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Mak Betisek concepts of humans, plants and animals


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Studies of symbolism in anthropology have mainly attempted to show the relationship between ritual behaviour, ritual symbols and the kind of social system which is maintained by the people of the society. By ritual symbols, I mean objects, words or physical behaviour which are regarded as representing or typifying something else by virtue of analogous qualities or associational characteristics. In *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner (1967) is primarily concerned with the way in which symbols express and reinforce the social institutions within Ndembu society. In *The Ritual Process* (1969), his approach is more contextual, since he focusses on the multi-referential character of ritual symbols — the way in which the same symbols are used to express different ideas. However, he does not break away completely from the conventional 'social structural' model, since his ultimate concern is with relating ritual symbols in their varying forms to prevailing social institutions. Douglas (1970, pp. 8-9) puts forward the view that the body can supply symbols for people to express attitudes to their own society. Body postures, body movements and gestures reflect the kind of relationships which one establishes in a group and the way in which individuals are bound to one another within it. Here she attempts to show how differences in social systems may reflect differences in ritualized behaviour. Again here, the social system is pre-established as a social...
entity and behaviour perceived in terms of symbols which express the
given social system.

Increasingly, anthropologists have attempted to study symbols by
means of semantic analysis, binary analysis, and dialectical and dualistic
models in an attempt to show their phenomenal complexity and to
remove from these studies the theoretical constraints of models which
conceptualize language and ritual behaviour in terms of a particular
type of social system or in terms of types of symbolic systems. James J.
Fox (1975), in his study of Rotinese cosmology and ritual language,
conceives the underlying symbolic structure in terms of a configuration
of semantic pathways. A. Jackson's study of a Na-Khi myth (1975)
reveals the conceptual varieties and ambiguities contained within it,
through identifying and differentiating between manifest and latent
meanings in the ritual language. In this way, he manages to show a
dual parallelism between changes in the symbolic structure of the myth
and changes in the Na-Khi social system. Both writers have attempted
to remove the holistic and unitary perspective manifest in earlier
anthropological studies of symbolism.

It appears that a number of conceptual differences have emerged
in the study of symbolism in anthropology. However, although all these
theoretical approaches have added an important perspective to the
study of symbols in different cultures, there is still little emphasis on
the relationship between changes in symbolic structures and ritual
processes — the operational or functional significance of symbols in the
context of situational or environmental changes. This study of Mak
Betisek plant and animal symbolism stresses the manipulative aspect
of symbols and the way in which differences in economic activity and
states of health influence the Mak Betisek conception of plants and
animals. I attempt to show how the Mak Betisek use two mutually
opposed views of plants and animals to accommodate to the different
kinds of situations which occur from day to day. Perhaps the most
important study on the relationship between symbols and change is
contained in Lévi-Strauss's analysis of Bororo and Ge myths. In The
Raw and the Cooked Lévi-Strauss suggests that an underlying principle
of Bororo thought is to define cultural and natural categories in terms
of a regular set of symbols. He supports his argument by analyzing a
series of Bororo and Ge myths explaining the origin of the cooking of
food. He shows how the variations which exist in the contents of these
myths are a consequence of the processes of borrowing and adaptation
which take place spatially and over time. When these different versions
are compared, the same form of opposition between the raw and the cooked, man and animal, culture and nature is manifested. However, mediatory symbols serve to conjoin categories which are opposed, so that opposition on one level may be met by conjunction on another. Lévi-Strauss argues that the processes of separation and recombination of conceptual categories reveal the way in which ideological systems transform from one kind to another, changing only the content of ideas but not the pattern in which they are combined. Though this study is not concerned with a structuralist analysis of the kind which Lévi-Strauss is concerned with, it nevertheless aims at discovering the underlying structural features which bring about changes in symbolic systems. Lévi-Strauss's analysis of ideological systems is made in terms of 'historical dialecticism', but it is possible that in the short term, the processes of transformation of conceptual categories will also occur when a new situation requires a change of behaviour and attitude. In the study of symbolic systems, one may need to consider changes of this sort along with changes which are viewed as part of historical processes which occur in the long term.

The Mak Betisek are a sub-group of the Senoi aboriginal group found in the north and central states of the Malay peninsula. The Mak Betisek population, comprising not more than 2,000, is located in the coastal areas of the state of Selangor. My own research was focussed on the Mak Betisek population on Carey Island, off the west coast of Selangor. The Mak Betisek villages on Carey Island are located in the coastal areas immediately behind the mangrove forests. These mangrove forests form natural shelters against the storms which break out, when variable winds occur, between the monsoonal periods and at other times of the year. For this reason, the villages do not expand beyond the mangroves and mudflats along the coast. The Mak Betisek houses are dotted along the upper creeks of the meandering rivers on the island and are seldom built too far inland, since the Mak Betisek are very dependent on river transportation. Since the houses are built along the river banks, the villages tend to be linear. Nuclear settlements have developed in recent years, as a result of the demarcation of physical boundaries between aboriginal land and private estate or government land. This has prevented the Mak Betisek villages from expanding along the river creeks as before, forcing them to build their houses more closely to each other. Today, the Mak Betisek villages on the island are hemmed in between the mangroves and the rubber and oil-palm estates.
Each village (kampung) is recognized as an independent political unit. The majority of the members of the village are related by consanguineal and filial ties, so that a village also forms a local kinship grouping known as opoh. The village also contains men and women from other villages who have married members of the opoh. However, it is the kampung rather than the opoh which exists as a unit of political organization, since affines (men from other villages) may acquire political positions in the village of their wives. A village is administered by a Council of Elders known as menggek. This Council of Elders is composed of men who hold formal titles based on ascription and achievement.

