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In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 132 (1976), no: 1, Leiden, 124-145

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CURSING, SPECIAL DEATH AND SPIRITS IN EMBALOH SOCIETY*

To my knowledge very little work has been published on the subject of cursing in South-East Asian societies, although there are many scattered references to cursing in the African literature.¹ Since it is a relatively neglected subject in the South-East Asian world this article is an attempt to examine some of the verbal curses used in a Dayak society of Indonesian West Borneo (Kalimantan) and to try and relate these curses to other areas of Dayak life and belief. There is no attempt to analyse situations in which curses are used, nor to point to social structural implications of cursing, other than in an obvious and general way. The main focus is the translation and examination of the content of a number of curses and an explanation of their significance to the people who use them.²

By cursing I mean "words said, or an appeal, implicitly or explicitly,

* The data upon which this article is based were gathered in the course of fourteen months' fieldwork in Borneo, a year of which was spent in West Kalimantan (1972-73). Financial assistance was obtained from the Social Science Research Council, the Evans Fund (the University of Cambridge) and the British Universities Student Travel Association. I am deeply grateful to Professor M. A. Jaspan and Mr. L. G. Hill for reading a draft of this paper and making valuable comments and suggestions.

¹ Brief references to cursing in South-East Asian societies are found in J. H. Hutton (1921: 216, 262; 1969: 83, 241), C. Hose and W. McDougall (1966: 118-20), J. P. Mills (1937: 148), J. C. Vergouwen (1964: 84, 86, 95, 227), F. A. E. van Wouden (1968: 15) and C. Dubois (1944: 172-5). In addition, there is the more detailed work of P. Middelkoop (1960) on the curse complex in Timor. However, Middelkoop's work is not so much concerned with the actual verbal content of curses, as I am, but with the connection between ideas about cursing in Timorese religion and in Christian teaching. There has also been more substantial work published on verbal abuse in South-East Asia, see for example G. Wijeyewardene (1968) and E. R. Leach (1964). See my distinction between 'abuse' and 'cursing' later in this article.

² The African literature on cursing is more concerned with its function in the social system, the situation in which cursing occurs and the location of those people who use curses. Very little has been written on the meaning and significance of various curses to the society in question, although some commentary along these lines is found in B. Bernardi (1959: 121), W. F. P. Burton (1961: 106-7), C. M. Doke (1931:77), M. Fortes (1949: 44, 46, 189-90), W. H. Sangree (1966: 62) and G. Wagner (1949:104-6, 254-6).

to gods and spirits (including evil spirits and ancestor spirits) to witness a person's wrong-doing and to visit punishment either by death, sickness or some other misfortune on the wrong-doer". Embaloh people believe that if the person cursed is indeed an offender then these supernatural agents will perceive this and send misfortune on him as punishment. I distinguish cursing from sorcery in that in cursing only words are used to achieve a specific magical result, whereas sorcery not only employs words but also certain magical procedures and potent medicines.³ Witchcraft can also be distinguished from cursing in that it is generally believed to be a power lodged in an individual himself.⁴ Witchcraft power or substance may be hereditary, inborn or acquired by undergoing special rites, and it can sometimes harm others without the volition of the witch. In addition, Spencer maintains that the curse is rather different from either sorcery or witchcraft in its moral implications, since if a man is provoked he may be morally justified in using a curse, and that a curse cannot harm an entirely innocent person (1965 : 186). This would certainly apply in the Embaloh case.⁵

However, all three, cursing, sorcery and witchcraft are linked in that they are part of a general belief system which attributes unfortunate events to supernatural action, and they are all usually motivated by anger towards, or hatred or jealousy of a particular person. In line with this Middelkoop, in his work on Timorese cursing, writes:

"It is perfectly clear that the whole curse concept is closely linked up with the ideas of enmity, revenge and retribution, not only as human actions, but founded in an inevitable transcendental claim for justice" (1960: 45).

³ On sorcery see J. Clyde Mitchell (1956: 135) and M. G. Marwick (1965: 74).

⁴ See for example E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937: 20, 38) and P. Spencer (1965: 184-6). Also useful are the definitions on sorcery and witchcraft found in the R.A.I. volume *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (1960: 188-9, 6th edition reprint).

⁵ The moral implications of cursing are well illustrated in the case of the Rejang of South-west Sumatra. M. A. Jaspán reports that "If someone issues a curse in the heat of the moment, but realises later that it was unjustified, he (or she) will suffer a physical discomfort or malady — from headache to 'flu usually, although it can be more serious. This will persist until an apology is made to the person wrongfully cursed, together with an offering of rice or a chicken — sometimes there is a *kedurai* feast too, sprinkling yellow rice and sacral water" (personal communication). However, sorcery and witchcraft although usually morally unjustified and anti-social are not necessarily so. Sorcery can be used to seek out and punish a criminal, and witchcraft is also used as a weapon of revenge after a person has been harmed or insulted by another.

In addition, Turner sees cursing as a form of sorcery (1957 : 121) and Marwick says "... threatening and prophetic words is the surest mark of the sorcerer" (1965: 74). Doke also notes that those who curse may be witches (1931 : 77), and Sangree points out that cursing can be used in conjunction with sorcery to bring a quicker end to the action (1966:238).

