house, where a large crowd was waiting for them. Everyone in this congregation was dressed up in his best finery, decorated with embroideries and other patterns. Many children and young women showed themselves off with beautiful pearl-embroidered hats, bracelets, and necklaces. None of these items of fine clothing should to be seen except on a ceremonial occasion like the present one (I: 326). The crowd was led by the main chief, Kwing Irang, and other notables. Kwing Irang watched the dance session from the gallery of his rice barn, squatting surrounded by baskets filled with fighting cocks (I: 326).

The masked figures performed a particular dance lasting a considerable time. The performance was accompanied by a rhythm beaten on a gong. This beat had to be steady, as any deviation would lead to an immanent danger for the participants. The green figures arranged themselves in a circle and started to dance different steps accompanied by movements of the arms, their heads also shaking and turning (I: 326). At midday a band of young men from the area around the small tributary River Ikang, also in masks and dressed in green, joined the dancers, who were now twenty-three in number (I: 327).[8] While performing, the masks must not utter a single word; should the rule be broken, the dancer might drop dead. According to Kayan beliefs, this was because the spirits could not speak (I: 325). Thus, language and spiriting seem incompatible: crossing the line in this respect had immediate consequences in that death followed.

One of the dancing masks, described as the "Hauptperson" and leading the masked crowd, carried a "hook," a long wooden stick (*krawit bruwa*), the length of which had been carved to produce long fine shreds as an embellishment. The hook was instrumental in catching and bringing back the soul of the rice (*bruwa parei*) to the newly planted fields. At a given moment the performers arranged themselves into a line behind and within reach of one another. The leader moved forward holding up the long hook in his hand. Suddenly he made a movement, the whole line of performers following him as if they wished to draw something to themselves, namely the soul of the rice. The soul was thought to have strayed to foreign areas (I: 324, 327): the rice was thought to have lost its soul, perhaps during the harvest or when it was planted in the earth. It needed to be restored in order for the grain and plants to grow. The good mood of its soul was a matter of great importance for the results of the harvest. Striving for this state of affairs, later in the season the female priests would conduct very complex rituals connected with agriculture (I: 107; King 1993: 177).

The *huda kajo* dancers retired into an "assembly hall"[9] built for the occasion, led by their headman

6 It will be recalled that in the myth the divine Mang gave birth on a pebble bank in the river.

7 It has also been reported that in Sarawak the prows of Kayan boats are sometimes ornamented with a crocodile's or a conventional dog's head, carved in hardwood and painted red and black (Hose 1988: 162; Hose and McDougall 1912/I: plate 125). There are descriptions from other parts of Borneo of very long "war boats" that could carry up to one hundred people. They were not actually used in warfare but transported head-hunting parties on raiding expeditions. They are said to have been "communal property." They were decorated, and the middle part had a raised freeboard, covered with an arched roof of palm leaves, which was where the chief sat. See Hose and McDougall (1912/I: 66, 166 f., 174; II: 55 f., 199–202, 241).

8 In his account of the Mendalam riparian settlements, Nieuwenhuis tells us that a similar dance of masks, following the rhythm beaten out by a gong (in der Weise der Javaner beim "*tandak*"), was followed by an imitation of "war dances," but as the dress of the masked people was very heavy, the effort did not come out that well. The expected high jumps accompanied by shouts were just too strenuous (I: 168). The ethnographer also reports that the Mendalam masked dance ended with a dramatic show depicting the hunt of a wild boar. Yet another "obscene" show by a single man followed the subsequent female dancing (I: 168 f.).

9 This was a temporary arrangement, as the gallery of the new longhouse had not yet been finished, and, therefore, ritual assemblies could not be held there.

Fig. 3: Episode 2: Dancing spirits (Nieuwenhuis 1904–07/I: Taf. 59; facing p. 326).

carrying the *krawit bruwa*. The hall was packed with people, but space was left for the green spirits in their midst. Chief Kwing Irang, too, left his barn to take up a new position in the hall between some of the eldest prominent men. This meeting was also an occasion for the chief to make public announcements, in this case concerning the reception of the Dutch expedition among them. The chief's proclamation and its public acceptance were confirmed by the masked men, who uttered "ein gutmütiges Gebrumm oder Gebrüll," accompanied by movements of their heads (I: 327).

Nieuwenhuis offers an explanation for the masquerade. According to him, the nature of the ritual was social. On his earlier visits to the area, the festival had not been celebrated in its entirety, nor would it be recreated in this grand fashion in the years to come. The reason was that in 1896 the longhouse, which was the village, had been rebuilt and repopulated after a period of thirteen years of dispersed habitation. This temporarily dispersed settlement was the result of a military attack by Dayaks from Sarawak in the Mahakam area in 1885, and the inhabitants of the settlement of Long Blu-u had their traditional longhouse by the river looted and burnt by the Sarawakans. After this event, the people had spread all over the countryside to live in their small field houses, otherwise used only during the agricultural season. In 1896 the Long Blu-u house was in the course of being rebuilt, the sowing rituals being held in their complete form to mark the completion of the new community house (I: 324). This convincing interpretation contains an argument about the social articulation of a house-based society and ritual centralization,[10] but it does not really explain the liturgical features of the events.

