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#### Citation

Chan, Margaret. 2013. "The Spirit-mediums of Singkawang: Performing 'Peoplehood' of West Kalimantan." In *Chinese Indonesians Reassessed: History, Religion and Belonging*, edited by Sai Siew-Min and Hoon Chang-Yau, 138-158. New York: Routledge.

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## **The Spirit-mediums of Singkawang: Performing Peoplehood of West Kalimantan<sup>1</sup>**

Margaret CHAN

**Abstract:** Chinese New Year in the West Kalimantan town of Singkawang is marked by a parade featuring hundreds of possessed spirit-mediums performing self-mortification and blood sacrifice. The event is a huge tourist draw, but beyond the spectacle, deeper meanings are enacted. The spirit-medium procession stages a fraternity of Dayak, Malay and Chinese earth gods united in the purpose of exorcising demons from the neighborhood. The self-conscious presentation of the Chinese as brethren among pribumi [sons-of-the-soil] Dayak and Malay, proposes the Chinese as belonging to the 'peoplehood' of West Kalimantan.

### **Introduction**

*Capgomeh* [十五暝 *shi wu ming*], the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, marks the close of *Imlek*, the Chinese New Year celebrations in Indonesia. On this day, hundreds of spirit-mediums parade through the town of Singkawang in West Kalimantan. The procession represents an army of spirit-warriors who have come together to exorcise demons that may bring misfortune to the community in the new year. The spirit battle is enacted in a theatre of ritual violence that annually draws thousands of spectators to Singkawang town (see for example, *Pontianak Post Online* 27 February 2010). Since 2008, the *Capgomeh* parade in Singkawang (hitherto abbreviated as *Capgomeh*) has been recognized in the official *Visit Indonesia* calendar, lending national significance to the event.

The ostentation of *Capgomeh* has made it a target for Malay ire rooted in resentment against the intrusion of the Chinese into the political life of the region. In December 2007, a Chinese, Hasan Karman [Bong Sau Fam 黄少凡 Huang Shao Fan], was sworn in as Singkawang's first mayor. The following month another Chinese, Christiandy Sanjaya, was appointed provincial vice-governor of West Kalimantan. In 2008, the Malays of neighboring Pontianak protested; ostensibly against the use of Chinese characters in the *Imlek* decorations put up by Karman in his official residence. The action resulted in the banning of spirit-medium parades through the streets of Pontianak from 2008 to 2011 (the time of the writing of this chapter). I have discussed this political situation in an earlier article (Chan, 2009) and want, in this chapter to analyze *Capgomeh* as a performance of identity.

I propose *Capgomeh* as a performance of 'peoplehood' by the Chinese of Singkawang. Peoplehood, in these terms, is a statement of 'localness'<sup>2</sup>, a belonging to the land, and should be distinguished from representations of what might be termed as an Indonesian essence. So the gods of *Capgomeh* do not include national

heroes such as Diponegoro or Kartini but are Dayak, Malay and Chinese earth gods – local tutelary spirits. The personalities, and so the spirits of individual gods are not what is pointed to; in *Capgomeh*, what is on show is a united army of gods deriving from the *tiga tiang* [three pillars] of West Kalimantan society. I propose that the performance situates the Chinese as brethren of the *pribumi*, and therefore rooted and entitled, as part of the ‘peoplehood’ of West Kalimantan.

The empirical evidence for this study was gathered from my participation-observation of *Capgomeh* in February 2008 and from a second field-trip to Singkawang in June-July 2009 to visit temple and homes. The private practice of religion and the public displays of *Capgomeh* were examined for meaning using the methodology of performance studies. This discipline is the fruit of a collaboration between anthropologist Victor Turner and theatre practitioner Richard Schechner (Turner, 1988: 72-98; Schechner, 2007). The approach views daily living as a kind of theatre and rituals as social dramas which may be read using the theories and vocabulary of theatre studies. I turn now to definitions of key terms used in this chapter.

Definitions of religious terms are nebulous for we cannot ostensibly point to empirically observable entities. Thus my explanation of terminology is not about pinpointing lexical meaning but is about taking consistent positions for the sake of clarity. The word ‘gods’ is used to designate supernatural beings that are the objects of worship. Despite Elliott’s (1990: 28) worry about its overtones of western theology, this term is widely used in discussions of Chinese religion. The word ‘spirit’ is used here to refer to an animating supernatural force, as in spirit-medium, both for its etymological sense as well as because of established usage. Malevolent supernatural beings, the objects of exorcism, are designated as ‘demons’ here.