Finally, verbal abuse should not be confused with cursing. At one point Burton says of cursing that it is "... that peculiar form of insult which simply consists in saying loathsome things about sexual parts and functions" (1961: 32). Cursing does not, in Embaloh society at least, include references to sexual parts, the sexual act, or indeed to animals and animal actions. This kind of verbal usage is best seen as "abuse", and the more specifically sexual references as "obscurity" (Evans-Pritchard 1965 : 76-101; Ardener 1973 : 422-40).

The Embaloh

The Embaloh are a subdivision of that complex of peoples which their close neighbours the Iban and the Kantu call "Maloh" or "Memaloh", and obviously "Maloh" is derived from the word "Embaloh". However, those people who are called Maloh do not use this term themselves. It is a term coined by others to refer to a Dayak complex inhabiting the Upper Kapuas region of West Kalimantan, which has a broadly similar language, culture and social structure.⁶ The so-called Maloh recognise that they are a distinct group (*bansa*), but they have no common name of their own making to express their unity. A man from the Embaloh river will call himself an Embaloh, or more correctly a Támembaloh, a man from the Kalis river will call himself a Kalis, and those from the area around Putus Sibau, the administrative centre of the Upper Kapuas, call themselves Taman. For simplicity I propose to use the term "Maloh" when referring to the whole complex of people since it is a widely used and widely known term in Borneo, and it is accepted by the Maloh themselves.

The curses were collected from the Embaloh river and in some cases are not generally known by all Maloh. They are, however, in common usage among the people in the Leboyan, Embaloh, Lauh and Palin rivers, who constitute a distinguishable subdivision of the Maloh people as a whole.

Maloh men are the famous itinerant silver- and copper-smiths who

⁶ For a general cultural description of the Maloh see T. Harrison (1965: 236-350) and V. T. King (1972: 83-105).

ranged widely over Borneo, both within what was Dutch Borneo (now Kalimantan) and more especially within Sarawak, the largest country in the previous British-controlled northern area of Borneo, and now a state within the independent federation of Malaysia. Maloh would visit the long-houses of other Dayak peoples, particularly the Iban, and make various feminine adornments for them from silver, copper and sometimes gold. In return they would receive free accommodation and food while they were engaged in their work, and a final payment in hulled rice or woven Iban skirts (*kain*) and blankets (*pua*). In recent years this craft has sadly declined because of lack of demand from indigenous people, and because of competition from imported wares.

The Maloh are themselves long-house people, building high and strongly made houses on massive ironwood stilts. In some cases these dwellings can stretch for up to 1,000 feet in length along the bank of a river. In the economic sphere Maloh are industrious and diligent dry rice farmers, practising a method of swidden cultivation on the flat land of river flood-plains. If natural conditions are favourable they usually manage to secure a rice surplus. Subsidiary crops are root and green vegetables, various fruits, maize and sugar cane. Their main source of cash comes from the tapping of rubber, the sale of timber, and in some years the collection of *tengkawang* nuts, the oil of which is extracted and eventually exported for use as a base in such things as cosmetics and toothpaste. The main domestic animals are pigs, cattle, goats and poultry which are either sold, traded or sacrificed for feasts and ceremonies. Secondary occupations are hunting, fishing and the collection of jungle products.

The Maloh have a bilateral kinship system, links being traced equally through both male and female lines. Each apartment of the long-house is inhabited by a separate and independent family unit (*kaiyan*). There are also property-based descent categories (*kapulungan*), the members of which are descended from a common ancestor, and hold rights in land, fruit trees, long-house support posts and valuable Chinese gongs and ceramics. There is also a ranked social system of nobility (*samagat*), a middle class (*pabiring*), commoners (*banua* or *ulun*), and formerly slaves (*pangkam*). Up to the time of Indonesian independence village headmen always came from *samagat* ranks. Besides their administrative and legal functions *samagat* headmen were also important leaders in certain rituals and ceremonies. Today headmen are democratically elected, and many of their traditional functions, particularly those in the ritual sphere, have disappeared or become greatly modified.

Maloh religion is directed towards a host of spirits (evil, good and ancestral), gods, goddesses and culture heroes. Although in the past a large number of Maloh embraced Islam, more recently many have accepted the Catholic faith. However, there are still many Maloh, Catholics included, who retain much of their animistic tradition. One sign of these ongoing beliefs is the performance of the important and impressive Feast of the Dead (*mulambu*). In this ceremony a new death-house (*kulambu*) is built for the storage of coffins, and the spirits of ancestors are called down, feasted and honoured.

Cursing in its social setting

The curses examined in this article usually occur in face-to-face situations.⁷ They are delivered to a definite person spontaneously and frequently in a state of anger. They are not accompanied by such gestures as the indecent exposure of one's buttocks or sex-organs to the person to whom the curse is addressed (Wagner: 1949 : 103). Nevertheless, cursing does often occur in the context of spitting, foot-stamping and arm gesticulation. Fixed verbal formulae are also used.

Most of the curses are not normally used between children. If a child does curse another then it can often lead to a legal dispute between both sets of parents. I have witnessed cases where a child has cursed another, and his parents have publicly scolded and punished him, fearful that the other's parents may take up the matter. Cursing between adults, if without foundation, can be fined and sometimes heavily so, and the curse has to be removed. Those who wrongfully curse others are also in danger of supernatural punishment if they refuse to make an apology and lift the curse.