Nieuwenhuis calls the masquerade a "Geistertanz" but fails to tell us what sort of spirits were thought to carry out this dance. However, he records the Kayan belief that if they dress up as spirits and play their parts in the ritual, they, too, will be performing suprahuman acts. The spirits were thought to possess the capacity to bring back human souls when they escaped, and likewise it was assumed that the same spirits could lure back the straying soul of the rice (I: 324).[11]

Excursus Three: On Spirits and their Habitats

The ethnography speaks of "Geister" or spirits. What sort of spirits were these beings, and how are we to understand them? A very brief examination of local cosmography suggests that the Kayan lived in a clearly compartmentalized universe. Gods, spirits, human beings, and souls did not live in a

10 Rousseau (1990: 117) has presented a similar argument in relation to ritual centralism among the Kayan.

11 King (1993: 259) suggests that the Kayan wooden masks used in agricultural ceremonies were intended to drive away malevolent rice-harming spirits. This is not so clear in the present ethnography. Perhaps they had double functions, e.g., to secure blessings for the local community while at the same time driving away foreign malevolent forces. See also Hose and McDougall (1912/II: 115).

single unified world but in separate specific layers and regions, each bearing a special name. There were, according to Nieuwenhuis, five such realms. A brief exploration of the destiny of the spirits of the dead is therefore required.

A land of the dead, called "Apu Kesio," is mentioned (I: 320), and perhaps the masked travellers on the river journeyed symbolically from this region of death to the territory of their living progeny. The Kayan person had two souls, one being obscure and after death possibly connected with the grave,[12] the other one launching a new career. When a Kayan died of illness – which was regarded as a good death (*matei saju*) – his or her soul (*bruwa*) settled in the Kayan heaven of Apu Kesio. What was needed for the soul's life there was assembled in the course of two or three days before the funeral. Dead chiefs required up to eight days for such preparations (I: 89). Coffins were placed at graveyards situated by rocks along some river (II: 119).[13] The journeying dead heading for Apu Kesio were accompanied by the celestial shadows seen cast on mountaintops and clouds at sunset, shadows that were described in terms of boats (II: 117f.). The implication seems to have been that the dead travelled to the realm of the deceased in some sort of vessel. Life in this postexistence was characterized by an abundance of food, with no work being required (I: 102). Apu Kesio was, however, not the final destination of the *bruwa* soul, since it later migrated to yet another region called "Langit Mengun," where it was transformed into a true ghost of eternal existence. Those who had the unfortunate experience of dying a violent death – murder, suicide, accident, warfare, or at birth– ended up in two other places, where they joined similarly unfortunate deceased for what seems a somewhat duller afterlife (I: 91).

Another spiritual region of concern here was "Apu Lagan." In the myth of the creation of human beings and deities, Apu Lagan was a kind of original world (II: 114). This realm was ruled by Djaja Hipui, the female controller of the world of benevolent spirits. She was once herself a human being and the wife of Tamei Angoi, who was a chief of the banks of the River Kayan. She had a mythical connection with the growing of rice but, above all, she was a usurper of Apu Lagan, conquering that realm by violence and driving away its original female ruler, Buring Bango, into another land, "Pu-u Siu." Life in Apu Lagan mirrored Kayan life on earth, its inhabitants having settled in longhouses along the shores of rivers (I: 99). The benevolent spirits of Apu Lagan were helpful to people, they possessed the priests and priestesses, and in cases of illness helped them call back the escaping soul of the sick person.[14] They also inspired the tattoo masters, deerhorn carvers, blacksmiths, and similar craftsmen (I: 100f.). At the New Year celebrations, the benign Apu Lagan spirits were the guests of the living and were invited by the *dajung* priest. However, they then arrived at the mundane world in a way entirely different from that of the crowd of spirits carried on the water by boats at the sowing festival (I: 171f.). Thus, it seems less likely that the shrouded figures appearing at that time had any connections with the good world of Apu Lagan.

The underworld was the realm of the two powerful spirits, Amei Awi and his wife Buring Uhe, who ruled in a chthonic world and controlled all agricultural activities. The harvest was greatly dependent on their judgement of the behaviour of the owners of fields. They were particularly keen on receiving the sacrifices prescribed by tradition (I: 157).

So, in terms of the story line implied in the ritual sequence, where did the boat spirits that appeared at the sowing rituals come from? Nieuwenhuis notes in a general way that the masks of both men and women all manifested evil spirits. Their gruesome heads (wooden masks) and long hairy bodies (wrapped with shredded banana leaves) expressed some of the characteristic features of demons (I: 167). It seems, then, that the boat spirits were not denizens of Apu Lagan (who are benevolent), nor did they belong to Apu Kesio, Langit Mengun, or the other two realms of death. Perhaps, then, they had something to do with the underworld of Amei Awi and Burung Uhe, or with the realm of Pu-u Siu, where the original female ruler of Apu Lagan survived? We shall return to this question later when we have learnt more about the remaining events of the rice festival.

12 Stöhr (1959: 92) says generally that there is a soul, which is connected with the physical body and which does not go to the death realms but lingers at the cemetery until it is transformed into an evil spirit. We learn that not only human beings but pigs (domestic and wild), dogs, chickens, deer, and grey monkeys also had two souls, whereas other animals, plants, and "dead" things had just one (I: 103).

13 At some earlier point in time, all the Kayan tribes practiced double burial. The cleaned bones were removed from the coffins and put into big clay jars, which were then placed in some of the many grottoes in the area. The cranium was decorated in a special way. In the late 19th century this mode was still in operation along the upper reaches of the Mahakam (II: 119f.). On graveyards and interment, see also Hose and McDougall (1912/II: 34f.).

