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BASANGLIANG: TRADITIONAL HEALING THROUGH POSSESSION AMONG THE KATINGAN NGAJU OF SOUTHERN BORNEO

Junita Arnel, *Scientific Collaborator*
Museo delle Culture, Lugano, Switzerland

and

Paolo Maiullari, *Curator*
Museo delle Culture, Lugano, Switzerland
(telangkah@bluewin.ch)

Introduction

One characteristic of the Katingan, a Ngaju subgroup of southern Borneo, is the presence of female mediums who during healing ceremonies enter a state of possession and cure patients through the intervention of spirit-beings who are believed to possess them during these ceremonies. The social status of these healers is ambiguous: on one hand, they are valued for fighting disease; on the other, they are feared, owing to their constant contact with it. Generally speaking, such respect as they enjoy is offset by a sense of unease caused by the sacred context in which they operate and the peculiar formative experience – linked to a temporary state of illness – which has brought many of them to practice as healers.

In this contribution we propose to analyze the circumstances of healing through the use of possession among the Katingan in the wider context of traditional Ngaju medicine, concentrating especially on some key ideological concepts and specific aspects of Ngaju medical practice. As indicated by the scant published literature on the subject, this is a little-known area of research. Among those who have devoted some attention to the subject are Johannes Salilah and Arnoud H. Klokke (1998), Sian Jay (1989), Hans Schärer (1946, 1938), Carl Lumholtz (1920), August Hardeland (1859), and Carl Schwaner (1853-1854). Up until now, Johannes Salilah and Sian Jay are the two authors who have provided most of the published material available on possession healing. The former, Salilah, was a district head of Ngaju customary law (*damang*) and a priest (*basir*)¹. He is best-known in the South Borneo literature as the main informant of Dr. H. Schärer and the principal source of the ritual texts relating to Ngaju funeral rites which Schärer edited (1966) (see Baier 1974:57). He came from Pangkoh, in the lower Kahayan River area, a traditional center of Kahayan language and culture. Kahayan is the dominant Ngaju cultural tradition and the Kahayan language is considered by most

1 Damang Johannes Salilah (d. 1989) was born in 1892. He was a Ngaju Dayak priest who converted to Christianity in 1930. That same year he began working as a medical assistant at the Protestant Mission hospital in Kuala Kapuas. During the Japanese occupation and the years that immediately followed, with the growth of the Kaharingan religion under Tjilik Riwtu, he went back to his original religion and continued to perform as a priest in Ngaju ceremonies. He was the supreme *adat* judge of Kabupaten Kapuas in Central Kalimantan until 1971. Around 1981 he converted to Islam, but by the end of the 1980s he re-embraced Christianity and died shortly after his last conversion, in 1989 (Baier, 1974:57; 2007:75; personal communication).

Ngaju to be their lingua franca. The first written version of Ngaju religious traditions (*Panaturan*) was published in the *sangiang* sacred language by the Great Synod of Kaharingan priests held in Palangkaraya in 1973.² This work is dominated by origin myths from the middle course of the Kahayan River (Baier 2007:568). Even the second edition of the *Panaturan* (1996), which was slightly adapted to embrace other Ngaju Dayak traditions and formally agreed upon by a committee of chiefs representing different Kaharingan communities, retains much the same bias. Kahayan myths differ from those of the Katingan River. While Katingan priests (*pisor*) use *Panaturan* notions when dealing with outside authorities, when it comes to local traditions, ceremonies and rituals they use notions particular to their own region, which differ especially in terms of cultural traits, such as mythology, ritual practices, and the arts (Arnel 2008:136; Stöhr 1959).

Salilah's material, contained in the volume *Traditional Medicine among the Ngaju of Central Kalimantan* (Klokke 1998), is a major source for the study of Ngaju healing. Originally written in the Ngaju language in the 1930s, it was translated into English, edited, and published posthumously by Arnoud H. Klokke. Salilah's account has the virtue of bringing together a vast amount of material relating mostly to the healing of physical ailments, such as the curative properties of plants and medical prescriptions; it also describes the causes of illness and documents ceremonies performed for spiritual healing by the use of possession. It should be noted, however, that when Salilah describes ceremonies characterized by possession, he is referring to a practice called *badewa* which is marked by strong Malayo-Javanese cultural influences. The healers are men and they make use of deities of an extra-Kaharingan pantheon referred to locally as *dewa*. When these healers are possessed by *dewa* spirits, they frequently speak in Malay (Klokke 1998:255). As Salilah indicated, in many Ngaju areas, by the time he was writing, *badewa* healing had supplanted by several generations an indigenous ceremonial form called *basangiang* in which female healers used the sacred *sangiang* language to appeal to local divinities and spirits (Klokke 1998:289). However, in the Kahayan area, Salilah's region of origin, along the upper course of the river, as well as in the neighboring upper Rungan River area, there appears to have been an exception. Here Jay (1989:39) describes healing ceremonies involving possession performed predominantly by female mediums called *tukang sangiang* that appeal to Kaharingan deities and spirits, although she does not name these ceremonies.

To this day *basangiang* healing ceremonies are those that are most frequently performed in the Katingan River area. Here healing practices are still under female jurisdiction and the few men who practice *basangiang* ceremonies dress as women in order to do so. Katingan healers, called *tukang sangiang*, are descended from the *uluh balian*, the married women and mothers who were historically responsible for conducting all community ceremonies among the Ngaju, including the most important of these, the *tiwah* secondary burial ceremonies.³ The present-day *tukang sangiang* healers in

2 *Panaturan* is the official holy book of the Ngaju Kaharingan religion. Its complete name is *Panaturan: Tamparan Taluh Handiai* which means 'The Origins: The sources of all being.'

3 In the Ngaju language, *balian* was the original name for all religious ceremonies. Hence, priestesses were called *uluh balian*, 'those who led the *balian*,' or *bawin balian*, 'the women who

the Katingan area are what remains of the former *uluh balian* class of priestesses. This connection is clear to the *tukang sangiang* whom we interviewed for this study and is also acknowledged by local Kaharingan priests (*pisor*), although the latter are reluctant to speak openly about it. This *uluh balian* origin of the *tukang sangiang* accounts for the fact that they and the priests continue to use the same sacred language. This point, until now, has been largely ignored in the anthropological literature. In practice, *tukang sangiang* healers are *uluh balian* priestesses who have been downgraded and reduced in status to marginal religious practitioners. The fact that they still perform a religious role, if only peripheral, is probably thanks to the fact that their healing knowledge is thought to be fundamental to the well-being of the Katingan community. As documented by Schwaner (1854:76), Schärer (1963:57), Lumholtz (1920: 189), and Baier (2008:50), Katingan priestesses in the past, unlike *uluh balian* in other Ngaju areas, never offered mere entertainment such as singing or prostitution.

As far as we have been able to ascertain from our fieldwork, the main difference between *basangiang* and *badewa* ceremonies concerns the spirit beings appealed to. In the case of *badewa* ceremonies these are said to belong generally to the *wayang* stories. Thus, healers in the Katingan area, using *dewas*, turn mainly to Batara Guru.

Our research, which began by documenting the activities of the great-aunt of one of the co-authors (Junita Arnel), the latter a Ngaju who speaks the local language as well as the sacred *sangiang* language, turned out to be especially complex for three primary reasons. First, our research concerns a class of initiated women who guard a knowledge that has secret aspects; second, healers are set apart from the rest of society due to perceptions regarding their ambiguous social position; and third, external pressures have, in the course of time, resulted in the exclusion of the *uluh balian* from the wider range of Ngaju ceremonies.

The information gathered in the field and presented in this paper derives primarily from interviews conducted between 2007 and 2015 along the middle course of the Katingan River with three women healers, one male healer, and three priests. Other people interviewed include patients about to undergo healing ceremonies, previous patients and their relatives. The results of these interviews allow us to sketch out what is a currently shared outlook on the subject of *basangiang* healing. We will begin by introducing readers to the meaning of the term *basangiang* itself and to its historical significance. We will then explain the Katingan concept of *semenget* or 'life force,' which is fundamental

led the *balian*.' In the past these *uluh balian* priestesses were responsible for all Ngaju ceremonies, including the *tiwah*. In some cases, as with the *tiwah*, they were assisted by other ritual specialists who performed more restricted ritual functions. According to our research and the field data that we collected, the most important of these ritual specialists were the *uluh hanteran* (*pisor*), who during the *tiwah* assisted the *uluh balian* in accompanying the soul of the deceased to the Upperworld. While in the past their role was to help the *uluh balian*, today the *pisor* (and *basir*) are the official priests of the Kaharingan religion. Regarding the *basir*, these men, dressing as women, acted as *uluh balian* in the past. *Basir* is a Ngaju term referring to infertility, metaphorically comparing the priests to infertile paddy (*parai basir*): hence *basir* are infertile "women" because they are, in fact, transvestite men, who, being men, cannot bear children. Therefore, "infertile" should be interpreted in a cultural sense, not a physical one. *Basir* are not necessarily infertile or impotent men: we should rather refer to them as non-productive "women" (Arnel, 2011:64-65). Today *basir* dress as men like the *pisor*.



