

ritualist, cosmologist, geographer, philosopher, sage, and ruler, who each tried to formulate a model of the animal world. Sterckx provides such a wealth of information that a second, or even third, reading of the book is necessary in order to digest all it has to offer!

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### SOUTHEAST ASIA

KERSHAW, EVA MARIA. *A Study of Brunei Dusun Religion: Ethnic Priesthood on a Frontier of Islam*. Borneo Research Council Monograph Series No. 4. Phillips, ME 04966: Borneo Research Council, Inc., 2000. x + 287 pages. Photographs, map, glossary, bibliography. Cloth US\$38.50; ISBN 1-929900-01-5.

Despite its oil wealth and trappings of modernity, Brunei Darussalam is one of the most self-encapsulated nations in Southeast Asia. With even its national budget a state secret, it is not surprising that little long-term social science research has been done in the kingdom, particularly on ethnic minorities such as the Dusun. For this reason, Eva Kershaw's book is especially welcome. In addition to providing a detailed account of traditional Dusun religion and worldview, this book also offers an insightful analysis of the precarious status of a minority ethnic religion in an increasingly Islamic Malay state.

*A Study of Brunei Dusun Religion* is based on material collected from 1985 to 1993. Because of the secrecy that surrounds the calling of the priestesses, or *belian*, much of the information contained in this book comes not from the *belian* themselves, but from Narak Buntak, whom Kershaw describes as an octogenarian male authority on Dusun custom and religion. When she started her work, Narak's son simultaneously began to tape-record his father; hence their sessions together gave Narak a chance to pass on what he knew, not only to the author, but also to his favorite son. This, Kershaw tells us, is unusual, as most Dusun elders have long resigned themselves to the incompatibility of the old religion with "modern times."

The primary purpose of this book, Kershaw tells us, is "to establish a precise record of a dying religion of Borneo" (5). More specifically, it attempts "to describe the traditional Dusun view...of the universe and the world around them; of self; of man's life-force (*nyawa*) and soul (*lingu*); of divine and malign spirits (*derato* and *isi*) and the spirits of the dead (*lamatai*)" (4). The final sections of the book deal with the ritual role of the Dusun *belian* and contain a series of brief descriptions of the principal rituals they perform, including healing and exorcist séances.

Since 1961, the Dusun have been classified as one of seven "original indigenous" groups in Brunei. Three of these are Muslim, including the dominant Brunei Malay. Since 1971, the practice has been to classify all "original indigenous" groups, whether Muslim or not, as "Malay." This practice is consistent, the author argues, with the nation-building project of the modern Brunei sultanate, which is, essentially, to promote the general assimilation of non-Muslim communities to Malay culture and Islam under Brunei Malay political leadership. Hence, today, the Dusun are officially merged with other "Malays" and are classified under "Religion" as "freethinkers." The central rituals of the *belian*, called *temarok*, are described by Brunei Malay Islamic religious officials as *berhantu* ("playing ghosts") and so are equated with the possession séances that persist among Malays, which the modernist Islamic revival aims to stamp out.

In the absence of writing, the repositories of Dusun religious knowledge, and the agents

of its transmission, are almost exclusively religious specialists, chiefly the *belian* and *dukun*. The author's concern is mainly with the former. The Dusun *belian* are almost always women and are described by Kershaw as both priestesses and mediums. They never become "masters of spirits," however, nor do they lay claim to personal authority in a "classic" shamanistic sense. Thus, the author prefers to call them "priestly practitioners" (8), the bearers of a religious office, who act as the "custodians of a wealth of firmly established ritual proceedings." In addition to healing rites, the *belian* also perform communal harvest rituals, house-cleansing ceremonies, and obligatory monthly offerings to the divine spirits (77).

A *belian* may be "summoned" to her calling, or she may become a *belian* as a result of a promise made by her parents or guardians, usually during an illness in infancy, or she may vow to serve as a *belian* in order to resolve some family problem or calamity (79). In the case of a summons, the novice typically experiences an initial illness and then a return to her pre-affliction state, with no lasting change in her physical or psychological makeup. There is no shamanic "apotheosis" (80). Following initiation, each *belian* binds herself to a *derato*, or "divine spirit," through spiritual matrimony. During a *temarok* ritual, after a *belian* has summoned her *derato*, and the spirit has united with her, her waking consciousness is transformed into what Kershaw calls "a divided state of consciousness," partly focused on the presence of her spirit, partly aware of her own emotions (87). Her ritual self thus undergoes a kind of fusion in which a number of opposites are combined: male/female, perceptible/imperceptible, bounded/unbounded.