In the past, if a slave cursed someone of higher rank, he could lose his life without recourse to traditional law (*adat*). But after the Dutch colonial government abolished the institution of slavery, set fines were introduced with differentials according to rank. Within a rank fines are standardised. On the other hand if a lower ranking man wrongfully curses a member of the nobility the fine is considerably larger than if the man of higher rank cursed him.

Embaloh have great belief in the magical power inherent in words, particularly in supplications, prayers and chants addressed to spirits and gods.⁸ Curses too have these magical attributes. Merely to utter a curse

⁷ For a classification of different types of curse see Middelkoop (1960: 47-65).

⁸ See S. J. Tambiah (1968: 175-208) on the magical power of words, and more specifically for the Batak of Sumatra see J. C. Vergouwen (1964: 95-9).

may call it into being if the curse is deserved. The belief that the wish contained in a curse may become reality means that cursing is a serious action, and one which is taken seriously by both parties. That is why Embaloh are careful not to engage the wrath of village medical experts (*balian*) who are skilled in the use of spells and magical words. A man, if cursed by a *balian* usually begs forgiveness, brings a gift of rice or a chicken, and asks the *balian* to lift the curse. In fact, this is the usual method of getting a curse removed.

The frequency of cursing is comparatively high within a family sharing the same long-house apartment, particularly parents cursing disobedient and unruly adolescents.⁹ There is also exchange between man and wife. These are generally looked on by the village as personal matters. Only if the curse is undeserved and the person delivering it refuses to lift it, is the case brought to the village elders (*tamatoa*) for settlement. Cursing is also fairly common between an individual and closely related kin (*sundaman* or *saparanak*). Since there is also rather more daily intercourse and association between members of the same sex, and again between those of the same rank, curses are also common within these circles. Cursing between members of the opposite sex (except husband and wife) and between different ranks is rather less. However, as a person's respect and authority increase so does the power of cursing. Therefore, if one is legitimately cursed by a higher ranking villager or by someone in authority in the village then the likelihood of its coming into effect is greater. Very rarely does a member of the junior generation curse his seniors.

On the other hand Wagner says that, "It appears . . . that curses are predominantly the spiritual weapons of persons who are not in a position to impose their will by more tangible means, because they are poor, old or physically weak" (1949 : 102). Among Embaloh less attention was paid to curses delivered by poor or physically weak people, since these were not felt to have much magical power. Curses from a high ranking man, a village official, a *balian* or someone of the senior generation carried most force and were very much feared. However, the curse acted as an ultimate sanction when all other lines of attack had failed.

Finally, cursing may be used in the context of legal proceedings. Here

⁹ G. Lindblom notes that cursing among the Akama is more frequent between parents and children (1919: 182-5). Fortes also points to this for the Tallensi (1949: 46, 175, 182-5), as does Mitchell for the Yao (1956: 135), Wagner for the Bantu of North Kavirondo (1949: 103) and Vergouwen for the Batak (1964: 227).

the elders, or more especially the headman (*samagat*) or regional *adat* head (*temunggung*) may curse an individual who is deliberately lying or giving false evidence, or who refuses to accept the *adat* tribunal's decision.¹⁰

One point which was emphatically made by villagers is that there was very little cursing between affinal kin, and certainly very few remembered cases of a man or woman cursing their parents-in-law or classificatory parents-in-law. There are, in Embaloh society, certain rules of conduct surrounding the relationship between this last category of affinal kin, expressed in terms of deference and respect on the part of the son- and daughter-in-law. This is itself partly reflected in the rule that one is not allowed to mention the personal name of one's parents-in-law (*tata' bosung*). If one disregards this then misfortune will almost certainly result. On the other hand a curse delivered by a mother- or father-in-law is considered very powerful and to be avoided at all costs.

A note on translation

In transcribing the Embaloh language the new Indonesian-Malaysian orthography has been used. However, where a vowel is long, this has been symbolised by an acute accent ('), and to indicate a glottal stop an apostrophe (') has been inserted.

In the following analysis the various curses (*mamang*) are set down in the Embaloh language with an accompanying translation in English. The main difficulty in translation is that most of the curses in the original language are concise and forceful, since they are delivered in anger to an individual's face. I have attempted, where possible, to retain this force in the English, but where the meaning is unclear an explanation is offered in brackets. In some cases it has been impossible to translate particular curses concisely without altering the essential meaning, and therefore the translation may remain somewhat stilted. The curses are ordered according to whom they are addressed (i.e. either to males, females or to both), and according to certain themes such as "death in childbirth" or "death away from the village". Obviously a number of curses reflect differences in the division of labour in Embaloh village life.

¹⁰ In the African material there are many references to the chief, headman or elders having the sanction of cursing against disrespect towards their person, their office and tribal oaths and norms. See, for example, Douglas (1963: 69), Marwick (1965: 164-5), Boston (1968: 155-7) and Spencer (1965: 193). Cursing by elders in dispute proceedings is mentioned by Gulliver (1963: 286) and Lewis (1972: 72, 147-8).

For example "Die at the hands of your enemies" is more appropriately addressed to a man, whereas "Die in childbirth" is specific to females. "Die before tasting the newly-harvested rice" can be addressed to both men and women.

