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The Death and Burial Practices of the Berawan

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The Berawans

Dorothy O'Boyle

The Borneo rainforest



Who are the Berawan?

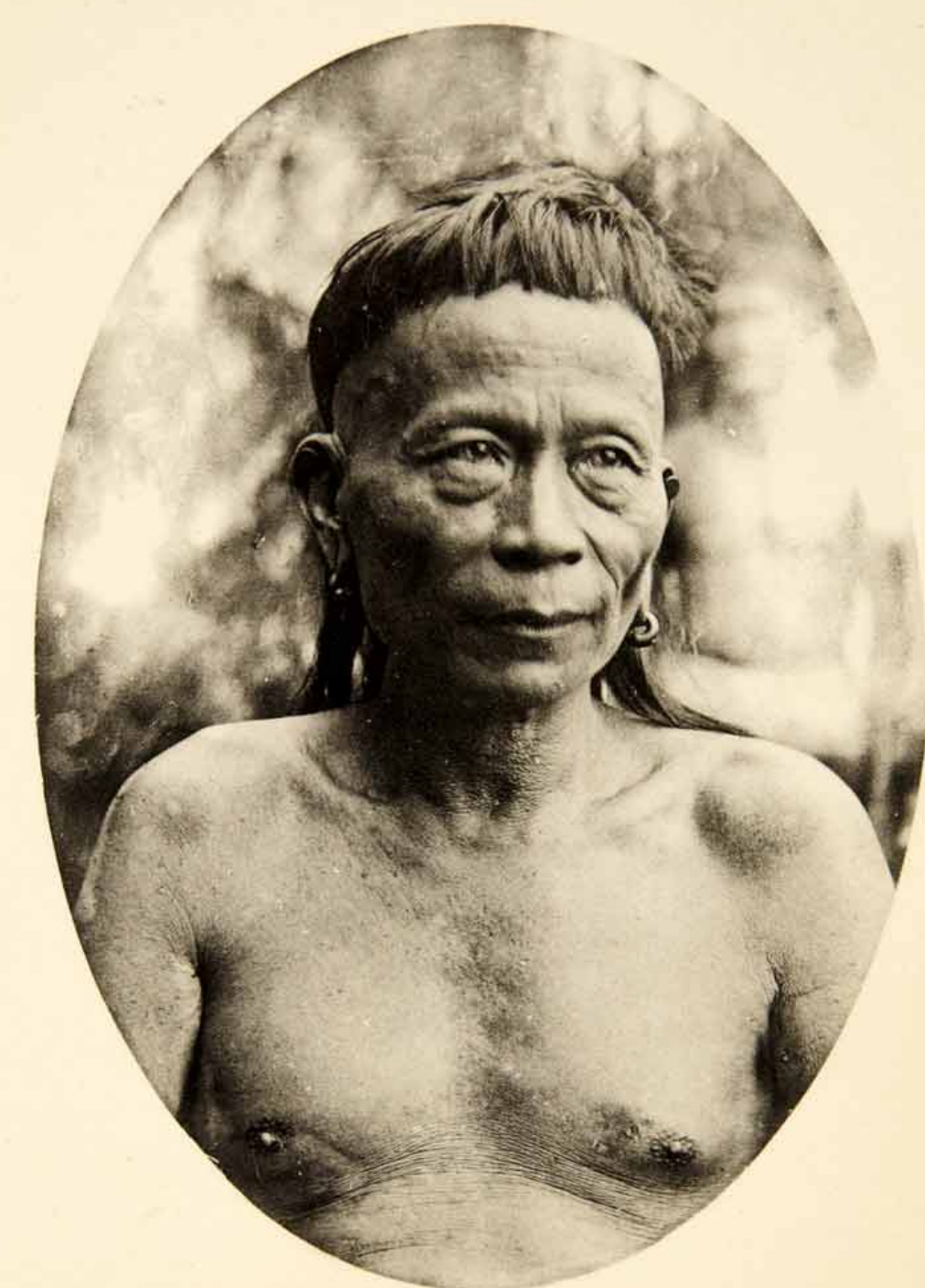
Berawan people inhabit the island of Borneo, which is the third largest island in the world and the largest in Asia. Their society is egalitarian and agriculturally based; The Berawan earn livelihood by using swidden agriculture to grow hill rice, foraging, and fishing in the rivers that also provide transportation (Metcalf, Huntinton 1991:64). Within the community, every member lives in one longhouse (each individual house is connected into one long row of houses). The combined population on the four Berawan communities is about 1,600 people, each tribe separated by the dense rainforest. The Berawans say that they are “Kenyah” and are known on the island to be a “subculture” of the Kenyah, although Peter Metcalf disagrees. During his studies, he noticed the lack of cultural traits shared between the two, specifically with their differing languages (Metcalf 1976:85-105).