Photo 1: A healer dancing during a *basangiang* while possessed by a *sangiang* spirit. Behind her, hanging from the ceiling, is a *jamban sangiang* (axis-mundi) made out of paddy. Katingan River area, 1986.

for sustaining interactions with spirit-beings during *basangiang* ceremonies. We will then define Katingan concepts of illness from an emic perspective and present a description of local healers. In conclusion, we will briefly describe the unfolding of a *basangiang* ceremony and identify the deities and other spirit-beings involved in healing. An historical account of the cultural context of Ngaju healing, including the progressive exclusion of female healers from the religious sphere, will be the focus of a separate paper which we are currently writing.

The meaning of *basangiang*

The traditional Ngaju practice aimed at healing an illness of spiritual origin through the use of possession is called *basangiang*, which translated means, literally, 'doing *sangiang*,' or 'interacting with the *sangiang*' (Photo 1). In the Kaharingan religion, the Creator, Ranying, is said to have created seven primordial divinities before he created human beings. Collectively, these divinities are called Raja Uju Hakanduang.⁴ These divinities are the right hand of Ranying and embody his seven powers. One of these seven is Putir Silong Tamanang, the Master of Healing. Later Ranying created the first man, named Manyamei Tunggul Garing Janjahunan Laut (or Manyamei) and the first woman, named Kameluh Putak Bulau Janjulen Karangan Limut Batu Kamasan Tambun (or Kameluh). From their union, Manyamei and Kameluh had three sons: Raja Sangen, Raja Sangiang, and Raja Bunu. The last of the three, Raja Bunu, is said to be the founding ancestor of the Ngaju, while the *sangiang* spirit beings are said to be the descendants of the other two brothers, Raja Sangen and Raja Sangiang. Hence, the term *sangiang* refers

⁴ These divinities, each with different powers, are said to have been created by Ranying at the same time. In Ngaju, *uju* means 'seven.'

to the descendants of the Raja Sangen and Raja Sangiang, both of whom are described as the brothers of Raja Bunu, the ancestor of the Ngaju.

The *sangiang* who are summoned during *basangiang* healing ceremonies are divided into two categories. These are at times hard to distinguish with precision, but they are valued differently. The first and most important group is made up of *sangiang* spirits who inhabit the Upperworld and who, as the descendants of Raja Sangen and Raja Sangiang, are believed to be related to the Ngaju, although these spirit-beings have never lived anywhere else but in the Upperworld. Ties of kinship with these Upperworld *sangiang* are affirmed through mythic genealogies called *timang* that are orally transmitted and recited during ceremonies by priests and *tukang sangiang* in the *sangiang* sacred language.⁵ Although the *sangiang* are related to human beings, they are not regarded as the direct ancestors of the present-day Ngaju, who are, instead, descendants of Raja Bunu. In general, the *sangiang* are spirit-beings of a human type, although their nature and supra-human powers ally them closely with the Upperworld divinities.⁶ The second category consists of *sangiang* who are not Upperworld beings, but whose existence, instead, is confined to the earthly realm. This group includes “near” ancestors, especially powerful people whose spiritual powers made them sacred. In local ideology, these people are said to have been able to dissolve themselves and so became spirit-beings without really dying. They are considered less prestigious than the Upperworld *sangiang*, as they are less noble and less powerful.

Stories of the mythical ancestors of the Upperworld are told in origin myths describing the creation of the earth and the distribution of human beings throughout the world. The human ancestors, as we have noted, are descended directly from Raja Bunu, the mythical founding ancestor of the Ngaju, who came down from the sky to live temporarily on earth. When he returned to the Upperworld, he left his mortal descendants on earth with the promise that they would one day join him in the Upperworld. Raja Bunu was one of the three sons of the first human couple. His two brothers, Raja Sangen and Raja Sangiang, with their respective descendants, have always lived in the Upperworld and make up, as noted above, the Upperworld *sangiang*. It was the wish of Ranying, the Creator, that mortal humans should be helped in their daily lives by their *sangiang* relatives, whose primary task is therefore to intervene when summoned.⁷

According to the Panaturan, Ranying created a village called Lewu Bukit Batu Nindan Tarung Kereng Liang Bantilung Nyaring in the third level (out of seven) of the sky as the home for the first human couple. The first man was called Manyamei Tunggul Garing Janjahunan Laut and the first woman, Kameluh Putak Bulau Janjulen Karangan

5 The ordinary term for “genealogy” in the Katingan language is *jereh*. However, the mythic genealogies that are narrated during rituals are called *timang*.

6 An example of an Upperworld *sangiang* is Harimaung Darun Bawan, a feline-like deity referred to later in this paper. The Upperworld, or *langit*, is inhabited by both “divinities,” such as Putir Silong Tamanang, as well as by the Upperworld *sangiang*. Each of these various spirit-beings inhabits a separate settlement/village (*levu*), each located in a different part of the Upperworld.

7 It should be noted that not only *sangiang* are called by the *tukang sangiang* during *basangiang* ceremonies, but also other Upperworld and Underworld divinities, most notably Putir Silong Tamanang and Jata. Thus the spirit beings with whom these female healers interact are not confined solely to the *sangiang*.

Limut Batu Kamasan Tambun. As already noted, they had three sons: Raja Sangen, Raja Sangiang, and Raja Bunu. Raja Sangen had nine children, Raja Sangiang eight, and Raja Bunu and his wife Kameluh Tanteluh Petak had, to begin with, also eight. After having these eight children, Raja Bunu and Kameluh Tanteluh Petak left their upperworld village at Lewu Bukit Batu Nindang Tarung and traveled to the earth, to a place known in the Panaturan tradition as Pantai Danum Kalunen.⁸ In their journey to the earth, Raja Bunu and his family were ordered by Ranying to stop in a village called Lewu Bukit Tambak Raja located at the entry to the Door of the Sky (Tumbang Lawang Langit). Here, they stayed for a time before they continued down to earth. During this time they had another six children, making 14 children in all.

Myths tell that Raja Bunu received his wife, Kameluh Tanteluh Petak, as a gift from Ranying (see Arnel 2008). She was presented in the form of a statue fashioned from earth. Raja Bunu asked Ranying for life-giving water in order to bring the statue to life. But, three times Raja Bunu lost the water of life, the third time because he was tricked by a malevolent spirit called Angui who disguised himself as Ranying. At last, Angui persuaded Raja Bunu to let him animate the statue by capturing the wind to use to give breath to the statue; gathering water to give it blood and transforming the earth into flesh. Eventually, the Creator decided to send Raja Bunu to the earth for an undefined period of time. He also established that Raja Bunu and his descendants would remain immortal for nine generations, after which time, starting from the tenth generation, they would be mortal, but would return to the Upperworld following death provided they performed the *tiwah*. Before Raja Bunu and his descendants departed from the Upperworld for earth, Ranying carried out a *tiwah suntu* (model *tiwah*), which was to provide the model for all *tiwah* to be held on earth. Taking part in the performance of the *tiwah suntu* were the descendants of Raja Sangen and Raja Sangiang. Later, knowledge of how to perform the ceremony was transmitted from the Upperworld to the Ngaju by a group of deities called the Bawi Ayah who descended to earth in order to convey this knowledge. The Ngaju women who learned from the Bawi Ayah how to perform the *tiwah* and other ceremonies were called the *bawin balian* (women [*bawin*] who led the ceremony [*balian*]) or *uluh balian* (those who led the ceremony). In this way, the mortal descendants of Raja Bunu (i.e. the ancestors of the present-day Ngaju), by following these teachings, have been able to enact the journey back to the Upperworld, returning as souls to an ancestral village that the Ngaju call Lewu Tatau.