Local terms used in this chapter include ‘*latok kong*’ [拉啄公 *la zhuo gong*, hitherto abbreviated as ‘*latok*’], the Singkawang term for earth god. ‘*Latok*’ derives from the Malay ‘*datuk*’, ‘grandfather’. ‘*Kong*’ also signifies ‘grandfather’ in Chinese (Cheu, 1992: 383; Cheu 1996-1997: 8). The double honorific signifies a god, specifically, an indigenous earth god. In Singkawang the spirit-medium is referred to as ‘*tatung*’. None whom I asked had bothered to trace the origin of the word *tatung*, but I offer an educated guess that it derives from ‘*tiao tong*’ [跳童] meaning ‘to jump or dance as a spirit-medium’.

Among the southern Chinese, spirit-mediums are called *tangki* [童乩 *tongji*] generally translated as ‘divining child’. DeBernardi’s alternative proposition of the term as deriving from the Min [閩] word for ‘shaman’ with an etymological link to the idea of “to dance” (2006: 11) is useful. Chinese popular religion is performative (Chan, 2006: 92-105) and rituals often feature sacred choreographies, which is why the spirit-medium performance is described as dancing – ‘*tiao tong*’ [跳童]. ‘*Tiao*’ can also mean ‘jump’ because possession has been described as the spirit jumping into the body of the medium.

### **The spectacle of the *Capgomeh* parade in Singkawang**

*Capgomeh* is distinctive among southern Chinese popular religion processions performed elsewhere for the numbers of participating spirit-mediums. The Singkawang parade stages an army of gods on the march. The records of the *Panitia Perayaan Imlek* [Chinese New Year festival organizing committee] of *Capgomeh* show that in 2008, 498 *tatungs* registered for the parade. In 2009 there were 592, and in 2010, nationally designated as *Visit Kalbar* (short for Kalimantan Barat, West Kalimantan) year, there were 666 spirit-mediums (Nusantio, 2010). In 2011, 635 *tatungs* participated in *Capgomeh* (Nusantio, 2011).

In Singkawang on 21 February 2008, I watched the *Capgomeh* parade from a grandstand of plank and canvas that had been set up in front of the old Kota Indah cinema on the town's main street of Jalan Diponegoro. From early morning the spirit-mediums had begun to assemble at Kridasana Stadium on Jalan Kridasana, and at 8 am they set out for the town center. Past Jalan Diponegoro they marched on to Jalan Budi Utomo Street, thence to Jalan Hasan Saad, Jalan Saman Bujang, Jalan Kempol Mahmud Street, Jalan Niaga Street, ending at Jalan Sejahtera around 11 am. Lio Kuniarwan, the head of the *Capgomeh* organising committee of 2011, told me that the morning hours were chosen less for a sense of the sacred than for practical reasons: Singkawang sits close to the equator and it can get swelteringly hot by noon (Kuniarwan, Singapore, 12 June 2011).

For Hasan Karman, it was his inaugural parade as mayor of Singkawang. He was resplendent in a golden high-collared Chinese tunic closed by frog buttons as he greeted VIP guests including West Kalimantan Governor Cornelis M.H. and Puan Maharani, daughter of former president Megawati Sukarnoputri. Thousands of spectators had gathered on the road before the grandstand. A path had been cut through them, but not by police or traffic wardens; people just seemed to know where to stand. Into this path entered the parade of *tatungs*. Some marched on foot, but most were carried on palanquins borne upon the shoulders of teams of ten to fifty supporters. There appeared to be no spiritual hierarchical difference between the two; some *tatungs* explained their lack of palanquins as owing to insufficient funds for construction and to pay supporters to carry them. The palanquins served a useful theatrical purpose; they were as floats that allowed the *tatungs* to perform in clear view of the crowds.

The sedan chairs were made of wooden planks with knife edges or nail beds for seats and armrests. Halberds were set at the end of the arms. The *tatungs* performed acts of invulnerability upon their portable thrones. Some stood tall pressing their bare feet upon the halberds. Others balanced on their stomachs upon a knife blade protruding from the back of their palanquins. Many had metal skewers and ornate rods thrust through their cheeks. Some were pierced with tree branches, and I saw one spirit-medium with an electric stand fan passed through his cheek. Yet

another danced with heavy cans of soft drinks hanging by threads sewn into the flesh of his cheeks and torso.

Bands of musicians clashed cymbals and banged on drums and gongs. Dragon and lion dancers joined in the procession, and unique to Singkawang, were the *jailangkung* troupes on parade. A *jailangkung* is an ordinary vegetable basket dressed with a shirt. When prayed over, it is believed that the *jailangkung* becomes spirit-possessed so that it self-automates to answers questions, writing with a pen pushed into the basket weave (Chan, forthcoming). In the *Capgomeh* parade, the *jailangkungs*, held either by a single spirit-medium channeler or by sashes between two people, swung and bobbed wildly, dragging those who held them hither and thither. Fifteen *jailangkung* groups featured in *Capgomeh* 2008, 16 in 2009 (*Panitia Perayaan Imlek* 2008 and 2009), 46 in 2010 (Nusantio, 2010) and 28 in 2011 (Nusantio, 2011).