14 On the catching of human souls, see further Hose and McDougall (1912/II: 29).

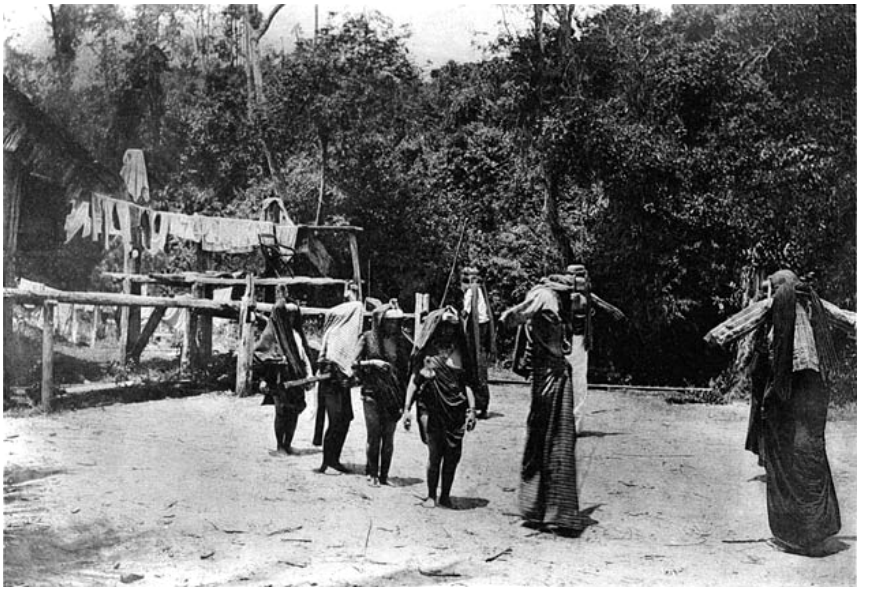

Fig. 4: Episode 3: Dancing female masks (Nieuwenhuis 1904–07/I: Taf. 60; facing p. 328).

Episode Three: Female Masks and Transvestite Girls

The sequence of the "rice dance" continued to unfold into a third phase, as mature and presumably married women appeared in the public space carrying masks made of rattan. These *hudo adjat* figures arrived in a long procession. The performing women were the most prominent ladies of the local Kayan world, including the two wives of the Chief Kwing Irang (I: 328). Their masks were adorned with cloths on which patches, glittering lids, and a couple of cotton bands with attached earrings had been fastened in the shape of a Kayan head. The performing women's heads were half-covered by their masks, but also their bodies were hidden by jackets and large pieces of cloth. With the help of bamboo rods, the arms of the jacket were fixed so that they were held upwards on the sides (I: 327f.). These formless figures moved in dancing steps over the public space in front of the chiefly house. They were followed in the same way by a row of young, presumably unmarried women, dressed up in the costumes of young men and wearing swords, who walked in a procession behind the elderly masked women (I: 327f.).[15]

Like the male masks of wood, the female basket masks were regarded as depictions or manifestations of evil spirits of a demonic nature (I: 167). Where they were supposed to come from and what part they were supposed to play are questions that are not directly addressed in the ethnography. Given the general character of those spirits who appeared in the world of human beings in the shape of masks, these female shapes were more demon-like than benevolent. The young girls appearing in their train dressed as men may have been in a different category, not fully masked but still dressed up. Somehow, they appeared as female men in a world of dominant female presuppositions. Being young and not married – and, therefore, presumably asexual – they were not yet full women and, as such, qualified to appear ritually as men in a world defined as female.

Episode Four: Forest Nomads

The next episode consisted of another performance by six men who emerged suddenly from the forest behind the house. They were dressed in torn clothes. Their bodies were wrapped in mats, and on their heads they sported dirty old hats of rattan or fur. Their accoutrements were old baskets, wooden spears, and exaggeratedly large quivers at their sides. The little band of ragged young men moved timidly and nervously into the open space and were greeted, especially by the younger members of the crowd, with cheers and mockery. The performers conveyed a choreographed *tableau vivant* depicting the life of the Punan nomads of the forest with

15 In the Medanam area on a similar occasion, young women also performed a dance in a kind of "Indian style," with arm movements (I: 169). Perhaps this corresponded to Episode Six.

Fig. 5: Transvestite girls (Nieuwenhuis 1904–07/I: Taf. 61; facing p. 328).

their entirely different way of life. "Punan" seems to be a very uncertain ethnic category of foragers that roamed the Borneo forests hunting and gathering.[16] Nieuwenhuis says that the Punan actually spread fear among the settled people, but in the present context they formed an obvious target for ethnic ridicule and scorn (I: 328f.; II: 4). After this exhibition of ethnic differences the scene was filled with various performances by small boys, which the ethnographer did not understand well, but they offered the audience good fun (I: 329).

The imaginary appearance of the nomadic forest people, or Punan, in the performance has a special interest for our reading of this ethnography. The migration into the area of the upper River Mahakam by the Kayan took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when immigrants arrived from the high and mountainous region of Apu Kayan (I: 273). From the perspective of the *longue durée*, the Kayan were newcomers to the banks of the Mahakam, the first settlers there apparently being the Pnihing rather than Punan. Nieuwenhuis mentions, for instance, that in all the country dominated by the Kayan there lived no Punan at all. It is, then, somewhat curious that they should appear so explicitly in a ritual concerned with the sowing of rice (I: 273–275, 278).