In the Carey Island region, the mangrove environment allows the Mak Betisek to maintain an economy which is dually orientated to the land and the sea. While the Mak Betisek practise sedentary agriculture, they also fish along the river creeks and the open sea. Hunting and gathering activities are very diversified, and range from the exploitation of animals and forest products in the lowland rain forests and mangroves, to the gathering of crustaceans, bivalves and univalves in the mangrove swamps and mudflats, beyond the mangrove forest belt. When these economic activities are performed, the Mak Betisek indulge in a practice known as kelem, when men build temporary huts along the rivers and stay away from the village for a number of days till a substantial catch or game is obtained. The Mak Betisek also practise seasonal migration during the crab season and stay away from the village for a few months till the season is over.

Two fundamentally opposing views express the Mak Betisek relationship with plants and animals. The first view is contained in the concept of tulah. The word tulah literally means 'to curse'. It expresses the idea that plants and animals have been cursed by the forefathers of the Mak Betisek to become food for humans. To illustrate, a man who hunts an animal, and subsequently eats it, will explain his behaviour in the following way. "It is all right to hunt an animal and to eat it because it has been cursed to become food. Our forefathers made it into a law that plants and animals must become our food, so when we kill and eat them, we are practising our ancestral law."

The second view refers to the concept of kemalik. This term is generally used to describe objects, situations and behaviour which are tabooed and which, when violated, are likely to cause or to lead to dangers which appear in the form of illnesses, injuries and death. The kemalik view expresses the idea that acts involving the killing and
destruction of plants and animals bring humans misfortune and death, because plant and animal life is derived from, and is essentially similar to, human life. In other words, the exploitation of plants and animals as food resources is fundamentally wrong because it is conceived as exploiting or using humans as food. For example, when a person is affected by an illness and does not get better after being treated with a medicinal cure, he will explain his illness in the following way. "It is because I hunted that animal that I got ill. Since it is also human, it avenged the wrong I did by launching a spirit-attack on me."

When *tulah* and *kemalik* beliefs are compared, ideas relating to plants and animals manifest fundamental contradictions on the ideological level. However, when both these sets of beliefs are viewed contextually, each appears to be dominant in different spheres of ritual activity, so that the ideological oppositions are not manifested on the ritual level. More specifically, when the Mak Betisek are preoccupied with activities relating to hunting, gathering, fishing and cultivating, their behaviour is explained in terms of the *tulah* view. *Tulah* ideas are also reinforced in the context of harvest ceremonies, the rice and durian fruit harvests, and rituals connected with the learning and practising of love charms. However, when the Mak Betisek are afflicted with illnesses and injuries and misfortunes connected with natural contingencies such as drought, thunderstorms and whirlwinds, they tend to explain their action in terms of the *kemalik* view. Thus, *kemalik* ideas dominate in rituals connected with shamanistic forms of healing and curing. Although these different spheres of ritual activity by no means encompass the total range of ritual activities which are performed by the Mak Betisek, they nevertheless represent two sets of activities which are fundamental to the Mak Betisek way of life. For analytical purposes, I have viewed humans as the cultural order and plants and animals as the natural order.

The *tulah* and *kemalik* views appear to express an ambivalence in the Mak Betisek attitudes towards using plants and animals as food. This is partly revealed in the way in which two separate sets of terms are used to describe plants and animals within each conceptual view. When the *tulah* view is being expressed, the Mak Betisek refer to themselves as *mak*, a word which means 'people' or 'humans'. Plants and animals are called *lok* and *natang* respectively. Here, human categories (*mak*) are conceptually set apart from plant (*lok*) and animal (*natang*) categories. However, plants and animals are, in the context of hunting, gathering and fishing, collectively known as *lawuk*.
or jumak. The term lawuk or jumak is normally used to refer to a cooked dish of either meat or vegetables. When tulah ideas are being reinforced, humans are conceptually differentiated from plants and animals by the fact that they are a non-food category in opposition to plants and animals, which are a food category. Since humans eat their food cooked, in contrast to plants and animals, which do not cook their food, it becomes apparent that the term lawuk, in the tulah context, conceptually categorizes plants and animals as human food.

When the kemalik view is being expressed, the same conceptual distinctions are not apparent. Humans continue to be referred to as mak. Plants and animals, however, are collectively referred to as moyang. The term moyang is normally used to refer to living members of the generation of great-grandparents and to the ancestors of the Mak Betisek. It may also be used to refer to kinsmen who have recently died. The use of this term in relation to plants and animals reinforces the kemalik concept that plants and animals are derived from the souls of deceased humans and, therefore, cannot be destroyed, killed or eaten. Plants and animals are said to react negatively to such forms of destruction by subjecting humans to mystical forms of attack known as tenong. Humans who are subjected to tenong become afflicted with illnesses and injuries of various sorts. In the most severe cases of tenong such afflictions would ultimately lead to death. Plants and animals are also referred to by other terms, such as hinkik mak kele (they are also human) and tuhan (that person), but these terms are only alternative ways in which the Mak Betisek express both the human and spiritual aspects of plants and animals.

