

### LETTERS FROM KALIMANTAN: III

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From January 1963 until May 1964, my husband and I lived in Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), where we did anthropological research. The bulk of our time (April 1963-April 1964) was spent in the small village of Telang in the province of Central Kalimantan, where we collected ethnographic data on the Ma'anjan, a Dajak ethnic group. During the course of our stay in Kalimantan, I wrote a series of "letters home," in which I recorded our experience and impressions in a more personal form than field notes could have provided. The following passages are the third installment of excerpts from this "journal."

Telang, August 8, 1963

After the conclusion of the final cremation ceremony, we had anticipated a welcome respite from ceremonial activity as the exhausted villagers turned their attention to agricultural matters. We were mistaken, however, for now there is some sort of ceremonial feast or celebration almost every day. In normal, non-idjambe years, there is a period of intense ceremonial activity during the months of May and June, following the annual rice harvest and before work on next year's swidden fields has begun. This year, post-harvest ceremonies were postponed until all of the "death" rituals associated with idjambe were out of the way, since "life" ceremonies may not be mixed with those belonging to the "death cycle." "Life" ceremonies--all those not actually concerned with death--include rituals attending birth, marriage, the offering of food to a household's protective ancestral spirits or to a shaman's familiar spirits. Many "life" ceremonies resemble idjambe in certain particulars. Often they are all night affairs, and we have become experienced in the fine art of floor napping during the dull, repetitious parts of the evening's work. As in idjambe, the "life" rituals are conducted by shamans, usually old women, although male shamans also have their ceremonial niche. The Christian segment

of the population often has analagous ceremonies, but, needless to say, church elders, and not shamans, preside at such affairs, and many purely animistic elements are omitted.

Last week, we attended one ceremony which combined several different rituals. The main purpose of this two-day rite, called mira ka'ajat, was to give thanks to the household's protective spirits for what had been received in the past year, and to solicit good fortune in the year to come. At the conclusion of the second day, a small procession walked down to the river, not far behind the house, to offer a bit of food to the water spirit, named Dewata. Dewata is a crocodile spirit, but once, a long time ago, he assumed human shape to woo and win a Ma'an-jan maiden. After their marriage, Dewata took the girl back to his fluvial kingdom to set up housekeeping. This turn of events quite naturally upset the girl's parents, and they sought the return of their child, much as Demeter did Persephone. Through the spirit grapevine, the parents found that if they performed the proper ritual and provided suitable offerings of food, their daughter, escorted by her crocodilian husband, would return once each year for a short visit. This is still done annually by many Padju Epat families, and Dewata, for his part, protects those families who have fed him.

As we stood on the bank of the river, an elderly male shaman in magnificent festive costume presented, to the accompaniment of extensive chanting, an offering basket to Dewata, mounting it on a long pole erected in the stream. If there is a sick child in the household sponsoring the ceremony, its parents may give a special offering to Dewata to ask his help in curing the malady. The child is ritually bathed in the stream, and then the father takes his offering and dives into the water, for the gift must be hidden below the surface away from the sight of men. If the offering should rise to the surface, this is considered an ill omen for the child's future welfare. Consequently, the father dives below the water repeatedly, very much concerned to fasten the offering securely to some underwater snag, where none but Dewata will know. This activity provides a fair amount of amusement for the spectators.

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Telang, August 29, 1963

The intense ceremonial activity described in my last letter has now largely subsided, to our considerable relief. The attention and energy of everyone is now being turned to the swiddens, long neglected during idjambe. Because of poor lateritic soil and the highly concentrated rainfall in Padju Epat, the fertility of a swidden field declines rapidly after clearing. Consequently, a given field cannot be planted with subsistence crops for more than two years in a row, after which

it must be allowed to lie fallow for a number of years. Thus, every household must clear one or more new fields every year, a hard job that is only somewhat mitigated by the institutionalized use of cooperative labor.

