



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XXXIV No. 55

December 1985



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Schneider, W. M. (1985). A Selako Household Festival. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XXXIV (55): 53-66

A SELAKO HOUSEHOLD FESTIVAL¹

William M. Schneider*

We often write very detailed descriptions of the religious rituals of different ethnic groups. These usually concentrate on the particular symbolism of the rite or the belief system underlying it. Religious rituals, however, always take place in a social context, and a crucial element in understanding religious behavior is to place it in the context of the society in which it occurs. This article is a description of a particular festival in terms of the social connections surrounding the festival and those that are formed, reinforced and expressed through the particular festival. It reveals a good deal about the nature of Selako society as well as Selako religion.

Selako festivals are of two principal types: village festivals and household festivals. Household festivals like this one are sponsored by individual households. Attended by everyone in the longhouse or hamlet, by most people in the village and by relatives and friends from other villages, they deal with matters of importance primarily to the household rather than the whole village. Thus curing rites, funerals, weddings, circumcisions and harvests are celebrated by each household with the assistance of relatives and friends.

On June 25, 1971, at Bantang Saka'ampat in Kampong Pueh the household of Bingar celebrated the marriage of Bingar's daughter, Bihe, to Iliis, a young man from another longhouse in Pueh. Bihe and Iliis had married in 1968. They have a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

The actual wedding in 1968 had involved little ceremony. Possibly the parents felt that Iliis, then twenty, and Bihe, then seventeen, were too young to marry. The marriage has, however, been a success. Iliis has proved himself a hard worker and a welcome addition to the household of the widowed Bingar. Iliis has been the oldest man in the household since the marriage of Bihol, Bihe's older brother.

A SELAKO HOUSEHOLD FESTIVAL¹

by

William M. Schneider*

We often write very detailed descriptions of the religious rituals of different ethnic groups. These usually concentrate on the particular symbolism of the rite or the belief system underlying it. Religious rituals, however, always take place in a social context, and a crucial element in understanding religious behavior is to place it in the context of the society in which it occurs. This article is a description of a particular festival in terms of the social connections surrounding the festival and those that are formed, reinforced and expressed through the particular festival. It reveals a good deal about the nature of Selako society as well as Selako religion.

Selako festivals are of two principal types: village festivals and household festivals. Household festivals like this one are sponsored by individual households. Attended by everyone in the longhouse or hamlet, by most people in the village and by relatives and friends from other villages, they deal with matters of importance primarily to the household rather than the whole village. Thus curing rites, funerals, weddings, circumcisions and harvests are celebrated by each household with the assistance of relatives and friends.

On June 25, 1971, at Bantang Saka'ampat in Kampong Pueh the household of Bingar celebrated the marriage of Bingar's daughter, Bihe, to Ilis, a young man from another longhouse in Pueh. Bihe and Ilis had married in 1968. They have a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

The actual wedding in 1968 had involved little ceremony. Possibly the parents felt that Ilis, then twenty, and Bihe, then seventeen, were too young to marry. The marriage has, however, been a success. Ilis has proved himself a hard worker and a welcome addition to the household of the widowed Bingar. Ilis has been the oldest man in the household since the marriage of Bihol, Bihe's older brother.

This festival in 1971 is much like a wedding ceremony between families of high ritual and political rank. Its performance now, three years after the actual wedding, serves to correct the minimal ceremony and festivity of the wedding itself. This ceremony is an affirmation of the marriage and the couple's status as responsible adults.

Serious preparations begin on the evening of June 23rd with the gathering of some thirty men on the roofed galleries, *saami'*, (See Schneider 1975 for a longhouse plan.) of Bingar and her nextdoor neighbor and husband's younger brother, Mina. Mina is the *Tuha Binua* or principal

*Dr. William M. Schneider, Department of Anthropology, University of Arkansas, USA.

internal chief of the village. Planning had actually begun long before this. On June 2nd Mina, in his capacity as *Tuha Binua*, had announced to a public gathering that he had appointed June 25th as the date for the festival. This evening's meeting is to organize the gathering of food and other supplies which will be needed in quantity for the celebration.

About an hour after sunset men from most of the other houses in the longhouse gather on the gallery of Bingar, overflowing onto Mina's gallery. Most of them are relatives of Bingar's dead husband, Turat, whose family form the core of this longhouse. Also present is Putun, a respected elder from Kampong Siru', Pueh's daughter community, which lies less than an hour's walk to the east. Tengkeh, father of Ilis, and Jisup, Tengkeh's sister's husband, have come from Rumah Jangut, the two-door longhouse where Ilis lived before his marriage.

Most of the men present have spent the day hunting or looking over the plots of land they will soon begin clearing for new fields of dry rice. Some have been putting up the last of their recent wet rice harvest, moving it from drying platforms and sheds to permanent storage houses or bins. Others have been at work in their coconut gardens. A very few have returned from a day in Sematan, the market town about two hours walk away, or Lundu, the district capital, a further one hour bus ride beyond Sematan. This is the easy season. The harvest is in, and it has been the best in years for many. Scarce, hard-earned cash will not have to be spent to purchase rice during the next rainy season. This is the season of household festivals, the quarter of the year when Selako feast and rest, tending their less important garden crops, and hunting and gathering, free from the hard work and short rations which dominate the rest of the year.

The gathering begins much like any other on the gallery. A group of men sit and lie about on mats, chatting about the day's work, plans for tomorrow, work on the irrigation system, an interminable quarrel which is tearing apart one of the village families. At first this evening's gathering is unusual only in its size and the presence of men from outside the longhouse. But then refreshments are brought out from the back of Bingar's house. This is the first indication of the formality of the gathering. Coffee, bananas, store-bought cookies are often served to infrequent guests as a gesture of hospitality. On this night, however, traditional dishes pregnant with ritual connotations are served: *tumpi'*, a cake made from a batter of rice flour, sugar and coconut milk, all fried in oil; *bonto'ng*, rice soaked in water, wrapped in a small leaf package and steamed in a large bamboo tube; *pue'*, rice mixed with sugar and coconut milk, served and cooked in long, thin bamboo tubes. These three dishes are served at all Selako rituals in a house.

Several brass trays piled high with plates of *bonto'ng* and *tumpi'* and crossed with long tubes of *pue'* are brought out to serve the large group of men. Putun, from Kampong Siru', seated underneath the skylight and facing out of the gallery onto the unroofed drying platform, *pante*, makes a brief prayer and scatters bits of rice from an open package of *bonto'ng* out onto the drying platform as an offering to the spirits. The others help themselves to the food, expertly cracking the roasted tubes of *pue'*, splitting them, and with skillful fingers removing cylinders of the sticky rice confection. Somebody calls attention to the deep purple, almost black,