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ORIGIN THEMES IN ORANG ULU ETHNOHISTORICAL TRADITIONS

Allen R. Maxwell

INTRODUCTION

The origin of human beings is one of the recurring subjects of ethnohistorical oral traditions. The Book of Genesis in the Bible represents only one well-known example of this theme. In many traditional societies such accounts often describe the origin of human beings, or the origin of the ancestors of a particular ethnic group. An account of the historical origins of a particular group provides a people with a spiritual and emotional anchor, not only in their natural environment but also for their social relations with other ethnic groups.

A number of Orang Ulu groups, the Bisaya, the Sekapan, the Lun Bawang, the Kayan, and the Melanau possess origin myths which commence with the first humans either falling from the heavens, coming out of an egg, or a combination of both these themes, to found humanity on the planet. These tales often focus on a single male figure of heroic stature. The origin accounts of two groups, the Lun Bawang and the Bisaya, appear to be intimately connected with the themes of the origin of the Brunei Sultanate (Harrison and Harrison 1956: 285, Sandin 1980: 165—168).

Both of these origin themes, the emergence-from-an-egg as well as the falling-from-the-sky, are also found in the origin accounts of the Sultanate of Brunei. By examining published accounts which are currently available as well as unpublished accounts, it is possible to show the existence of ethnohistorical themes shared by a number of different ethnic groups in Borneo.¹ The possession by a number of quite different groups of these common threads suggests they participate in a common heritage, and that this heritage unites both Orang Ulu and Malay groups in an orientation to the past.²

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ASIK AND THE BISAYA

While no full Bisayan language accounts of Bisaya origins have been published, several summary accounts have appeared. Peranio (1976: 43–44) indicates that the Bisaya have one more or less standardized creation myth of the Bisaya which he summarizes as follows:

In the beginning, before there were true men, taboos, and laws (*adat*), there existed on the face of the earth semi-human creatures with very long hair and arms. Some of these beings lived in a place called Mt. Kiyangan. Among these were a brother and sister who, in order to survive when food was scarce, ate charcoal. With no prohibition on sexual relations, this sibling pair had a son whom they called *Asik*. When Asik was old enough to fend for himself, he went on a trip to the other side of Mt. Kiyangan, and as he looked up to the sky he heard a voice calling his name. It was the voice of (the angel) Gabriel instructing him to leave his birthplace and descend to the land of Borneo. When he arrived at a place far to the north (i.e. Sabah) of where the Bisaya now live, he found himself physically transformed. He was now a true man. He also found a woman, Seramin, whom he was instructed to make his wife. With the help of God (Tuan T'Allah) Asik learned the arts of growing rice, animal husbandry, and many other useful occupations. He also developed the sacred Bisaya *adat* (customary law), and became the first spirit medium (*penomboi*), curing the sick and attending to the rice plants. Asik taught his wife all these things, and later they both taught their children. Asik is still remembered today when, in the last stages of initiation into spirit mediumship, the acolytes don a ceremonial headress, the *singalasik*.

Sandin's accounts of Bisaya origins refer to a "Raja Kiangnan of Kain Ran Mountain in the sky" (1980: 181), and to Raja Kiangnan of Java (1971:1, 1980: 165) who had a number of children, one of whom was Si Gerambak. A Tenggara female descendant of his married an immigrant man and this pair gave rise to the Bisaya people (Sandin 1971: 1, 1980: 165). Sandin also provides a summary Bisaya account of creation (1972: 42-44).

According to this account, the world was created by the mighty spirit, Allak Talak. At that time in the beginning the world was flat and it was out of this flatness that the many different types of plants emerged, and the water and earth were created by Allak Talak. "After the world was made, Allak Talak made man. For this he sent his chief attendant Raja Gibrail from his house at its great height to fetch some earth of the earth below" (Sandin 1972: 42). Finally after obtaining the right kinds of earth Allak Talak created the evil spirits, animals, and humans which inhabit the world today. The creator, however, became unhappy with his humans who believed they could do as they pleased and committed sins. In his anger he sent a great flood over the earth, destroying the world. "Everything died except one man and his family of nine persons who were saved in a warning in a dream which asked them to put a bamboo raft beneath their house" (Sandin 1972: 43). The main points in Sandin's account (1972: 43-44) continue as follows.

After the flood subsided, a boy and his sister came out of their house to beg for fire from Allak Talak at his house up in the heavens. *****

They left to return home, but the boy had forgotten to ask for fire from Allak Talak. Being ashamed of his forgetfulness on their arrival at their own house, the boy suddenly jumped into the mud, where he instantly became a spirit called Nak Pujut who stays forever in the underworld. *****