THE CONFLUENCE OF POLITICS AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION AMONG THE IBAN IN ELECTIONS IN SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

The longhouse symbolizes the livelihood strategy of the Iban and acts as the custodian of the community’s values, norms, adat (custom), system of belief, tradition and culture. The Iban strictly follow their adat when undertaking new initiatives or adopting new livelihood strategies like embarking on a bejalai or a journey of fortune. Before embarking on or adopting a new livelihood strategy, the Iban will perform a miring (process of giving offering) and a blood sacrifice ceremony where chants are uttered asking the petara (god) to guide them in their new endeavour as they seek happiness and fortune. The miring ceremony is to prevent the person from encountering bad omen, to appease the petara (god) and to boost his confidence. At the end of the miring ceremony and after the sacrifice is done, the piring (offering) will be smeared with the blood of a rooster, as usually a rooster is sacrificed. Amulets and charms too will be smeared with the blood of the rooster. Miring ceremony can be performed for virtually any significant activities that the Iban wish to undertake such as before starting a new padi season. Today, many Iban politicians adopted the practices in their political activities.

Keywords: Invocation, Offering, Sacrifice, Deity and Politician

INTRODUCTION

One of the things that the Iban peoples of Sarawak always do when they embark on a new enterprise like adopting a new livelihood strategy is to perform the miring ceremony where chants are uttered before and after the ceremony. The one that is said at the beginning of the miring ceremony is just to inform the petara (god) that the miring process is about to begin, and the one that is said at the end of the miring ceremony is to invoke god to ask for help. The Iban believe that the petara could become upset if he is not informed beforehand of what they intend to do, particularly in respect to land use and in the clearing of forest for farming activities or for building a longhouse. The miring ceremony in this case is performed in order to appease the petara. A significant event in the life of an individual is when he enters politics. Becoming a candidate in an election is one example of significant changes that take place in one’s life. The Iban candidates often perform the miring ceremony on nomination nights.

The Iban traditional religion is based on the concepts of pantheon, soul and dream, ritual obligations and festivals, cults like padi cultivation and healing, and the practices of the system of bird omen and augury (Kedit, 1977 and 1988). The Iban cultural values and social sanctions are derived from their conception that all objects have souls (Kedit, 1988, p. 24). Two of the most important Iban gods are Singalang Burong (the god of war) and Simpulang Gana (the god of padi). Singalang Burong is also the god that oversees the general welfare of the Iban. The highest rank Igan God is Singalang Burong. Sutlive and Sutlive (2001, p. 442) claim that Singalang Burong “is older than the oldest, bolder than the boldest, stronger than the strongest, mightier than the mightiest deity’. Singalang Burong “is the white and brown hawk so frequently seen in this country; mythologically he is a great antu (spirit), the presiding power of war and inspirer of bravery (Roth, 1980,
During the miring ceremony hosted by the candidates on nomination nights, the celebrants in their chants invoked Singalang Burong and other gods to help the candidates during the elections.

According to Kedit (1988, p. 21) in his conceptual model of Iban traditional values and norms system, adat or custom comes under the purview of the community’s moral obligation, while augury and dreams creativity come under its ritual obligation. Both augury and dream creativity deal with three types of cult: death cult, manang (shaman) cult and padi cult. The Iban practice a system of augury where the calls and sightings of omen birds and other notes of warning from other creatures of significant must be respected and should not be disregarded. Misfortune may come to those who dare to disregard and not heed to the warnings from creatures of omen.

The Iban make offerings and sacrifices whenever they want to embark on new activities including politics in order to get blessings from god. Moment of importance in Iban life may be marked by ritual festival or gawai. Sutlive and Sutlive (2001, p. 1595) explain that “that there is no activity of importance that is not accompanied by some appropriate ritual, and no such ritual of any significance that is not reinforced with the presentation of offerings”. Going into politics is a big moment in one’s life. For many Iban candidates, election is not just about giving political speeches, campaigning or soliciting for votes; it is also about the candidate’s attempt to engage the assistance of supernatural qualities. Charms (pengaruh), which are assumed to have these supernatural qualities, are commonly used by the candidates as they are supposed to make them to become revered, to look invincible, and to be seen as someone who has high esteem and full of courage. Those with lots of charms are regarded as someone that are closer to the deities and the spirits than the rest of the people and they are perceived to be under their care and guidance. The aim of this article is to show why the indigenous Iban system of belief, adat and culture such as augury, offering, gawai (traditional, religious or festival), incantation, chanting, charm, talisman, and amulet are used by the Iban in politics.

Omen

Omen is about foretelling what is going to happen in the future. Omens can be good omen or bad omen. The Iban omen birds are the seven son-in-laws of Singalang Burong, the highest deity and the god of war. In terms of seniority and authority, these omen birds are Ketupong, Beragai, Embuas, Papau, Pangkas, Bejampung and Kunding. Ketupongis married to Endu Dara Tincin Temaga, Beragai to Puchung Pengabas, Embuas to Endu Letan Berpulas, Papau to Endu Ketunsong Nyambai, Pangkas to Endu Kechapong Pulas, Bejampung to Endu Kechapah Dulong Midong and Kunding to Dara Patri Langit. Except for Kunding, all of these birds are day bird. Kunding is a night bird. The Iban regard the calls of these birds as an omen. The calls of these birds influenced the Iban daily farming activities and also when they are out on a hunting trip (Hose, p. 159 in Roth, 1980: 233-34).