With death the journey of the Ngaju on earth comes to an end, and they begin on a path which, through the performance of the *tiwah*, leads the deceased's soul to its new home in the village of Lewu Tatau. The "soul" referred to in this context is called the *salumpuk liau* in the *sangiang* language.⁹ At the same time, a second soul associated with the mortal flesh and bones of the deceased, called the *liau balawan panjang ganan*

8 Its full name is Pantai Danum Kalunen, Luwuk Kampungan Bunu, Lewu Injam Tinggang Rundung Nasih Nampui Burung.

9 Prior to death, this soul is called the *salumpuk entang*, but since the context here is the *tiwah* ceremony, the name is changed to *salumpuk liau*. Similarly, while alive, the second soul associated with the flesh and bones is called the *salumpuk bereng*, but after death it is called the *liau balawan panjang ganan bereng*.

bereng, remains on earth until the performance of the *tiwah*. During the *tiwah* burial ceremony these two souls are sent to the Upperworld separately, but once they are there, they are reunited, as the deceased starts its new life in Lewu Tatau. Since, for mortals, access to the Upperworld occurs only by way of death, the earthly *sangiang* described earlier, who become spirit-beings without dying, remain forever bound to the earthly world.

The term *basangiang* refers, in the final analysis, to ‘interacting with spirit beings,’ not only, in the literal sense, with *sangiang*, but also with other divinities who are considered superior to both kinds of *sangiang* spirits. These divinities were created first, before all other spirit-beings. For the purposes of the *basangiang*, the most important of all is Putir Silong Tamanang, the Master of Healing, who lives in the most prestigious part of the sky, while the second is Jata, who is the principal divinity of the Underworld. These two divinities are both female. During *basangiang* healing ceremonies, Jata is called on by the *tukang sangiang* to assist in healing illnesses, while in everyday life, Jata may be given offerings for protection and well-being. Offerings are placed on a wooden altar dedicated to her that is built near the house.¹⁰

The possession healing that occurs during *basangiang* ceremonies involves interaction with many kinds of spirits and divinities whose capacity for healing is recognized by the Ngaju. This elasticity probably derives from the socio-cultural changes that are now transforming Katingan society. In this context the term *basangiang* appears to have replaced a more ancient term, *jaya*, which was previously used to describe similar healing practices involving possession. The term *jaya* is translated by Hardeland (who spelled it, *djaja*) as ‘powerful’ (*kräftig*) or ‘medicinal’ (*Arzneien*). Hardeland also added that in the *sangiang* language *djaja* becomes *mait*, meaning ‘effective’ (1859: 98). According to our findings, which differ slightly from those of Hardeland, in the past Ngaju healing ceremonies were called *balian jaya* (ceremony [*balian*] for healing [*jaya*]) in the *sangiang* language. Concerning the *sangiang* word *mait*, it means ‘powerful’ or ‘proven effective beyond doubt.’¹¹ A distinction that is still clear to those we interviewed is the source from which possessing spirits are drawn. *Jaya* refers specifically to interaction with Upperworld beings. This differentiates it from *basangiang* where the involvement of minor earth-bound spirit-beings is also called for. Although our research on *jaya* is still ongoing, we can say, based on the information we have gathered so far, that in the past, *jaya* ceremonies were held by *uluh balian* priestesses, who were entrusted with

10 Altars dedicated to Jata are permanent structures; families place offerings in them even if no one is ill. At the moment, we are collecting further data on the role of the Underworld spirits in Katingan healing.

11 The Panaturan sheds further light upon the meaning of the term *mait*. Here, in the last important event in the story of Manyamei and Kameluh, the first human couple and the parents of Raja Bunu, as related in the Panaturan, they leave their family and village at Bukit Batu Nindan Tarung and move to a new village called Batang Danum Rasau Kaput (still in the Upperworld). In this new village, Ranying changed their names. Manyamei became Mangku Amat Sangen and Kameluh, Nyai Jaya Sangiang. At the same time Ranying provided them with a powerful medicine that can revive even the dead, which they then use to cure illness. In the *sangiang* language this medicine is called *garu bahari*, *santi mait*, meaning ‘powerful medicine proven to be effective’ (Panaturan 2002:176).

directing all the ceremonies of what is now the Kaharingan tradition. Today's healers, known as *tukang sangiang* or 'experts in *sangiang*,' are their descendants.

With their progressive loss of ceremonial power, marked by their exclusion from the *tiwah*, the *uluh balian* have continued to practice in other areas of ritual. In most of the Kahayan River area, they have progressively lost ground in ceremonial matters, as documented by Salilah (Klokke 1998:285, 289). In the Katingan area, they still perform several ceremonies that are not considered to be within the area of competence of the priests who perform *tiwah* ceremonies. They also perform some rituals that priests also practice, particularly those that are an integral part of (almost) all Ngaju ceremonies.

The kinship ties that exist between humans and the spirit-beings invoked during *basangiang* ceremonies are affirmed through the recitation of *timang*, origin myths recounted in the *sangiang* sacred language that elegize these spirit-beings so as to obtain their favor, thus persuading them to participate in ceremonies meant to help human beings. This practice of reciting the *timang* has been described mainly in connection with the priests' performance of the famous *tiwah* ceremonies, but it is also done by the *tukang sangiang* during *basangiang* healing ceremonies. Healers thus interact with the divinities and *sangiang* in the same way as the priests do and in doing so, they make use of the same sacred language, known as *bahasa sangiang*. The opening of a ceremony begins with a *tawur* rite. *Tawur* means, literally, 'asperging,' i.e., 'sprinkling' or 'casting into the air.' By casting grains of rice into the air the priest or the healer acts to awaken the seven rice deities and send messages to the intended deities. While casting these grains, the priest or healer chants the *timang*. These chanted *timang* are highly formalized and the act of throwing rice skyward as they are being chanted symbolizes the journey of the seven rice deities as they carry human messages to the divinities. In the *tawur*, these messages are anticipated by reciting different *timang* origin myths, each one elegizing a different divinity. The first to be called are the rice deities, as their function is to build a bridge to connect the earthly world to the heavenly one. The other deities or spirits summoned depend upon the nature of the ceremony being performed and its objectives (Arneld 2011:65).

The "life force" of the body: *semenget*

According to Katingan myths of human creation, the soul is made up of two components that were given to human beings, first to Raja Bunu's wife, by Ranying, the Creator. As noted before, these myths tell that, in the Upperworld, Ranying gave Raja Bunu an inanimate statue made of earth to be his wife. Raja Bunu was deceived by a malevolent trickster called Angui into allowing Angui to give life to the statue instead of Ranying. However, although the statue was alive, it was unable to speak. Ranying then helped Raja Bunu by giving the statue the ability to talk by blowing wind into it through the anterior cranial fontanel. As a result, after having received Ranying's "breath of wind" the earthen body gained "complete life" (i.e., not only animation but also consciousness). But since it was Angui who animated the earthen body with life instead of Ranying, Raja Bunu's descendants, after the passage of nine generations, were destined to become mortal. Since then, the descendents of Raja Bunu (i.e., the Ngaju) are able to return to the Upperworld only after having first died in the earthly world.

The “breath of wind” and the “earthen body” given by Ranying to Raja Bunu’s wife make up the two primary components of the human self. The “breath of wind” is considered to be the principal soul and is called *salumpuk entang*. But the body, too, is animated by a soul called *balawang panjang ganan bereng* (or *salumpuk bereng*). *Salumpuk entang* and *salumpuk bereng* are the two components which join together to form a living human soul, which in the Katingan tradition is known as the *semenget*. In this case, there is no difference between the everyday and sacred language; in Katingan this soul is generally called the *semenget*; whereas in colloquial Ngaju it is referred to as the *hambaruan*. For the Katingan Ngaju it is the *semenget* that is thought to give power to the human body. Hence, we describe it here as the human life force.

The *sangiang* word for “soul” in general is *salumpuk* (or *salumpok*) (Baier 1987:153) but in the chants of the priests, different types of soul are usually specified. As already noted, the principal soul is called the *salumpuk entang*, while the body soul is called the *balawang panjang ganan bereng*. In the Panaturan it is said that the *balawang panjang ganan bereng* consists of the souls of the cornea (*lumpuk mata*), flesh (*biti bereng*), blood (*isi daha*), hair (*pupus*), bones and muscles (*karahang tulang*). In summary, all of these souls together – *salumpuk entang* and *balawang panjang ganan bereng* – make up the soul of a living human being which is called *hambaruan* in everyday Ngaju. Upon death, this living soul becomes the soul of the deceased which is now called *liau* in both colloquial Ngaju and in the *sangiang* sacred language. However, more specifically, in the *sangiang* language the *salumpuk entang* becomes the *salumpuk liau*, while the *balawang panjang ganan bereng* becomes the *liau balawan panjang ganan bereng*. When a person dies, it is believed that the *salumpuk liau* quits the body and goes to a peripheral part of the Upperworld to await the performance of a *tiwah*, which then sends it to its upperworld home at Lewu Tatau. The *liau balawan panjang ganan bereng* also quits the body, but stays on earth while awaiting a *tiwah* ceremony. During the *tiwah* the two souls are sent separately to the Upperworld, where, upon their arrival, they are reunited.