THE TULAH VIEW

During the time when the Mak Betisek are actively engaged in the exploitation of these animal resources and forest products, tulah views are reinforced. Within the tulah set of ideas, humans are believed to be more powerful than plants and animals. This is because they are attributed with powers of cursing or tulah, which enable them to use plants and animals as food. Human dominance over plants and animals is reinforced by the idea that they subscribe to a strict moral code, contained in their adat moyang or ancestral laws, which prohibit incest and cannibalism. Conversely, plants and animals do not adhere to any moral code. To the Mak Betisek, this makes them essentially different from humans. Animals, in particular, are immoral, for they are incestuous and eat one another. According to Mak Betisek mythology,
humans were able to differentiate themselves from plants and animals in this way by a stroke of luck. Apparently before, humans did not have customs or laws (adat), either. They freely committed incest and cannibalism and were in a constant state of anarchy and conflict. These laws were fiercely guarded by moyang melur, the ancestor spirit who lives on the moon. Depicted as half human and half tiger, moyang melur is said to have kept these customs and rules in a bag and stored them under his sleeping-mat. Every night he would peep down and watch humans on earth commit murder, incest and adultery. One night, he peeped out too far and fell down on earth. Anxious to return to the moon, he caught sight of a Mak Betisek hunter in the forest and demanded to be sent back. The hunter agreed and flung a liana, which he obtained from the forest, at the moon. He climbed up the liana and moyang melur followed him up till he was safe on the moon again. Moyang melur was so grateful that he invited the hunter to eat with him. As he was eating, the hunter caught sight of the bag of rules under the sleeping-mat and, when moyang melur was not looking, grabbed it and rushed away, down the liana, to earth, where he subsequently distributed the rules to his kinsmen. From that day onwards, humans began to practise the rules relating to incest and cannibalism and were able to lead a way of life which was essentially different from animals.

The superior status of humans in relation to the plant and animal world is reinforced by the notion that plants and animals cannot destroy human life whereas humans may exploit plants and animals as food. The Mak Betisek have a myth on almost every common plant and animal in the region, describing how these plants and animals tried to destroy human life and were eventually cursed to become food for humans. I will relate one of these myths to show the way in which the ritual curse of tulah brings out the idea of the irreversibility of human life forms and plant and animal life forms, and how this has enabled humans to exploit plants and animals as food.

The Myth of the Ketab Gedeng

Long ago, the ketab gedeng and all the creatures of the sea were as big as humans. They were constantly changing their physical forms into those of humans in order that they might mingle with the Mak Betisek men and women, and kill and eat them without casting too much suspicion on the animal world. One day, the ketab gedeng decided that this process was too slow and that all the humans in the world...
should be destroyed. It gathered together all the animals of the mangrove and sea to plan a mass attack on humans. The following plan was decided upon. The ketab gedeng would dig deep trenches underneath the ground, causing the land to collapse and the water from the sea to rush in. When this happened, the villages would be flooded and all the fishes, crustaceans and animals could then rush in and attack the Mak Betisek — men, women and children. AU those present agreed to the plan, and they set to work immediately. While the ketab gedeng was busily digging the trenches, a Mak Betisek man discovered what was going on and told the rest of the villagers about it. The villagers gathered the leaves of the moyang bantu plant (a ginger species) and the terong pipit plant (solanum torpum), mixed with rice of seven different colours — yellow, brown, white, green, red, purple and black — and scattered the potion on the ketab gedeng. As this rite was performed, the following curse was said aloud, "If a human be a human, if an animal be an animal, but do not be both". Immediately, the ketab gedeng and all the other animals which were present shrunk in size, and lost their ability to assume human forms. They remained animals, and this has enabled the Mak Betisek to hunt them as food.

On the conceptual level, plants and animals are symbolically set apart from humans in terms of the criteria of physical irreversibility of their life forms and their edibility as sources of food. This myth reveals that the human order is opposed to the animal order in form and function. Humans are physically differentiated from animals by their life form and by the fact that they hunt them for meat. Animals are not a category which eat but rather a category which are eaten. Significantly, in the context of economic activities, vegetatives which are picked from the forest (merii), crustaceans and shellfish which are hunted and trapped, are referred to as lawuk, or 'cooked-food'. For example, a Mak Betisek will point to a bird and say lawuk instead of chiip, a term which refers to its taxonomic category rather than its edibility as food. Similarly, the sound of a wild-boar will evoke the comment, lawuk ming (cooked food is near), rather than ketu ming (the wild-boar is near). Taxonomic categories are important when popular game meat or fish, referred to in terms of siyok or 'sweet meats', are being differentiated from less popular game meat or fish, referred to as kedik or 'bitter'. The general tendency is to regard plants and animals as potential food sources and then to discriminate amongst them in terms of other categories such as 'sweet' or 'bitter' types of food, food which is poisonous (bul) and food which is non-poisonous (kob nachah).
The symbolic reference to plants and animals in terms of 'cooked food' expresses the idea that while plants and animals have been designated as human food, the reverse is not true. Since humans are a mak category, they are non-food and may never be cooked. Plants and animals, however, are lawuk, and therefore are food and may be cooked. On the conceptual level, the human world is opposed to the natural world in terms of non-food and food, raw and cooked categories.

On the ritual level, it will be seen that acts relating to the gathering of vegetables from the wild, the felling of trees, the trapping and hunting of game, and the gathering of crustaceans are not accompanied by rites which suggest that plants and animals are spiritual entities which have to be appeased first before they can be exploited by humans. Where ritual offerings are made, they are prepared for wandering human spirits who may happen to pass by at the time when the activity is being performed, and who may take offence when they see that they have been deprived of shelter or food. The ritual offerings which are normally made before felling a tree 'take the form of an anchak, woven tray, containing rice grains, tobacco, betel-vine leaves, betel-nut and some water. The tray is placed under a tree close to the one which is to be felled as a symbolic gesture 'to replace the tree', expressed in the term tukah gantik. However, in practice, the Mak Betisek do not bother with these ritual offerings. The moment a suitable tree is found for firewood, construction or wood-carving, it is chopped down without any further regard to the wandering human spirit. Nor are animals which are hunted or trapped subjected to these ritual offerings. When asked if this will not provoke the wrath of the wandering human spirit, they will reply that they cannot possibly carry little trays of food offerings every time they go into the forest. It is common for the Mak Betisek to make verbal promises of food to human spirits or, when they eat in the forests and mangroves, to throw a few grains of rice and say, "Here, eat this, that is yours, this is mine".