16 Hose and McDougall (1912/II: 177–193); King (1993: 31); Sellato (1989: 7, 15); Rousseau (1990: 20).

Episode Five: The Whirligigs Game

The green *hudo kajo*-actors retired to their respective apartments in the communal longhouse or some unobserved corner where, with the help of their relatives, they got rid of their leafy spirit costumes and masks. They were now excited about the presence of so many people and very keen on playing a special game with whirligigs (*pasing*), said to have been a passion among the Kayan (I: 329). The whirligig was made of hardwood and set in motion with the help of a string, thereby producing a sound. The game seems to have consisted of one man throwing his spinning top into the centre of the open space, after which his opponent tried to throw his own so as to hit away the first one, but without it ceasing to spin (I: 167, 329). Nieuwenhuis adds that there were no prizes involved and that anyone could join in, even those without particular skill in the game. About twenty to thirty men took part (I: 329f.). Ritually speaking: it seems as if it was the release of competitive energy in the game that was important and, interestingly, it was staged solely in connection with the feast of the sowing of the rice (I: 330).[17]

Episode Six: Women's Dance

After dusk, the dancing place in Long Blu-u was illuminated by resin torches (I: 330). The sixth episode started in the evening after a pause in the proceedings and consisted of a party of women dancing in an Indian-like style. The visitors from "outlying" places had now begun to return to their residences, but there was still a considerable crowd to watch, and the hall was much too small to accommodate all the people who wished to see the *hudo lakeuj* being performed by the women under the leadership of Uniang Anjas, a wife of the chief. Six young women, who shone not only with

17 Among the Mendalam Kayan, the feast of sowing included a nightly session of competitive games between younger men in front of an audience of women, all participants displaying physical strength and skills (I: 167). It seems that here, too, competitive energy was released in a general way.

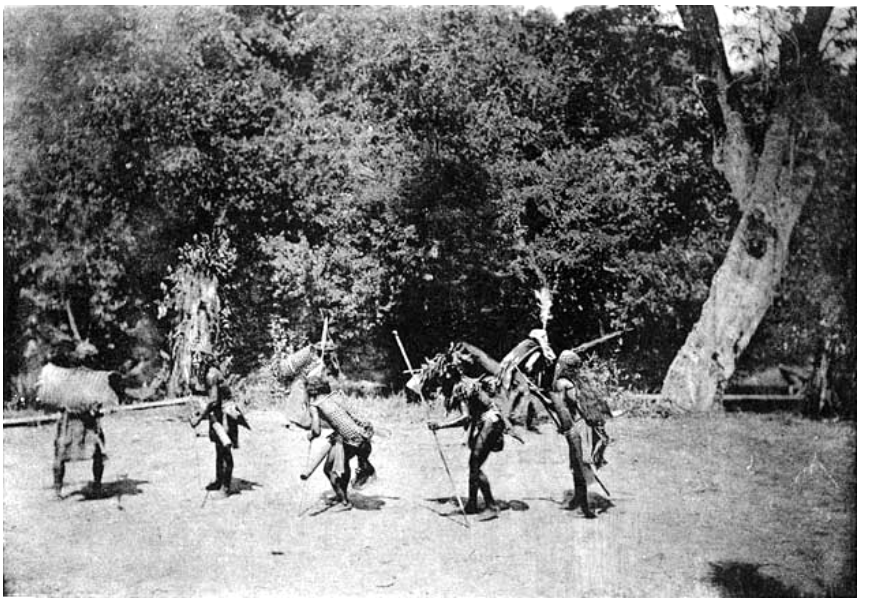

Fig. 6: Episode 4: The performance of forest nomads (Nieuwenhuis 1904–07/I: Taf. 62; facing p. 328).

their appearance but also with their ability, followed Uniang. The dancing was a combination of steps and graceful movements of the arms. The performers were accompanied by a special tune played on a stringed instrument called a *sape*. There was no singing. We learn that Uniang danced in a real Indian style with many flexions and tranquil movements of her limbs. Nieuwenhuis adds that the performance was much more vivid than similar ones on Java (I: 330f.).

Episode Seven: Feasting

The feasting formed the seventh and last episode of the ritual cycle. The drama of spiritual visitors to the house community and the chieftaincy thus ended in commensality among the human participants in the celebration. The guests left early.

The Following Days

On the second day of the second sowing period, work was again resumed in the large field belonging to the chief called *lunga ajo* (I: 323), which was then sown. In this work, representatives of all families, both free men and slaves, took part (I: 323).

This day was also marked by the erection of special structures for offerings (*pelale*) in the fields with which the person doing the sowing must remain in immediate contact during the work. At this time, the Kayan did not allow foreigners to enter their fields, and, above all, they were not allowed to talk to them (I: 323).

The day continued with a new masquerade, the course of which was similar to the earlier version described above (I: 323, also 168). It is not clear in Nieuwenhuis's account, whether the masks recalled and caught the vanishing soul of the rice at this second appearance too.

After the second day of the third period, provided they had finished the sowing for the chief, the free men and their slaves were allowed to start sowing their own fields. However, they did not need to make any sacrifices on their own – this could only be done together with the chief (I: 323).

A Tentative Interpretation of the Rice-Sowing Ritual of the Mahakam Kayan

So far I have presented Nieuwenhuis's ethnography of 1896 with only slight interpretation. Now it is time to ask what this is all about. My enquiry seeks a foundation in the Kayan autochthonous iconic codes used to construct visions of worlds that were otherwise hidden by the opacity of mundane life. In these imaginary worlds, the Kayan navigated with the help of their cultural intuitions rather than through any explanatory exegeses in terms of language. What we are confronted with in the "rice dance" is the exposition of a symbolic drama that is construed through performance and participation but dimly understood by conscious reflection. My reading of these events is as follows.