The parade was noisy, colorful and martial featuring acts of ritual violence; typical of the demon-exorcising tours that are a hallmark of Chinese spirit-medium worship. The tradition has a venerable ancestry extending back to the *Nuo* [傩] exorcism of the proto-Chinese Xia dynasty [夏 1990-1557 BC?]. By Zhou (周 1027-221 B.C.E.), the *nuo* was institutionalized as state rituals led by an exorcist wildly brandishing weapons (Bodde, 1975: 75-138). The contemporary southern Chinese spirit-medium, including the *tatung*, is a warrior exorcist in this tradition (Chan, 2006: 106-13, also Chan, 'Warrior gods incarnate,' forthcoming)<sup>3</sup>.

My research interest is in spirit-medium cults, and over more than ten years I have observed many spirit-medium processions in China, Taiwan and Southeast Asia. And while the blood sacrifice of puppies (see below) performed at *Capgomeh* in Singkawang presented arresting sights, what engaged me was the staging of multi-ethnic earth gods joined in united purpose. Most spirit-medium possessions are by popular gods of the Daoist pantheon such as Guangong (关公), the red-faced god of war or Nezha (哪吒), the commander of the central army of celestial spirit soldiers, but at *Capgomeh* in Singkawang in 2008, instead of seeing the familiar Chinese gods, I encountered Dayak, Malay and Chinese *latoks*. This was unusual<sup>4</sup>. To be sure, Guangong and other spirit luminaries might have been at the parade (I met with a Guangong medium in 2009), but the overwhelming image presented was of a united army among whom individual gods did not stand out. Adding to this impression of a host of anonymous gods rather than of a gathering of named personalities was the conspicuous absence of effigies carried in procession. By staging an army of *latoks* drawn from the three ethnic pillars of West Kalimantan, the Chinese signified themselves as brethren to the Dayak and Malays, rooted and entitled, as part of the 'peoplehood' of West Kalimantan.

## **The Chinese of Singkawang: Religion and worldview**

Singkawang used to be the administrative centre of Kabupaten Sambas but achieved regional autonomy in 2001. At 504 square kilometers in area and with a population of under 180,000 (*Pemerintah Kota Singkawang*, Administration of Singkawang, 2010), the town is the second largest in West Kalimantan, after the provincial capital of Pontianak. Singkawang is the epicentre of a region that has been named the “Chinese Districts,” both for the large number of Chinese in the local population and for the persistence of the practice of Chinese traditions in the area (Heidhues, 2003:11). Population figures by religious affiliation for 2006 report: 50 per cent Muslims; 36 per cent Buddhists; 12 per cent Christians, the rest as Hindus and “others” (*Pemerintah Kota Singkawang*, Administration of Singkawang, 2008).<sup>5</sup> This data point to a Chinese population of at least 36 per cent, but Mayor Hasan Karman (e-mail, 19 June 2008) noted that he personally believed that the Chinese formed 60 per cent of the town population. He did not substantiate this claim but repeated it in a press interview (*Republika Online*, 24 January 2009).

The Chinese came to West Borneo from the eighteenth century to mine for gold. They came by sea to Singkawang before moving inland into Monterado and Bengkayang (see Yuan, 2000 and Heidhues, 2003 for the history of the Chinese in Singkawang). When the Chinese came to West Kalimantan, they brought with them the practice of Chinese spirit-medium worship. Yuan (2000) and Heidhues (2003) relate how spirit-mediums were consulted in all major decisions including military action. Yuan noted that the Chinese society of eighteenth and nineteenth century Borneo cannot be understood without an appreciation of the centrality of religion in the community (2000: 33). Heidhues described Chinese popular religion as the social cement, how for the early Chinese “religion was as much about this world as the next, and gods, mediums, and processions could be expressions of state and individual power as much as were armies, judicial procedures, or administrative structures” (2003: 59).

The critical role of religion in the Chinese community of Singkawang continues today as is borne out in the nickname “The town of a thousand temples”. In 2008 there were 268 Chinese houses of worship compared to 18 Buddhist temples, 131 mosques and Muslim prayer houses and 83 churches (*Pemerintah Kota Singkawang*, 2010). Spirit-medium parades are a part of the local culture, attested to from the 1960s and 1970s in text and in photographs. There is also documentary evidence of Chinese festivals, including spirit-medium parades celebrated in Singkawang during the New Order. From 1999, with the start of the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid, spirit-mediums began to gather more openly, and the present tradition of a procession through the Singkawang town centre began in 2002 (for a fuller account including photographs, see Chan 2009: 111-6).