When ritual prohibitions do occur in the tulah context, they are concerned with the effective exploitation of plants and animals as food rather than the effective avoidance of plants and animals as food (see Figure 1). The figure shows that plants and animals are associated with different, and opposed sets of rules and practices in different economic situations and in the context of illness. While their physical characteristics are emphasized in the economic context, it is their mystical characteristics which are emphasized in the context of illness.
and injury. For example, in the tulah context the ritual prohibitions associated with the wild-boar and deer concern ways in which they may be trapped most effectively. From the time the traps are set, a hunter must not comb his hair. This will cause the wild-boar or deer to slip away from the trap. Also, the hunter should not look in a mirror, for otherwise when he goes into the forest the animal will spot him.

**Figure 1**

THE UTILIZATION OF PLANT AND ANIMAL RESOURCES IN THE CONTEXT OF TULAH AND KEMALIK IDEAS

**ECONOMIC SITUATION**

**TULAH**

Plants and Animals as Food Resources *(laivuk)*

Rituals and charms to exploit and kill effectively *(pantang * and tangkal)**

**KEMALIK**

Plants and Animals as Humanized Spirits *(moyang)*

Ritual prohibition against acts of killing or exploiting *(pantang *)

**MISFORTUNE & ILLNESS**

**SHAMANISTIC SEANCES**

*Pantang:* a ritual prohibition, or taboo on food, activity or behaviour practised in times of illness, misfortune, or at certain stages in the life cycle of the individual, particularly marriage, pregnancy, and birth.

*Tangkal:* a curative spell, which normally accompanies a specific curing ritual performed by village ritual specialists or the village shaman. The term is also used for love charms and spells practised by most villagers during courtship and marriage.
immediately and bolt. When a noose trap is used for deer, the hunter should not wash his hands, as this will enable the deer to slip through the noose of the trap. Finally, the hunter should not bathe, for just as the water runs down the body, so the deer and wild-boar will run away from the trap. Here, human activities such as the removal of dirt from the body, combing one's hair or gazing into a mirror are symbolically associated with parallel activities in the animals, like escaping from the trap, slipping away from the noose and spotting the hunter in the forest. These human activities are therefore seen as triggering off a similar set of activities in the animals. These ritual prohibitions emphasize the way in which humans may use their ritual knowledge to their own advantage to procure plants and animals as food. Charms are also used in hunting game, and these are designed to use ritual knowledge to make animals submissive and obedient to the hunter. In hunting charms, the ritual powers of humans are given dominance over the mystical powers of animals. In fact, these mystical powers which animals are believed to possess and which appear in the context of kemalik ideas, are not at all brought out in the hunting charm. This may be evidenced by the following charm, used to trap mouse-deer.8

Come out of the mountain,
The entrance is open, ask to enter,
Cross the entrance, ask permission to leave,
The entrance is open, ask to enter,
Ask to enter the bangle of love.

If you do not obey, climb the mountain and you'll be denied food,
Go down the well and you'll be denied drink,
If you don't enter the bangle of love,
You'll die a death untimely.

This charm is meant to make the mouse-deer submit to the ritual powers of the hunter. Through the magical use of words, the hunter attempts to entice the mouse-deer to place its head in the noose. Here, the noose is depicted as a love bangle, an object which is normally given to a woman by her lover. The charm contains two sets of ideas, the first of which is concerned with establishing the 'hunter's power over the animal, and the second with the negative repercussions which the charm will bring to the animal should it not obey the charm. The first idea is contained in the first five lines of the charm, and the
second in the last four. The occurrence of odd and even verses or clusters of ideas is consistent with the Mak Betisek notions of numbers, according to which things which are good or promising should be represented by odd numbers, while things which are bad or unchanging should be represented by even numbers. This will be taken up again later in the discussion of shamanistic seances.

The structure of the contents of hunting charms is similar to that of love charms, which also operate on the principle of subordinating animals, and subsequently humans. It appears that to the Mak Betisek, hunting a woman is no different from hunting a wild pig. Consider the following love charm, intended to make a person obedient and submissive.

The leaf *penduduk,*" the leaf *kepayang, 10
The leaf *selaseh* 11 grows on a stone,
The more you submit the more you love,
The more desire you have for me.

The white elephant across the sea,
Chop up its hair,
Chop up its tusk,
If the white elephant can submit to me,
How much more so you.

The tiger in the deep forest,
Which is strong,
Which is brave,
If the tiger can submit and desire me,
How much more so you.

I am using the charm that makes you love,
    submit and desire me,
If it fails, you will die a death untimely,
If it succeeds, enter my body,
"Kur-way-wayt 12 ...,"
Enter my body.

The first four lines are referred to as the *bukak tangkal,* or 'the opening of the charm'. This normally consists of four lines, in accordance with the structure of Malay love verses or *pantun,* which are very popular among the Mak Betisek and from which the verse is derived. These four lines serve to indicate that the charm is concerned with
love and submission. The first two lines are referred to as *pembayang maksud* — literally "to conceal the meaning", i.e. of the verse or *pantun* — that is, they imply the message which is contained in the third and fourth lines. The potency of the charm derives from the verses which follow the first four lines — the idea concerning the establishment of one's dominance over the elephant and the tiger. It suggests that once these animals are overpowered by the spell, a man or woman will also submit to it. Significantly, in the context of *kemalik* ideas these animals are attributed with unusually strong *kemalik* powers. Generally, the charm symbolically expresses the dominance of humans over animals, and the cultural order over the natural.