In an ordinary year, the clearing of new fields is begun in the month of June, but this year few people had the opportunity to clear before the beginning of August. The clearing of a new swidden is heavy work. Trees on the plot must be felled, branches and brush collected into piles for drying, and, finally, the whole field must be burned over. There is no longer any agriculturally usable primary forest in Padju Epat, so that the trees to be cut through are not as large as those found in some other Dajak regions. Small, cooperative work parties, comprising ten to fifteen people, are formed to accomplish the preliminary clearing of an individual household's plot. (We are told that later planting groups will be much larger and gayer.) In the early morning of a pre-arranged day, a group of fairly close neighbors gathers in the village and walks together to the plot being cleared that day. Work usually continues until nearly midday, when lunch is provided by the host household whose field is being cleared. If the swidden is close to the village, the workers return there for lunch, otherwise they eat out in the field. Another, afternoon, work period lasts for several hours, followed by a break for coffee and sweets, and then a few final hours of work is done. We have joined several of the groups (more as observers than participants) and were most interested to witness the clearing process which has been described by everyone else who has worked in Borneo. Local axes are small, but with good steel blades, some of which were forged locally several generations ago. The steel head is fixed with a rattan binding to a slender springy shaft that in turn is mounted in a soft wooden handle. The springiness of the shaft eliminates any shock to one's arms, and the axes are handled with remarkable speed and skill. When a large stand of trees is to be felled, it is done in series. A whole line of trees is boxed, though not chopped through completely. One tree at the head of the line is then felled in such a way that it hits and topples the next tree, and so on down the line, like a series of towering dominoes. The whole spectacle is quite exciting and could prove dangerous to the person who isn't paying attention. There is no master plan, and smaller trees do tend to crash haphazardly, occasionally coming close to a worker. One afternoon we tried to photograph the process, but we spent most of the time dodging trees. After each near miss, we were moved, with great solicitude, to a spot considered safer by our host.

We were amazed to see a few women wielding axes like professionals, for the earlier accounts we had read all stated that clearing was strictly men's work. The young men all say

that women really shouldn't cut trees, but in Telang several women participated because their households were small and lacked sufficient manpower. There is one woman (who even wears shorts for the job) who always clears with her aged husband and rather lazy son; she, however, both literally and figuratively wears the pants in her family. The moments of sitting down and gossiping between cutting trees are the best, of course, next to the actual restbreaks when one is fed and given coffee or tea. The rest periods are long and relaxed; the men usually bathe before eating, and they sit and talk together or play with their young children. Frequently, a small five-toned bamboo xylophone is taken down from the wall and strung between the big toes of the player's outstretched legs. The light, high, rippling sounds of this instrument add a note of musical festivity to the occasion.

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Telang, September 21, 1963

Although one thinks of Borneo as almost the stereotype for a wet, tropical climate, our particular portion of the island suffers from a six-month dry period, extending from May to October. This prolonged drought is caused by the foehn effect generated as the wet winds of the southeast monsoon blow over the Meratus Hills that form a north-south line about 75 miles to the east of us. The southeast winds release most of their moisture to the east of the Meratus range, so that little if any is deposited in Padju Epat during this season. Thus it is possible for newly cleared swidden fields to get good and dry before they are burned over. In this respect, Padju Epaters do not seem to suffer the psychological trauma experienced by swidden agriculturists in parts of the island having year around rain, where the longest dry spell may be of only several weeks' duration, and where each day the cultivator must debate with himself whether to burn a not overly dry field right away, or whether to wait an additional day or so and risk a rainstorm that will preclude any burn at all.

Each year at this time, the Telang River gets extremely low, and all the residents of surrounding villages come to fish in its steadily receding, muddy waters. On a prearranged day, people from as far away as Serapat and Djaweten (Padju Sapuluh villages near Tamiang Lajang) will gather, by invitation, to participate in a fish drive downstream from Telang. First a barricade is erected across the river to prevent any fish from escaping, and then a large group of people wades into the stream above the barrier. With nets, spears or bare hands alone, the fishing party combs the mud for fish, scooping the catch into canoes or stringing fish on rattan strands tied about their waists. The experienced mud fisherman sinks up to his knees in the ooze and is thoroughly soaked from head to foot; the



Fishing expedition in low water

Photo by Hudson, 1963.



