

PREPARING FOR BALIIR THERAPEUTIC CEREMONY (UPPER WAAR RIVER, NOVEMBER 29, 1991) Robert K. Dentan

All names in the following description are pseudonyms. ">" is pronounced like ou in "ought." "v" is pronounced like e in "perhaps" or "the dog" Refs include:

IHBurkill 1936 A Dictionary of the Econ Prods of the Malay Peninsula

I Polunin 1988 Plants & Flowers of Malaysia. Singapore:Times Eds.



image 1

1-2. Four women preparing fringes made from the foot long glossy leaves of *slb>>'* (*Orchidantha longiflora*). Patches of *slb>>'* are common in deep forest but also found so readily in swiddens (*slaay*) and *pabeel* or *pabvvl*, secondary forest, that Semai do not need to plant it. Few Semai have seen the flower, which is rare. The leaves are *slarjar*, lanceolate, with faint alternating dark and light longitudinal lines (veins?).

Women (sometimes men or kids) gather the leaves, which smell cnges like those of *bn klooy* (the name means yellow ritual-plant), a wild ginger of which Lwey, in house the ceremony will occur, has planted a stem in his garden. Bn klooy leaves will be dug up, mixed *-c'>>b* together with the stiff leaves of the little *kmrl>>k* palm, (*Iguanura geonomiformis*), which is ubiquitous in the peninsula, to make a shamanic whisk, *grnaar* (from *-gaar*, to use a shamanic whisk) or *slaa' bvvd*, ritual plant leaves) for the ceremony. The name of this palm doesn't seem to be of Semai origin, and Burkill (1936:1242) says the *Sakai name* is *bogen*. Semai use the palm nuts as a betel substitute (they say it is a member of the areca palm family) and cough medicine. You *-srguut* (roll on your thighs to make string) the leaf to make a strand for the Waar River shamanic headbands *pnangk>>d*, although, since the leaf *has no smell*, it isn't a *b>>d*, mutually significant plant like *bn* (= *b>>d* in compounds) *klooy*.

Lwey planted *bn klooy* in anticipation of ceremonies like brushing evil out, *-gaar*, of his children with a whisk or *-crik knah snglook*, summoning back one's hunting wife, i.e.

restoring the power of a hunter after a successful hunt. *Bn klooy* is related to *ngek*, which has larger leaves. You can *-srguut* the leaves (roll them on one's thighs to make a strand, as in the picture from the Telom) and weave the strand into a Waar River shamanic headdress, *pnangk>>d*.

In the unlikely event you can't find *slb>>'*, you can use *brk>k*, the *younger sibling* of *slb>>'*. This deep forest plant also has broad orchid-like longitudinally veined leaves a foot or more long (cf. the terrestrial orchid *Geodorum citrinum*, Polunin 1988:90-91). The longitudinal veins are important, since they let the women tear the leaves into tidy longitudinal strips. The leaf is *slei*, smooth, and *slajeer*, linear, the flower as small as the tip of one's finger. Like *slb>>'*, it smells *cngees*.

Bun (of whom you can see only part, on the left in the first picture but all in the second) and the assistant headman's wife (with toddler, on the right in the first picture)) are the women for whom the ceremony will be held. 10:28 AM



image 2



image 3

3. Lwey sharpens his machete as his friend tells him where he could find a *praah* (Elateriospermum tapos) sapling, whose soft white wood is ideal for making *baleey*, the *palaces* (Malay balai) which Semai construct to lure and house the shy familiar demons whose power makes ceremonies successful. On the floor in front of him is a *ragaa'*, Malay raga, the open weave back basket Semai use for heavy loads. Luering (1901:94) reports that people near Mncaak used the word *gala'* for backbasket.

For other photos of *ragaa'* see Wavell 1958 (opp. p. 49), Ooi 1963: pl. 7; Rathnone 1898:187; for collection, Am Mus Nat Hist in NYC, Cambridge Mus of Archeol & Ethnol. Muz Negara (from Taiping Mus 2085/O6) Brau de St Pol Lias dicusses Temiar "ragaa'" (254, 256). It takes a woman a day or two to make one. On the Telom you needed them especially for carrying the green bamboo tubes of water from the river. There are several variants in Perak (along R'eis, Mncaak). The Muz Negara has a double back basket, small one hanging behind large one, from south Perak. The *ragaa' gareek* (from Malay garing) normally are about a foot or so tall, 5-8" wide, made of rattan--*cook tunggal* (Daemonorops verticillaris), *cook st>'* (Calamus javanensis or spotted rattan, *cook jrnang* (Daemonorops didymophylla). The *ragaa' s'r>>k* or *ragaa' saleek* (perhaps from Malay/Arabic salek, a traveller) is for tapioca roots or blowpipe hunting equipment, made of *cook st>'* (Calamus javanensis), *cook gncuuk* = shrimp rattan, Malay rotan udang (cf. Korthalsia echinometra) or that rattan's elder brother, *cook haak* (Korthalsia scortechinii) . You can use this sort of back basket to catch fish with. by dumping trash from under the banks into the basket, and then draining out the water, leaving large trash and fish (*kaa'*), a method called *rng'r>>b kaa'* in Mncaak, *rn'raab ka'* on the Telom. The *ragaa'uncang* (Malay raga ambung; Malay uncang is a bag with a drawstring) is quite large and may be of Malay origin. It's for carrying commercial amounts of durians, hence the name *ragaa' smpaa'*, or huge firewood. You usually but not always split the rattans of

which the back basket is made.

