Seeds of Play, Words of Power: An ethnographic study of Iban shamanic chants, Clifford Sather

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de chaux, des incrustations d’os, de corne, de laiton ou de cuivre mettent en valeur et que surmontent des frontons sculptés de motifs floraux ou de figures mythologiques. À la fois répertoire des formes données à des objets qui organisent les moments d’une existence ritualisée à l’extrême et clé pour la compréhension de cette existence, voilà un ouvrage qui devrait pouvoir prendre place dans la bibliothèque de l’amateur d’art populaire comme dans celle du chercheur.

Note
1 Décrochés des cimaises, les tika ont intégré les réserves du musée, mais certaines pièces devraient prochainement rejoindre ses collections permanentes. Pour tout renseignement, musée d’Horlogerie, Château des Monts, route des Monts 65, CH-2400 Le Locle, tél. 41-32 931 16 80.


By Pascal COUDERC

Sometimes, “overloaded” with the illnesses that he has taken upon himself in healing his patients, the Iban shaman falls ill. He must then perform a rite to ease his burden, “bailing” it like water out of a boat. It certainly is a heavy burden that, so to say, Clifford Sather has eased off himself by writing this book, the materials for which he began to collect in the Saribas region of Sarawak twenty-five years ago. The corpus presented here, totaling some 3,300 lines of chants with interlinear gloss and an English translation, pertain to nine different shamanic ceremonies, which themselves represent but a portion of the repertoire commanded by many senior practitioners. Making up as many chapters, these chants are preceded by another eight chapters describing in rich detail the social and cultural background of Iban shamanism. Completed by a musical transcription of one of the chants by the musicologist Patricia Matusky – a commendable attempt given the peculiarities of this singing style, but for the sake of comparison an appended CD might have been more useful – all of this constitutes the most comprehensive account of Iban shamanism to date. While many insights, particularly into the meaning of chants and performance, are sustained by references to studies of shamanism in other parts of the world, no attempt is actually made to delineate the features of Iban shamanism against the wider Bornean context. This lack of regional comparative dimension is more than compensated for by the fullness and accuracy of the ethnographic record, which encompasses many an area of Iban culture, from situating the shaman (manang) among other ritual specialists to conceptions of illness and the person, to cosmology, mythology, and oral history. In this sense, the book also constitutes a perfect introduction to Iban religion.

The largest number of shamanic rites (pelian) aim at retrieving a sick person’s soul, which may have gone astray in the world of the dead, or been captured by a spirit. Other types of pelian involve tending a patient’s plant image, slaying spirits, or erecting invisible barriers around the patient’s body or house. All these actions are performed by the manang projecting his own soul to various places in the cosmos according to the purpose of the rite. Although he is assisted in this venture by a spirit guide, it is really the manang himself who performs the healing, and Sather stresses that Iban shamanism involves neither spirit possession nor spirit mediumship. The point is worth making, since other studies have shown trance and possession to be widespread healing techniques in Borneo. Sather insists on the full autonomy of the manang, described as a “skilled intercessor,” and associates it to the central value of personal autonomy in Iban society (p. 119). The Iban shaman remains in control throughout the curing session, even – somewhat paradoxically – when fainting at the conclusion of a pelian (p. 12). Likewise, the entry into the shamanic career is the result of a vocation freely embraced by the novice, not the outcome of an illness caused by a possessing spirit that would then be controlled in order to heal other people. The manang’s autonomy is also revealed by the way he forges his diagnosis from a variety of signs that he must interpret: accounts of dreams, omens, physical symptoms, or the image of the patient’s soul seen in a crystal (chapter 5).