Clearing a swidden plot

Photo by Hudson, 1963.

reluctant or fastidious individual, who shrinks from such immersion, is rewarded with a scanty catch. The muddy water also holds unseen hazards: a deep hole into which the unwary person can fall; sharp sticks that snag bare feet; painful stabs from the large spiny lances on the heads of lurking catfish. When the barrier has been reached, it is moved downstream, and the process begins anew. On the first day that the river was worked, the catch was enormous; one old man filled two canoes with fish. The stream was fished for several days in this fashion, although the magnitude of the first day's catch was never equaled. From now until the flood waters from the Barito rise in the rainy season, fresh fish will be a scarce item in our daily diet. Most of the fish taken in this way are cleaned, salted and dried, either for later personal consumption or for sale in the market.

The dry weather has completely halted water communications, and we no longer are visited by motor boats on market days. In fact, we feel totally cut off from modern civilization with its engines and automobiles; it is a peaceful world in which we live, surrounded by forest, with no louder sounds than the raucous cries of two hornbills across the river.

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Telang, October 3, 1963

The dry season continues, intensified by relatively hot weather (the thermometer registered 96° F. the other day, and we really feel the additional six degrees now that we have become accustomed to the normal daily range of 70° to 90°). We anxiously await the coming of the rains: to end the heat; to supplement water supplies, as the village well is nearly dry and the river extremely low, having been impassable even to small canoes for at least a month; to soften up the ground for planting in the newly burned swiddens; to put an end to small brush fires in the woods which have gotten out of control in the process of swidden burning. Now, clouds begin to gather at the end of the terribly humid afternoons, but as yet no rain has fallen to relieve the drought.

We have been taking advantage of the dry season to complete a pace and compass map of the villages and surrounding areas, for now the ground is firm enough to allow us to go almost anywhere, even to the banks of the rivers, without getting soaked. Until the map has been completed, and the rice-fields and rubber holdings of each family located and measured, we will not have an accurate idea of the total ecological pattern of the area. Residents of Telang and Siong are now getting quite used to seeing us pop up with compass and notebook, and, in all truth, we must present quite an amusing spectacle. Al takes readings with the compass, then strides off, pacing a straight line, while I pant along behind him with notebook and

pencil, recording his sights and strides as he barks them out over his shoulder. We could certainly never come upon anybody by surprise. We have now mapped all the swiddens with a radius of two to three miles from the village, but there are still quite a few fields yet to be visited.

Often several nuclear families make swiddens within one general territory, slowly expanding their cuttings over a few years until the resources of the immediate area are exhausted or the fields inconveniently distant from the original swidden with its central hut. Many people now plant rubber trees during the first year of cultivation, and then after ten to twelve years return to the area to tap the trees. We have noticed considerable variety in the appearance of different swiddens: some are neatly trimmed and cleared, surrounded by fencing to keep out wild pigs and deer; others are rough clearings hacked out of the forest, with many unburned tree trunks that make planting, weeding, crop tending, and even walking around, quite a chore. The field that is neat is usually well guarded. The unattended field is quickly overrun by wild animals. Pigs root up cassava; deer nibble at the young rubber trees, ringing the trunks; monkeys demolish pineapple crops.

Today we encountered our first planting party, a group of Murutuwns at work on a lowlying riverbank plot that gets enough moisture from its location so that planting need not wait for the onset of the rains. The planting operation employs a cooperative labor exchange system. When the group has gathered at the field for the day's work, the men move over the field poking holes in the charred ground with long pointed poles (dibble sticks); women with small baskets of seed follow, throwing several grains into each hole. Today's group, numbering about 25 people, formed a tight little bunch pushing and jostling and joking as they covered the field in somewhat helter-skelter fashion. A good time was had by all, with frequent rest breaks. As usual in such cooperative activities, food was served by the host family.