The other omen bird is Nendak. He lives in the same longhouse as Singalang Burong but he is not his son-in-law. Nendak has a family unit or a family compartment or the family bilik but he does not have a ruai (the family hall). It is suffice to say that Nendak actually squats at the end of Singalang Burong’s longhouse, and as such he is less significant than the rest of the omen birds. The most feared of all the omen birds is the Ketupong, the husband of Singalang Burong’s oldest daughter, Dara Tincin Temaga.

The Iban belief that the Ketupong is supernatural being taking the form of a bird. His main task is to warn them of the impending danger (Roth 1980, p. 224-25). When a Ketupong flies inside a house, for example, the Iban must leave the house. Beragai is “esteemed sacred to the Iban and may not be killed” (Low in Roth, 1980, p. 227).

If one is on a journey and hears a Ketupong on the right, the person should stop immediately and show respect by casting it an offering of betel-nut, before proceeding again (Roth, 1980, p. 221). An Iban should not disregard a bad omen on a journey to a farm, for instance, otherwise misfortune may befall him. He should go home immediately and stay there and do nothing for the rest of the day.
Omen birds are seeing by the Iban as “ministering spirits, who have the power to give notice of good or bad fortune to come, and so warn them of danger, or cheer them by the prospect of success” (Ibid, p. 224). The deities expressed themselves through these birds.

The origins of omen birds started when an Iban got married to an antu (spirit). Their off-springs took the form of a bird. They were looked after by their parental relatives until they were able to tender for themselves. To show their gratitude to the descendants of their guidance they “exercised spiritual powers by giving them warning of coming sickness or misfortune, and encouraging them to proceed in such undertakings as will end in advantage” (Ibid, p. 225). Their spiritual power is derived from their mother, the antu (demon). The Iban listen to their advice strictly and have taken them into their confidence on every occasion. The omen birds “are consulted with respect to the good or evil fortune of every journey of importance” (Ibid, p. 226). Antu is spirit and it is also often referred to as as ghost, demon or devil.

The Iban are either lucky or unlucky and places are either fortunate or unfortunate. Many birds are believed to be demon and “their presence foretells all kinds of mischief to traveler or to farmer who pays no attention to the warning (Hose, p. 165 cited in Roth, 1980, p. 221). The Iban are superstitious people and they “listen to omens religiously, whenever on a hunting or fishing excursion, and never name the animal, for fear the spirits should carry information to the object of pursuit” (Brooke, p. 9 cited in Roth, 1980, p. 224).

The deities could also express themselves in other forms or phenomena. Omen could also be told by other creatures such as cobra and kijang (barking deer). A lot of the Iban cannot consume or eat the barking deer meat or kill it because of what the spirit had done to help the Iban in the past. An Iban was pursued by the enemy and as he was trying to look for a place to hide in the wood, a barking deer appeared on the scene. His pursuers on seen the barking deer gave up their chase, and accepted the fact that they actually had been chasing after a barking deer instead of chasing after a perceived enemy. In the old days when hunting activity was still rampant, a stranger could be perceived as a potential headhunter and therefore regarded as an enemy. In the incident, the spirit had manifested itself in a form of a barking deer and the man was saved by this action. The barking deer has been a scared animal to many Iban since this incident, and in remembrance of what the barking deer had done many Iban refrain from eating its meat or kill it. The author knows many Iban who do not take the meat of a barking deer because of this reason. My wife’s family and many of my relatives from my longhouse and neighboring longhouses in Paku, Saribas in Betong Division in Sarawak, for example, do not consume barking deer meat for fear that misfortune might befall them. One of the most feared consequences for not respecting or disregarding the taboo is that the person who has violated it could become mad (gila) or mentally unsound, and there are evidences of this actually happening.

Barking deer is still hunted by the Iban for its meat and horn, but the Iban also know pretty well that the animal is also an object of omen. If the barking deer behaves in a peculiar or a strange manner, something not good is going to happen to a person who sees or hears it. Hearing the cry of a deer “is at all times unlucky, and to prevent the sound reaching their ears during a marriage procession, gongs and drums are loudly beaten” (St. John, p. 64 cited in Roth, 1980, p. 228). It is also a bad omen if the barking deer is seen loitering near the longhouse such as at the longhouse’s bathing place or at its front or backyard. The barking deer is a wild animal, and it is strange, therefore, if it happens to be at the vicinity of a longhouse. If it does come near the longhouse or any dwelling place for that matter, such as a farm hut, then it is assumed that it is trying to communicate something. Often, the message it conveys is not a desirable one.

Soul

The Iban reckon that there are seven semengats or lives. The one in this world is just one of them (Brooke cited in Roth, 1980; p. 218).Iban believe that the souls of men after death become antu (ghosts or spirits). The Iban religion has “distinct notion of a future state which is often mentioned in their conversation” (Roth, 1980, p. 218). Their burial rites, for example, “all tend to support the idea of a future state”. The main points mentioned in the burial rites suggest that the Iban expect to meet each other after death. Iban religious feeling
is not fatalistic as it appreciates good blessing in the worldly life (Brooke cited in Roth, 1980, p. 219). The souls of man and that of god impinge upon each other in the Iban’s daily activities.