Curses addressed to women

1a. *Maté apuh-ko*

May you both die now.

(This is addressed to a pregnant woman, meaning die with your child still in the womb. All deaths in childbirth or during pregnancy are invariably attributed to the evil actions of one particular spirit called *antu anak*).

1b. *Maté manangkayut-ko*

Die in delivery.

(This refers to the position the woman assumes in childbirth. She kneels, gripping two rattan cords which are tied to the wall, just above the woman's head. Embaloh women are not allowed to lie down during delivery).

1c. *Maté aranak-ko*

Die in childbirth.

1d. *Maté anak sarik-ko* or *Maté anak ribang*

Die split apart in childbirth.

(The vagina is so torn in birth that the mother dies from excessive bleeding).

1e. *Maté anak tunggang-ko*

May a breach birth kill you.

1f. *Maté datunggang basi papak-ko*

Die breached by a red-hot sword.

(The foetus is likened to a sword lodged horizontally in the womb).

1g. *Maté anak tampus* or *maté tampus*

Die childless.

(This curse can be addressed to both males and females although it is usually meant for females, since it is particularly shameful and embarrassing to be barren).

Curses addressed to men

2a. *Maté sia'i*

Die cut to pieces with salt rubbed in your wounds.

(i.e. at the hands of the enemy. These curses relating to death in war can also refer to death at the hands of spirits. In oral literature there are many legends of men fighting spirits which can assume human form. Implicit in these curses is also the imprecation that a warrior's protective spirits will desert him. These spirits take the form of magical stones (*batu rani*) which a man wears tied to his belt when he goes on a head-hunting raid).

- 2b. *Maté duno'*
Die at the hands of your enemies.
(Almost invariably with one's head taken).
- 2c. *Maté lamba'mangayo*
Die while on a head-hunting raid.
- 2d. *Maté kuap*
May you die speared in the chest.
- 2e. *Maté tajin*
Die suddenly.
(On a head-hunting raid).
- 2f. *Maté rarap*
May you be speared to death.
- 2g. *Maté lamba' badang-ko*
Die while away trading.
(Almost invariably a man's activity).
- 2h. *Maté lamba' manamué-ko*
Die among foreigners.
(Lit. "While visiting").
- 2i. *Maté na'an-ko mamaliki batang támembaloh*
May you never see your homeland again.
(Lit. "Die before returning to the Embaloh river").

Curses addressed to both men and women

- 3a. *Maté lamba' masuk-ko ilalam toanen*
Die on entering the jungle.
(Usually implying at the hands of evil jungle spirits).
- 3b. *Maté lamba' bakaraja*
Die while away working.
(Usually addressed to men, but can be addressed to women who go out to work in the jungle and in the fields).

- 3c. *Maté lamba' aruma*
Die while away working in the rice-fields.
(Frequently addressed to women who spend more time in the fields, particularly during weeding and harvesting).
- 3d. *Dapapas mata'aso* or *Dapapas-ko kuléa mata'asón*
May the sun-spirit strike you dead.
(During a legal dispute various spirits, including those of the sun, the moon and famous ancestors are called down to witness the proceedings. If the case is undecided then the disputants are subjected to various tests, such as retrieving a stone from a pot of boiling water using one's bare hands. It is believed that these supernatural beings are on the side of truth, and thus the innocent party prevails unharmed. In addition, a particularly recalcitrant individual may be cursed by the head of the village tribunal and sentenced to death at the hands of these spirits).
- 3e. *Maté datimbang bulan* or *Datimbang-ko kuléa bulanen*
May you die by the judgement of the moon-spirit.
(Life is also likened to the moon here, at its waning death occurs).
- 3f. *Polo tio-ko*
May your life be cut in half.
(i.e. die young).
- 3g. *Pandak umur* or *Apandak umuro*
Die young.
(Lit. "Short age").
- 3h. *Pandak tio*
Die young.
(Lit. "Short life").
- 3i. *Maté riring*
Drop down dead.
(i.e. prematurely, while still young).
- 3j. *Maté jaum*
May you be speared to death.
(With a sharpened bamboo pole. This was a traditional means of sacrificing a slave. Hence this curse also implies that the person cursed is of slave descent).
- 3k. *Dajaum sakong* or *Dajaum kuléa sakongen*
May the *sakong* spear you.
(The *sakong* is an evil jungle spirit).

- 3l. *Dajaum suang kulambu* or *Dajaum kuléa suang kulambún*
May you be speared to death by the spirits (Lit. "contents") of the death-house.
- 3m. *Dajaum antu langké* or *Dajaum kuléa antu langkén*
May you be speared to death by the *antu langké*.
(An evil giant which lives in the jungle).
- 3n. *Datamai-ko ilam batango kuléa sakongen*
Die from a violent sickness.
(i.e. the *sakong* enters the stomach and causes sickness and eventual death).
- 3o. *Datutuk-ko sakit mondok*
May sickness strike you first.
- 3p. *Na'an-ko parambit angkán asé baru*
Die before tasting the newly-harvested rice.
- 3q. *Manabé ibanuako*
Die in your country.
(i.e. die suddenly from some misfortune).
- 3r. *Katabéan-ko indiang*
May misfortune befall you here.
(Usually addressed to someone who refuses food or drink offered by a host).
- 3s. *Katabéan-ko dibala umán*
May you die in the rice-fields.
- 3t. *Katabéan-ko ditarinoan asén*
May you die at the rice-bin.
- 3u. *Katabéan-ko dipakayu sauen*
May you die near the house supports.