It is important to note that hunting and love charms cannot in any way be employed in seances or ritual ceremonies which the spirits are said to attend. They may only be used in the context of activities relating to hunting and the gathering of food or in that of courtship and marriage. Similarly, the songs sung by the shaman during a seance cannot be sung in the mangroves or forests, or in any other situation, for fear that the person may become possessed (*cheluy kutaay*) by a plant or animal spirit.

The term *cheluy kutaay* refers to the way in which the shaman controls and masters spirits from the overworld, and directs them in the task of healing and curing a person suffering from a spirit attack.

**THE KEMALIK VIEW**

In the context of *kemalik* ideas, plants and animals are perceived to be essentially similar to humans in their physical needs and in the kind of life which they maintain. They are believed to indulge in the same kinds of practices as humans, particularly in their concern for food, shelter, privacy and recreation. It is in the context of *kemalik* ideas that the anthropomorphic notions of origins of plants and animals are reinforced. Plants and animals are said to originate from the souls of dead humans which fly into the little seedlings and the wombs of pregnant animals, on their way to the overworld. The souls of dead humans give plants and animals their life, and enable them to multiply in the same way as humans. Evidence of the human qualities of plants and animals may be derived from certain physical features which they possess. For example, certain trees are said to reveal their human origin from the red saps which they contain. These trees (of the species *Knema latifolia*) are referred to as *lok maham*, literally, "bleeding trees" — the red saps which trickle out when the trunk is slashed is associated with
human folood. The white-handed gibbon (*tembok*) is said to have been a woman, on account of the white rim of fur round its face and its white paws; these are associated with the powder made from rice paste worn by Mak Betisek women. Similarly, the Malayan pangolin (*kondok*) is believed to originate from the human after-birth. The after-birth is usually wrapped in a pandanus palm mat and buried under a tree the moment the navel cord of the infant dries. The scales of the pangolin are said to resemble the design of the woven pandanus mat in which the after-birth is wrapped. The Mak Betisek make numerous associations of this kind between humans, plants and animals. Similarly, on the level of mythology, a set of Mak Betisek myths are oriented round *kemalik* ideas of this sort. In the context of illness and injury, humans are said to be subject to spirit-attacks from plants and animals because they exploit plants and animals as food. In the context of *kemalik* ideas, all acts relating to the exploitation of plants and animals are tabooed or ritually prohibited. The symbolic continuity between human, plant and animal life is manifested in die healing rites performed during shamanistic seances. As compared with other humans, the shaman enjoys the unique position of being able to mediate and bridge the differences between the human and natural domain on the world level, and, on a higher conceptual plane, the differences between this world (*duniyak enarri*) and the overworld (represented by *duniyak tuju* and the *Ledang* mountain).

The symbolic oppositions between the human and natural domains are neutralized by die shaman's ability to master spirits from both these domains (see Figure 2). Here, these domains are conceived in terms of physical abodes — the human domain is represented by the village and die natural domain is represented by the forest, mangrove and shore. However, on another conceptual level, the animal spirit-guides are associated with the Ledang mountain and the human spirit-guides with the Seventh World. By controlling both human and nature spirits, the Mak Betisek shaman symbolically mediates between the human and animal world and, similarly, between the cultural and natural order. This reaffirms the *kemalik* ideology that humans and animals (including plants) are similar in character and form. Indeed, when the shaman summons his animal spirit-guides and coaxes other animal and plant spirits to attend the seance, he addresses them in human terms — they are conceived as respected elders, benevolent men and active players and dancers. Each animal spirit-guide has a personality of its own. Their characters are consistent with the different
The Mediatory Role of the Shaman in the Seance: The Summoning of the Spirit-Guides and Other Human and Nature Spirits

For the seance to be fully effective, it has to be held three or five nights in succession. The preparations are normally made a day in advance. Several layers of plaited coconut or nipah frutican palm leaves, called dawun moyang, are stuck against the wall. These comprise a number of set patterns or designs, which are only woven for ritual ceremonies where nature and human spirits have been invited to attend (see Figure 3). These leaves act as landmarks for the descending spirits to find their way to the world. They are symbolically important, for the success of the seance partly depends on whether these spirits manage to find their way down to the house where the seance is held. The Mak Betisek believe that since these leaves represent things typical or characteristic of the world, the spirits would know, once they see them, that they have left die overworld and entered the world. The leaves then symbolize the continuity between the world and the overworld, here referred to as duniyak lapih tuju. The use of these plaited leaves to represent things of this world is consistent with the Mak Betisek view that in the context of illness, human, plant and animal distinctions
Figure 3
SPIRIT LEAVES (DAWUN MOYANG) WOVEN FOR SHAMANISTIC SEANCES

Subak
papan
lipan
en
O
S-
a
Lembeng moyang
ïtyao

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Wacir-j w D Karim

Lembeng moyang
ïtyao
should not be made. The leaves are derived from plants, but when plaited, they represent objects commonly used by humans. For example, the *subak* represent ear-rings worn by women and traditionally by men. The *papan* and *Upan* represent forms of attire worn by both men and women; the *lembeng moyang* represents a knife used by men in hunting; while the *ityao* and *bumbe* represent bird game and fruits respectively. These collectively typify the personal adornments, garments, weapons and food which are commonly sought by the Mak Betisek.