**Dream**

The spirit world communicates with the Iban through dreams. The soul acts as the medium through which the world of unknown powers communicates with the Iban’s soul. Deity appears to the Iban through dreams where he commissions the fortunate ones to do or lead certain activities. For example, only someone that has been commissioned by god in a dream can lead a war party (Tau Serang). Many Iban become creative in the work of arts like weaving and remembering sacred text because of dream experiences (Kedit, 1977).

According to Mr. Chambers, the Iban “place implicit confidence” in dreams (Roth, 1980, p. 231). Low says that the Iban “will not spare expense to atone by ceremony or sacrifice for a bad one. Those who dream of the cobra are lucky” (Ibid, p. 233). The Iban believe that “during sleep the … (soul) can hear, see and understand, and even leaves the body occasionally” (Grant, p. 69 in Roth 1980:, p. 232). “When we dream of falling into the water we suppose that this accident has really befallen our spirits, and we send for the manangs, who fish for it and recover it for me” (Miss. Field 1867, p. 462 in Roth, 1980, p. 232). Dreams are judiciously interpreted. The demon or ghost (*antu*) is also an object of dreams, which Sutlive et al (2001, p. 50) describe as “at the same cognitive level as semengat” or soul. *Antu* is appeased by killing pigs to inspect and examine the hearts (Roth, 1980, p. 233).

Good dreams are highly sought after by the Iban. It is in a dream that magical charms are received. The antu or the spirit also indicates in a dream where the charms are to be obtained or collected. Before embarking on life changing activity, the Iban often looks for a good dream. On the night before the event is going to happen, an Iban may purposely seek a good dream. Before he goes to sleep that night, an offering and a sacrifice may be performed and a prayer said.

**Augury**

The Iban practice a system of augury to avert evil. The Iban believe that god communicates with them through this system by using the calls of birds and other visible and audible signs made by the behaviour of animals and insects. Through “an examination of the entrails of a particular animal”, the Iban know whether the message from god augurs well or is it a message about evil (Ibid, p. 234). For this purpose, the Iban have special augur as (*Tuai Burong*). His main task is to interpret the special signs communicated by birds, animals and insects. Tuai Burong is consulted before major activities are undertaken such as when to start the padi planting season and where to construct a new house.

Traditional Iban believe in having charms to protect them from both men and evil spirits. In fact a lot of them have set high value on these charms. Charms are of various types. The one for the medicine (*ubat*) is regarded as a good one as its main use is to ensure good health and successful undertakings. This one is a highly sought after or coveted one. The charm of this nature is handed down from one generation to the next. Some charms are known as *pengaruh*, and they can be good charms or bad charms. The good charm can be used to procure blessings, while the bad one can be used in black magic to hurt or kill someone.

A good charm, for instance, may be able to help the owner to become strong and weakens his enemy or opponent. In some instances, a charm is basically a spirit (good or bad) that manifests itself in all sorts of forms such as the horns of the animals like that of the mouse deer, the *kijang*’ (barking deer) and or in the tusks of pigs and or object of spirit. Those who have them are said to be fortunate as they are guided and led by the spirit. Charms (*pengaruh*) may be attached to the swords to make the owner of the sword more menacing and fierce or they may be carried “around the waist when in dangerous positions” (Roth, 1980:238). In today’s world, charms are carried in the pockets or in a bag.
Feasts and Festivals

Ritual festival or gawai is important in Iban life and it is an integral element of Iban religious agricultural cycle (Kedit, 1988, p. 25). Ritual festival is often held when an Iban is going to embark on an importance activity like becoming a candidate in an election. The Iban has many forms of ritual festivals, but the three most common ones that are still practiced in some respects are those associated with: (a) cultivation of padi, (b) health and longevity, and (d) prestige. In the old days, a ritual festival was also held in connection with headhunting activities. The three principals festival organized by the Iban are Gawai Sandau Ari, Gawai Antu (Festival of the Dead) and Gawai Burong.

At this ritual festival feast, a timang (ritual chant) is sung by a team of bards. Through their chanting, the bards ask the god (petara) to visit the petitioner or the host. During the ritual festival a timang is chanted by a lemambang or a bard. A timang or a ritual chant is an invocation inviting the petara (god) to join the feast.

There are many forms of ritual festivals undertaken by the Ibans. Besides the festival of the dead (Gawai Antu), the other types of gawai performed by the Ibans are “Gawa, Gawai Amat, Gawai Kelingkang, Gawai Ijik Pumpung, Gawai Tangga Raja, Gawai Kayu Raja, Gawai Kenyalang (Hornbill Ritual), Gawai Lemba Bubun (Ritual of Warfare), Gawai Nanga Medan (Ritual ascending to Medan), Gawai Sandau/Sandang Liau, Gawai Sempunung Matahari (Ritual of the Conical Sun Basker) and Gawai Setunggul (Ritual of the Flag) (Sutlive and Sutlive, 2011, p. 599-600).