Embaloh ideas on death and sickness

At this stage I should point out that other writers have also set down curses used in various societies, such as "You won't father children", "You will be a barren woman", "You will die badly", "You will ail" (Sangree 1966 : 62). Wagner also notes that curses relate to "illness, poverty, impotence, barrenness, insanity, weak or abnormal offspring" (1949 : 254). There are many similarities between these and some of the Embaloh curses, but to further our understanding of curses I hope to show why Embaloh use certain verbal forms in preference to others.

Embaloh believe that every human being has a main spirit or soul (*sumangat*) which is usually thought to reside in the head. People say that this spiritual essence cannot be seen, although they know it is there while a person is healthy, awake and working. A person becomes sick when the soul leaves the body and wanders abroad. If it should reach the Land of the Dead (*Télung*), then the person will almost certainly die.

The soul leaves the body during dreams, and at this time it is very susceptible to being enticed away by evil spirits (*antu ajau*), which usually inhabit caves, uplands, tree-trunks and jungle. It is the task of the village medical expert to retrieve this lost soul in order to cure sickness. Sickness and death can also be caused by an evil spirit entering a person's body and causing damage to bodily organs, or by a spirit stabbing or piercing parts of the human body with a knife, sword, spear or sharpened bamboo skewer. Hence a number of curses specifically refer to death or sickness at the hands of various spirits (3k, 31, 3m, 3n). The remainder implicitly point to supernatural causation, for example "death in childbirth" and "death away from the village". Not all sickness is recognised by the Embaloh as a result of evil supernatural forces; natural causes are acknowledged. Yet the more mysterious sicknesses, particularly those which involve internal pains are usually attributed to spiritual beings. Those *antu* invoked in curses are all evil, and all delight in harassing and harming humans.

The *antu sakong* usually live in the jungle, in holes in the ground, in caves, and sometimes in the hollow trunk of a banyan tree (*nunuk*). The *sakong* is anthropomorphic, it attacks human beings by capturing souls, by invading the human body and by unseen means, piercing the body with sharp instruments. It is said that if you meet it in the jungle, it will physically attack, devouring human flesh. Stories of the *sakong* are frequently told by parents to frighten disobedient children, and according to the Embaloh the *sakong* is always close by (*sakong lamba'*) on days when it rains while the sun is still shining.

Other evil spirits include the *antu langké*. These also cause sickness and death. The *langké* takes the form of a hairy giant, some ten to twelve feet in height.¹¹ It is equipped with large, sharp fangs with which it can tear and devour human flesh. It will usually attack someone who has strayed too far from the village and is lost. Another is the *suang*

¹¹ The *langké* is almost identical to the Batak *begu panjang*. For a discussion of Batak spirits and concepts of the soul (*sumangat*) see Vergouwen (1964: 69-71). The Rejang of Sumatra also have a 'long spirit' — *semad belelkat*, see Japan (1964: 78, 95, 188, 371).

kulambu or *antu kulambu*. Embaloh are vague about the exact nature of this spirit. It is definitely anthropomorphic; it can harm human beings, and it inhabits the death-house and its environs. Some people say that despite all precautions during death rites a person's soul might lose its way, remain in the *kulambu* and become a potentially harmful ancestor spirit. Factors outside people's control, such as sorcery, may cause this to happen. Others say that this *antu* is a good spirit which only harms humans who offend it. Still others believe that it is the spirit of someone who died in the jungle, and which comes back to haunt the death-house in which its relatives and friends have been placed. In any event the death-house, because of its otherworldly associations, is considered a dangerous place to go near.

Curses which use the form *manabé* or *katabéan* (3q, 3r, 3s, 3t, 3u) also imply that the person cursed will be struck down by evil spirits, particularly by the *sakong*. These are very common curses addressed to those who are considered ungrateful and to those who refuse food and drink offered them.¹² It is certain that if a person insults someone's hospitality without good reason, then a misfortune is bound to befall that person. He may be bitten by a poisonous snake, drown in the river, be struck by lightning, fall seriously ill or be attacked by spirits in the jungle.

Having said something about supernatural causation of death, it remains now to go into some detail about certain kinds of death. I do not propose to deal with the sequence of death rites and the nature of the "journey of death". Here I am simply interested in examining ideas about death as they relate to cursing. Death through mysterious sickness, or at the hands of evil spirits is undesirable in itself, yet there are other problems which underlie the nature of death and its associated rites. Variations in the rites which are performed depend very much on the kind of death with which a person meets, the stage in his life-cycle when he dies, and his status, rank and wealth in the community at the time of death. Embaloh are anxious to be sent to *Télung* with full ceremony so that they are not ashamed when they eventually meet their ancestors.