Post-1998 Reformasi brought a renaissance of Chinese pride. In the euphoria of the election of the first Chinese mayor, wealthy Chinese Singkawang citizens contributed funds towards the staging of *Capgomeh* 2008. Sitting next to me on the grandstand in 2008 was a businessman, born in Singkawang but living in

Jakarta. He was one of a group of Singkawang alumni who had made good in the nation's capital and who had returned to give to their hometown. "Look," he said to me, "Lanfang is reborn". Perhaps Lanfang [兰芳公司], one of three eighteenth and nineteenth century mining federations, itself was not referenced but the idea of a Chinese-led community of West Kalimantan. Lanfang was not located in the region of Singkawang, but it is the most popularly-known of the three, being the only one with a published history (Heidhues 2001: 169)<sup>6</sup>. Thus again in 2008, as in three hundred years ago, religion provided the glue of Singkawang society bringing together economics, politics and administration – but this time with a crucial difference. Whereas the Chinese confederations of the eighteenth century were founded as kernels of Chinese unity against hostile others, in *Capgomeh* of the twenty-first century, the presentation is one of Dayak-Malay-Chinese brotherhood.

I have described spirit-medium worship as a "living palimpsest of the religious yearnings of a Chinese people" (Chan, 2006:10). Spirit-medium worship is a living ritual theatre; having no written canon, it is improvisational and situational with spirit-mediums performing in response to the needs of their congregation. I visited Singkawang temples and home shrines to learn how *tatungs* presented themselves to devotees. It was clear that even away from public parades, the *tatungs* consistently maintained the belief of themselves as mediums for Dayak, Malay and Chinese *latoks*.

### **The earth gods of Singkawang**

Earth gods are tutelary gods of localities and are often depicted as indigenous characters. For example, Ong Dia [Grandfather of the Earth], the Vietnamese earth god, wears a Cham-style scarf (Thien, 2003: 113-20) of the people of the ancient kingdom of Champa (for a history of Champa see Vickery, 2009: 45-60), and in Malaysia and Singapore, Datuk Kong spirit-mediums don Malay sarong (see images in DeBernardi, 2006: 8, 183 and 188). The worship of earth gods is ancient and is found universally in Chinese communities (see, for example Chamberlayne, 1966; Wolf, 1974: 134-45). When land is used in some way, for example to build upon, or to plant, or mine; an altar, mostly in the form of a humble shrine, or even just a pile stones, is set up on the site so that the local earth god may be prayed to for permission to exploit the land and for protection (Zheng, 2004: 67).

The vast majority of Singkawang spirit-mediums are Chinese. The *tatungs* belong to one or both of two Singkawang spirit-medium associations. Chet Ket Khiong [蔡国强 Cai Guo Qiang], the head of *Majelis Tao Indonesia* (MTI) told me that on his register of 700 spirit-mediums, seven were Malay and 20 were Dayak (Chet, Singkawang, 30 June 2009). Bong Wui Khong, [黄威康 Huang Wei Kang], head of the *TriDharma* group said that among 400 members, three were Malay and around 10 were Dayak (Bong, Singkawang, 30 June 2009). However in *Capgomeh* 2008, and in the 2009 visit, it appeared that as many *tatungs* believed that they were

mediums for Dayak as Malay and as Chinese *latoks*. They portrayed this belief through symbolic ethnicity (Gans, 1979 and 1994), using cultural markers of costumes, props and ritual behavior. Such emblems may be theatrical aids, but crucial to this analysis is a theological principle that in Chinese spirit-medium worship; ritual is theatre, and theatre is ritual (Chan, 2006). Entranced spirit-mediums perform being gods using costumes, props and gestures, and while they are acting out their roles, it is held by believers that they are the veritable gods incarnate.

### **Dayak gods**

At *Capgomeh* 2008, the Dayak spirit-mediums were distinctive for their costume of embroidered vests, representing the traditional *baju burung* [literally, bird garment], worn over trousers covered by embroidered aprons that represented the traditional *sirat* or *cawat*. The Dayak mediums wore headbands or helmets decorated with hornbill or pheasant feathers, or leaves of *daun juang* [*cordyline fruticosa*]. These brown and red streaked leaves were to be seen on all palanquins bearing Dayak spirit-mediums. Sheaves of *burai pinang* [the inflorescence of the areca catechu] were also placed on altars to Dayak *latoks* or were carried by supporters accompanying Dayak *tatungs*. Both plants are sacred to the Dayak<sup>7</sup> and their use in *Capgomeh* reaffirmed the authenticity of possession by Dayak spirits – a claim which was also made through blood sacrifices.