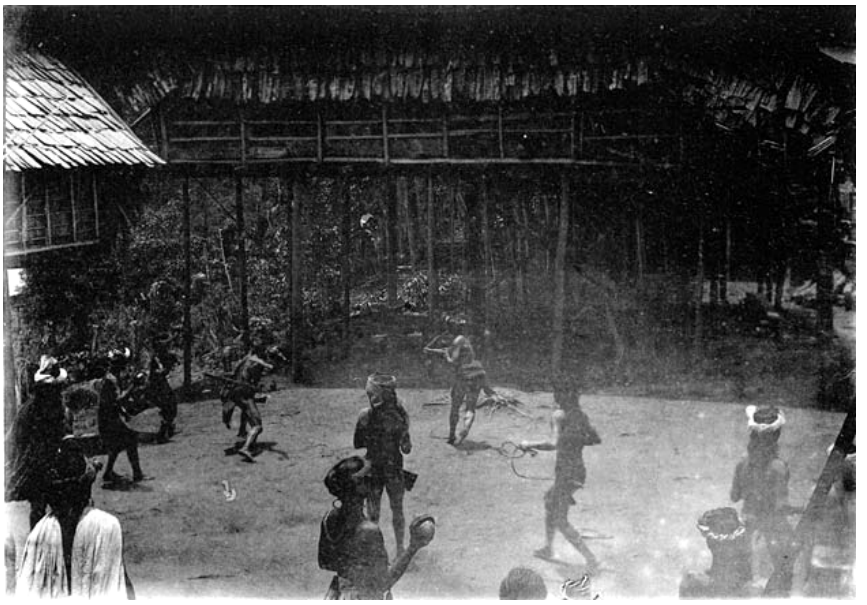

Fig. 7: Episode 5: The whirligigis game (Nieuwenhuis 1904–07/I: Taf. 63; facing p. 330).

The masked figures that emerged on a pebble bank in the river manifested certain spiritual beings. It may be that they were the assembly of deceased of a particular community, that is, former residents of a specific longhouse. One reason for this assumption lies in the ethnographic circumstance that the dead in their coffins (and earlier on in ceramic jars) were buried in cemeteries located along steep banks of a river. It was noted in the previous ethnographic presentation that human beings, like some other living beings, had two different souls. It is suggested, that one human soul remained with the bones in the riverside grave – being this remaining the essence, or aspect of the dead, which was represented in the masked figures – while the other soul should have migrated to a different realm of existence.

An alternative would be to see the masks as spirits of the local environment, with no direct link to the deceased ancestors of the living villagers. However, such distinctions may not have been so clear. In fact, they may well have merged: the deceased of the local people in their sepulchral aspect becoming the local spirits (demons?) in control of local natural forces and local terrain.

In this reading of the ethnographic evidence, the dead emerged from the river and travelled to the world of the living in narrow longboats. These Long Blu-u boats had only a few decorations lacking explicit discursive associations. However, in other parts of Central Borneo (for instance, among the Kenyah in Apu Kayan) riverboats of this kind were provided with "dragon heads" apparently indicating that in certain ritual situations the boats might have been seen as manifestations of *naga* water snakes.[18] Possibly riding these snake boats was an imaginary journey from death to life. The boats were propelled independently of the masked passengers, being paddled by a crew of young boys. The locomotion of the *naga* boats may thus have seemed self-willed, not requiring help from the travelling spirits of the dead who were returning to the world of the living.

The spirits disembarked from their *naga* vessels, climbed the bank of the river, and proceeded to the open space in front of the longhouse where they started performing. The chief was watching their presentation from the gallery of his rice barn, a feature that stresses the connection between the chief and rice. In a sense, he is the main consumer of the ritual, but also his male and female followers are present, all dressed up in their most festive outfits. Beauty is part of the imagery. The congregation implied a synthesizing assembly of the dead and of the living, of spiritual and mundane, and this mingling of forces gave shape to the future. The

18 The *naga* is a being of the underground and water in South and Southeast Asia and of great significance in many societies. The *naga* symbolism is varied, but its many shapes show a number of family resemblances. Victor King (1993: 110–112; 1985: 132–134, 138) points out that it is an ancient Bornean symbol of the underworld that seems to have been incorporated from Hindu-Javanese imagery. This is a historical explanation, but it may also be that there were "deeper" connections embracing the wider scene of Southeastern Asia. I will return to this in the final paragraphs.

dancing movements of the masks may have represented the idea that the visitors were not human, their choreographed movements indicating a different class of being. The performance may also have had aesthetic qualities, and thus moral implications (Wittgenstein 1949: 6.421). The wooden masks were finely carved and regarded as heirlooms. Obviously, they were beautiful to watch. The ethnography suggests that the various dancers and the community assembled in Long Blu-u were joined together by their common acceptance of the morality of what was pleasing. In this view, the festival thus contained a political dimension over which the chief presided as a paramount controller in virtuous splendour at a timeless congregation of moral beauty.

When the spiritual guests had made themselves present for some time, they regrouped to conduct their main task on this occasion, which was to catch and bring back the escaping soul of the rice. Rice was about to be sown in the swiddens, and the festival at Long Blu-u was directly related to this phase of agriculture. For reasons to be discussed later, the settled people of the locality were not in a position to conduct this ritual themselves, since they depended on the spirits of the dead to perform this important task. The masks lined up in a row, their leader brandishing a special "hook" or staff with ornaments to accomplish the expected soul-catching. In dramatic movements, the train of masks stepped backwards, thus expressing the drawing-in of the rice soul. This implied a reendowment of life force in the now growing grain that promised to provide bountiful crops later on.