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Telang, October 30, 1963

Our life these days is entirely regulated by the local system of cooperative planting, and every morning we trek out to whatever swiddens are scheduled for planting. Keeping ahead of the game, knowing who is going to be planting, when, and where, is nearly a full-time job. Fortunately our earlier map-making expeditions are now paying dividends, and furthermore the planting gives us an opportunity to catch up loose ends where we may have left them. In order to get a good description of rice farming methods, we try to collect information from each family head: how much seed, and of what varieties,



is planted; a calculation, from our map, of the actual area involved; the amount of last year's harvest; the source of the host's land rights; and finally, a listing by name and household of all the individuals participating in the cooperative planting. The latter generally necessitates our own presence so that we can get an accurate account of who plants for whom, although we find there are a good many factors other than pure labor exchange that operate in the cooperative labor system. Kinship ties are important in establishing cooperative work groups, but neighborliness and friendship often count as strongly. An individual with no other commitment for the day may go along to a planting just because a friend is, and often such a person will tell his host that his day of work is a gift: that is, it need not be returned in kind by the host family. Another contributing factor to a popular planting party is the promise of a good meal. A host who announces his intention to slaughter a pig will usually attract more workers than one who merely kills a few chickens, whereas a poor family that only provides fish cannot expect much gift labor. We ourselves are hardly immune to the attraction of food, and although we are expected to attend (and therefore to eat at) nearly all plantings, on days when several occur simultaneously, we try to plan our itinerary so we will end up with the best meal. Since protein has become even scarcer in the local diet because of the dry season, and our canned supplies are dwindling far too rapidly, we are as eager for a good meaty meal as the next person.

We both participate in the planting activities ourselves, Al dibbling and me sowing. Of the two activities, sowing takes considerably more skill, and I have to bend nearly double to cast the seed into the holes with any accuracy. By contrast, Al can walk along with the men, poking holes all around him. Although dibbling is basically man's work, and sowing woman's, we find that the division along sex lines is not strict. In fact, a number of young men work quite happily among the women, and we have finally realized that this was one of the few activities in which a young man could freely associate in public with the unmarried girls! Pre-marital promiscuity seems rare among the Ma'anjan, as compared with other Dajak groups. A few women are known for their largesse, and it is usually among these that a young man must acquire pre-marital experience. Marriages between young people, often on a trial basis, are arranged by the boy and girl concerned. Divorce is easy and an accepted solution to an unsatisfactory union, and consequently most couples express their intentions to marry rather than seeking illicit excitement on the outside.

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Telang, November 21, 1963

The planting season has now concluded, and in all we attended 38 different work parties. Varying in size between fifteen and 150 participants, we had a good chance to judge the relative character and spirit of various households. Some plantings are pure work, and the group which assembles is far from jolly. For a man who, in our estimation, is the laziest in all of Siong (and that takes in pretty wide territory), the only workers who appeared were those who had a direct obligation, either those with very close kin ties (siblings or first cousins) or members of families for whom he had already worked. The sixteen or seventeen individuals who showed up to help this man plant were a disgruntled lot, and well they might have been on contemplating the size of the four-acre field to be worked! At the other end of the scale was a planting party which drew 153 people from all the surrounding villages. A fat pig had been slaughtered, and everyone ate his fill. The planting itself was over in a matter of minutes, for the group needed only to sweep across the six-acre field twice and the whole expanse had been sown. On such a festive occasion, one need only look at the women to know that the occasion is more a social event than a day of work. All come dressed in their finest batiks, whereas a day of anticipated work calls for one's oldest clothes. Following the token work of the latter planting, the day was devoted to eating, gossiping, music making, and gambling. Although informal gambling (guessing the number of seeds in an unripe mangosteen, for instance) had frequently occurred at other planting parties, this occasion actually brought out the professional and semi-professional gamblers with their mats, on which a simplified version of roulette is played with a six-sided top.

Toward the end of the planting season, we came upon a traditional dance, the "dibble stick" dance, that is only done in the fields during planting. We had not seen the dance previously, because several of the villages were observing mourning taboos that prohibit any dancing. The Ma'anjan dance is similar to a widely known Filipino dance in which a pair of parallel poles are alternately opened and closed rhythmically as a dancer moves in and out of their interstices. The Ma'anjan version, however, is more complicated, involving four pairs of dibble sticks, two pairs being parallel to each other and at right angles to the other two pairs. Each pair of sticks is manipulated by two men squatting opposite each other. The rhythm of the dance follows a three beat pattern of open-open-close. On the open beats the sticks are hit on the ground; on the close beat, each pair of sticks is brought sharply together with a loud report, and the dancer must nimbly avoid having his leg amputated at the ankle. As the dance progresses, the dancer performs a series of increasingly complicated steps, while trying not to be caught by the closing sticks. The synchronization

of the dance steps to the movements of the sticks is a challenging feat indeed, and one at which I failed quite decisively!