A person’s loss of vigor is associated with a weakening of the *semenget*. Consequently, as a person’s physical condition worsens, his level of life force correspondingly decreases. A null level of *semenget* results in death (Arneld 2011:66-67). *Semenget* is therefore believed to be an indicator of one’s strength, which varies according to an individual’s condition independently of his or her age. However, *semenget* may be strengthened by means of a homonymous ritual, called the *semenget*, which is performed to call back and so reinvigorate the life force, especially for those who have completed or are about to embark on a risky endeavour. For example, someone who has just returned from a long journey may be in danger of losing his *semenget* because it has been weakened due to the physical rigors of travel. The goal of the *semenget* rite is to reinforce the *semenget* and so to reinvigorate the body (the idea is that if the soul is strong, the body will be strong, too). This rite is not always performed by a priest (*pisor*) or a *tukang sangiang* healer, but may also be conducted by an elder provided he has the ability to call back the life force. In this case, when performed by a layman, the *semenget* is done without a *tawur* and is conducted in the colloquial language. Otherwise, on ceremonial occasions, either when performed during a *basangiang* or as part of another ceremony, the *semenget* rite is opened with a *tawur*, which, for the Katingan, can only be performed by a priest or a



Photo 2: A bowl filled with rice on which a white sachet containing the *behas semenget* has been placed. Pieces of meat wrapped in betel leaves and rolled cigarettes constitute offerings to the divinities, while metal coins function to strengthen the soul of the person for whom the *semenget* ritual is being held, so that his or her soul becomes as strong as metal. Katingan River area, 2010 (Photo: Paolo Maiullari).

tukang sangiang.

When performed at the beginning of a *semenget* ritual, the *tawur* is addressed to the seven rice deities which are invited to travel to the Creator, Ranying, and request life force for the patient. Thus the seven deities go before Ranying who gives them life force which they then transmit to those who need it. During the ritual, a small white cloth sachet containing seven perfectly whole grains of rice (*behas semenget*) is prepared for the patient. These rice grains are associated with the seven rice deities, the purveyors of life force. The *behas semenget* is placed in a rice-filled bowl on which are also arranged offerings for the rice deities (Photo 2). The actions performed during the ritual repeat and evoke what is occurring on a spiritual level: i.e., the healer (if the *semenget* ritual is being performed during a *basangiang* ceremony) brings the bowl close to the cranial fontanel of the person being treated and blows over it three times, invoking the life force. The healer then blows over the sachets containing the rice grains representing the rice deities and on the patient's fontanel in order to put back or recharge the *semenget* received from the Ranying (Arnel 2011: 66-68). At this point the *semenget* is strengthened and any endeavor the person may wish to undertake may now begin in earnest.

Katingan healers are believed to possess strong *semenget* which allow them to withstand the physical and spiritual pressures they undergo during *basangiang* ceremonies. While in a possession state, healers are at great risk of losing their *semenget*. Thus, they must guard their *semenget*, carefully keeping it always close at hand.

Diseases of the body and mind

Tukang sangiang healers clearly distinguish between two kinds of illnesses: those that are body-related (what we describe here as “physical illnesses”) and those that are mind-related (what we refer to here as “mental illnesses”).

Physical Illnesses

The range of physical illness is vast and includes pathologies that manifest themselves in a series of more or less serious health problems, ranging from bodily pains caused by fatigue, inflammations, rheumatism, broken bones, infectious diseases (and so on) to more serious forms of illness, some of which may be difficult or impossible to diagnose. Theoretically, all body-related illness have one or the other of two causes. The first is what we would call a “natural” cause, i.e. the illness originates from a condition causing physical dysfunction or pain without any metaphysical trigger (without the intervention of malevolent spirit-beings). The second is a “spirit-related” cause, i.e. dysfunction or pain caused by the actions of malevolent spirits. Spirit-related illness is believed to happen for different reasons, for example because a spirit is annoyed and therefore randomly targets people or because someone has activated or sent a spirit through black magic to attack a specific person.

A physical illness may thus have either a natural or a spirit-related origin. It is up to the healer to determine which is the case. In both instances healing is performed without the direct intervention of the *sangiang* and therefore does not involve possession. If the healer diagnoses the cause to be spirit-related, it is generally believed that the spirit has inserted something sharp into the patient’s body. This “sharp thing” is believed to be the source of the physical dysfunction affecting the patient’s body and may be (a) something concrete/material that can be touched and observed (wood, thorns, and so on); or (b) something that is immaterial/invisible. In both cases, the sharp thing is considered to be the cause of the illness. Regarding spirit-related illnesses, it is important to note that the healer must determine that a spirit is to blame, for a patient may experience pains in his body without these necessarily being due to the actions of spirits. Moreover, it is not the spirit itself that is believed to have entered the patient’s body, thus causing the illness, but rather something belonging to the spirit. Therefore, the behavior of the patient is unaffected, only the condition of his or her body is altered. There are essentially two ways to heal a person who is suffering what we are describing here as a physical illness. These ways differ according to the cause of the illness. In the case of a physical illness that is presumed to be of natural origin, the healer treats the patient mainly by applying an ointment to the affected part of the body. This ointment, produced by the healer herself, is made from coconut oil in which medicinal roots and herbs with curative properties have been steeped, and in which special stones are sometimes immersed.

The stones immersed in these ointments are believed to have been received or thrown down from the Upperworld by the *sangiang*. Like the medicinal plants, they transmit their curative properties to the liquid in which they are immersed. These stones are generally found by healers, and their peculiar shape often suggests that they are endowed with special powers (see Photos 3, 4, and 5). The healer may also treat some specific



Photo 3: A stone kept in ointment because its peculiar shape suggests positive healing properties. A stone in the form of a hornbill (*batu tinggang*), a bird that according to the Ngaju mythology brought the first seed of a Ficus tree (*lunuk*) to earth. It is associated with prosperity and good luck and is also considered an icon of the supreme being. Katingan River area, 2012 (Photo: Junita Arnel).

Photo 4: A stone in the form of an omen-bird (*burung dahi*ang). Katingan River area, 2012 (Photo: Junita Arnel).



Photo 5: Spherical and circular stones. Katingan River area, 2012 (Photo: Junita Arnel).



illnesses using herbs, as is amply documented by Salilah. Overall, a *tukang sangiang*'s knowledge of plants is limited to those with medicinal properties and is more or less detailed depending on the level of instruction she has attained. There are clear differences between individual healers in the extent of their knowledge and capacity to

diagnose and cure illnesses. As in other societies, there are good healers and not-so-good ones.

If a physical illness is diagnosed by the *tukang sangiang* as having a spiritual origin, it means that it is caused by the actions of a spirit or is due to the effects of black magic. Most illnesses of unknown origin are attributed to the influence of malevolent spirits.

Spirits may also act indirectly, for example, by transmitting disease through infected food. A physical illness of spiritual origin is characteristically experienced as something sharp thrust into the person's body—as if he or she had been struck by a dart from a blowgun (*sumpit*).¹² As noted, the object may be material—a thorn, splinter, or nail—or immaterial. In treating it, the healer follows the same procedure as described for illnesses having a natural cause, but while doing so, the healer uses an ointment to extract the “sharp thing” causing the illness from the patient's body. If the sharp thing is invisible, the healer “materializes” it. How she does this is a guarded secret, making it an extremely delicate matter to discuss. Once the sharp thing is removed, the evil essence causing the illness is neutralized and the patient should recover. Because there is no malevolent spirit inside the patient's body, there is no need to perform a *basangiang*, the goal of which is to free the body from a harmful spirit residing inside it. The action of removing sharp things from the body is called *mangumul* (literally ‘to perform *kumul*’ or ‘make sharp things come out of the body’). Performing *mangumul* is obligatory when a physical illness has a spirit-related cause.

Physical illnesses of spiritual origin may also be associated with unusual circumstances present at the onset. For example, the occurrence of rain while the sun is shining (*hujan bandang*) is believed to trigger unusual events, including illness. A measure to counter the effects of *hujan bandang* is to disguise the person as a plant so that he will not be recognized by spirit assailants as a human being and so be protected from attack. This is done by bringing a leaf close to the person's ear. Food, too, as a possible source of illness, may be protected by being concealed by leaves, by being wrapped as if it were being transported, or simply by placing a leaf next to it.

If a patient is not cured after being treated with ointments, medicinal herbs, or *mangumul*, the healer must give up, since she cannot use her *sangiang* spirits in a possession ceremony because the sick person's illness has been diagnosed as physical rather than mental (Photo 6).