Although it would be unfair to attach more importance to matters of classification than they receive in the book, Sather may appear to highlight
this autonomy of the Iban shaman by presenting a slightly distorted view of possession. Possession need not be that passive experience that he posits (pp. 11-12) and, as it is practiced, for instance, by shamans among some Barito groups of South Borneo, it is in no way incompatible with a high degree of dramatization of the performance. From a comparative standpoint, the manang’s faint is not very different, more “learnt” or “theatrical” (p. 183) than the “possession” of those other practitioners who lend their body to a healing spirit. Rather, what is striking in the Iban case is the breakdown into episodes of what is elsewhere a unified action. Thus, the pelian typically unfolds in three successive parts: The first and most important part consists of the chants narrating the manang’s and his spirit guide’s cosmic journeys; the second part is a very brief, sometimes almost instantaneous, enactment by the shaman of the events related in his chant, most notably his seizing of the patient’s soul; the third part, immediately following the second, is the fainting (luput) during which the manang’s soul is thought to engage, like in a dream, in the actions previously narrated and enacted. However, luput mainly concludes those pelian aiming at soul recovery.

The sung words, referred to as the “seeds” of the pelian, are not only an important feature of the curing session in quantitative terms; they also hold the greatest interest for the Iban, who consider them a primary source of efficacy. The performative approach to ritual and ritual language, which has gained currency in the last twenty years, has replaced the traditional interrogation on the therapeutic effect of the shamantic cure – whether and how it was obtained – with a concern for the effectiveness of the performance, as to which the judgments of the audience are more relevant than the patient’s recovery, which may occur or not without necessarily challenging the shaman’s competence. In this line, following and generously quoting from a previous study of Saribas shamanism by Robert Barrett, Sather devotes much attention to the onlookers’ active participation in the ritual through their critique of the performance, and little to the psycho-somatic impact that the latter may have on the patient’s body. Among the criteria of the pelian’s effectiveness are the well-ordered chanting of the stanza by the manang, his verbal artistry and power of description, his ability to mix “deep” and “shallow” languages, his convincing acting in dramaturgical highpoints – such as grasping the patient’s soul, falling down into a faint, or emerging from the faint in a dazed state. The Iban do not differentiate between the shaman’s poetic and dramatic skills and his effectiveness as a healer: the former are indexical of the latter.

Now, where exactly does this efficacy lie? The pelian, and more particularly the pelian chants, create what Sather calls an “intermediating reality” that momentarily merges the two dimensions of the experiential world: the visible (the patient’s body, the everyday life, the ritual setting) and the invisible (the patient’s soul and plant image, the spirits, the world of the dead). In this ritual but nonetheless empirical reality, through words both meaningful and powerful, the shaman reveals and acts upon the hidden causes of the illness. The enactment that briefly follows makes visible what normally is invisible – notably, the patient’s soul, materialized by a mustard seed that the manang reinserts into the patient’s head at the end of the rite – after which the usual alignment between the seen and the unseen is restored – whereby the soul is invisible inside the limits of the body, and invisible to the spirits as well (p. 67).

The way in which space and architecture are exploited to represent the unseen world and the manang’s journey into it (chapters 5 and 6) is a fascinating aspect of the ritual scenography. Pelian are ranked in series of ceremonies of increasing difficulty, corresponding to the shaman’s increasingly distant and perilous forays into the domains of spirits. These travels are enacted as centrifugal movements through the architectural divisions of the Iban longhouse, starting from the family apartment where the patient lies, going then progressively to more remote parts of the longhouse gallery, and extending to its open platform, rooftop, and precincts, each of these areas forming a landmark in the shaman’s soul journey. Symbolic references may shift according to the rank of the ceremony within a series. Thus, in pelian aimed at recovering a patient’s soul from the world of the dead, the longhouse gallery may represent an intermediate zone between this world and the afterworld, but it may also symbolize a major river in the land of the dead. In the highest-ranking ceremonies of this series, the spatial progression is reversed so that the longhouse of the living becomes the longhouse of the dead, which the shaman enters
from outside to search for the sick person's soul (p. 138).