This drama concluded and the masked figures retired into the public hall to which the chief also found his way, after which the masquerade ended. The imagery does not seem to indicate the return of the spirits to their own haunts by their travelling back along the course of the river.[19]

The next *tableau vivant* to be realized in the progression of the ritual sequence was a female dance including the transvestism. The stage was invaded by a procession of tall masked women with a tail of very young women dressed as men. The ethnography seems to suggest that the plaited female masks looked somewhat demonic, but it remains uncertain what "demons" would have been implied here. The dancing women established a female sphere where even maleness was an aspect of a world with female presuppositions. In all Dayak societies, rice and agriculture are said to have been associated with the underworld, which is clearly female (e.g., King 1993: 240). In the earlier ethnographic presentation, I discussed the various realms of the Kayan cosmography. Of these regions, the most likely candidate to match the scene of masked and dressed-up women is the realm of the underworld, which was female in nature and ruled by Ami Awi and Buring Uhe. This couple were the controllers of agriculture, and it will be remembered that rice is female blood transformed. The circumstance that the dancing women, while providing blessings through their choreographed steps, appeared as grotesque and different may indicate that they were not really connected with the Kayan population but rather to their predecessors in this place as the original owners of the land. The Kayan were newcomers to the country, having pushed out other groups of people living there, but in ritual terms they were still regarded as the true and rightful possessors of the land. The fact that the wives of the chief impersonated some of the pristine underworld spirits brought a status to the dancing figures as being of equal rank to the Kayan chief, who wished to appropriate their blessings for the coming harvest. The ritual visualization of the underground suggests some sort of contract or agreement between the Kayan chief and the forces of chthonic blessings.

The same theme of ritual legitimacy challenged by usurpation must also be part of the next episode that amused the congregation at Long Blu-u in 1896. Six men made their appearance dressed up as forest nomads, or Punan. It was pointed out that the classification of the impersonators as Punan was somewhat curious, as there were no real Punan (whatever that diffuse term might have implied) in the area. But the idea of pristine landowners as forest nomads may have been brought from the earlier abodes of the Kayan in the Apu Kayan area. The dancers made a timid appearance while demonstrating the attributes of life in the forest. They were met with jocular shouts and words of mockery; the whole show indicating their inferiority to the Kayan audience headed by their chief. And yet it appears that this strange show of mortification was a necessity in the ritual sequence. What we see is a vision of the original inhabitants of the tract who were the legitimate controllers of the spiritual forces of the land and waters, and who, in a new political situation of Kayan occupation, must now mediate between the newcoming usurpers and the original forces of the locality, to which the newcomers have no direct access. The chiefs were connected with celestial phenomena, not with subterrestrial worlds.

19 In modern Kayan ethnography from the Sarawak side, we are given the interesting information that people splashed each other with water, which had the effect of sending away the spirit masks (Rousseau 1998: 184).

One reading of the drama of Punan participation in a Kayan ritual is that, by their appearance, they in a sense transferred their ritual authority to the presiding Kayan chief who could then, with fresh authority, deal with the life-bringing local forces of the underground (seen in the earlier ritual tableau) that would allow the successful cultivation of rice. This contract had to be rewritten every year, and this took place in the festival of the sowing of rice. A myth provides some supporting evidence in this direction. In it, the celestial chief is turned into a legitimate worshipper of the forces of the terrain by an act of adoption. There is a phase in the myth in which the abandoned chiefly infant of divine descent is adopted by a woman of the forest (a Punan) and brought up by her. In this narrative, we see how later the grown-up chief could trace two different paths of legitimacy and fuse them in his own person.

The scorn and humiliation of the Punan will best be seen as an expression of Kayan dominance, while at the same time it screened the latter's actual ritual dependence on the former, mirrored in their (mock) participation.

Once the order of subterrestrial forces had been established, the participants turned to whirligig games, which were reserved for this occasion. It was only the men who participated, which they did with great enthusiasm, playing the game in pairs. However, there was no overall pattern to the event, and everyone took part regardless of skill, age, or talent. There may have been winners in each particular contest, but no total count was kept, and the whirligig competition did not produce what might be called winners and losers. It was apparently the fierce competition as such which was valued, and which had a ritual significance. The material will not allow a reading of the whirligigs themselves as symbolic objects,[20] but we can discern that the contest between these spinning objects would have produced beneficial energy for the growth of the rice. The contest united rather than separated, providing both pleasure and blessings.

The last performance in the sequence took place after dark in the form of a female dance illuminated by resin torches. The group of six women were led by a wife of the chief who danced in a style the ethnographer calls "Indian," implying combinations of graceful movements of the arms and of steps, all accompanied by a tune played on a string instrument. It is also suggested that this dancing had its counterparts on Java. My opinion is that this *tableau vivant* depicted the divine world of Apu Lagan, ruled by Djaja Hipui (significantly impersonated by the chief's wife), a female divinity (once a human being and herself a chief's wife) who ruled good and benevolent spirits and, furthermore, had mythical connections with the cultivation of rice. At a remote period of time, in a period of famine, a chief – the husband of Djaja Hipui, the woman who was later to conquer this divine realm – climbed a ladder leading to Apu Lagan and was there received with courtesy by its then female ruler, Burung Bang, and given plenty of rice to support his earthly followers. He returned with this rice to his own realm. The inhabitants of Apu Lagan were thought to help ordinary people in various ways, e.g., calling back an escaping human soul in cases of illness – a clear parallel to the annual calling-back of the soul of the rice. The life force of men was restored with the help of divine beings, while the life force of rice was recovered by beings connected with death, water, and/or the forest.

Another feature of interest is that Djaja Hipui was a woman who usurped power by driving away the original female ruler of the realm, Buring Bang. This feature surely parallels the supposedly historical Kayan conquest of the Mahakam area and their driving away of the original settlers here. The dancing scene displayed in the sixth ritual episode not only pointed to the ancestry of the chief and his divine connections but it was also a reminder of his legitimacy.

I have found no explicit information in the early sources on the location of Apu Lagan, but I assume that this was a celestial or upper abode, balancing the underworld of Amei Awi and Burung Uhe which, as mentioned, was another world controlling all agricultural activities. Moreover, high divinity must be reconciled with the local forces of vegetative power, the gods being uninvited invaders. It is also clear that the prospect of a year of abundant rice crops would need the prerequisites of both chthonic and celestial blessings.