Mental Illness

Mental illnesses are associated with abnormal social behavior thought to be caused by the presence of a malevolent spirit inside the sick person's body. The range of behavioral alterations associated with such illnesses is vast and includes anxiety disorders and personality disorders of different kinds and degrees of seriousness, such as, for example, impulsive or angry behavior, hysterical or anti-social actions, withdrawal or isolation, or an inability to communicate, work together with others, or function socially. In the most serious cases the sufferer refuses to take part in his or her community, for example, by running away from home, refusing to work, or by going to live in a tree in the forest for days or even weeks at a time. In such cases, the sick person is considered to be out of his or her mind and is described, using Indonesian, as “mad” (*orang gila*). The only way to treat a person suffering from a mental illness is by performing a *basangiang* ceremony.

Mental illness is generally attributed to the actions of territorial spirits that enter

12 It is interesting to note that this same image of a blowgun dart stuck in the body which we recorded in the Katingan area, was also used by *tukang sangiang* in the upper Rungan and upper Kahayan River areas (Jay 1989:40).

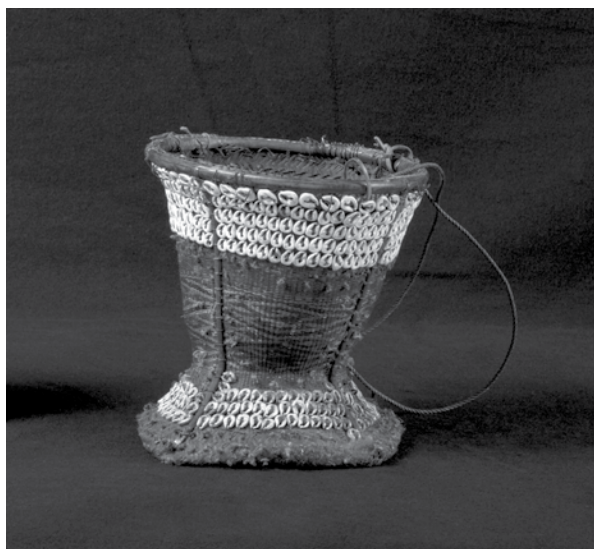


Photo 6: *Ranjung*, ancient basket used for healing purposes that has been passed down from *balian* to *balian* and from *balian* to *tukang sangiang*. It is decorated with cowrie shells (*rabusi*) which are believed to have healing properties. *Rabusi* were removed from the basket and given to the patient. The shells were then pulverized and taken by the patient as a curative drink. This basket was used by Junita's great-aunt. She had inherited it from a former *tukang sangiang* or *balian* within her family, together with other ceremonial paraphernalia she used to perform. A short time before she passed away, she officially gave a five-generation

old ikat skirt used in *basangiang* and this *ranjung* to Junita. Katingan River area, Desa Taliang Kereng, beginning of the XX century or earlier. 15 cm [height] × 15 cm [diameter]. © 2016 Città di Lugano, Museo delle Culture (Photo: Simon Brazzola).

the patient's body and so cause a mental alteration such that the victim is incapable of interacting or even of living together with other human beings. As in the case of physical illness, a triggering factor may be the effects of black magic. However, the most serious cases tend to be associated with powerful spirits identified with particular kinds of trees, most especially the *Ficus benjamina* (*lunuk*), where these spirits are believed to make their homes.

The intervention of a healer in a state of possession (*ngupang*) involves two forms of interaction with the patient. The first and most common consists in a communication, ideally between a *sangiang* spirit and the patient believed to be under the influence of the malevolent spirit causing his illness¹³; the second one presupposes, instead, a clash between the two spirits brought into contact when a *sangiang* spirit is introduced into the patient's body. In the latter case, the patient, too, enters a state of possession. In both cases the aim is the same: to expel the evil spirit from the patient's body and free his or her soul, thus allowing the person to be reintegrated back into the community. It is possible that a family may have to organize more than one *basangiang* ceremony, as it is not certain that healing will be achieved on the first attempt. In some cases it will never occur, but if a person is reintegrated in the community, the *basangiang* is considered to have been successful.

In local ideology, physical illness is considered benign, while mental illness is regarded mostly as its malignant counterpart. We were told that mental illness is

13 The patient in this case, although in a confused state of mind, is still responsive; hence there is no direct interaction between the *sangiang* spirit and the malevolent spirit as in the *toha* rite, which is described below.

considered to be especially malignant because it is more destructive of the victim's family and community, i.e., the sufferer may attack or harm other people. The reason for this probably derives from the characteristics of "traditional" societies in which persons exist primarily within relationships of cooperation, solidarity and reciprocity, such that collective interests take priority over those of the individual. From this perspective, mental illness is not just a sign of individual disorder, but signals a wider disorder, a breakdown of ties within society at large (Appleton 2006: 8). In this context, the healer's intervention is a true mediation aimed at rebalancing the dynamics of the social order. Thus, from an emic point of view, it might be said that physical illness is to the individual what mental illness is to the community. Hence the greater seriousness attributed to the latter, which is seen as an attack on the social order itself.

Healers

Healing among the Katingan is a female area of expertise. It is practiced by a class of women who draw upon teachings believed to have been passed down by the Master of Healing, the goddess Putir Silong Tamanang, who is known to Katingan healers as "the one who has the power of healing." Local myths narrate that Putir Silong Tamanang lives in the seventh level of the sky—the most prestigious part of the heavenly world – and that she is married to the primordial divinity, Raja Angking Penyang. She and her husband are credited with creating rice. Rice was created in the Upperworld through the union of a flower and sacred life-giving water (*danum kaharingan belum*) originally for Raja Bunu, the progenitor of human beings, because, unlike other divinities, he was unable to eat betel leaves, the godly food, as they made him ill (Panaturan 1973:97).¹⁴

This does not preclude men from being admitted to the ranks of the *tukang sangiang*. Just like women, if a man is considered capable of communicating with divinities and spirits, he may accede to the teachings that will enable him to practice as a healer (Photo 7). In doing so, he will normally take on a woman's identity during ceremonies since the power to perform *basangiang* derives from a goddess and is transmitted along the female line.¹⁵ There are three conditions that must be met before a person may begin to learn how to practice as a *tukang sangiang*: 1) he or she must first experience a mental illness, undergo a *toha* ritual, and be cured through a *basangiang* ceremony. It is possible to undergo a *toha* ritual only if the patient has had, or currently has, a *tukang sangiang* in his or her family. In other words, eligibility is restricted to families that have produced *tukang sangiang* healers in the past. The fact that a prospective healer has a kinship connection with a current or former healer certifies that he or she has the strength and predisposition to host a spirit in his or her body. The existence of this connection may be generally known or be determined by the *tukang sangiang* who performed the *basangiang* ceremony. Later this same *tukang sangiang* may become the master who instructs the prospective healer in how to perform the *basangiang* ceremonies; 2) the

¹⁴ According to priests (*pisor*), the jars represented on the main posts of Ngaju mausoleums (*sandung*) depict this creation myth and ideally contain some grains of rice as a symbol of prosperity and well-being.

¹⁵ Information is unavailable for the upper Kahayan and upper Rungan River areas. Although Sian Jay notes that not all *tukang sangiang* are women, it is unclear from her account whether or not male mediums dress as woman.



Photo 7: A male healer dressed as a woman – with a *kebaya*, shawl, and earrings – posing for a photograph showing some of his ceremonial paraphernalia: a *sapuyung* ceremonial hat (*sapuyung daré* in the Katingan language), a walking stick in his right hand and a drum (*katambong*) lying on the ground. Katingan River area, 2012 (Photo: Junita Arnel).

tukang sangiang performs divination the results of which confirm that the patient is eligible to practice as a healer; and, finally, 3) the apprentice healer must be able to pay the master *tukang sangiang* compensation for his or her instruction.

Knowledge relating to the art of healing is passed down within a broadly defined lineage whose members reveal themselves as being predisposed to interacting with spirit-beings. The youngest age documented by us was nine years old and the oldest, forty-three. The starting point for undertaking this educational path can have two possible

origins: either illness or dreaming.