The symbolic incorporation of animal spirits into the human world is brought out in the following *kutaay*, or spirit-calling song of the shaman:

**THE SPIRIT-CALLING SONG**

1. One call, two calls, three calls, four calls, five calls, six calls, seven calls.
2. I am not calling malicious spirits.
3. I am calling the supreme players of the seventh world.
4. Come, come to the sixth world.
5. "Piyalak-piyalu", the leaves in the ricefields rustle and crackle, like the sound of breaking twigs,
6. "Melinchao", hear the sound of die birds bathing,
7. See the blossoming flower near the stone well,
8. "Wah-wah", is that the sound of the drongo-cuckoo?
9. "Wayt-wayt", is that the sound of the green-leaf bird?
10. "Terambiyao-terambiyao", that is the sound of the monkey leaping on the tree.
11. "Telengkeng-telengkeng", that is the sound of the frog.
12. Come, come to the sixth world.
13. I am calling the original players of the seventh world.
14. I am calling our ancestors of the sevenüi world,
15. Follow the path of the seven fences, the seven crossings, the seven lemon trees, the seven wells.
16. Bring with you the dew,
17. To bathe, to heal,
18. Come, change your clothes with mine,
19. Come, change your shadow with mine,
20. Come, come and enter me.
21. Come, come to the sixth world.
22. There's a sweet fragrance in the air.
23. It is the fragrance of the antoy\textsuperscript{13} flower,
24. It is the fragrance of the kenanga\textsuperscript{14} flower,
25. It is the fragrance of the senduduk flower,
26. Come and see the young virgins bathing near the well.
27. Come, come to the sixth world.
28. Cross over the Upan string,
29. Cross over the papan string,
30. Cross over the ityao.
31. Cross over the lembeng moyang.
32. The swbak flower hangs on the wall.
33. Come, come to the sixth world.
34. Your child is sick,
35. Take a look, have a peep,
36. Your child is ailing,
37. Your child has a fever.
38. Come, change your clothes with mine,
39. Come, change your shadow with mine,
40. Come, come and enter me.

The song begins with the shaman calling the spirits of the overworld to the world. In the context of the seance, the spirits are all associated with the overworld (duniyak lapih tuju) rather than with the various worldly domains from which the shaman's spirit-guides were recruited. For this reason, they have to be invoked to descend to the world where the seance is being performed. The shaman calls the spirits by flicking a bunch of betam palm leaves, called lambaay, alternately over his shoulders. Each gesture he makes coincides with a call. He repeats the call seven times, in correspondence with the seven worlds which exist within Mak Betisek cosmology. Although the shaman is only concerned with the seventh world, which, in the context of the song, represents the overworld, he goes through the procedure of mentioning each world before calling on the spirits of the seventh world.

In the first verse (Lines 1 to 3), the contrast between the world and the overworld is brought out by the association of the former with "malicious spirits" and the latter with "supreme players". Here, all spirits of the overworld are treated as human ancestral spirits. This is probably because human ancestral spirits are associated with acts of
benevolence, in contrast to nature spirits, which are associated with spirit-attacks. The spirits of the overworld are lured to the seance by the contrasting physical forms of life which are found in this world. The song brings out the physical attraction of the world by dwelling on the sounds and movements of plants and animals in the fields and forest. Lines 5 to 11, and 22 to 26 are concerned with these forms of life and activity in the world. The emphasis appears to be on plants and animals rather than human life. Line 26 mentions virgins bathing near the well but, here again, this form of human activity is linked with the fragrance of flowers, that is, objects contained within the natural domain. Generally, then, the world is made to appear to contain all things which are earthly, in contradistinction to the overworld, which is made to contain all things which are spiritual.

The helping spirits are guided down to the world by land features which are associated with Pulao Buwah, the intermediary world, between the sixth and seventh world, which takes care of the souls of the dead. It implies that the journey from the seventh to the sixth world necessitates crossing Pulao Buwah, where the route of the seven fences, the seven crossings, the seven lemon trees and the seven wells has to be attempted.

The emphasis on the number seven here is an expression of the Mak Betisek concept of numbers whereby things which are odd are good while things which are even are bad. Generally, odd numbers symbolize events or situations changing in a positive direction. By contrast, the Mak Betisek view things which occur in even numbers as expressive of situations which are fixed, final or complete. In the context of illnesses or other kinds of misfortune, the Mak Betisek always ensure that ritual objects, items of food and the numbers of people attending the seance appear in odd rather than even numbers. This is indicative of the idea that the situation will change for the better. However, when even numbers appear in the context of illness, it suggests that no change will occur in the situation which is experienced. The illness will not get better or worse. It is meaningful that the spirit-calling song constantly draws on the number seven when objects of the overworld are mentioned. This relates to the idea that it is the objects from the overworld which will bring the cure. The optimistic note of the song is further reinforced by each set of ideas mentioned being narrated in groups of three, five or seven lines. The activities of animals, the fragrance of flowers or the actual call of the spirits from the overworld appear in clusters of three, five or seven. Each verse
comprises three, five or seven lines which contain a set of interrelated ideas. Each of these are punctuated by the actual calling of the spirits, which form a total of five lines (Lines 4, 12, 21, 27 and 33). It is only where the patient is mentioned that the verse contains four lines (Lines 34 to 37). This expresses the idea of the unchanging state of the illness of persons who have been subject to attacks from spirits.