Chapter Seven explores the stylistic dimensions of the chants and the multiple facets of the meanings conveyed by the “deep” language in which they are partially composed, an archaic and cryptic ritual speech that sometimes even ritual experts cannot make sense of – hence the difficulty of the task that the author has fulfilled in translating them. To sum up, Sather makes a convincing case for the centrality of words in Iban shamanic rituals and for their priority over non-verbal acts.

Finally, let us ponder the equation contained in the book’s title: “Seeds of Play” equals “Words of Power.” As mentioned above, the sung words are known as the “seeds of the pelian” (leka pelian), or “seeds of play” (leka main). As indicated in the preface of the book, leka literally means “seed” or “gist of”, and main, “play”, “doing”, so leka main can be translated as, literally, the “gist” or “seeds of the performance” (p. xiii). This term, Sather adds in the following sentence, “suggests [that] words are taken to be a major source of the shaman’s power.” Subsequently, however, he does not translate leka pelian literally, simply stating in the introduction that, taken together, the two words refer to “ritual poetry, either sung or spoken” (p. 1). In the glossary appended at the end of the book, we learn that leka is also a numerical classifier (p. 724), and this raises the question: In the phrase leka pelian, is the word leka to be taken in a metaphorical sense that already implies the idea of the ritual efficacy of the chants, or is it used as a classifier, therefore standing for “word” without any specific connotation? Or both? In the absence of any explicit indication of “deep” language being involved here, one may ask whether these words, the “power” of which is so eloquently described, are really “seeds of play” – or what it means.

*Publications on Borneo from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 2001-2002*

*By Bernard Sellato*

The Institute of East Asian Studies (IEAS) was created at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in 1998 with Professor Michael Leigh as its inaugural Director. Michael Leigh is a long-time scholar of Sarawak. His earlier publications include: The Chinese Community of Sarawak: a Study of Communal Relations (1964), The Rising Moon: Political Change in Sarawak (1974), and Council Negri Sarawak, Malaysia’s Oldest Legislature (1992). It was after a long career in Australia (University of Sydney) and peninsular Malaysia (Penang) that he took up the challenge of starting IEAS at the then newly-founded UNIMAS in Sarawak.

Within IEAS, the Dayak Studies Program, chaired by Professor Clifford Sather, was inaugurated in January 2001, at the initiative of and sustained by a generous endowment from the Dayak Cultural Foundation, with the aim to promote long-term research on issues confronting the Dayak communities of Sarawak and, more generally, of the island of Borneo. Later, at the end of 2002, Professor Abdul Halim Ali was appointed to the Chair of Nusantara Studies at IEAS. He is undertaking a major research project on the coastal Malay communities.

Clifford Sather has published extensively on the Bajau Laut and on the Iban, including his recent Seeds of Play, Words of Power: an ethnographic study of Iban shamanic chants (2001, see the review by P. Couderc, above), and has edited Origins, Ancestry and Alliance (with James Fox, 1996; see *Moussons* 99: 121-125). The Dayak Studies Program initiated two publication series, an Oral Literature Series and a Contemporary Society Series. The former saw four volumes published, the latter, one.

**Dayak Studies, Oral Literature Series**

King Siliman and other Bidayuh folktales. Raja Siliman pas tingah tanun Bidayuh da bukan, compiled by Robert Sulis Ridu, Ritikos Jitab, and Jonas Noeb, OLS No. 1, 2001, 138 p.; Suket: Penan folk stories. Suket Penan, compiled by Jayl Langub, OLS No. 2, 2001, 198 p.; Apai Alui becomes a shaman and other Iban comic folktales. Apai Alui nyadi manang enggau ensera Iban bukai, compiled by Clifford Sather, OLS No. 3, 2001, 181 p. With the introduction of television, National Language schooling, urban migration, and other changes, the once rich corpus of Dayak oral literature is rapidly disappearing and, where it still survives, it is rapidly changing, either being radically reshaped or assuming new cultural roles and meanings. Each book includes a brief, but useful introduction by the volume's editor or compiler, ten selected folk