In the first, and most common case, the triggering event is a long and serious illness of spiritual origin which may involve anti-social behavior manifested, for example, by running away from home or prolonged isolation as described earlier. The disease is difficult to treat so that more than one or two *basangiang* ceremonies may be necessary to heal the patient. During the *basangiang* the healer may opt, as a last resort, to introduce a practice called *toha*, that provides for the insertion of a *sangiang* spirit – from either the upper or earthly world – into the patient's body. *Toha* is a ritual which may be performed as part of a *basangiang* ceremony to solve a long-standing, unresolved mental illness. It is not performed during every *basangiang*, but only if the patient is related to a *tukang sangiang*. Ties of kinship are interpreted as proof that the patient is capable of hosting a *sangiang* spirit. When the *sangiang* spirit is inserted, the patient is possessed by it and according to local explanations, the *sangiang* spirit fights against the evil spirit, to expel it from the patient's body so that the latter becomes normal again. This fight between the *sangiang* deity and the evil spirit inside the patient's body is believed to be very dangerous. That is why the patient has to be someone strong enough to host a *sangiang* in his or her body.

The *toha* is considered to be more dangerous than the communication procedure mentioned earlier as it involves bringing a *sangiang* deity into direct contact with the evil spirit inside the patient's body. In this phase of the ritual, both healer and patient are in a state of possession. To begin with, a *sangiang* spirit inside the healer's body

calls for another *sangiang* spirit and asks it to enter the ill person. From an external communication between *sangiang* spirits and the patient, the confrontation then enters the next, more violent phase, that of a spiritual struggle inside the patient. For this reason, *toha* is considered a very dangerous sort of “shock therapy” that is performed only if the patient is thought to have a talent for interacting with *sangiang* spirits. Hence, the importance of kinship connections with practicing healers. These connections may be commonly known, or be indicated indirectly through divination, by reading an object belonging to the ill person such as a shawl, which acts as a mirror to the patient’s soul, revealing whether the person has a talent for interacting with the *sangiang*. The object used for divination is later wrapped in a black cloth and kept by its owner as a sacred object that functions as an amulet. After the *basangiang* is over, those who were healed by the *toha* may feel that the experience “opened” their bodies to the *sangiang*. As a result, they may now choose to become healers themselves. That is why, after they have been healed, they may visit the healer in order to have her determine whether they meet the conditions that would allow them to learn how to become healers themselves.

A case documented in the field concerns a seventy-eight year old woman who, when she was fifteen years old, during the period of seclusion (*kurung* or *bawi kowo*) practiced by the Ngaju and the Ot Danum due to the girl’s beauty (Bundu nd:21; Maiullari 2011:56-58), ran away from home and took refuge for two months in a *Ficus benjamina* tree (*lumuk*) before being treated by a *tukang sangiang* healer. The latter read from the girl’s shawl that they shared a kinship link and so was able to cure her by performing a *toha* ritual that was held during a *basangiang* lasting three days and three nights. From that moment, the young woman realized that she had the power to perform *basangiang*. A second case concerns a fifty-eight year old healer who, at the age of thirty-five, fell ill for eight years, remaining for much of this time on her mat and “behaving like a madwoman” (her own words). Two attempts at *basangiang* failed to produce a positive outcome, but the third was successful due to a *toha* performed by a male healer dressed as a woman, as described below. The healer performed a *toha* that made the *sangiang* enter into her body by whipping her over the head with betel leaves.

A second, less common way of becoming a healer is by means of a dream that serves as a revelation. Such dream experiences distinguish those who are considered to be supreme healers. An episode we documented during our fieldwork concerns a forty-eight year old man who was visited in a dream when he was nine by a female *sangiang* who taught him to perform the *basangiang* and ordered him to dress as a woman whenever did so. On the next day, he says, he fell ill and acted like a mad man. One of his relatives known as a *tukang sangiang* had to perform a *toha* to bring him back to a normal state. Following this *toha*, the youth pursued further training with the same healer, who belonged to his family.

From this point onward the two paths described, learning to heal following an illness or following a dream, proceed in the same way: those who wish to practice healing turn to an expert, tell her about their experiences, and ask to study with her so as to learn how to heal with the help of the *sangiang* spirits. Like other training calling for specialized technical knowledge, acquiring such knowledge generally requires the payment of a fee, either in cash or, as was more common in the past, in the form of material goods such as

jars, gongs, and other items.

However, it is not always the case that a person who is receptive to *sangiang* wants to become a healer. In Ngaju collective imagination, healers are considered to have been mad women (*mantan gila*), although now integrated into the community. They are therefore people who are receptive to the *sangiang*—who are subject at times to sudden convulsions associated with possession—but who have chosen not to become healers precisely because of the negative connotations that attach to healers. We documented one case in the field of a famous weaver of ceremonial textiles who lived in the area of the mid Katingan River. She died in 2012 at the age of 94. She enjoyed a prestigious position in society because of her social class and the skills for which she was known. As a young woman she had been ill for a time—and had also lived in isolation in a tree—until she was cured by a *basangiang* ceremony. Following her recovery, she realized that she was particularly receptive to spirits, but chose not to become a *tukang sangiang* because of the negative connotation of the profession, because “it is madwomen who do *basangiang*.”

During her training, a novice learns how to recognize and address the gods and spirits, the formulas used to communicate with them, the *sangiang* sacred language, how to identify and make use of medicinal herbs, and more generally all that is necessary in order to perform healing ceremonies. She also learns the other rituals that form part of the *tukang sangiang*’s repertoire, such as those held to pay tribute to the deities following the fulfilment of a request (*mapunduk hajat*) made with the promise of offerings should the request be answered, feeding spirits (*pakanan taluh*), locating lost property, building or moving family altars (like, for example, a *balai* Jata, an altar used by families who venerate the deity, Jata),¹⁶ and requests for longevity and a good life (*manyambuhul* or *nyembuhul*). *Tukang sangiang* operates mainly in the context of healing. During her period of training, a pupil follows her teacher to all of the ceremonies that she directs in order to memorize her words, but also, through visual observation, the practices that form part of her newly chosen vocation. Once her training is complete, and she becomes an expert herself, the new *tukang sangiang* works by interacting with a certain number of *sangiang*. Each healer has a number of deities who regularly help her during *basangiang* ceremonies. These are not necessarily the same as those employed by her teacher.

Only ritual specialists can summon *sangiang* spirits during healing ceremonies. This is because communication is conducted in the *sangiang* language and requires that specialists narrate origin myths (*timang*) that praise the *sangiang* deities and affirm their kinship with human beings. However, *sangiang* spirits sometimes come spontaneously, of their own accord. For example, Junita’s great-aunt, who was a *tukang sangiang*, used to lose consciousness at times and became possessed even when not performing a *basangiang*. This was interpreted as her being visited by the *sangiang*. Other instances are known, but our data are insufficient to comment on the frequency with which *tukang sangiang* experience this kind of spontaneous possession.

At the moment, our ongoing research is focused on acquiring a deeper understanding of aspects of *basangiang* healing, including the training of novice *tukang sangiang* as outlined here.

16 Not all the families have a *balai* Jata; many maintain altars dedicated to other deities.

The *basangiang* healing ceremony

Basangiang is performed in the patient's house, or, less often, in the place where the illness is presumed to have been contracted. Taking the form of a complex of rituals, the duration of an individual *basangiang* is variable, ranging from a minimum of one day to—as far as we could ascertain—a maximum of three days, nights included, without significant interruptions. However, the main activities related to possession take place at night, after sundown, and end, at the latest, around dawn. This is linked to an idea that night and day are reversed in the Upperworld. Therefore these activities are held at night, which is day in the Upperworld. Nevertheless, preparing the ceremonial site, making offerings, and so on are held during the day and are considered to be part of the *basangiang* timeline.

The *basangiang* is preceded by a preliminary ceremony called the *manyandah*, the general meaning of which is “to diagnose.” The ceremony is also referred to as a short *basangiang*. It is normally held one or a few days preceding the first day of *basangiang* and serves to invoke the *sangiang* spirits, introduce them to the illness afflicting the patient, ask them to find what has caused it and how it might be cured. Before the *basangiang* ceremony begins, all the necessary material for its performance must be prepared, including the sacrificial animals – chickens, pigs, or buffalo (now more often cattle). The nature and quantity of this material is indicated by the *sangiang* who have made themselves present during the *manyandah* as a result of the *tukang sangiang*'s invocation. This material represents a fee paid in return for the spirits' intervention. Once the material has been assembled, the *basangiang* ceremony may begin.