Sandau Ari Festival

Sandau Ari is one form of a gawai or a ritual. Sandau ari is a one day ritual festival. The guests arrive early in the morning and go back to their respective longhouses before the end of the day. The function normally ends in mid afternoon after a sacrifice has been made. A sandau ari may be held for various reasons such as before undertaking a major event in one’s life or before going on an expedition or for the sick (Ibid, 2011, p. 1639). A person suffering from long illness and has lost hope on the ability of modern medical science in helping him to get well may hold a sandau ari festival where offerings and sacrifices are made in order to please and appease the deity, particularly Singalang Burong so as to get his blessing and mercy in anticipation that he would restore his health. A person may host a sandau ari festival because he may have dreamt certain dreams that require him to do so. Or he may have been commissioned in a dream to do so.

Unlike during the festival of the dead (gawai antu), which is held for a day and a night and may take months or years of preparation as it is a very costly ritual festival to hold, during the sandau ari a pengap or chant is not needed. A pengap is performed during the festival of the dead by a team of seven or nine men with a bard leading the way. The pengap is sung all night long and the singing ends just before dawn. For sandau ari, a pengap is not required; a prayer is sufficient for it.

One interesting element of a sandau ari is the sacrifice of a pig. A pig is killed for its liver. Before the pig is speared, it is combed and is symbolically fed by a specifically chosen woman. The pig is fed an offering (piring) which has already been smeared by the blood from the rooster after a prayer (sampi) has been said. The process of combing and feeding the pig is held at the drying platform of the longhouse or the tanyu. A special shed is built in the middle of the drying platform to house the pig and to keep it cool. The pig is laid down on its side and its four legs are tied to a pestle.

The pig’s liver is removed as soon as the pig is killed. Experts would then be gathered to interpret the fortune of host by reading the signs as indicated by the positions and the nature of the ventricles. From the positions and the nature of the ventricles, the experts are supposed to be able to foretell the fortune of the host: whether the future is going to augur well for him or not. Basically, the experts are looking for straight and untwisted ventricles as this signifies good augur, while the winded and twisted ones are considered to be not nice and may bring misfortune to the host.
As uttered in the prayer, the petara or god is asked to manifest his message or to indicate his wish for the host in the pig liver. So the signs as indicated by the positions and nature of the ventricles in the pig liver are regarded as messages and wishes from god. As Sutlive et al (2011, p. 1461) have observed, pig liver is “one of the most important objects used in divination” among the Ibans.

### Ritual Offering and Sacrifice

The Iban believe in the subject of offering and sacrifice. Before the Iban embarked on major activities like in going on a ‘bejalai’ (a journey of fortune), in the cultivation of padi, offerings and sacrifices are consistently held. Even at thanksgiving, offerings and sacrifices are always held.

Iban’s offering or ‘piring’ is presented in odd number. Depending on the occasion, there can be one-fold offering (one plate), three-fold, five-fold, seven-fold or nine-fold, the maximum number. If the offering is more than one-fold, one of the offering will act as a lead offering (indu piring), and it must be placed on a metal tray (tabak) and covered using a traditional Iban blanket (puu kumbu). Before the making of the offering begins, a rooster is waved above the ingredients of the offering to mark or announce the start of the offering process (miring). After the offering has been prepared, the rooster is waved over it (bebiau) and it is during this time that chant or invocation or prayer (sampi) is uttered.

An Iban offering is only complete with a blood sacrifice. Hence, after the chanting is over, the blood for the sacrifice is withdrawn from the rooster by slicing the upper part of its comb. The offering is then smeared by the rooster’s blood using a feather which has been plucked from its wing. The feather is then put at the lead offering. And depending on the types of the ritual festivals or occasions, the rooster may be sacrificed and its blood is smeared on the feet of the person involved to wish him luck.

In certain festivals, a pig is sacrificed where its carcass is cut open to get out its heart and its liver for inspection and interpretation by experts. Some of the things that these experts are looking for in the pig’s liver, for example, are: its size, the position and run of the ventricles, and the nature of the ventricles to see whether it is straight or bend and to see whether it is twisted or not. The experts also look at the bile to determine its firmness, as in whether it is full of fluid or not or whether it looks healthy or otherwise.

If the liver is bloched or spotted, it is a very bad sign; if it is held together strongly by the larger blood-vessels, the position these bear to each other is considered; or if the gall bladder is in any way overlapping the liver, this is also a sign that the omen is unfavourable. But, if the liver is healthy and free from all blemish then the omen is favourable, and the pig can be eaten” (Hose in Roth, 1980, p. 235).

The offerings are of two types but they are put together in the same plate. The first type represents the hospitality of the host and this include offering things like cigarettes (insap, which is usually in the form of nipah palm leaves or daun apong), tobacco, betel-nut and gambier leaf that has been smeared with slaked lime. Traditionally, these symbols of hospitality are the first things the Iban offer to their guests upon their arrival at their longhouses. As the guests are seated at the hall (ruai) of the family unit and looking towards the family living room (bilik), they are immediately offered cigarettes, tobacco, betel-nut and gambier leaves. The same hospitality is extended to welcome the deities, the spirits and the ancestors that had been invited through chants and invocations to attend the ritual festivals.