A person's rank is important in determining certain extra entitlements in death rites. In the past those of *samagat* rank had the right to have slaves sacrificed to accompany them to the Land of the Dead. This custom is no longer practised, but *samagat* still have the right to have a carved and decorated coffin (*lungun*), an expensive silk cloth draped

¹² Misfortune resulting from the refusal of hospitality is a fairly general belief in South-East Asia, and Jaspán reports it for the Rejang of Sumatra (personal communication).

over the roof of the death-house, and longer, more onerous mourning prohibitions. A *samagat* death ceremony also usually meant that the scale of the rites and feasting would be much grander. Today, however, funerary rites are generally said to be less elaborate than formerly.

There are means, to some extent outside this ranking system, which enable a person to attain status and position in the community, and thus to ensure extra entitlements in his death ceremony. If a person has already organised, financed or played an important part in certain major feasts then he/she is provided with extra offerings of food in death rites (*daun tau maté*). These offerings, consisting of such things as rice, cakes, chicken, tobacco and betel nut are placed in trays and hung in the roof of the death-house. They are used to feed the dead person's spirit during its journey to, and on its arrival in *Télung*. It is also shared among the spirit's ancestors who act as an escort to the Land of the Dead. Thus the more offerings a person is entitled to in death, the more he/she can provide for the ancestral feast in *Télung*. Food offerings are arranged on a graded scale according to whether the individual has organised or significantly participated in one of the following feasts (*gawa*): —

1. *mulambu* - feasts accompanying the building of a new death-house.
2. *mamasi sau* - feasts accompanying the building of a new long-house.
3. *mamandung* or *mandung* - sacrifices performed on behalf of ancestors and gods, usually in conjunction with 1 and 2 above.
4. *pamolé béo* - feasts accompanying the successful return from a long journey of adventure.
5. *manyarung* - rites accompanying the initiation of a *balian*.
6. *mauno' tauen* - taking an enemy head and associated rites.

Obviously the organisation and inception of a number of important feasts was in the hands of the *samagat* rank, and so the attainment of merit was somewhat easier for them. Nevertheless, commoners could fairly easily attain status and position by their own courage and initiative in warfare and on journeys of adventure, and for lower ranking women in particular, initiation into the secrets and skills of a *balian* provided a means of status mobility. In recent years with the gradual decline in the local importance of rank, high position in the community is now attainable by an increasing number of common people.

As one gets older the chances are that more status will accrue to one's person. Even if a man has not excelled in any of the events mentioned above, he has probably had children, taken part in legal disputes and gained wisdom. In any case he is entitled to a modest death ceremony,

provided his kinsmen can afford it, and a place in *Télung*. To die in old age is generally considered to be a good death (*kamatéan mám*). The opposite is, of course, to die while still young. This is not only a tragic death but also an unfavourable or bad death (*kamatéan ajau*). If one dies while still a bachelor or spinster then one dies without offspring. An important mark of status in village life is to marry and have children. Parents are then referred to by a teknonym such as *Ma' Rajang* or *Indu' Rajang* ("the father of Rajang" or "the mother of Rajang"), a tangible sign of true adult status. The married couple then have heirs to their property, extra hands to help in the work, and comfort and security in old age. There is a positive value placed on fertility and reproduction. In addition, a person if still young, has not usually had time to accumulate merit from feasts (*angkosanpi aduna* or *angkosanpi gawana*). He/she is not entitled to the full death rites; there is no feast; the coffin is not kept in the house for the full six-day period before being taken to the death-house; there is no ceremonial dance around the coffin; no food offerings are provided. A person who dies while young has to be satisfied with a lowly status in *Télung*. Hence there are a number of curses which relate to death at an early age (3f, 3g, 3h, 3i), and also to death without having had children (1g).¹³ In addition, curses which relate to other forms of death, but which are delivered to a young person are immediately taken more seriously than if they had been addressed to a member of the senior generation. However, this should be qualified, in that in a situation where a young person curses an older person then this is also a serious matter.

Another death in which rites are incomplete is that of death in childbirth or during pregnancy. Pregnancy and childbirth are hedged round with all kinds of taboo. In Embaloh society a high percentage of deaths is the result of complications in childbirth and pregnancy, and women, their husbands and the immediate family are confined by taboos (*tata'*) relating to food, to certain work and action, and to avoidance of certain animals. If a woman should die in childbirth her soul invariably becomes a much-feared, malevolent spirit called *antu anak*. This spirit delights in seeking revenge and bringing sickness and sometimes death to pregnant women, as well as to mothers and their small children. It can also attack

¹³ Among the Karo Batak of Sumatra the death of a young child is the saddest death of all. It is believed to be the result of sinful behaviour on the part of the dead child's father and mother. To guard against the child's spirit becoming angry or turning into an evil spirit the dead child goes through a rite of symbolic marriage. For a description of this rite see H. G. Tarigan (1974: 32-4).

men at night and devour their genitals, the symbol and ultimate cause of the spirit's demise in life. To a man the *antu anak* frequently appears in the guise of a beautiful woman, but it can also change into a variety of furry animals such as the monkey, squirrel and civet cat.

The corpse of a woman who dies in delivery or when pregnant is wrapped in a rattan mat, taken as quickly as possible from the village and buried in the jungle away from the death-house. There are no ceremonies, the soul does not go to *Télung*, and any status a woman may have had in life is immediately cancelled. Curses which relate to this whole area of pregnancy and childbirth (Ia, Ib, Ic, Id, Ie, If) are therefore the most terrible that can be delivered to a woman. She is, in fact, condemned to an eternity as an evil jungle spirit.