According to a discussion I overheard at the bus stop the best rattan is *cook srpvvk/srpeek* (*Calamus manau*), which would last 3-4 years if you dried it first, but commercial exploitation has been so ruthless that younger people have never heard of using it for a back basket. Next best would be *cook laak* [from *talaak*, waterfall?] (*Plectocomiopsis geminiflora*), whose wood is *le'een*, soft enough to make dart butts and bird lime sticks out of, is easiest to use and to collect. But, like *srpvvk* and for the same reasons *cook laak* is extinct near Mncaak and rare on the R'eis. You have to go way up Cnaan Jrmp>k, a mountain way down the road into territory now taken away from Semai to find any, a day's trip. Third wd be *cook juk* (*Calamus diepenhorstii*, whose name refers to the fact that it bends over and *goes back where it came from*, also extinct around Mncaak and threatened along the R'eis.

Others include the durable large variety of *cook krey* (Malay rotan kerai) or The others you need to *-saleey* or *-tiil*, dry out over the fire or in the sun, before you can use them. There's a brace on the bottom, *trnghang i keid*, brace for its butt, of some tough rattan like forked rattan = *cook cabak*; *cook gncuuk* = shrimp rattan, Malay rotan udang (cf. *Korthalsia echinometra*); *cook grtaas* = paper rattan (*Calamus insignis* var *longispinosus*) *cook r(a)k>>'* (? cf. *Ceratolobus subangulatus*) *cook st>'* (*Calamus javanensis*) *cook tawar*; And you usually interweave other material like plastic string into the basic weave (-*bir*). If made of *cook gncuuk*, it'll last two harvests.

On the R'eis the top of the basket is its head, *kuuy*, the weave at the top is *cngweel* or bird chins, *jingkaa' ceep*. The backstrap, *'n'ain*, carrier, from *-'ain*, to carry; usually made of *cook st>'* (*Calamus javanensis*) or the bark of *stvvk*, which is widely used for ropes, *Hibiscus macrophyllus*, [maybe also *Horsfieldia* sp., but I doubt it].



image 4

4. Lwey's fireplace storage area. From left to right, top to bottom:

- a. dart quivers, *lv'*. See attached sketch for details.
- b. firewood, *c'>>s*.
- c. blowpipe (see photos, tables and figures in under folk ornithology). You keep blowpipes warm so that they'll stay straight.
- d. pandanus leaves, *slaa' skei'*, for weaving thatch and baskets.



image 5

5. Lwey splits some cnraad wood. It was easier to get cnraad than puleey. This specimen seems to be *Macaranga triloba*, but the term also applies to *M. cornuta*, probably other *M. spp.* and also to *Mallotus floribundus*. For a photo of *Macaranga triloba*, the cnraad which Semai use oftenest, see I. Polunin, *Plants...of Msia*", Singapore: Times Editions, 1988:113. This small tree, like others of its genus, flourishes in secondary forest and along streams. You can identify cnraad by the smell (cngees) and by the fact that the hollow twigs are full of little black ants, laas siip. The laas siip in cnraad (cngraad in Perak lowland dialects) bite less fiercely than the laas siip pmbat which live in the wild bananas, mamyyk, *Musa iolascens*. The name also applies to pluup cnraad, "macaranga landleech," the tiger leech, *Haemadipsa picta*, a striped creature associated with supernatural horrors.



image 6

6. Macaranga wood is too soft to be used for much besides firewood but it easy to make into planks for baleey n'asiik, demonic palaces for ceremonies in which people go into erotic trance with demonic familiars (from Malay-Arabic ashyik) or baleey nu'upah, demonic palaces in which one leaves offerings (Malay upah). The red jellylike exudate may suggest blood and thus shamanic/demonic power. Mallotus wood tends to be harder, though the two genera are hard to tell apart for non-experts. Semai say a that a variant of cnraad, cnraad cee' dadaan, "dying bug cnraad, " is a ubiquitous shrub whose trunks people may plant at each of the four corners of a traditional grave. It would be pnalii' taboo to make demon palaces with it. ("Bug" is a common euphemism for "demon," nyanii' or janii'). 10:21 am



image 7

7. Lwey's friend has lent him a rawuud, lunate knife (Malay raut, smooth, pare). He is whittling off the asperities from the rough hewn slats, papad (from Malay papan, board, plank) of the demon palace. 10:40 am.



image 8

8. Bun and her elder brother's daughter, Lwey's wife, a fringe of slb>>' between them, string pop rice to ornament the demon palace. 10:40 am