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KAYAU INDU**THE WARPAT OF WOMEN: A NGAR RITUAL AT ENTAWAU, BALEH IN OCTOBER 1988****Traude Gavin****INTRODUCTION**

The main objective of my research in Sarawak in 1988 and 1989 was to compile an extensive file of the patterns of *pua kumbu*, the ritual weaving of the Iban. In the course of my field-work I had the opportunity to document a very rare event: a ngar ritual, also called *nakar*.

Nakar is the term that defines the technical aspect of this ritual and literally means to measure (by volume) and to mix the ingredients of the mordant in their correct proportions. The effectiveness of the mordant is essential for the dyeing with *engkudu*, a process which yields the rich deep red that distinguishes a *pua* of superior quality¹. If the mordant is faulty, the dye will not penetrate the thread properly and will not 'take'.

Ngar is the term used for the entire procedure, including not only the technical part of mixing and applying the mordant, but also the performance of the proper rites and the use of powerful charms, both of which are deemed indispensable and crucial for a successful outcome².

Most weavers have a rudimentary knowledge of the ingredients that make up the mordant. However, there are very few women who have been initiated properly through dreams to *ngar*. A woman who is able to lead a ngar ritual has reached the pinnacle of accomplishment as a weaver and, since weaving is the primary female prestige-activity, she attains the highest status accorded to a woman.

Even in the past such an accomplishment was rare. Now, with the rapid changes in life-style that have occurred since the Second World War, it is rarer still to find a woman who can fulfil all the necessary ritual obligations and perform the *ngar* in the traditional manner.

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by

Traude Gavin

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At a weaving-seminar in Kuching in September 1988 I compiled statistics which showed that out of 252 weavers from 17 longhouses only seven knew how

to *nakar*³. During my own field-work which took me to most areas of Iban settlement, I met only two groups of weavers who had performed a traditional *ngar* in recent years. Since the procedure is laborious, such a ritual is held only once every few years at most.

Taking all these facts into consideration, I feel justified in relating in full detail the *ngar* in which I participated at Entawau in October 1988 as the second part of this paper. In the first section I discuss the importance of status in Iban society in order to illustrate the position of the *ngar* as a female prestige-activity. I also give an account of a weaver's stages of development and provide background information regarding dreams, charms and the deities associated with weaving.

PART 1

Traditional Iban society is marked by its lack of a class structure and of a hereditary ranking-system. An individual's position within the community is not predestined by birth, but depends solely on personal merit and achievement. Men and women gain prominence within their peer-group only through their own actions⁴.

In the past, the Iban male had several ways in which to acquire status⁵. Pioneering, meaning the occupation of new lands and felling of primary jungle for swiddens, formerly counted as one of the foremost prestige-activities. Usually pioneering involved not only the mere migration into unoccupied territory, but the defeat of other tribes who were in competition for the same areas. Skill at warfare was therefore of paramount importance.

Nothing, however, equalled the esteem and recognition awarded to the man who had taken the head of an enemy. No Iban youth was considered even half a man before having taken at least one head. No woman would deem him worthy of her favours before he had proven himself as a successful headhunter. Any able-bodied male with average ambition and courage could join a party on the warpath, but it took exceptional qualities to become a warleader, or *pun ngayau*, literally an "originator of war" (Freeman 1981: 36). Such a man not only had to have the necessary skill, knowledge and charisma to attract a following, but also had to have received divine sanction in a dream in order to be qualified as *tau serang*.

Serang means "to attack" and *tau* literally is "to have the ability, the knowledge". In this context, however, the term implies that the person concerned has had the appropriate dreams where a deity or ancestor (*antu nulong*, or "helping spirit") appears, bestowing supernatural powers in the form of charms and giving the divine approval without which no man would have presumed to offer himself as a warleader⁶. Bantin, the Ulu Ai Iban who, at the