Some *tatungs* bit off the heads of chickens and drank the blood from the struggling birds. Two spirit-mediums (one an ethnic Dayak, introduced to me by name, and another a Chinese but possessed by a Dayak spirit), cut off the head of black puppies<sup>8</sup> and drank the blood. These acts, performed in full view of spectators sent powerful signals of ethnicity for several informants explained that Dayak spirits get energized from drinking blood. However, the popular belief that blood sacrifice is intrinsic to Dayak culture (see, for example Schiller and Garang, 2002: 251) was rejected by John Bamba, the Director of Institut of Dayakologi (Bamba, Pontianak, 22 February 2008).

Hioe Tjin Kiong [虎进强 Hu Jin Qiang]<sup>9</sup> is the medium for Latok Sungkung. Sungkung, in Seluas, West Kalimantan, has been named “the navel of Borneo”, the mythological ancestral home of the Bidayuh (People of the Land). Staal, a nineteenth century Jesuit missionary to Borneo relates a local story that traces the fierce and warlike Sungkung Dayak to descendants of an early Chinese immigrant who had married Dayak women (Staal, 1940: 56). Hioe, aged 55 (in 2009), described Sungkung as a place of mystery and magic where the spirit healers could walk upon trees (Hioe, Singkawang, 20 February 2008. I met with Hioe again in Singkawang on 2 July 2009). He became a medium at the age of 17 and is the fourth generation of Hioe spirit-mediums. As Latok Sungkung, Hioe travels about Singkawang capturing demons which he imprisons in ceramic bowls (one cupped upon the other) and in a large Chinese jar set in the compound of his temple on Jalan Said Harun. This jar is opened just once a year, when a chicken and a black



dog must be sacrificed. I also met and interviewed a Dayak spirit through his *jailangkung* spirit-basket.

In a small temple in the compound of a shop house on Jalan Ali Anyang, I was introduced to spirit-basket-god Wang Kong Kong [皇公公 Huang Gong Gong] by his channeler Bhong Ci Thung [王志星 Wang Zhi Xing]. Bhong, aged 30 (in 2009), is himself a medium for the Dayak Latok Iban Pulau Gabung, and every *Capgomeh* Bhong leads a contingent of spirit-mediums all dressed in Dayak costumes. The spirit-basket Wang Kong Kong also joins in the parade riding upon his own miniature palanquin, which, like those of human mediums, is set with knives. Bhong told (Bhong, Singkawang, 1 July 2009) how before setting out on a *Capgomeh* parade a chicken has to be sacrificed to Wang Kong Kong. The bird would be decapitated and Wang Kong Kong would sup on its blood by pecking at the neck with the pen inserted into the weave of the basket.

### Malay gods

The Malay spirit-mediums were not dressed in anything that might have resembled the Malay sarong and cap, instead they wore vests over trousers with sashes tied criss-cross over the chest, wrapped about the arms, and tied as bandanas on the forehead. Many of the headbands bore writing in curvy scrawls and dots that resembled Arabic script.

However, with regard to *Capgomeh*, Ahmadi Muhammad, the head of the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* [Council of Muftis] in the municipality of Sambas Muslims in a newspaper report of 21 February 2008 issued what was described as a “stern warning” reminding all Muslims that the followers of Islam are prohibited from getting involved in the rituals of other religions. So Muslims Ahmadi said, were forbidden to become spirit-mediums, to carry spirit-medium sedan chairs, to enter Chinese temples or to engage in any other activities of a religious nature. (*Pontianak Post*, 21 February 2008: 24). In Singkawang in July 2009, I met and interviewed a Malay medium who told me that the Front Pembela Islam (FPI) had attacked him that year to warn him against taking part in *Capgomeh*. Perhaps Muslim sensitivity is behind the Chinese spirit-mediums’ avoidance of an overt symbol such as costume to signal Malay ethnicity. Instead the spirit-mediums depended on inconspicuous Arabic-like writing on headbands, and it appears that the ability to write this script is the defining mark of possession by a Malay spirit.

I met Ji Su Jiu [余赐友 Yu Ciyou] at a small temple which was set in the front hall of his home, a terrace house in the Jam Thang [盐汀 Yan Ting] Salt District on the outskirts of Singkawang. Ah Jiu, who was in his 20s (in 2008), had been first possessed in 2005. Ah Jiu does not know the name of this spirit but believes it to be Malay, for when entranced Ah Jiu says he can write the Arabic script, a skill he professed not to ordinarily know. When we met on 19 February 2008, Ah Jiu showed

me a sample of this flowing calligraphy written in gold paint on a large black fan. Ah Jiu must not have set his heart on being a medium, for when I visited the temple in the Salt District again in July 2009; I found that he had left to find work in Jakarta. Only the fan remained, the writing upon it now faded. When I showed a photograph of Ah Jiu's fan to people who could read Arabic, they could not make out any words. This seemed to be the case with all of the images of writings of Malay *tatungs* and *jailangkungs*, the script was not legible.