In contrast to the underworld and its inhabitants, the Apu Lagan universe was directly connected with the usurping Kayan population and their chiefs who themselves had divine blood flowing in their veins. The scene concluding the rice-sowing celebrations at Long Blu-u seems to have visualized the heavenly powers led by the main female ruler of the upper world, who by their dancing gave life force to the Kayan rice fields.

20 See, for instance, Hose and McDougall (1912/II: 163) and Jensen (1974: 188). The Berawan say that the sound of the spinning tops resembles the speech of the dead (Metcalf 1982: 172). Whirligig games are known throughout Southeast Asia.

The sequence of visions relating to the sowing of rice was brought to an end in a grand commensality, so food bringing together everyone in the all-embracing union of the divinely inspired chief.

Discussion

In this study of a corpus of historical ethnography from 1896, I have limited the analysis essentially to one place and time, although there are now and then excursions into other areas and other times to complement the account. Most of these notes are best seen as annotations that may further illuminate what has been said about the actual Kayan festival. It is of course true that these annotations imply a minimal comparative approach, the circumstance that may create the space for some further discussion. In Indonesian and Austronesian studies, there is a time-honoured interest in the broad comparison. Research in and results from one particular area and its inhabitants often allow to buttress analyses made in very different environments somewhere else. Such comparison generally was motivated by *prima facie* similarities. Here, within the limitations of space, I wish to touch on this discussion to raise some old questions in a tentative way.

As symbolic imagery, the Kayan rice-sowing festival shows a great many family resemblances to other celebrations in Southeast Asia. Here I will leave aside the many similarities between the various Dayak groups in Borneo.[21] What I have in mind are such patterned clusters of symbols that recur and are transformed in a great many societies in Southeast Asia as a whole. Sometimes comparison is discussed as being made within the historical "Austronesian area."[22] Here I wish to look beyond language at a possible comparison of elements belonging to iconic codes.

Let me start by briefly rephrasing the findings presented above, following a sense of déjà vu. I think it is clear that the Long Blu-u description concerns a miniature riverine kingdom of the Southeast Asian type. What we find is that, in its stately ceremonials, this Kayan "little kingdom" displays an imaginary narrative resembling those of other, grander polities in the region. What we see in this, I think, is one example of a whole complex of iconic symbolism centred on rice and divinely inspired authority as related to political power. We can recognize the features of this complex from southern China, Japan and the Ryukyu Islands, Laos, Thailand, Burma, Assam, and Manipur on the continent, as well as from numerous places in the archipelagic world.

Among the Mahakam Kayan, in 1896, a kinglet of divine descent initiated the sowing of rice, and it was in his power to unite the forces of Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld to bless the sowing and consequent growth of rice. He surveyed the various stages in this ritual manifestation from his palace, a building which itself was also a source of political and social structure embracing his whole realm. It harboured not only himself and his close aristocratic relatives but also the whole community physically under his dominance. The energy needed for the rice to grow was released by competition and dancing. The dead, seen as constituting local spiritual forces, were retrieved from the realms of death arriving by boat from amidst the river, watercourses being avenues for travel, both in the geographical space and between the dominions of life and death. The rice, lifeless in the ground, was now revived by catching its escaping soul; a soul-hunt conducted in front of the kinglet, his palace, and its residential community. Fields were thus endowed with life force.

The unity of phenomena in vast areas of Southeast Asia has been supposed for a long time. One early anthropological example is Henry Yule (1880), who listed a great number of traits found across the region, which he thought, should be seen and investigated as being interrelated. Another early example of the broad comparative perspective is found in an interesting article by the Dutch ethnographer Bernardus A. G. Vroklage (1936), a close follower of the Vienna school of *Kulturkreislehre*. In terms of two different "cultural waves," Vroklage traces the spread of key symbolic phenomena, especially symbolic topoi centred on the congeries of hornbill birds, *naga* snakes, and "soulships." The boat is essential in the second wave as the centrepiece of a symbolic texture organizing important aspects of social life and death.

Vroklage's idea of a great double-tiered cultural complex in Southeast Asia has a clear parallel in the

21 There is some consensus among scholars who work with the problems of various Dayak societies that conventionally named "tribes" cannot be studied in isolation from one another, even though among themselves they show a great deal of variation and differences. The argument is that processes of sociocultural fission and fusion have both taken place in Borneo, and it would be a grave mistake to examine one Dayak group in isolation from others. Anthropologists can only establish approximate ethnic categories and groupings in Borneo because boundaries are invariably blurred and, it is claimed, social, political, and economic relations do not correlate with particular ethnic identities (King 1982).

22 See, for instance, Blust (1980) and Fox (1995) for two different ways of doing this.

article of the American archaeologist Carl Whiting Bishop's (1938) from about the same time. Bishop stresses two particular features that form part of a postulated Southeast Asian "culture complex." One difference in Bishop's account is that he adds southern and central China to the complex. A key feature in this vast complex is the longhouse. Another one is the ritual use (including racing) of special slim vessels found within southeastern Asia, including China (1938: 417, 424).

In 1935, Jan P. B. de Josselin de Jong (1977) launched a comparative research programme for the Indonesian archipelago at the University of Leiden, which after the war was elaborated into the so-called FAS (Field of Anthropological Study) programme. Patrick E. de Josselin de Jong suggested a further expansion of the programme to embrace also continental Southeast Asia (P. E. de Josselin de Jong 1965, 1988). Similar comparative programmes were established in Paris (Condominas 1965)[23] and elsewhere.

