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SELAKO CIRCUMCISION

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ABSTRACT

Rituals are an important aspect of Selako life. They are held to accompany every important stage in life as well as in the annual cycle of padi cultivation. Selako claim that there are many reasons why rituals are observed. One is that ritual have been taught to them by supernatural beings who relate events in the mythical past. One good example is the *ngebayan* ceremony, a padi ritual held after the end of every harvesting season. The ritual was first known by a couple known as Bungka and Kumuh (Awang Hasmadi Awang Mois: 132—135) who were two miserable farmers until the appearance of three spirit figures Ne' Kechang, Ne' Rode and Ne' Angkir. These were spirits who taught them how to grow padi and what rituals to perform before planting the padi. It was through help from them that they had a good harvest. However this state of good fortune did not last.

After their abundant harvest they overlooked the need to express their gratitude to the three spirit figures who had assisted them. Naturally Ne' Kechang, Ne' Rode and Ne' Angkir were offended by the attitude of Bungka and Kumuh particularly by their greed especially after they had worked nonstop. To express their anger the three spirits destroyed a bridge that the couple had to pass through on their way home. The couple were therefore quite unhappy with the incident. But what astonished them even more was that when the bridge broke not only the padi that they were carrying vanish but also those which they had painstakingly stored in their padi huts (*dango padi*).

SELAKO CIRCUMCISION*

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The importance of rituals

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Thus sadness overcame Bungka and Kumuh. The spirit figures came to explain. They advised that following every harvest man should make some offerings to the spirits who have helped them and also to appease their souls (*sumangat padi*). They were also advised to do the same before planting. When the advice was followed by the couple their padi "returned" to their original places. This was how the *ngebayan* came to exist.

The Selako say myths such as the one mentioned explain why the rituals are still observed. They claim that the rituals have proved effective in the past. Therefore man should observe them so that they could also share the same benefits as the characters in the myths. Thus in any offering ceremony spirits are invoked and blessings from them sought for. Bad spirits are also given offerings and in similar manner are appeased. Various other practices are also observed so as to ensure that bad fortune does not befall man. For the Selako then, rituals such as those associated with padi are symbolic. They express their cultural values, pertaining to what is good and what is bad. Rituals also explain man's relationship with his surroundings which are not only inhabited by himself but also by supernatural beings who are capricious.

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Selako classify rituals into two categories. One category which involves man is known as *rukun ka manusia* ("rites for man"). This comprises such rites as birth, naming, marriage and death. However according to some elderly Selako folk not all rites that concern man are classified as *rukun ka manusia*. Healing rites for instance are classified as *adat*.¹ Another category of rites is known as *rukun ka padi* ("rites for the padi"). These are rites that are held to mark the various stages in the growth of the padi. In form they are almost the same as the "rites for man", especially some of the initiation rites.

Bataah and basunat

One of the first initiation rites for both male and female children is the *bataah* (Awang Hasmadi Awang Moïs 1978: 11). This is the naming ceremony commonly known in Biawak as *napung tawar*, "to daub with tumeric rice flour". This takes place a week after the baby is born. In the case of the Selako girls the next most important rite after the *bataah* is the *batenek* (Malay, *bertindek*, "to pierce the ears"). This is the ear piercing ceremony which takes place approximately between the age of six and eight years. (See Wilder: 1970; Djamour: 1965 regarding similar practices among Malays).

On reaching the age of 10 or 14 boys have to go through the *basunat* or *baturih* ceremony. *Baturih* is synonymous with *basunat*.² The term *basunat*, however, is more widely used than the former. This may be due to Malay influence among whom similar ritual is also found. However the term *baturih* is regarded as more refined than *basunat*.

The Selako say that there are many reasons why their sons should undergo the *baturih* ceremony.³ To them it is a means whereby the boy is socially informed of the change in his status. After circumcision his status is elevated to that of an adult (*dimatuha*). Indirectly he is also "informed" of the things he could or could not do in terms of their *adat* laws and cultural practices. Hitherto he is not subject to such restrictions.

Myth of the origin of *basunat*

Selako claim that the origin of *basunat* is to be found in the myth of Jerita Guanse' anak Jelawat (Awang Hasmadi Awang Moïs 1977: 136-7).⁴ Jelawat is the name of a fresh water fish (*Leptobarbus hoevni*). According to Howell and Bailey (1960: 45) this species of fish is "exceedingly delicious. It is only found (Dayaks say) in the Kapuas and its tributaries." This story about Guanse' begins with a god warrior Panglima Maniamas fishing at a stream. He had employed *tuba* root (*Derris elliptica*) to get the fish. In this stream there lives the Queen Jelawat (*raja ikan* Jelawat), who on that instant was suffering from thirst.

On finding that the stream has been poisoned the fish moved upland in search of water. She managed to find some in the hollow of a tree trunk (*tongkor*). This she drank, not knowing it was Maniamas's urine (*kameh*; Sarawak Malay *kemeh*). (Maniamas is said to have been there earlier). As a consequence of her drinking (*nucuk*) Maniamas's urine the Queen Jelawat became pregnant (*babunting*) and finally gave birth (*maranakan*) to a boy named Guanse'. This child she left crying on the rocks (*karangan*) in the river