But the Chinese take the 'Arabic' writing of the Malay spirit mediums seriously. On the morning of 4 July 2009, I watched a *jailangkung* possessed by Latok Pak Gani write in such a script. Wielded by two Chinese men, the spirit-basket scrawled upon a strip of white paper with a brush dipped in black ink. This was a medicinal talisman which was to be burnt so that the ashes could be mixed with water to be drunk by the patient at the *Maghrib* [Muslim evening prayers] hour. In a small shrine to Latok Pak Gani in front of the temple in Kampong Natuna, there is a picture of a handsome old man dressed all in white and wearing a *haji's* [a Muslim who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca] white skull cap. With the help of his channeler, Li Qiu Quan [李求权], aged 42 (in 2009), Latok Pak Gani told his story writing in Indonesian through his spirit-basket: Pak Gani had been born in Surabaya in the nineteenth century. He came to West Kalimantan and became an ascetic on Pulau Serasan. In death, Latok Pak Gani returns through his *jailangkung* to help people with medical consultations.

### Chinese gods

On 1 July 2009, I consulted with Ma Guohui [马国辉], aged 61 (in 2009) at his temple on Jalan Kalimantan. Ma wielded a *jailangkung* moved by the spirit of his younger brother Ma Zenghui [马增辉] who in death is said to have become a warrior god under the somewhat generic name of Wu Sheng Jiang Jun [武圣将军, the 'Martial and Holy General']. In fact most of the names of the Chinese spirits I met through their human mediums and their spirit baskets had general names such as Zhi Gao Da Wang [志高大王, the 'Exalted and Most High Highness'], Ling Shan Tong Zi [灵山童子, the 'Mountain Spirit Child'] and Niao Xiu Cai [鸟秀才, the 'Bird Scholar'] testifying to them being *latoks* rather than established gods of the Daoist pantheon.

One medium Lie Teck Poh [李德保 Li Debao], the father of Li of the Latok Pak Gani *jailangkung*, was the medium of Fam Sai Fu [范师福 Fan Shi Fu], a *latok* who had apparently once lived on Gunong Pasi in Singkawang. Fam's story is not likely to be told because Old Lie, now in his 60s, is mute from a stroke. No one, including Lie's son, knows anything more, and only a photograph on the temple wall shows how when Fam's spirit possessed Old Lie, the medium, would strip down to shorts and cover his body with black paint. This habit must have made Lie in his incarnation as Fam a distinctive figure on the Singkawang spirit-medium scene, for from viewing *Capgomeh* 2008 and video images of the parades of 2007, 2009, 2010

and 2011, it is clear that the vast majority of the Chinese *tatungs* signified the Chinese ethnicity of their possessing spirit by dressing up in Ming [明 1368-1644] style costumes as popularly depicted in films and on the Chinese opera stage. Some wear the pajama-like uniforms of foot soldiers comprising tunics over trousers; others dress up as generals in costumes featuring circular metal plates sewn on to give the appearance of armour. Even the *jailangkung* spirit-baskets wear the shirts of foot soldiers.

In parade, the costumed spirit-mediums and spirit-baskets present a striking image of a united army of Dayak, Malay and Chinese *latoks*, a performance that narrates a mythic history of brotherhood.

### **Reading *Capgomeh* as performance of identity**

A population, writes Lie, is different from a people. The first is an aggregate, an analytical category, whereas the second is an experienced entity (2004: 41). A people is a group that shares an internal conviction of their identity. Peoplehood is a self-reflexive construction; a primal definition that provides a repository of deep truths of subjectivity and individuality which we feel about ourselves (Lie, 2004: 1).

Lie writes of a modern peoplehood born out of the making of the modern state. A new civic rule has replaced old absolutist systems under kings or religious authorities. Nationalism is the new rallying point; one so potent as to have aroused millions to go to war and their deaths for the sake of their nation (Lie, 2004: 98). But the true achievement of nation-building is the integration of citizens into a polity sharing an inclusionary identity thereby transforming “a people in itself (population) to people for itself (peoplehood)” (Lie, 2004: 99). This order depends upon a notion of commonality, and state institutions such as education, judiciary, military and welfare are pressed to the purpose. But, writes Lie, the nation as a cultural whole is a chimera for cultural integration can never be complete; “peoplehood identity and racism develop hand in hand” (Lie, 2004: 169).