Reflecting the division of labour, curses delivered to men having the same kind of force as those concerning childbirth, are those referring to death at the hands of the enemy (2a, 2b, 2c, 2d, 2e, 2f) or to death in a distant land (2g, 2h, 2i). Today, however, with the decline in head-hunting, many of these curses are little used. In the past, an important symbol of a man's status was his success in warfare. This meant not only taking part in a successful head-hunting raid, but also taking enemy heads and capturing prisoners who became one's slaves. A man who took heads ensured that his victims accompanied him, on his death, to *Télung*. Prisoners of war were also sacrificed on the death of their master so that they would continue their services to him in the otherworld. This is all part of the general belief, reflected in the gradation of death rites, that one's status and position in this world is carried over into the next.¹⁴ Conversely, a man who was killed in a raid eventually became the slave of his slayer. There is also the belief that his soul can become an *antu maté duno'*, a headless spirit which attacks people in the jungle. A man who died in war was usually buried where he fell. Again there were no death rites, and any status achieved in life was immediately lost. Of course, women and children were also victims of head-hunting raids, either killed on the spot or taken as slaves. But curses relating to death in war were specifically addressed to men, since success as a head-hunter was part of the total status of a man, and played an important part in his ability to earn respect, a wife and a following.

¹⁴ This belief is seen in a very obvious way among the Chin of Burma. A person's position in the Afterlife is determined by his position on earth. In addition, Chin distinguish different types of death, such as death in war, by drowning, by hanging, and death of women before the age of sterility. These show some similarities with Maloh. For the Chin see H. N. C. Stevenson (1938: 171-92).

However, some of these curses concerning death in war also have the secondary meaning of "death at the hands of *antu*". *Antu* are seen as enemies who frequently delight in attacking a human being in the jungle. Someone who mysteriously dies in the jungle and is found headless, or someone who disappears and is not found at all, may sometimes be considered as the unfortunate victim of evil spirits. The dead person's soul has already wandered off or has been captured by a spirit, and cannot therefore be despatched to *Télung*. Other curses relating to evil spirits are dealt with later.

Death in a distant land is also an unhappy event and one to be avoided. In death rites there is a striving for normality and ritual order in a situation which is charged with potential supernatural danger. The corpse is washed, dressed, offered food, and drink and is presented with certain property which is taken to the Land of the Dead. In fact, items are provided which the spirit will have need of in its new home. The corpse is guarded while it is kept in the long-house so that no evil spirits can capture the body and its soul. Various taboos are enforced to protect the inhabitants of the long-house from misfortune, illness and death. The corpse is placed in a coffin, likened to a canoe, which is used on part of the journey to *Télung* and the coffin is placed eventually in a *kulambu*, a structure on stilts in the shape of an ordinary house. From there the soul of the dead person is accompanied by the ancestors on a long journey to its final resting place. The journey passes along a fixed route, meeting natural features such as rivers and uplands, and various obstacles, until the final separation between living and dead is achieved. The rites are controlled at each stage so that the living are not harmed by evil supernatural forces. At all costs the dead person's soul must not be lost.¹⁵ If it is not cared for then it can and often does vanish into the jungle to become a wandering and potentially harmful spirit. It naturally follows that death away from one's homeland (including long-house and environs) cannot be controlled and ministered by kin and friends. The soul is, therefore, lost forever.

There are a number of other curses which simply call for the death of another (3a, 3b, 3c, 3j). Here the hoped for result is not necessarily a bad death in terms of the rites performed and one's status in the next world. Death may occur suddenly during the course of everyday activities, such as working in the rice-fields or in the jungle. However, the

¹⁵ The journey of death is common among Bornean peoples. See for the Iban, Harrisson (1965: 1-57) and Harrisson and Sandin (1966: 32-286). For a general discussion of Borneo death see Harrisson (1962: 1-41).

possibility exists that if a person dies *outside* the long-house, i.e. "while away working" (3b) or "on entering the jungle" (3a), then the body may not be discovered for some time. If the body is left overnight then it is treated as an unfavourable death since during that time the soul has already had time to wander off into the jungle. Burial is again carried out on the spot. But if the body is discovered shortly after death then rites can be carried out in the normal way with due recognition of the dead person's status in life. The only difference is that the body cannot then be brought into the long-house. A temporary shelter (*kakalang bangkayoan*) is constructed outside and the appropriate rites are performed there. Embaloh say that carrying a corpse into the house may lead the spirits of ancestors and the spirit of the dead person to confuse the long-house with the death-house. It is just such confusions of ritual order, custom and category which often result in ancestral anger and subsequent misfortune.

Those curses which explicitly call for death at the hands of spirits (3j, 3k, 3l, 3m, 3n) viewed superficially are not calling for a necessarily unfavourable death.¹⁶ However, to use the verb *jaum* refers to the method of sacrificing slaves. In the past, when a high ranking man died, his slaves would be sacrificed at the death-house, and then buried. In addition, during the building of a new long-house slaves would be sacrificed and thrown into the holes dug for the main ironwood support posts. Death by spearing with sharpened bamboo was also the punishment for committing incest. The guilty pair were lashed together with rattan cords, speared by all male members of the village, and then set afloat in the river. These curses therefore imply that firstly, the person is of lowly descent and will meet a death in which his status, if he has any, is not recognised, and secondly, that he will die in shameful circumstances.