Often, a planting party may also become the occasion for a ceremony or the resolution of some traditional adat matter related to the rice cycle. Most families, even some of the Christians, perform small ceremonies to bless the rice seed, thereby hoping to ensure a good harvest. If anything has been done to offend the spirit of the rice, or perhaps spirits resident in nearby fruit trees that have been scorched in the process of burning the swidden, restitution must be made. Village elders, experts on adat law, are called to sit and discuss the offense in question, to assess an appropriate fine, and witness the ritual payment of the fine. Many of the plantings we attended included some sort of adat gathering, and normally only three or four old men would sit on the case, reach a decision about the fine, and with the blood of a chicken that had been killed for the meal, perform the necessary ablution.

In one village, however, we attended a case which had the proportions of a *cause celebre*. The tiny hamlet of Kararat, some five kilometers northeast of Telang, and the former adjacent village of Maibe had once possessed a single cremation site and two tambaks (ash receptacles). None had been used since the Japanese occupation, and in 1951 a new tambak, on a different site, had been erected. The old cremation site stood in a grove of ancient fruit trees, and the surrounding soil was rich and fertile. Several young men decided that the area would yield a rich enough harvest to compensate for any adat fine that might be levied, particularly since inflation had already diminished the value of the rupiah to the point that the traditional fine schedule had been rendered nearly meaningless. The men consulted the Kararat village head about the matter, and we gather he had extended rather vague approval. However, when former residents of Kararat and Maibe who had moved to the Karau River region in the north in search of fresh land heard of the cutting, they were incensed over the destruction of their property and the offense against the spirits of their dead. Thus they brought suit against the men who had cut and burned the site, and the case was scheduled for judicial review before the plot could be planted.

Village adat experts from all of Padju Epat gathered, and the case was put into the hands of our good friend the pangulu of Murutuwu for arbitration, both because of his reknown as a legal expert and also because as a representative of an uninvolved village, his neutrality could be counted on. In the late morning we all trooped into the larger of Kararat's two houses to sit on the floor and witness the litigation proceedings. Discussion was long, minutely detailed, and often flatly contradictory. The young men based their defense on the village

head's consent, the village head tried to disavow his role in the matter, and the upcountry claimants pressed for compensation. Once the viewpoints of the prosecution and defense have been aired during arbitration of an adat case, the floor is thrown open to other elders who may wish to comment upon the situation, either supporting one of the parties concerned or more importantly reviewing any precedents or points of equity that might have a bearing on the case. Through all this, the pangulu, in his role as judge, listens without comment, and eventually sums up the case, giving his views about its resolution. Often the pangulu's opinion has been derived from the consensus of the discussion, although in cases like this one, he must reach his own decision and then hope to convince the disputing parties to accept his judgment by the persuasiveness of his argument. The seriousness of the Kararat case was reflected in the fine eventually assessed: in addition to a cash settlement larger than that prescribed by adat law, two enormous fat pigs were assessed for slaughter, some of their meat being distributed to the witnessing elders, and the rest cooked to feed the crowd of assembled spectators. The size of the monetary fine lost some of its bite because of the inflation factor, but the two pigs hit the defendants where it hurt. Following the decision, we all trekked out to the ricefield, where blood from the sacrifices was ritually splattered about the site to appease the spirits of the dead and to purify the field. The meal that we returned to consume was the only occasion on which we were served meat undiluted with vegetables!