Smith’s (1996: 581) definition of the nation encompasses the ideas set out by Lie: “a named human population with shared myths and memories occupying an historic territory or homeland, and possessing a common public culture, a single unified economy and common legal rights and duties”. But, as with Lie, Smith points out, ruptures inevitably arise. The ideological principles of a unitary identity, the very ties that seek to dissolve differences, can engender contestation. A sense of a shared solidarity may give rise to a drive to purify a community of alien elements (ibid.). The modern state is an artificial creation drawn up along territorial lines. This is an indiscriminate inclusionary categorization; all insiders are awarded systematic advantages. But inclusion will give rise to exclusion as insiders seek out, to exclude, the outsiders within. The challenge finds expressions in the gaps of peoplehood. One such separation is that of uneven ethno-history.

Ethnicity, writes Smith, is the sense of collective belonging to a community based on common myths of origin and shared memories associated with an historic homeland (1996: 583). In these terms we might place the Indonesian-Chinese on the side of civic nationalism, with claims to rights as citizens of Indonesia by virtue of the fact that they were born in Indonesia and grew up in Indonesia. But this is only the territorial claim of nation, and a gulf separates the Chinese from the native *pribumi*. In Lie's terms, the modern peoplehood of nationalism is 'thin' compared to kinship and local identities which provide 'thick', concrete and cogent narratives of identity (2004: 9-10). In a world where power stems from culture, writes Smith, the culturally peripheral and politically disprivileged communities will embark on strategies that would allow them to approach the center, and a potent idea would be the claim to filiation of a mythical shared golden age (Smith, 1996: 581-6). This then is the narrative of *Capgomeh*; that the Dayak, Malay and Chinese ancestral spirits of Singkawang form a united fraternity, situating the Chinese therefore as brethren of the *pribumi*, and therefore rooted and entitled, as part of the 'peoplehood' of West Kalimantan.

Gans writes that acculturation and assimilation is not the straight line dissolution of ethnic groups into the homogenous whole of a host society, but rather it is a bumpy process of continual innovative ethnic adaptation to a new society (1992). Cheu reads the worship of earth gods in Penang as an internal defense-mechanism of the Chinese against unconditional submission to ideologies of "Malay nationalism" (1992: 381). Here the Malay *keramat* [saint] is co-opted as Chinese Datuk Kong in a multilateral acculturative strategy that makes Malay ideas Chinese and Chinese ideas Malay. This has allowed the Chinese to negotiate Malaysianization while keeping intact their markers of ethnicity (Cheu, 1992, also Cheu 1996-1997).

*Datuk Kong* worship in Singapore and Malaysia depends on personal one-to-one consultations with possessed spirit-mediums (Cheu, 1992: 390-5; DeBernardi, 2006: 175-200), in scale, this strategy of adaptation through acculturation might be described as micro-invention, against which *Capgomeh* Singkawang might be described as a "macro-invention", Gans' concept of a deliberate invention of whole new ethnic patterns or the careful reconstruction of old ones never experienced personally (1994: 579-80). Blood sacrifices, Arabic-like writing and Ming-style costumes represent cultural symbols pulled out of the original moorings, "to become stand-ins for" (Gans, 1979: 9) in order to constitute a new peoplehood that allows the Singkawang Chinese to Indonesianize on their own terms, even though, and perhaps because the *Capgomeh* parade has been appropriated as touristic commodity.

### **The *Capgomeh* tale: Concretizing peoplehood**

In an interview in Singkawang on 20 February 2008, Mayor Karman told me that he saw *Capgomeh* as an equivalent of Tomatina, the annual tomato battle which brings

international fame and tourists to the small town of Buñol, Spain. Research indicates that ethnic tourism, where spectators come to gawk at exotic peoples, can have a way of concretizing ethnicity (van den Berghe and Keyes, 1984). The stories that locals tell tourists about themselves eventually become truths of identity. Picard (1990), for example, argued that cultural tourism contributed to a Bali brand image that became an identity marker that characterized the Balinese not only to outsiders, but to the Balinese themselves. In the same way, would *Capgomeh* have allowed the Chinese of Singkawang to perform a peoplehood both to themselves and to other Indonesians? The situation of the dragon column might supply answers.

In 2008, a column emblazoned with a handsome dragon sculpture was erected in the town centre, at the Kepol Mahmud-Niaga road junction. Today, this column has become a symbol of inter-ethnic conflict. The Malays led by the FPI want the column destroyed. They are opposed by the Chinese and Dayak. In the *Pontianak Post Online* report on a 2010 rally headed by the *Persatuan Pemuda Tionghoa* (PPT, the Association of Chinese Youth) and the *Persatuan Pemuda Dayak* (PPD, the Association of Dayak Youth), a Dayak, Joseph Noreseng, is quoted as saying: “The dragon is an important religious symbol of the Dayak. We want to live in peaceful ethnic harmony. The history of Borneo has shown that the Dayak, Malay and Chinese have long lived together in peace, so that we should not allow groups to destroy this harmony” (17 Jun 2010; my translation). Had the loud rehearsing of a myth of ethnic brotherhood helped shape Noreseng’s point of view?