The second type of offering is food offering. What is included in the food offering varies slight between the different riverine systems in Sarawak. The Iban in Sarawak tend to settle along the major rivers of the state, and this accounts for the slight variations in the food items for the offering as different river systems tend to have their own peculiarities and distinctive trait. Among the Paku Iban in Betong, an area where the author originates, the food items in the offering include five types of rice (white rice, black rice, red rice, yellow rice and glutinous rice), banana, egg, penganan iri (rice cake cooked by pouring batter on hot oil in a wok), salt, sagun (rice flour stir dry in a wok with coconut and egg and sugar or nipah palm sugar), popped rice (letup), cooking oil and rice wine (tuak).
Black rice, for example, is for the ancestors from the afterworld (sebayan). Yellow rice is to welcome Bungai Nuing, the spirit-hero from the raised world (Pangau Libau). However, yellow rice is not always used. Similarly, some longhouses in the Paku area also do not use black rice, but the usage of red rice in the offering is common among the longhouses in Paku. At the end of the offering preparing process, popped rice is thrown into the air in all directions, and it is not to be swept until the ritual festival is over. The prayer (sampi) process and the waving of the rooster (biau) only begin after this. Yellow rice may also be thrown into the air but this is not always done as with the popped rice as yellow rice has larger connotation, implication and meaning.

Unlike in the Rejang River basin, in the Paku region, puffed rice (rendai) and tumpi (rice or sago cake made by pressing the flour onto a hot wok) are not part of the ingredients of offering there. In contrast, sagun which is essential in Paku is not required in the other riverine systems. However, egg is required ingredients for the offering in all the riverine systems in Sarawak. For the Iban, egg is a symbol and a source of life. In some riverine systems, for the offering, while in Paku, Saribas in Betong Division in Sarawak, the egg is sliced into smaller pieces, but the concept is still the same. In the Batang Rejang basin, if the offering is of the nine-fold type, nine eggs will be offered in each of the nine plates. In the Paku region in Betong Division, there will be nine slices of eggs for this type of offering.

Most offerings are of three-fold type. Offerings made in the living room of the family unit (bilik), for instance, must be in three-folds. But the offering that is made at the hall (ruai) of the family unit, as it is more public in nature, must be in five-folds. An example of ritual festival that requires a three-fold offering is the festival to mark the purchase of an old Chinese jar, while an example of a ritual festival that requires five-fold offering is a the one that is hosted as results of having a had a dream or having commissioned in the dream by the deities, the spirits or the ancestors.

An offering of three-fold or more must have a lead offering (indu piring) and it must be placed on a metal tray (tabak) and covered using the Iban traditional blanket (pua kumbu). The chief goals of offerings and sacrifices are as described by (Roth, 1980, p. 278):

The speckled fowl for sacrificial waving and cleansing.
For doctoring, for resisting
For sweeping, for atoning
Ye fowl enables us to escape the curse muttered unheard;
To neutralize the spittle (of the enemy)…
To scare away evil dreams for ever;
To make harmless one’s ghost passing the farm;
To neutralize the ill omen bird flying across the path
To cut off the ketupong’s flight coming from the left…
To make harmless the pangkas, ‘a hot tempered bird;
To counteract the omen of the low voiced deer
Hence ye fowls are for having and for offering.

During the prayer session, the Iban invoke the deities, the spirits and the ancestors to come to their ritual festivals but they are also requested to come with gifts particularly charms. The offering is used to exchange for the gifts brought by them.

**Prayer**

Prayer or a sampi is offered to a Supreme Being. Sampi is an act of asking something or as act of wishing for something from the deities, the spirits and the ancestors (Saleh and Ensiring, 2011, p. iii; Jugah, 2011, p. i). “The only prayers which the Dayaks offer are invocations addressed to the various powers of the world of spirits, on certain great occasion, as e.g. to the birds of omen (…hantu) when they go to consult them…” (Grant, p. 1858 in Roth, 1980, p. 216). Prayer can only be uttered when offering (piring) has been prepared
and as such it cannot simply be invoked. A petitioner may organize a prayer session to appease the deity or the spirit after he has had encounter a bad omen or having been told to do so in a dream. As in the prayers in other religions or system of belief, in a lot of time Iban prayers are also about asking something from the deities and or from the spirits and ancestors.

When a prayer is uttered, the person who has been specifically assigned to do it may ask for many things from the deities, the spirits and the ancestors. He may ask for good health, prosperity, blessing or even praying that young adult would soon be able to find a spouse. During the blessing of a newly-wed, the prayer leader may ask that the couple be blessed with lots of children, prosperity, good health and long life. A prayer invocation is also performed before starting a new farm, asking that the farm be blessed with good produce and trees to bear fruits. Roth (1980: 129), for example, acknowledges that in a prayer many things are requested including that many pigs and deer may be killed, sea and rivers to produce sufficient fish, and wives to have children, lots of them, especially sons.

At the end of a prayer and depending on circumstances, yellow rice is thrown into the air. Prayer for the Iban is in a form of invocation and chanting where a rooster or fowl is waived and later sacrificed, as all prayer especially when a ‘miring’ is performed, it must be smeared in blood.