Which deities will intervene in a *basangiang* depends on the healer, who indicates the specific *sangiang* she or he plans to interact with during the ceremony. Each healer interacts with only a limited number of deities, not with the whole Ngaju pantheon of healing spirits. Some, for example, interact with three deities, others with five or six, and so on. The number probably depends on the knowledge passed down by the healer's teachers. To communicate with the *sangiang*, a healer must know the *timang* that refer to that particular spirit or deity. Here, as in other matters, our research is still ongoing. During the *manyandah* the healer describes the patient's problems to the deities, who then respond by possessing the healer and speaking through her, affirm their availability to heal the patient's illness in exchange for specific sacrifices and offerings. During a *basangiang*, the *tukang sangiang* is usually helped by more than one of the *sangiang* belonging to her healing group. If an illness is particularly severe, it is believed that only the most powerful divinities may be able to treat it. The most powerful deities are only appealed to by some healers, and only in particularly complex cases. The comportment of the *tukang sangiang* and the tools she uses when possessed serve to identify the particular deity who is possessing her and the characteristics that are associated with this deity. These tools and behavior are therefore symbols of identity. When a healer is possessed, the deity controlling her is believed to speak and act in a specific way that makes its identity recognizable. For example, the divinity Putir Silong Tamanang uses a *mandau* and/or puts a *sapuyung* ceremonial hat on her head. The divinity Sangumang likes to drink a lot of *baram* (fermented rice wine), while Sangiang Bandar plays music and walks with a staff. Some of the tools can be seen in Photo 7. In addition, deities

Photo 8: *Harimaung*. A sculpture representing a feline with human traits. *Harimaung* is considered a very powerful ancestor and sculptures such as this were often erected to protect a village. Its human characteristics are seen particularly in its hands and feet with five fingers and toes. Ngaju or Ot Danum. XIX -early XX century. 164 × 32 × 62 cm. Museo delle Culture di Lugano, Inv. As.Ins.4.013. © 2016 Città di Lugano, Museo delle Culture (Photo: Simon Brazzola).



often reveal their identity by mentioning their name.

At the heart of the *basangiang* ceremony, the healer dances to the accompaniment of music, with her head covered by a long shawl while she holds onto the “flying bridge” of the *sangiang* (*jambansangiang*) who are descending from the heavens to possess her. In the Katingan River area, a *basangiang* is normally performed by single *tukang sangiang*, but more than one is not considered unusual.

The musicians who provide her accompaniment are not *tukang sangiang*, but ordinary laypersons. The *jamban sangiang*, serving as an axis-mundi, is made of a bundle of long young betel palm fronds, stalks of rice, or a batik loincloth (*bahalai*) hung from the interior ceiling of the house (see Photo 1).¹⁷ The healer’s rotating movement as she hangs onto this “flying bridge” is a sign of the movement of the *sangiang* deities as they travel from the Upperworld to the earth. When a *tukang sangiang* grasps the *jamban sangiang* with her hands and starts swinging around it, her movements are interpreted as those of the *sangiang* descending into the *tukang sangiang*’s body to possess her. After that, the *tukang sangiang* enters a form of possession that, following Emma Cohen (2008), we would characterize as “executive possession.” “Executive possession” is a form of possession in which “the spirit entity is typically represented as taking over the host’s executive control, or replacing the host’s ‘mind’ (or intentional agency), thus assuming control of bodily behaviours” (Cohen 2008:103). During a *basangiang*, the *tukang sangiang* is typically possessed by several *sangiang*. If the first one that enters her body is unable to heal the patient completely, it will abandon her body in order to make room for others until one enters who is able to effect a cure. However, it is also believed that a healing ceremony may be successful thanks to the actions of more than one *sangiang*. In this case, the *sangiang* possess the *tukang sangiang* in sequence, one after another, until

¹⁷ Literally, *jamban* refers in Ngaju to a narrow wooden platform or walkway that temporarily connects two places.

the healing is fully completed and the pathological elements are totally gone from the patient's body. According to the information we collected from *tukang sangiang*, when a healer enters a state of possession, she is unconscious and after the ceremony is over remembers nothing of what happened. Thus, while the *tukang sangiang* is possessed by a deity, she falls unconscious, and it is believed that the deity takes complete control of her body and mind. This state of "executive possession" entails the following features: (a) the presence of an incorporeal intentional agent in or on a person's body that (b) temporarily effects the ousting, eclipsing or mediation of the person's agency and control over behavior, such that (c) the host's actions are partly or wholly attributable to the intentions, beliefs, desires and dispositions of the possessing agent for the duration of the episode (Cohen 2008:109).

As already noted, the identity of the deities possessing a healer can be recognized by the *tukang sangiang*'s behaviour, her voice, and the specific paraphernalia she uses while performing. Among the more common *sangiang* that we were able to document are the following:

1. Putir Silong Tamanang. She is the most powerful among all the *sangiang* healing divinities; she lives in the Upperworld and is married to a primordial divinity named Raja Angking Penyang. Her presence is associated with the use of a *mandau*, a *sapuyung* ceremonial hat, the *bunge* flower, and *sawang* (*Cordyline fruticosa* Backer). In Ngaju belief, *sawang* is a plant that symbolizes well-being and prosperity and was brought to earth from the Upperworld. According to myth, *sawang* was given by Ranying, the upperworld Creator, to Raja Bunu, who brought it with him when he descended to earth. Because of this connection, *sawang* is planted at the end of a ritual called *mambuhul balaku untung*, the goal of which is to bring well-being, prosperity and longevity from the Upperworld to the people living on earth. The *mambuhul balaku untung* ritual may be performed in different ceremonies, like, for example, a *tiwah* or a marriage. *Sawang* is planted mostly around houses, but may also be planted elsewhere.
2. Patindih Layang Ngambu Melai Lawang Langit. An ancient female *sangiang* from the Upperworld employed particularly when treating serious illnesses.
3. Sangumang. A male upperworld *sangiang* known for drinking *baram*, the locally fermented rice wine. When a healer is possessed by Sangumang she, too, drinks large quantities of *baram*, sometimes continuously over several nights if the ceremony lasts that long.
4. Harimaung Darun Bawan. An upperworld divinity who, according to local mythology, is a very powerful Ngaju ancestor. His effigies decorate the *sapundu* ceremonial poles of the *tiwah* and the poles that protect villages against malevolent spirits (see Photo 8).
5. Sangiang Bandar. An earthly *sangiang* employed by many healers. He is known as a heroic warrior renowned for his power and manifests his presence by using a lute, a violin (*kecapi*), and a walking stick.
6. Jata. The most important *sangiang* of the Underworld.
7. Saluh Bujang. An underworld *sangiang* corresponding to a Jata in the Petak Putih area.
8. Sangiang Dohoi. An earthly *sangiang* who manifests his presence by using a drum

(*katambong*) and speaking the Dohoi language.¹⁸

9. Andi Pati Singa Ria. An earthly *sangiang* in the shape of an elongated catfish with gills (family *Clariidae*, genus *Clarias*).

To describe in detail the elaborate procedures of a *basangiang* ceremony is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we wish to present some of its salient moments, both as they relate to executive possession by the *tukang sangiang* and in order to illustrate concretely the transposition of local ideologies in a ceremonial context. The main phases of a *basangiang* ceremony—which we list below—are subject to variation depending on the “lineage” of the *tukang sangiang* performing it. By “lineage” we mean in this context a “line of descendants” within the class of *tukang sangiang* healers. The class as a whole includes a number of these “lines.” A “line” may feature some specific cultural traits (note: these are very small variations) that differ from the others, giving rise to small ritual differences in how the *basangiang* is conducted. For example: at the end of a *basangiang* ceremony, when the *sangiang* are invited by the healer to return to the Upperworld (as documented also by Schärer; see below), not every *tukang sangiang* simulates their return by the movement of a *sapuyung* ceremonial hat (i.e. swinging it in imitation of the *sangiangs*’ boat journey). This would be the peculiar feature of one “line of descendants” or “school” of *tukang sangiang* (or maybe more than one, however not of every “line”). Below are some of the main phases of a *basangiang* ceremony:

Manapah: preparation of the white ceramic bowl containing the *behas semenget* rice used for strengthening the soul of the patient in the *semenget* ritual. This bowl, once it is ready, is called the *mangkok tambak*;

Semenget ritual: the ritual performed to strengthen the patient’s soul;

Tawur: dispatching messages to the *sangiang* to summon them to the ceremony. The rice grains used for this are instructed: “don’t fall to the ground but travel to the *sangiang* spirits and the patient’s soul”;

Jucung mangkok: the *mangkok tambak* bowl is placed on the healer’s head (see Photo 9);