The individual spirit leaves, or *dawun moyang*, which are mentioned in the song express the spirit's journey from Pulao Buwah to the actual scene of the seance. As mentioned earlier, they symbolize the continuity between the world and overworld on one conceptual level, and the continuity between culture and nature on another. These leaves feature alongside an elaborate, artificially constructed 'flower garden' (*taman bungak*), represented in the form of a flower vase. The 'flowers' are made from the young shoots of the *nipah frutican* palm and the coconut palm, which are cut into intricate shapes and designs and pierced through soft sticks to form flower-like sprays. The 'flower garden' is supposed to be the final destination of the spirits in this world; here, they are supposed to relax and contemplate the beauty surrounding them, before assisting the shaman in the seance. This will, it is said, make the spirits more eager or willing to assist in the seance. The 'flower garden', like the 'spirit leaves' earlier described, represents a recreative spot into which humans commonly retire. It also symbolizes the cultivated garden plots of the Mak Betisek which are contained within the village area. Here again, cultural and natural categories are interlinked, through the representation of 'natural objects' in a cultural form.

**The Extension of the Kinship Order to the Shaman's Spirit-Guides**

When the spirits finally descend to the world and make their way to the seance, they are immediately incorporated into the human world by an extension of the kinship terminology of the Mak Betisek. Once this is done, their social statuses are elevated to that of village elders. This is manifested by the kind of role behaviour maintained between the spirit-guides and the audience. Furthermore, the superior hierarchical position of the spirit-guides is reinforced by the use of Malay terms of address which are specifically reserved for members of the Malay aristocratic class and Malay royalty.

The tiger spirits are normally the first to arrive at the seance. Their presence is believed to act as a positive inducement to the other spirits to attend it, mainly because the tiger spirits are known by them to
possess extraordinary powers of healing and to predict the recovery of the patient. In fact, the shaman of Siyalang maintains that if his tiger spirit-guides do not want to attend the seance, the patient will never ever be cured, since the other spirit-guides will also refuse to attend. The importance of the tiger spirits in Mak Betisek seances is related to the idea that tigers have unusually strong kemalik powers. Consequently, since they are able to cause humans mortal harm, they are also able, once they become spirit-guides, to cure them of mortal injuries or illnesses. Note the contrasting notion of the tiger here with that contained in Mak Betisek love charms.

The arrival of the tiger spirits, moyang dempam and moyang tungal, is signified by a highly ritualized form of greeting normally accorded to Mak Betisek elders. They are addressed by kinship terms depending on their relative statuses vis-à-vis the shaman. Moyang dempam, being the grandfather of moyang tungal, is placed two generations above the shaman, while moyang tungal is placed in the same generation, but in a younger age category. The audience addresses the two spirits in exactly the same way as the shaman himself refers to them. Moyang dempam is addressed as neneek, or grandfather, while moyang tungal is addressed as aadik, or younger brother. The former, in turn, addresses the audience as kenchet, or grandchild, while the latter uses the term for elder brother, namely ke’eek, for the men in the audience and ka’uuk for the women. The wives of moyang dempam and moyang tungal are addressed as gendoy (grandmother) and aadik (younger sister) respectively. However, they seldom address the audience directly, so that corresponding kinship terms of address for the audience are hardly used.

The human spirit, menterik muyeng, is placed a generation above the shaman. It is addressed by the term ibah, which is normally used to address one’s father’s or mother’s brother, irrespective of age. His wife is addressed as gomok, or aunt. Moyang menterik muyeng, in turn, addresses the audience as kenon, or child. Moyang chulao and kepah are placed in the same generation as the shaman and, like moyang tungal, in a younger age category. They are addressed as aadik, and in turn address members of the female audience as ka’uuk (elder sister) and members of the male audience as ke’eek (elder brother).

The respective statuses of the tiger spirit-guides are elevated by the use of the Malay terminology reserved for members of the Malay aristocracy and royalty. When they are called upon to eat, the audience uses the term santap instead of nachah, despite the fact that the latter
term is normally used by the Mak Betisek when an invitation to eat is being extended. The term *santap* emphasizes the superior status of the tiger spirits in relation to the audience. The spirit-guides, in turn, use the common term *nachah* when they invite members of the audience to join them in their meal. This is an attempt to differentiate between the relative statuses of the tiger spirit-guides and the audience. Another term which is commonly used is the Malay term *mengadap*, which refers to a wish to be granted an audience by persons of noble rank. During the seance, the audience tends to use this term instead of the Mak Betisek word *kahey*, which is used when a request is to be made. Both these terms *santap* and *mengadap* are consistently used throughout the seance by members of the audience. Generally, then, the spirit-guides and the audience are differentiated by a ranking system where humans are placed in a hierarchically lower position than animal spirit-guides. In this way, the spirit-guides are symbolically integrated into the human world and, like the shaman, made to enjoy an elevated position within it.

During the seance, the mediatory function of the shaman is also brought out by the way in which he interchanges his physical appearance and behaviour between those of a man and a tiger. When he is possessed by his tiger spirits, he puts on the attire of a titled elder. This emphasizes the 'humanizing' aspect of the seance, where the tiger is represented as a man. During this time, the possessed shaman wears a skirt, sash and headgear made from the plaited leaves of coconut shoots. These garments are similar to those worn by titled elders in the early days, before cloth was used for daily wear. The garments are made according to the *papan* and *Upam* design mentioned earlier.