The interpretation of the Kayan rice-planting festival presented in this essay highlights some aspects of this comparative perspective. The fact that the sowing of rice is ritually observed all over Southeastern Asia, continental as well as insular, needs no further documentation here. Even if agricultural techniques differ, there are still strong similarities. In southern China, "sowing" is an agricultural phase starting with the actual sowing in rice beds and finally accomplished with the transplantation of the young shoots into the large irrigated fields. The technical acts of starting up cultivation form a progression, the acts of which also belong together within one common ritual sequence, the process being celebrated as a continuous ritual drama engaging the dead (Aijmer 1964, 1978, 2001a). In southern China, as in Central Borneo, the dead are active agents in restoring vegetative energy to the new rice. In both cases, the dead and death have several dimensions and, similarly, it is death as contained in graves and the earth as a subterranean force that are brought out in these rituals for agricultural blessings.

In both China and Central Borneo, the dead arrive in boats across waters. In both places, the dead are engaged in catching the escaping soul of rice to bring it back where it belongs, in plants or seeds. In China the dead compete in grand boat-racing rituals, similar to those found in, for instance, Luang Prabang (Archaimbault 1972; Platenkamp 2008), Manipur (Parratt and Parratt 1997: 185; Parratt 1980: 45f.), and Siam (Bowring 1857: 101) without, as it appears, having the same sort of direct connections with death. Boat-racing certainly had somewhat different implications in these various areas,[24] but everywhere it seems to have had political meaning, the racing being watched by a king or an imperial administrator of rank.

The symbolic expression of racing boats was not present among the Kayan, but instead competitive energy was released through whirligig games embracing all participating living men.[25] Even so, slim boats were of importance in the Kayan ritual as carriers of the dead. Furthermore, they are associated with inter-community violence as the ceremonial carriers of headhunting parties. The boat is widespread as a symbolic topos in southeastern Asia, frequently being connected with both death and supreme power.

However, the use of masks in combination with outfits of leaves to manifest the dead among the Kayan is reminiscent of rituals in many Melanesian societies (e.g., Brown 1910; Dark 1979), though masks are used in many contexts all over a broader area. We may also note that feathered hats are seen on the crews of dragon boats, depicted on the famous ancient bronze drums found all over southern China and southeastern Asia (e.g., Heger 1902/II: Taf. 1, 4, 6, 34).

Dancing as a creative act expressing the emergence of the world, or aspects of the world, forms an idiom employed in many ritual situations, often involving the presence of royalty. Among the Mahakam Kayan, stage by stage the dancing created a unified universe of which the kinglet was the pivotal centre. From this cosmic unity a flow of blessings was endowed in the new rice fields. The kinglet directly mediated this life force in the offerings he made in the fields. The liturgy of the Kayan "rice dance" may also be seen as containing a more general process of symbolic statecraft in that the paradoxical juxtaposition of ethnic plurality and usurpation is ritually resolved, making the

23 In the "Centre de documentation et de recherches sur l'Asie du Sud-Est et le monde indonésien."

24 The British colonial administration of Sarawak introduced racing between "war boats" in Marudi, in 1899, as part of a campaign of pacification in that area. This was a true innovation, and there is no sign of any continuity being maintained (see Hose and McDougall 1912/I: 296).

25 Rousseau (1998: 183f.) mentions that among the Sarawakian Kayan there were tugs-of-war involving both men and women in the chief's longhouse gallery, these forming part of the "pre-harvest carnival." Again, the release of competitive energy seems essential. The tug-of-war is, of course, another widespread symbolic topos in the area (e.g., Izikowitz 1985b: 68; Aijmer 2003: 115).

Kayan political liturgy akin to those of the great state rituals of the Lao kingdoms (Aijmer 1979).

These few and incomplete notes raise anew the problem of comparison in larger Southeast Asia. The main endeavours in this direction have had as their starting points either *prima facie* resemblances or the discovery of structural patterns, both leading to crossover interpretations. My own suggestion is that for some historical reason, which is difficult to prove, elements of iconic symbolism are drifting around in the wider area, alone or in clusters, to be incorporated here and there with local symbolic universes and to form part of their expressive image-making.[26] There is a considerable robustness in iconic images as well as in their configurations. Relevant archaeological evidence in this direction goes back to perhaps 500 B.C.[27] In Southeast Asia boats are associated with rice, rulers, snakes, birds and death. Rice is connected with boats, rulers, heaven, and with transcendental energy in competition with vegetative one. On the other hand, death is associated with earth and with water.

Single symbolic topoi come together to form an iconic visionary catastasis, but they do not necessarily drift jointly through the social landscape in fixed structures, but may appear on their own or in varying combinations. Wherever such elements were introduced, they take part in the building of local imaginary realities providing what in the local perspective are independent iconic varieties to the local cosmic understanding. The potential force of the full catastasis is never completely realized. The ritual dramas observed never seem to show any clear outline of a total shared pattern. The comparison of bodies of ethnographic data will turn up many and varied family resemblances rather than realizations of some unified model.

In terms of iconic semantics, there is a "concrete" proposition in wider Southeast Asia implying an ultimate certainty of power as stemming from the transcendental control of life force and the transformation of death into blessings in the forging of social destiny. The Kayan of Central Borneo seem to have been among those who have built their continuous social lives around this basic iconic topos.

26 Perhaps, like Izikowitz (1985a: 253–255) earlier, one could suggest that the spread of elements of this symbolic texture has accompanied the spread of rice cultivation over the region.

27 This is evident in the Dong-son finds in Vietnam (Higham 1989: 200–203; 1996: 124–129, 132–134) or the paintings in the Niah cave in Sarawak. See, for instance, King (1993: 97).

I wish to thank Clifford Sather for introducing me to the wider ethnography of Borneo. Thanks are also due to Robert Parkin.

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