Death through sickness caused by evil spirits (3n) does not affect the nature of the death rites, but this curse hopes for an especially violent sickness, and one which will not be easily cured. The spiteful nature of the curse "May sickness strike you first" (3o) is obvious. There is no implicit meaning here. Those curses relating to refusal of hospitality on the part of a guest (3q, 3r, 3s, 3t, 3u) appeal for "death by misfortune". Again this does not mean that death rites will be incomplete, although it is an embarrassing death and very often a painful one. All these curses

¹⁶ (3j) although not specifically calling for spirits, implicitly calls them and should be seen in the category of "death by spearing" (at the hands of various spirits).

are fairly straightforward in meaning, as is the curse "Die before tasting the newly-harvested rice" (3p). The event of eating new rice is much looked forward to by the Embaloh, after toiling all year. It is a time of abundance, celebration and rest before the next agricultural year. To die before experiencing these pleasures would be a sad event for any Embaloh.

The imprecation "May you die at the hands of the sun-spirit" (3d) is used in the context of legal disputes. The sun, the moon and various well-known ancestors are called down to sit in judgement. A person who is lying or who fails to abide by the tribunal's decision is cursed. He dies in shame, although again there is no change in the individual's death rites or status because of this. The same idea is contained in the curse relating to the moon (3e).

The main purpose of the above discussion has been to demonstrate that, in Embaloh society at least, one cannot hope to understand the significance of the majority of their curses unless one is acquainted with other areas of the Embaloh belief system. In particular, the different consequences of different kinds of death go some way to explain the force behind various Embaloh curses. I have concentrated on curses associated with death, sickness and misfortune rather than abuse relating to sex and to animal categories, but this is not to say that abuse is absent from Embaloh life.

A note on Embaloh abuse

Among Embaloh there is frequent reference to sexual parts and bodily discharge. Such things as the male genitalia (*laso*), the female vagina (*pala'*), the backside (*taput*) and the anus (*adong*) are all referred to in verbal abuse. For example, a person's face may be likened to a vagina (*lindo' pala'*) or to a backside (*lindo' taput*). Other words used in abuse or more properly obscenity are dung or excreta (*ta'i'i*, to excrete *anta'i'i*), urine (*téa'*, to urinate *antéa'*) and menstrual blood (*dara' bulan*). In addition, a person who is clumsy, lazy or bad at his work may become the subject of abuse by being called dumb or stupid (*bisu*), lame (*abangkang*) or crippled (*apontol*).

Very common in verbal abuse is the use of animal categories (Leach: 1964). A person will be said to have the character of a dog (*asu*), pig (*bawi*) or monkey (*kara*) if he does something which exhibits a lack of respect for traditional behaviour and values. A son or daughter who does not respect parents and take care of them in their old age is invariably said to be no better than dogs (*baluh asu*) or pigs (*baluh*

bawi). These are both domestic animals, close to humans in that they are fed from the leftovers of their masters' kitchens, but regarded by the Embaloh as having their own *adat*. The monkey appears because of its obvious anthropomorphic qualities, and it is also kept as a pet. All these animals are regarded as foolish creatures, and are therefore used to characterise foolish human beings. The difference in human and animal *adat* is brought into sharp relief in the area of incest prohibitions. In Embaloh society generational categories are vitally important, and marriage and sexual relations are strictly forbidden between ego and parents'/parents' siblings and between ego and grandparents'/grandparents' siblings. In *adat* terms this kind of incestuous relationship is referred to as *sigilingang* ("to turn about or turn around", in other words "to turn kinship categories around"). It is said to result in misfortune and bad luck in the village (*sakala*), and to follow "animal *adat*" (*adat inatang*), rather than *adat mantuari* or "human *adat*".¹⁷ In the past the incestuous pair were usually put to death, but today a fine and the sacrifice of a pig or a chicken is all that is needed to avert misfortune.

A final way in which animals are used in a form of abuse is by naming one's dog or cat after a person who is disliked. For example, a person may acquire a nickname for being vain - *pudi kalé*, for being lazy - *palibak*, or for talking nonsense - *baluh bakoan* (*bakoan* is a hollow bamboo tube). It then sometimes happens that another villager will call his animal *pudi kalé*, *palibak* or *bakoan*, holding his unfortunate neighbour up to ridicule.

Abuse and obscenity frequently occur in the same situations as cursing, for example, between a father and a disobedient son, or between an elder and a person who does not respect traditional law. In addition abuse is often delivered in anger, but it is apparent from the above discussion that the content and purpose of abuse and cursing are quite different, and in addition, cursing has serious supernatural consequences.

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¹⁷ The inversion or switching round of kinship categories is also illustrated in a type of verbal admonition termed *mangalong antu* ("to call *antu*" i.e. to invite bad luck or misfortune). Sometimes close kin quarrel; a brother accuses his bossy sister of acting just like his mother — *Ko indu'ku* ("You are my mother"), or a father admonishes a disrespectful son for being like his own father — *Ko ama'ku* ("You are my father"). This kind of statement which confuses kinship categories invites misfortune to befall the person to whom it is addressed, and it can also result in a fine being paid.

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