



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XXXVI No. 57

December 1986



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Anne Schiller. (1986). A Ngaju Ritual Specialist and the Rationalization of Hindu-Kaharingan. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XXXVI (57): 231-240

A NGAJU RITUAL SPECIALIST AND THE RATIONALIZATION OF HINDU-KAHARINGAN

Anne Schiller¹

(Dept. of Anthropology, Cornell University, U.S.A.)

INTRODUCTION

On April 19, 1980 the Indonesian Ministry of Religion declared *Kaharingan*, religion of the Ngaju Dayaks of Central Kalimantan, a Hindu sect. The Ngaju are the indigenous inhabitants of the mid-and lower regions of several of that province's major waterways. Swidden agriculturalists who supplement their income by collecting forest products, the Ngaju generally live in villages of a few hundred persons each along the rivers. Villages are separated by great expanses of jungle and the sole means of transportation between villages available to most Ngaju is the river. Variation in ritual practices and beliefs throughout the area can be attributed in part to limited interaction between groups of Ngaju. The name *Kaharingan* originates from the root *haring*, a Ngaju word meaning "to come to life spontaneously". Informally in use since the first quarter of this century, the name *Kaharingan* won wide acceptance in the 1950's following a series of meetings held in several Kahayan River villages. The meetings provided a forum for ritual specialists and other local figures to discuss the future of their region's traditional religion. The government's decision to recognize *Kaharingan* came in response to a decade-long campaign for national recognition of Ngaju Religion, originally part of a wider set of demands which included the creation of the Province of Central Kalimantan.

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Anne Schiller¹

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On April 19, 1980 the Indonesian Ministry of Religion declared *Kaharingan*, religion of the Ngaju Dayaks of Central Kalimantan, a Hindu sect. The Ngaju are the indigenous inhabitants of the mid- and lower regions of several of that province's major waterways. Swidden agriculturalists who supplement their income by collecting forest products, the Ngaju generally live in villages of a few hundred persons each along the rivers. Villages are separated by great expanses of jungle and the sole means of transportation between villages available to most Ngaju is the river. Variation in ritual practices and beliefs throughout the area can be attributed in part to limited interaction between groups of Ngaju. The name *Kaharingan* originates from the root *haring*, a Ngaju word meaning "to come to life spontaneously". Informally in use since the first quarter of this century, the name *Kaharingan* won wide acceptance in the 1950's following a series of meetings held in several Kahayan River villages. The meetings provided a forum for ritual specialists and other local figures to discuss the future of their region's traditional religion. The government's decision to recognize *Kaharingan* came in response to a decade-long campaign for national recognition of Ngaju Religion, originally part of a wider set of demands which included the creation of the Province of Central Kalimantan.

The recognition of Hindu-Kaharingan legitimated a religious bureaucracy which had been taking shape since the 1970's. Today an official synod headquartered in the provincial capital coordinates regional and sub-district councils which oversee religious activities in the villages. Programs initiated by the synod are having significant impact upon the form and content of *Kaharingan*. For example, adherents living in the province's larger towns and villages are now encouraged to attend weekly worship services held in newly constructed Hindu-Kaharingan meeting halls, and to take part in religious events sponsored by the Hindu community in the capital.

Many of the synod's activities are directed toward religious education, codification of belief, and standardization of religious ritual. In the past religious knowledge was passed down as part of an elaborate oral tradition. Today a religious lesson book which originally appeared in 1973 is being revised and supplemental tracts made available. Religious rationalization has major implications for a system of belief and practice characterized by regional variation, a high value placed upon certain kinds of arcane knowledge, and innovation in the construction of ritual both by ritual specialists and lay practitioners.

The Ngaju ritual specialist is called *basir*². *Basir* possess sophisticated knowledge of cosmology and cosmogony acquired during a lengthy apprenticeship. *Basir* act as intermediaries between man and *sangiang*, the inhabitants of cosmological upper and lower worlds. They petition *sangiang* by means of chants performed in a ritual language. *Basir* memorize dozens of hours of chants which they present in rituals known as *balian*.³

One such ritual specialist is Basir Muka, who lives in a village along the upper Kahayan River. His training as a specialist far predates a rationalized Hindu-Kaharingan. Like other specialists Muka possesses a highly personalistic understanding of his religion based upon what has been passed down to him through oral accounts, his own experience, and the conclusions he has formed about the relationship between man and the supernatural. Basir Muka has produced a permanent record of his religious beliefs in a sculpture that is both sacred artifact and an attempt to preserve Kahayan mythology. He calls his sculpture the *hampatung karuhei*. *Hampatung* means sculpture, *Karuhei* has two meanings. On the one hand *karuhei* refers to an object such as a piece of wood, a stone, or a tiny vase filled with a particular oil believed to be imbued with the power to attract riches or good fortune to whomever possesses it. On the other hand *karuhei* is a quality or a kind of knowledge that brings prosperity. With Hindu-Kaharingan at the threshold of rationalization, the number of personal accounts of Ngaju mythology such as that represented by the *hampatung karuhei* will certainly decline.

BASIR MUKA AND THE HAMPATUNG KARUHEI

Basir Muka was born at the turn of the century along the upper Kahayan River in what is now Sub-District Kurun, located in the Gunung Mas District of the Kapuas Regency. His reputation as a specialist extends far beyond the confines of his village. He is an astute observer of society with an insatiable curiosity about the world. According to Muka, becoming a ritual specialist was the logical choice for his life's work as none of the other careers he tried, including trade and farming, offered the intellectual challenge his mind demanded. He made the decision to become a *basir* sixty years ago and apprenticed himself to several established specialists. For forty years he has served as head specialist in a variety of *Kaharingan* rituals and has trained dozens of other *basir*. Among his proudest accomplishments is having assumed the arduous role of head specialist at over twenty secondary mortuary rituals.

Like most ritual specialists Muka is skilled at producing carvings for use in religious ritual. The carvings are primarily of three types: *hampatung kurik* (small *hampatung*), *tajahan kayu*, and *hampatung sapundu* or *sapundu*. All three are usually anthropomorphic although small *hampatung* and *sapundu* may resemble animals (particularly tigers). Small *hampatung*, about ten to fifteen centimetres tall, are often used to represent humans during specific kinds of rituals. Small *hampatung* are frequently bound together in bundles for ritual purposes. *Tajahan kayu* are approximately forty centimetres in height; they stand watch over shrines for village guardians or at the edges of the village. *Sapundu* are painted poles to which sacrificial victims are tied during secondary mortuary rituals. The elaborateness of the *hampatung karuhei* and its unique role in ritual distinguishes it from other types of religious carving. The dozens of figures engraved upon it represent