Generally, when the shaman is possessed by his tiger spirit-guides, the kind of behaviour which he shows is essentially human. However, when this state of possession is about to end, the kind of behaviour displayed by the shaman is animal-like — that of a tiger. This is also manifest when the shaman is possessed by his other animal spirit-guides. It suggests that the tiger and the other animals forming the shaman's spirit-guides are humanized only in the context of the seance, but resume their animal state when they leave it. This supports the argument that the symbolic continuity between humans, plants and animals, and culture and nature, is relevant only in contextual terms. When the shaman performs a dance after being possessed by his tiger spirits, he clearly avoids movements like leaping, jumping and shrugging, so that animal-like mannerisms are not shown. The shaman maintains...
a slow, steady pace in his dancing, making sure that his hand and foot movements are in perfect symmetry with one another. When the right hand is raised, the left foot is raised at the same time, and this alternate raising of the hands and feet is consistently maintained throughout the dance. However, the end state of possession is expressed by movements which are both vigorous and uncoordinated. It appears that during the seance, animals as spirit-guides are believed to have mystical powers which are more effective and potent than those possessed by humans. By incorporating human features and forms into animal spirit-guides, such forms of mystical power may be positively directed to cure people from illness.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Mak Betisek are adapted to a mangrove ecology which allows them to maintain an extremely varied economic system, one which is dually orientated to the land and the sea. For this reason, the Mak Betisek are not only active hunters and gatherers of the lowland rain-forests and mangroves but also keen fishermen and sedentary agriculturists. Their preoccupation with these different forms of economic activity is reinforced by a pragmatic view of the natural environment — tulah ideas stress the separatdon of the human world from the plant and animal world and support the notion of plants and animals as customary sources of food for humans. On the other hand, the constant occurrence of illnesses and injuries amongst adults and children render an appeal to beliefs expressing the similarities between humans, plants and animals, and the mystical dangers inherent in acts of exploitation of important natural resources necessary. Significantly, it is in the context of kemalik beliefs that plant and animal anthropomorphism are given great importance. Thus, the way in which the human world and the plant and animal world are at some times set apart and opposed and at other times conjoined, is dependent on the kind of ritual situation at a given moment in time. I maintain that the tulah and kemalik ideas are only conceptually meaningful when seen in terms of the appropriate set of ritual activities of which they are part. Kemalik ideas of plants and animals are ignored when economic activities are performed. In the same way, tulah ideas are not given much importance in the context of misfortune and suffering. This suggests that tulah and kemalik beliefs are mutually exclusive to each other. As individuals move from one sphere of ritual activity

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to another, corresponding changes are manifested in the content of the ideology relating to plants and animals. It may be said that the structure of Mak Betisek beliefs concerning plants and animals is capable of adjusting and accommodating to different kinds of ritual situations. By giving emphasis to time differences and situational variations in ritual behaviour, anthropologists interested in studying symbolic systems may gain a clearer perspective on the rules whereby such systems operate. The dynamic and contextual aspects of symbols show the adjustment processes which take place on the cognitive level. In the long term, these adjustment processes would be capable of transforming the symbolic system gradually, in line with changes in the physical and social environment.

NOTES

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2 This definition closely follows that of V. Turner (1967). He defines a symbol as "the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour, it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context"; see V. Turner (1967), p. 14.

3 This viewpoint is similar to her earlier assumptions on concepts of pollution and the avoidance of dirt. In Purity and Danger (1966), she argues that such concepts reinforce the existing ideas and institutions which are contained within a particular society.

4 The Mak Betisek (meaning "people with scales") are more commonly known as Besisi or Mah Meri. The former term, Besisi, used by earlier writers such as Skeat and Blagden (1906) and Evans (1923), is unsatisfactory, for it does not phonetically represent the Mak Betisek word to which it corresponds. In their own language, the word "with scales" is betisek rather than besisi. In the Mak Betisek language, the term Mah Meri literally means "people of the forest". This term, however, is even less acceptable, for the Mak Betisek use it to refer to all the existing groups of aborigines found in Peninsular Malaysia. They use this term when they wish to distinguish the aboriginal groups as a whole from the other ethnic groups found in Malaysia, namely the Malays, Chinese, Indians and Europeans.

5 The term 'ritual' is used to refer to acts which are symbolically distinctive from and expressive of, the cultural system of the Mak Betisek. This definition of 'ritual' follows the one made by Leach (1954) in his study of the Kachin. In that study, Leach describes 'ritual' as a "symbolic statement which 'says' something about the individuals involved in the action". In this sense, activities which have economic or political functions are as much forms of ritual
behaviour as activities which have sacred functions. Possibly, the amount of symbolic statement one can make for secular acts may be less than that for acts which are sacred, but the two types of acts nevertheless constitute different forms of ritual action.

A mud lobster, of the species *thalassina anomala*. It burrows subterranean canals in clayey soils and forms earth mounds along the river banks, when it surfaces on rainy days. These earth mounds are a striking physical feature of the mangroves.

Significantly, the *tulah* conceptualization of plants and animals as cooked food and humans as non-food and raw reveals the same kinds of binary categories as those found in Bororo and Ge myths. However, here these conceptual parallels apply only in the *tulah* context. In the *kemalik* context, these binary categories are not manifested, for plants and animals are viewed in the same way as humans, i.e. non-food and raw.

This charm is also found in different versions among the neighbouring aboriginal communities, the Temuans and the Malays.

*Penduduk*, of the species *Melastoma polyanthum*, also referred to as *senduduk*.

*Kepayang*, of the species *Pangium edule*.

*Selaseh*, of the species *Ocimum sanctum*.

The term represents the calling of the soul. The birth-name of the person whose soul is being called is mentioned at the end of the line. The soul is symbolically perceived as a bird, hence the term is similar to that used to call birds or chickens, "Kurr". The term is also widely used by the Malays, who say, "Kurr semangat" ("Come, soul", or "come back, soul") when someone is shocked or startled, suggesting that the soul takes flight in such situations. Among the Mak Betisek, soul-captivity is crucial to the success of a love charm, and the calling of the soul of the person being charmed suggests his or her ultimate vulnerability.

Antoy, unidentified.

*Kenanga*, of the species *Canangium odoratum*; the *antoy, kenanga* and *senduduk* are extremely fragrant flowers, and are commonly used as personal adornments. They are also associated with benevolent ancestral spirits.

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