One of the large plantings we attended in Murutuwu was the occasion for a ceremony to celebrate the "marriage" of rice seeds belonging to a young couple. Upon marriage, a couple may take up residence with either set of parents, and generally the newlyweds farm together with the parental family for a year or so. Subsequently, the husband cuts his own ricefield, using seed from only one of their families. If the marriage proves stable and fruitful, rice seed is collected from both husband's and wife's families, and the two seeds are also "married" to produce a new "variety" of rice seed that becomes the exclusive property of the new family. The final celebration of the seed marriage is a big affair, demanding the slaughter of a pig. On this occasion, the seed marriage involved the daughter of the richest man in Murutuwu. Characteristically, several other ceremonies were combined with the seed marriage: a general ritual to ensure the welfare and continued prosperity of the father's own household, and an adat ceremony in which a fine was levied and paid in advance to enable Murutuwu families to cut swiddens prior to the next harvest. Following the planting festivities at the ricefield, we all returned to the village where a gala meal of pork, rice and vegetables was served. The crowd was sufficiently large to necessitate two sittings. Then a large jar of tuak was brought out, and the men settled down to their customary three rounds of drinks.

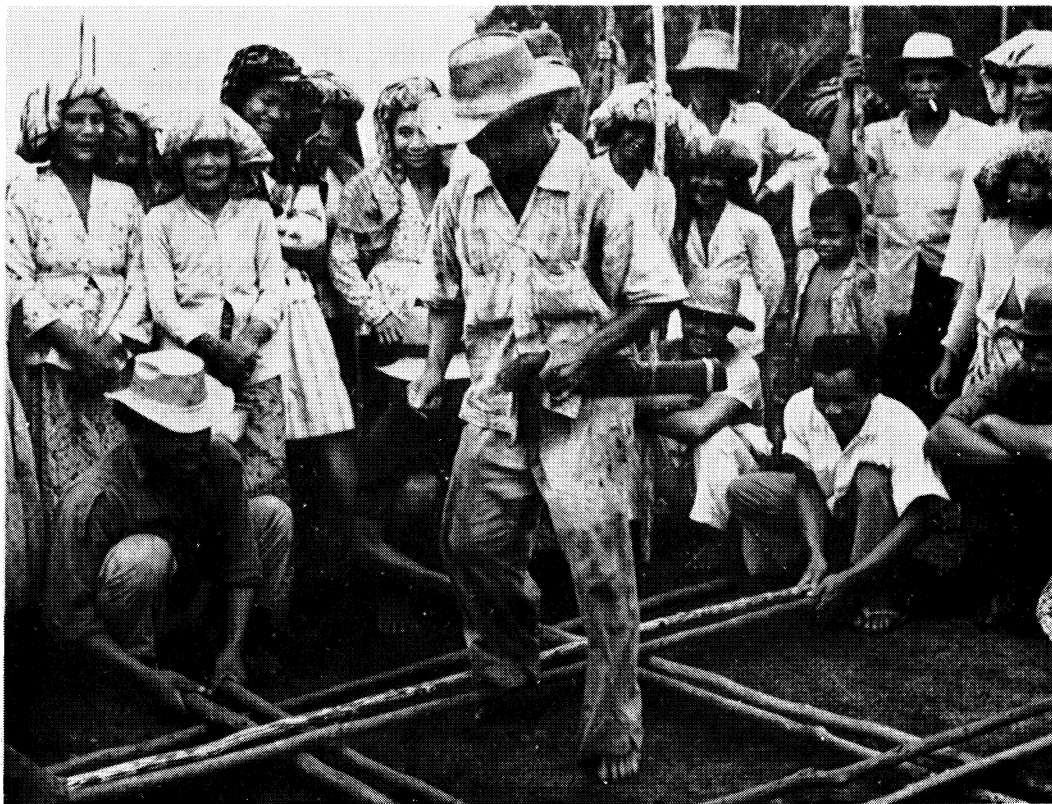
There was great festivity on this occasion: tuak was consumed and speeches were made; songs were improvised about the occasion. As the afternoon wore on, and the tuak continued to flow, often two songs and a speech were being presented simultaneously!

Now that the planting season is over, the village is quiet once more. Although each family generally leaves one member in the swidden to guard the sprouting crop from deer and pigs, most of the people have returned to the exercise of a more diverse variety of occupations: alternately fishing, hunting, weeding, making a new field hut or canoe, cutting timber or rattan, going on trading expeditions, or visiting relatives upcountry. For the Ma'anjan, occupational variety is truly the spice of life.



Dibbling and planting a swidden

Photo by Hudson, 1963.



Dibble stick dance. The dancer's foot has just been caught.

Photo by Hudson, 1963.