Prayer can be in all aspects like asking for good health and prosperity. Prayer innovation may be done in farming activities to as the deity to bless the farm with good produce, much rice and trees to bear fruits. Prayer may be said in order that many pigs and deer may be killed, sea and rivers to produce sufficient fish, and wives to have children, lots of them, especially sons (Roth, 1980: 215). A prayer starts with a ritual calling by counting number one to number seven and is uttered this way: Sa, dua, tiga, empat, lima, enam, tu...tu...juh. Ooo ha! Ooo ha! Ooo ha. Number seven is significant here as it indicates the Iban’s seven most important gods. As the prayer sayer (tukang sampi) or the officiant (Sutlive et al, 2001, p. 1305) is uttering those numbers, he is also waving the cockerel (biau). This will start the processes of preparing the offering. After the offering has been prepared, the officiant once again stand up and with the cockerel in his hand starts his invocation to call upon the deities, spirits and ancestors to come to the festivals and bring along with them charms (pengaruh). The waving of the cockerel is actually performed as a way of greeting and welcoming the guests: human guests and more importantly those deities, spirits and ancestors that have been invited to come by the officiant in his invocation or chanting.

The prayer also invites the Iban cultural-heroes. According to the Iban cosmology, these cultural-heroes are from a place called the Panggau Libau of the ‘raised world’ as opposed to the ‘afterworld (sebayan or the world of the dead people) and the dunya (the earth), the human world (Ibid, 2001: 442). The Iban number cultural-hero is Keling Gerasi Nading and his close pal, Sempurai Bungai Nuing and their wives are sisters. Keling’s wife is Kumang who is also the goddess of war. Like all heroes, these Iban cultural-heroes are handsome and also have high ego that easily gets bruised, and if they are not treated nicely and not welcomed accordingly, they can get angry and become offended easily, and can cause havocs. Sempurai, in particular, is hot-tempered. But if they are treated nicely and accordingly, they are very generous with their gifts (usually in the form of charms) and their blessings. They can become the guardian spirit.

Offerings must be made before the invocation; otherwise those deities would be upset when they see that there is no food for them and lack of hospitality on the part of the host. An invocation (sampi) must take place with a waving of a cockerel. One cannot be done without the other. These two processes cannot be done without the offering been prepared.

**Petara**

Iban has many deities (petara) with different one watching over different human activities. These gods must be respected by giving them sacred feast. As already been mentioned, the two most important Iban gods are Singalang Burong (the god of war) and Simpulang Gana (the god of padi). Of the two, Singalang Burong is the senior god as he oversees the general welfare of the people. According to Sutlive et al (2001, p. 442), and
as described in Timang Gawai Amat, Singalang Burong is claimed to be as “older than the oldest, bolder than the boldest, stronger than the strongest, and mightier than mightiest deity”.

Simpulang Gana is the god that oversees land and agriculture. Any agriculture activity must seek his approval and understanding. He needs to be informed if there is any kind of land use being undertaken. Nothing must be done to the land particularly in relations to farming activities without his prior knowledge. Omen birds are relevant and significant to all forms of human activities and even more so to shifting cultivation. The other Iban deities are: Seremugah or Serigendawho is the maker of the earth, Segundie or Serigundit (Maker of the Sky), Segendi or Serigendi (Maker of Water), Meni (Godess of the Waters and of Dying Thread), Renggan (God of the Dead), Selampandai (Maker of Human Beings) and Tutung (God of Blacksmith). Another very important deity is Kumang, the goddest of war (Sutlive et al, 2001, p. 442). Kumang is the wife of Keling (leading spirit-hero and superhuman being) of the raised world called the Panggau Libau (Ibid, p. 442).

The deities sometimes are referred to as antu (spirit) or petara (god). The Iban use the terms antu and petara interchangeably. Both the petara and the antu could not be seen, but they may express or manifest themselves in a variety of phenomena. The antu is generally not friendly to human being and to all his purposes (Ibid. 50). Petara, on the other hand, is friendly if human beings know how to be hospitable to them and seek their permission and knowledge first before embarking on certain peculiar activities. The antu is highly dreaded and feared as it is thought to be feeding on human souls and as a consequence the unlucky soul may become sick or may die. Antu Gerasi, a giant spectre or ghost for example, is highly dreaded, as it is believed to be hunting for human beings. Iban believe antu gerasi sees human beings as pigs, and therefore must be treated as something to be hunted for food.

Ritual festival is a time for the Iban to call the deities, the spirits as well as the ancestors. They must be received accordingly and the protocol to do it must be strictly followed otherwise they may get angry and may vent their anger on the person who host the ritual festival or members of his family or longhouse. The Iban always try to take the necessary steps in order to not offend Simpulang Gana, for example, lest they would have poor harvest and would not have enough rice for the year. The act of worshipping these gods is to offer them food in the form of a piring (offering) which must be smeared with a blood.

DATA COLLECTION

The data are collected using two main methods, through participant observation technique and through face-to-face interview with two key informants. As a person that originates from a longhouse, I have witnesses and participated in tenths of offering ceremonies and sacrifices. I have attended no less than five sandauari festival including the one hosted by the BN candidate in the Batang Ai by-election in 2009. The other sandau ari festivals that I attended are mainly hosted by ill persons who used the occasions to seek restoration of their health. I have observed many offering ceremonies conducted on nomination eves where chants or sampi are uttered to invoke the deities, the spirits and the ancestors to ask for their assistance, leadership and guardianship in the election. I have also participated in the processions where the carved hornbill, the deer horn and other objects that have spirit quality are paraded around the town on nomination day.