Borneo

Western Influence

Waves of Christian missionaries have been to and through Borneo, teaching the tribes people about God. During the 17th century, under the rule of Pope Innocent XI, Christian missionaries were sent to Borneo. The mid-1800s showed a great interest in the large island which lead to the occupation of ports in the early 20th century. In the early 1900s, Australian Protestants were sent to Borneo and were later known as the Borneo Evangelical Mission. Christian missionaries often encountered the Berawan and other tribes, but referred to the Berawans as the “inferior Kenyah” (Metcalf 1976:85-105). In the last 20 years there has been a great increase of Christianity among the Borneo, which is shifting beliefs and influencing rituals (Chua 2012: 511-526).



A Berawan man

Nulang, Death Rites, and Other Rituals

The Berawan term “nulang” comes from “tulang” meaning bone or bones. Metcalf explains how the substitution for the /n/ converts the noun into a verb, therefore “nulang” could mean “to bone” or “to take the bones”. Nulang is the process where the rites of passage take place during the mortuary sequence. It is the largest event, and the most prolonged and costly event of Berawan life; the cost is equivalent to five hundred “man-days” of cash labor, not including gifts(Metcalf: 1982:21-22). Nulang is closely related to the internal politics of the tribes because the more money an influential person spends on a nulang, the more respect they retain in the community. The Berawan believe that after death the soul is divorced from the body and cannot reanimate the already decaying corpse and the soul cannot enter the land of the dead because it is not yet a perfect spirit (Metcalf 1978: 6-12). Death is not the final malfunctioning of the body as a machine, but as an irreversible act of the soul (Metcalf 1982:46).

There is a Christian influence in Berawan life. They pray daily to a spirit or multiple spirits; bili is the “Creator Spirit” (Metcalf 1982:47). To the Berawans, there may be a spirit world filled with spirits of the land or of the place, but they do not claim to be well-versed in the spirit world. They don't assume anything about spirits, but believe in the possibilities.

Celebrations and Death

Celebrations are a large part of the Berawan culture, especially when there is a death in the village. Immediately after a death, the celebrations (pata) and rituals begin that involve the entire community (Metcalf, Huntington 1982:19). In order to let the surrounding villages know of a death, a gong sounds and drums specifically for funerals produce rhythms day and night (Metcalf, Huntington 1982:65). Crowds of people gather in longhouses to drink and socialize. Games are played inside between friends and families. All of the Berawan's lively parties can be heard from over a mile and a half away through their heavy use of percussion (Huntinton, Metcalf 1991: 74).

Treatment of the Dead

The basic features of the elaborate Berawan mortuary sequence is: funeral (4-10 days), period of temporary storage (at least 1 year), rites of secondary treatment (4-10 days), and then permanent storage. The secondary treatment of the dead is the most important rite of their region (Metcalf 1976:85-105).

Instantly after the persons death, the wake period begins in the longhouse. The widow is expected to stay inside her section of the longhouse with the corpse until entirety the viewing period is complete, in fact no one in the house can rest during this time. After the wake and once the skin begins to “sag away from the skeleton” (Metcalf 1982:80), the body is transferred into an elaborate “large earthenware jar or in a massive coffin hewn from a single tree trunk” (Metcalf 1978:6-12). for decomposition. These jars are welcomed and well-loved by every generation because of their versatility. Elders in the community often pick the type of jar they want to be placed in before they die. To distinguish their jar from the jars that are used to ferment foods and alcohol, they will turn it upside down (Huntington, Metcalf 1991: 73). The occupied pot is housed on the side of the family garden or the tribe's cemetery. For the entirety of the decomposition process, body decomposes into the earth via a bamboo tube at the bottom of the jar, nourishing the soil. In some cases, the liquified, decomposed body is collected to add to rice as a form of endocannibalism (Metcalf 1978:6-12). Once the bones are completely dry, they are transferred to a small, decorated coffin or a nicer jar, and permanently put into a sublime mausoleum.



Berawan women from Long Jegan



Longhouse in Borneo

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