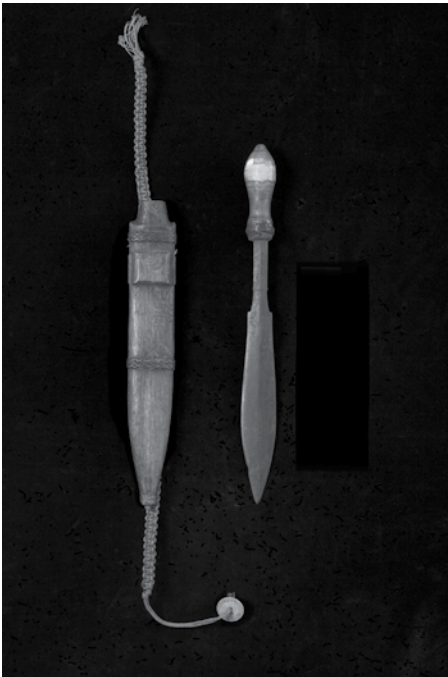
Healer’s dance, performed while holding onto the *jamban sangiang*. The dance marks the healer’s entry into a state of executive possession. The *sangiang* enter her body through the cranial fontanel. The woman is typically possessed by several *sangiang*. As noted, those who are not able to cure the patient exit to make room for others, until a *sangiang* who can cure the patient enters;

Heart of the ceremony: communication between the *sangiang* spirit (healer) and the patient believed to be under the influence of a malevolent spirit, talking about the patient’s problems. Patients may either speak for themselves or, if they refuse or are unwilling to talk, members of their family may discuss the problems afflicting them. During this

18 The Dohoi language is classified as a West Barito language and is spoken by the Ot Danum people in Kalimantan Tengah and Kalimantan Barat. Dohoi varies geographically. The variants currently spoken in Central Kalimantan show considerable Ngaju influence (Couderc 2013:7; Inagaki 2013:95). In Kalimantan Tengah, Dohoi speakers are present in the upper reaches of the Katingan and Kahayan Rivers (Sevin 1983:24; Arnel & Maiullari 2011:97). According to *Ethnologue*, the Dohoi language shows 60% lexical similarity with the Katingan language.



Photo 9: A *tukang sangiang* healer shows how to place the ceramic bowl (*mangkok tambak*) on the head for a *basangiang* healing ceremony. Katingan River area, 2012 (Photo: Junita Arnel).



exchange, patients sometimes become very agitated, cry out, or try to flee. When they seem to calm down, this is interpreted as a possible sign that the malevolent spirit has left their body. The ceremony then closes;

The rice bowl used for *semenget*, containing the *behas semenget*, is removed from the healer's head;

Divination using the *behas semenget* which is read for signs indicating whether, and to what degree, the patient will recover;

Extracting an object from the patient's body using a *sawang* leaf, a machete (*mandau*), or a ceremonial dagger (*duhung*) (Photo 10). The object, often a stone, symbolize the harmful agent inserted in the patient and varies depending on the patient's illness. Once it is removed, the object is wrapped

Photo 10: *Duhung*, a ceremonial dagger used by healers (*tukang sangiang*) and priests (*pisor* and *basir*) in performing rituals and for sacrificing

pigs and chickens. Katingan River area. 43.5 [height] × 5.5 [width] × 3.5 cm. [depth]. © 2016 Città di Lugano, Museo delle Culture (Photo: Simon Brazzola).

Photo 11: Junita Arnelnd participates in a *basangiang* ceremony held for a member of her family. On this occasion, one of the two performing *tukang sangiang* removes a stone from her head with the help of a machete (*mandau*). For healers, this is a common practice meant to relieve the members of the family sponsoring the *basangiang* from everyday worries. Katingan River area, 1986.



in a black cloth and becomes an amulet for the patient (Photo 11);

The *sangiang* are invited by the healer to return to the Upperworld. Sometimes their return is simulated by the movement of a ceremonial hat (*sapuyung*), which is made to swing in imitation of the *sangiangs'* boat journey. Such a method of dispatching the *sangiang* has also been documented by Schärer (1966: 486, 492);

Metaphoric closure of all the healer's doors to the body; this is done first by tapping her knees, elbows, the cranial fontanel and blowing in her ears (with the help of another person), then rubbing knees, elbows and fontanel with plaited young coconut leaves that have been soaked in a special liquid (*tampung tawar*) which neutralizes spiritual danger.

Throughout a *basangiang* ceremony, the *tulang sangiang* acts as a mediator at two distinct levels: 1) the spiritual level concerning the practice of possession and 2) the social level concerning the reintegration of the patient back into the community. The days of convalescence which follow the ceremony are when the success of the *basangiang* can be verified, to see if it has had a positive outcome and has freed the patient from the ills affecting his or her soul.

Conclusion

The *basangiang* healing ceremony is part of a religious institution that has undergone important changes, due mostly to cultural syncretism, acculturation, and political factors. These changes occurred especially in the last century, as documented by a large ethnological literature. During this time *basangiang* became marginalized. The female priestesses (*uluh balian*) who until then were in charge of local ceremonial performances, lost authority to a new class of religious leaders consisting of priests

(*pisor/basir*). Consequently, the *uluh balian* moved from being the most prestigious figures responsible for a wide range of religious activities to a marginal class of religious practitioners. While no longer considered priestesses, the *tukang sangiang* have retained their healing-related knowledge and, in particular, continue to this day to perform the *basangiang*.

In the past, access to the *uluh balian* priestesshood was opened to men provided they dressed and identified themselves as women while performing. The same goes today for the *tukang sangiang*, who recognize a female divinity as their Master of Healing.

While in modern Western medicine recent studies have shown that the factors causing mental illness may be psychological, environmental, biological, genetic or a combination resulting from the interaction of biological, psychological and social factors (Murthy 2001:10,16), in traditional Katingan medicine, as far as we were able to establish, natural and social causes of mental disorder and the loss of psychological well-being are not recognized because mental afflictions are attributed to the actions of external agents, namely malevolent spirit-beings. These agents are believed to enter the sick person's body and alter his ways of feeling, thinking, behaving and relating to others, disturbing not only the individual, but, in many cases, the entire community to which he or she belongs.

Mental pathologies range from mild to severe. The worst cases are considered those that result in behaviors that display alienation and a complete absence of social involvement with other persons. Such behavior may include disturbing acts and physical violence against the others. Those whose actions signal a break with society are considered *orang gila*. Their affliction is seen as a malevolent form of illness that troubles not only themselves but the equilibrium and well-being of society as a whole.

The goal of a *basangiang* ceremony is to remove evil from the sufferer's body in order to restore him or her to mental health. This is accomplished by the *tukang sangiang*, who through her use of the sacred *sangiang* language, communicates with the deities and offers her body as a temporary place for them to reside while they carry out their healing. A *basangiang* performance aims to restore the patient's mental health and to reintegrate him into the everyday life of his community. If one or more *basangiang* healing ceremonies fail to cure the patient, the sick person, in the worst case situation, becomes estranged from those around him and is socially marginalized.

Studies focusing on the relationship between religious and healing institutions show that from a mental health perspective, religion provides much-needed guidelines which can help individuals to devise a course for their lives (Behere, et al. 2013). Further research on this topic is needed among the Ngaju, but this seems to be the case, too, for the Katingan practice of *basangiang*, in which healing is accomplished by deities who communicate with the patient to help them overcome their difficulties by addressing the origins of their affliction. In this sense, a successful *basangiang* ceremony may be said to have a cathartic effect on the patient.¹⁹

19 Catharsis, which means "purification," is a concept that was first used by Aristotle in his *Poetics* in regards to classical theatre. The healer's intervention, could be compared to the modern phenomenon of hypnotic catharsis as utilized by Charcot, Breuer and at first also by Freud, who later abandoned this method and developed psychoanalysis, which is not based on hypnotic

The *basangiang* ceremony, if successful, frees the patient from psychic tensions, conflicts and the effects of traumas. As is shown by the experience of healers and other people, it is often following a *toha*, in which the patient enters a state of possession, so that the disease may be removed and his body “purified.” If this does not succeed, traditional healing stops, and the patient is considered incurable. This means that he will no longer be able to take part in the life of the community in the same way that normal people do. He will lose his social position and become an outsider living on the peripheries of the community.

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suggestion. A state of possession – including *toha* – is a psychic condition that may be induced or occur spontaneously and is similar to a hypnotic state, with the consequent sensory insulation from surrounding reality and exaltation of the faculty of producing paranormal phenomena.

The cathartic method works on the patient who is brought to a hypnoid state to make him relive, also emotionally, the situation that has been determined to be the beginning of his illness. The idea is that by reliving the origin of his illness, the subject expresses freely the emotions linked to that repressed memory, and whose very repression has produced the symptoms. Freud calls this phenomenon abreaction. Abreaction's therapeutic effect consists in the removal of the emotions connected to the traumatic event that has been repressed, and the consequent disappearance of the symptoms caused by its repression. These emotions, in local ideology, correspond to the presence of evil spirits, and are removed from the body during a *basangiang* as attested by the stones or other small objects materialized by the healer.

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