POLITICS, ADAT AND FINAL ANALYSIS

Despite modernity, many Iban still stick to the old ways and adhere strictly to it when they want to embark on new activities like becoming a candidate in an election. Why is this so? Why must a candidate perform a miring (offering) ceremony and make a sacrifice on nomination eve? In some instances, the ‘miring’ ceremony is so elaborate that hundreds of people are invited to witness it. Why is this miring ceremony a public event? Is it not easier to perform this ceremony privately and pray privately instead of involving the public?

Politics is an importance moment in Iban life. For a new candidate it is a defining moment. To ac-
knowledge this new chapter in their life, many new Iban candidates hosted a ritual festival and feast where people from neighbouring longhouses and villages are invited. The most common ritual festival performed for this purpose is ‘gawai sandau hari’ which is a one day.

In the the Batang Ai by-election in April 2009, both the Barisan Nasional (BN) candidate and the PKR candidates both hosted a sandau ari festival a few days before the nomination. At the end of the function, a pig was sacrificed where both its hearts and livers were taken out to be examined by experts and elders to see if there is any sign in there that indicated that the candidate was lucky.

The ceremony to examine the heart and liver of a pig can be an eerie experience for many as the petara (god) in the form of a hawk may soar at great height and “according to his flight that the Dayaks augur more or less success to their enterprise (where)(sic) they have an implicit belief in the good or bad omens they draw from the movements of this bird, especially when they have invoked it” (Muller ii. 368 in Roth 1980, p. 223). According to the experts and the elders the hearts and livers of the pigs for both candidates in the Batang Ai by-election were good and both candidates were deemed to be lucky.

The ritual festival feasts is not all about religion as the process of conducting it also has social implication. Hugh Low as described in Roth (1980: 237) explains that the social character of the feast takes precedence over the religious as attention is shifted to feasting than to feeding the deities, the spirits or the ancestors. Roth (1980, p. 23), quoting Hugh Low, says that

Priority is given to the needs to entertain friends and relatives instead of been given to the initial intention of hosting the ritual festivals, which is to invoke the deities, the spirits and the ancestors to come. Obligations to friends become a priority acknowledged, and hospitality carried over to prodigality….It is a social gathering of the tribe, when the dignity, the wealth, and position of the chiefs are brought prominently before the many; and everyone displays his finery and his importance according to his ability.

The ritual festival provides the Iban the opportunity to meet each other, to get acquainted with old friends, and to visit relatives and friends. The Ibans are good conversationists and communicators. This is one skill that the Ibans learned since at the early years, as one of the major activities in the longhouse, especially during the evening and after dinner had been taken, is to have a discourse at the ruai or the hall of the family-bilik compartment. The term for this in Iban is berandau, which basically is a form of a dialogue where Iban men in particular chitchat, talk to each other, converse and communicate ideas and opinion. This dialogue also acts as form of teaching and learning about the Iban way of life, culture, religion, adat, tradition, economic system and about life in general.

Attendance in the ritual festival gives the Iban the opportunity to exchange views on all aspects of life, culture and tradition with friends and relatives from the other longhouses. The host or the person performing the ritual festival would normally invite the Iban from the other longhouses that have a common understanding with his longhouse that during funeral vigils, weddings, and during the various forms of ritual festivals they are going to invite each other. If it is the whole longhouse activity, the number of longhouses invited to the function could be as many as twenty or more. In the case of Gawai Antu or the festival of the dead, for example, the number of longhouses invited could be as many as the number of the family unit (bilik) of the longhouse. If the longhouse has thirty family-biliks then the number of other longhouses invited is also thirty, with each family-bilik responsible for feeding and entertaining the whole population of one longhouse. For this reason Perham Miss. Life (1971) describes the feast as “assuming (sic) something of the character of a council and affords one of the best opportunities for indulging in their intense love of ‘bechara.’ Sociability, friendship, love of pleasure, religious instinct, and traditional custom, are all here united” (quoted by Roth, 1980, p. 257). The ritual festival, therefore offers the Ibans a platform for ‘bechara’, as Perham Miss. Life describes or in other words, the chance to berandau, albeit an extended one and at a different level and where topics of common interest are discussed (in Roth, 1980, p. 257).

In the state constituency of Batang Ai by-election in 2009, the BN candidate also performed a miring
ceremony after a member of his family saw a big cobra in their farm just days after he was officially announced as the BN candidate. During the by-election, offerings and sacrifices were made whenever dignitaries like federal and state ministers come to the longhouses to campaign. The BN candidate in the Batang Ai by-election also performed a miring ceremony on the eve of the nomination in his mother’s longhouse, about 10 km from Lubok Antu bazaar, the nomination centre for the nomination. On nomination morning, the BN candidate and his entourage left his mother’s longhouse while it was still dark for fear of hearing the calls or cries and the flights of omen birds.