The *belian* not only conduct ceremonies, but are believed to be responsible for maintaining the well-being of the cosmos. In dealing with malevolent forces, they adopt the position of mediators, acting as both protagonists and instruments. On the ritual stage, they combine the antithetical roles of "wife" and "spirit husband," thereby effecting what Kershaw calls a "conjunction of opposites." They are "wives" in real person and "spirit husbands" in mime. By entering a conjugal relationship with their spirit familiars, *belian* not only accomplish a fusion of supernatural and natural worlds, but also, Kershaw argues, they affirm the equality of the sexes (203).

Outside a ritual context, a priestess is like any other Dusun and enjoys no special authority. Leadership in traditional Dusun society was characteristically multiple without significant hierarchical distinctions. In terms of gender, some weight was placed on the male side in secular leadership, but this was balanced by weight on the female side in religion, notably in the person of the *belian* (201–202).

In Dusun belief, each individual is thought to be composed of a number of interconnected elements. "Life breath" (*nyawa*) enters a child at birth and remains bonded to it until death, whereupon it evaporates (35). The Dusun, Kershaw tells us, know only a single soul (*lingu*), which may detach itself from the living body and so require recovery. A person is also thought to have an undefined part, the *lamatai*, that leaves the corpse at death to lead a brief ghostly existence.

In addition to human beings, this world is also thought to be inhabited by *isi*, malevolent spirits empowered to chastise human transgressions. Thus, it is the *isi* rather than the deities who safeguard social norms and enforce taboos (47). An *isi* can be bargained with, but is unpredictable, and may at times harm innocent persons. *Isi* live in various places, like trees, rivers, and under the ground, and claim jurisdiction over these territories. If a spirit's anger is aroused, a family may call upon a *belian*. The priestess may then hold a *temarok*, using her helping spirit to negotiate with the vengeful *isi*.

The divine spirits comprise *mpuan inan*, the creator, and the *derato*, including the *derato belian*, the spirits that communicate only with the priestesses. The role of *mpuan inan* is limited to the original act of having created the Dusun, the non-divine spirits and animals.

The mythic separation of the *derato* and the Dusun was followed by their linguistic estrangement, so that today, laymen must seek the assistance of a priestly mediator versed in "spirit language" (*tuntut derato*) in order to communicate with the spirits. Thirty years ago the *belian* were called upon to treat all kinds of ailments. Today, most patients first consult a medical practitioner, and only if the latter fails, or improvement is slow, do the Dusun turn to *belian* for help (106).

The term *temarok* applies to all rituals in which one or more *belian* perform in priestly attire. The more elaborate the ritual, the more *belian* and musicians take part. As rituals, the *temarok* were, in the past, Kershaw argues, the principal arena in which the worldview of the Dusun was made visible and "where divine spirits and humans could interact" (123). Although the lay audience was excluded from direct contact with divine spirits, the laity acted as hosts and "walk-on actors." Today, as these rituals become less intelligible to younger Dusun, audiences become passive spectators, with the result, Kershaw tells us, that the *temarok* "cease to inspire the group spiritually and guide them morally" (123). They become "merely... a social get-together."

Formerly, the eclecticism of Muslims in the Tutong District meant that their Tutong and Kedayan neighbors "saw no harm in attending Dusun feasts and rituals" (191). But with an intensification of Islamic proselytization, the situation, Kershaw tells us, has changed. Today, there appears to be no place in Brunei for a Dusun priesthood on the periphery of Islam. In contrast to African examples, where mediumistic priesthods coexist with Islam, the Dusun are not a majority group subject to the penetration of Islam, but, rather, a small non-Muslim minority undergoing urbanization, and increasingly "subject to pressures to conform to the religion of the dominant group on terms laid down by its religious establishment" (198).

Under these circumstances, it seems unlikely that Dusun religion will continue much beyond the present generation. Even the *belian*, Kershaw reports, talk of the increasing powerlessness of the spirits. In the face of this seemingly imminent disappearance, we are especially indebted to the author, and to the Borneo Research Council, for providing us with this readable, detailed, and closely observed record of Brunei Dusun religion and traditional worldview.

There is much here that is certain to interest those concerned with Southeast Asian religion and relations between Islam and indigenous religious minorities. The book is well illustrated with 45 black-and-white photos, and includes a glossary of Dusun words and a short list of *belian* vocabulary (with both ordinary Dusun and English glosses).

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LIM, P PUI HUEN, JAMES H. MORRISON, KWA CHONG GUAN, Editors. *Oral History in Southeast Asia: Theory and Method*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998. xii + 172 pages. Hardcover S\$69.90/US\$44.90; ISBN 981-3055-77-4.

*Oral History in Southeast Asia* is a collection of papers originally presented at a workshop organized by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore in 1990. While the material is somewhat dated (there is no mention of the effects of new technologies such as the Internet and video on the process of oral history collection), it is nonetheless a unique contribution to the literature on oral history in Southeast Asia. Despite a noticeable absence of