During nominations, the Iban candidates take their charms and amulets with them to the nomination centres. Charms can be an inspirer and confidence booster and those who lavishly and publicly display them are perceived to be closer to the spirit and therefore should be respected and should not be disregarded. Charms can also be used to instilled fear among the people.

A long-term serving Iban politician from Betong Division in Sarawak, for example, seeks the assistance of the deities, the spirits and ancestors every time he contests in an election. He has a sacred ceremonial wood carving of Burong Kenyalang (Rhinocerous Hornbill) which he parades around Betong town as he proceeds to the nomination centre with a large entourage. On top of this, other forms of charms and spirit items as well as the offering are also carried along but they could not be seen as they are normally wrapped in the traditional Iban blanket (pua kumpu).

Upon arrival at the nomination centre, the carved hornbill is placed at the entrance of the nomination centre next to a horn of a deer which has also been paraded together. The hornbill is regarded as the god of war, while the deer horn is a charm that has a spirit quality. The caption of the photograph, taken by Ghazali Bujang, of the politician holding the carved hornbill states the reason for having it; “In former days, the bird spirits would attack and weaken enemy villages in preparation for headhunting raids” (New Straits Times, April 7, 2011, p. 6). In today’s world, the purpose is still the same, and that is to attack and weaken the enemy’s spirit, except that the enemy this time is the political opponent.

The reasons for placing the carved hornbill and the deer horn at the entrance to the nomination centre are not exactly known. But one thing is certain; if the opponents come to the nomination centre later than him, then they have to pass by the carved hornbill and the deer horn. As the two items are supposed to possess spirit quality, this therefore means that the entrance to the nomination centre is guarded by the spirit and the political opponents will also have to do a battle with them too. They are put there perhaps to remind the political opponents that the election is more than just a democratic process. It is also battle that involves the deities, the spirits and the ancestors. May be they are put there to remind his opponents about the seriousness of the occasion that ‘naked man’ (telanjai), that is those without the charms and the guardian from the spirit, should not get involved and messed around with him as the ramifications of their actions could be more devastating than losing the election itself.

During the procession around the town, it is widely believed that the deities, the spirits and the ancestors of the candidates are also in the procession as well. Their main task is to oversee the general well-being of the candidate and lead him into a battle. In the eve of the nomination, Iban candidates normally would perform the miring ceremony sometimes this is done in the privacy of their longhouses, but for many Barisan Nasional candidates, as they have access to the government facilities, a lot of the time this is done in the community hall or in the indoor stadium as is the case involving the Barisan Nasional candidate from Betong.

A lot of people are gathered for this purpose. For the longhouse headmen, it is mandatory that they attend the function. Food and drink are provided by the host and this is where the catch is. During the prayer after the preparation of the offering is over, the officiant or the tukang biau (the person who waves the rooster), sometimes go beyond invoking the deities, the spirits and the ancestors and asking for their leadership, guardian and blessing, as words that tantamount to cursing may be uttered at the same time. Non-supporters would be reminded of their responsibility and are asked to come back to the ‘correct path’ if they are not to be cursed or be sorry. Supporters who have eaten the food and drank the drink provided by the candidates are reminded
to continue supporting the candidate as they might also be cursed if they become turncoat and support the other party. In this situation, it is a thin line dividing actual praying and cursing as the atmosphere is highly political, emotional and ritualized.

At the end of the function, the candidate normally would rise up to deliver his speech. Those who have been invited to come to observe the offering ceremony or participate in it have now become a ‘captured audience’ and they have little choice other than to seat there listening attentively. In many instances, nomination eve acts more-or-less as a process of signing a memorandum of understanding and oath taking, whereby the candidate pledges to do something for the people, while the people promise to support him. Whoever breaks the promise shall be cursed as the yellow rice is tossed or thrown into the air after the preparation of the offering is over. Supporter or voters who have eaten and drank the candidate’s food and drink must be completely aware of their responsibility if they are to avoid been condemned.

**CONCLUSION**

Many candidates have the perception that contesting in an election is like going to a war so war paraphernalia particularly charms and all sacred items or objects that have spirit quality are used extensively to show off the color of the candidates. Those candidates that have these items or qualities are revered, feared and held with high esteem as possession of them indicate that owners are close (semak petara) to god and the spirit. God, petara or antu as the terms are seldom used interchangeably by the Iban to refer to the spirit or the unknown world, is thought to be fighting on the candidate’s behalf in his attempt to win the battle for supremacy in the constituency where he stands. A feel good factor is greater when one knows that the antu is fighting for you.

For this reason, many Iban candidates resort to their traditional system of belief, adat and culture such as hosting a ritual festival, preparing offerings and praying (besampi) to invoke the deities, the spirits and the ancestors to ask them to assist them in their battle for supremacy in the election and provide them the charms that could be used to weaken the opponent’s fighting spirit. During the election, Iban hospitality is manipulated as a festival atmosphere is created in the longhouse. A festival requires an offering which in turn requires a sacrifice and the invocation of the deities, the spirits and the ancestors. The festival like atmosphere is created in the name of the adat, tradition and culture while the politicians manipulate the whole process to his electoral advantage. The confluence of culture and politics in Iban areas during elections in Sarawak is an interesting phenomenon to observe and study.

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