The growing success of *Capgomeh* Singkawang can be as much attributed to post New Order religious fervor as to cash disbursements by the parade organizing committee. In 2008, this was up to 2.5 million rupiah (under US\$300 by 2011 rates) per spirit-medium team which carried a palanquin. Donor fatigue, political jostling, Malay animosity are just some of the forces that pose real challenges to the future success of *Capgomeh*. Perhaps the parade on its present scale will not survive if Chinese Mayor Hasan Karman is no longer in office, but the fragility of the situation cannot detract from the reading of *Capgomeh* as a performance of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgement: I thank the Office of Research, Singapore Management University for the kind and generous support for my research in Singkawang in two grants; Project Fund No: C242/MSS7S012 and Project Fund No: C242/MSS8S022. I also thank many without whom I could not have done this research: My Indonesian friends: Mayor Hasan Karman, Ardian Cangianto, Lio Kuniarwan, Amien Nusantio Setiadi, Pui Khian Fung and Rudi Dustika Teja. My friends from Taoism-Singapore Forum: Victor Yue, Timothy Pwee, Raymond Goh and Jave Wu. I am grateful for the advice and encouragement of Sai Siew Min, Hoon Chang Yau, and Nola Cooke.

<sup>2</sup> This term was suggested to me by Mary Somers Heidhues (e-mail, 22 April 2011 and 22 June 2011) to distinguish more clearly between 'peoplehood' as a statement of belonging to a locality in Indonesia, and what might be conceived as an essence of Indonesianess.

<sup>3</sup> This tradition of processions featuring exorcists possessed by warrior-spirit was brought to Southeast Asia by Chinese immigrants. A spirit-medium parade used to be held on the fourteenth and fifteenth of the first moon in Cambodia right up to 1968 (Willmott, 1990: 88-99; and 1998: 146). Jammes (e-mail, 30 April 2011) observed such a parade, featuring 20 or less spirit-mediums, in Phnom Penh in 2009. Exorcistic spirit-medium processions also feature at the festivals of the gods, as in the Nine Emperor Gods parades in Singapore and Malaysia, (among others, see Heinze, 1981; Cheu, 1988 and 1996; DeBernardi, 2004: 182-215). Cohen argues that the Vegetarian Festival, which takes place around Phuket, Thailand every October or November, is not an invented tradition but manifests a remarkable extent of structural continuity to ancient Chinese rituals (2001: 193).

<sup>4</sup> This view was shared by my travel companions. I had gone to Singkawang with five members of the Taoism-Singapore Forum, a group dedicated to the investigation of Chinese culture and religion. Ardian Cangianto, founder of the *Budaya Tionghoa* [Chinese Culture] website had also joined us. All of my friends are familiar with Daoist rituals, and all remarked upon the overwhelming representation of local gods in the parade.

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- <sup>5</sup> I accessed this website in May 2008. Since then, the website has been updated and no longer provides population statistics by religious affiliations.
- <sup>6</sup> There are Internet websites setting out brief histories of the Lanfang confederation, such as that on Indonesian Wikipedia and Sintaonet.com. Heidhues' 2003 history of West Kalimantan was published in Indonesian in 2009.
- <sup>7</sup> Zahorka (2007: 128-9) notes that these are two of the eight obligatory plant species used in shamanic healing rituals among the Benuaq Ohookng people of East Kalimantan. The Malay term *daun juang* might be named the 'struggle leaf' but this is only a literal translation. A popular name, the fire leaf plant describes the dark brown and red streaked leaves. The *pinang* palm is sometimes known as the betel nut palm for the areca nut is chewed with betel leaf.
- <sup>8</sup> The black dog sacrifice might be a Chinese cultural practice for Yuan (2000: 64) reports on a nineteenth century account of Chinese miners in West Kalimantan sacrificing black dogs. The blood of black dogs, along with menstrual blood, is regarded as an antidote against spells and curses (Chu, 1980: 39). However several Singkawang informants told me that the drinking of the blood of sacrificed animals was demanded by Dayak spirits. The Dayak spirits were energised by drinking blood. Hui (2007: 121) reports that in the 1966-1967 Indonesian military *demonstrasi* action against the Chinese in the interior of West Kalimantan, Dayaks who attacked Chinese bit off the heads of chickens and drank the blood.
- <sup>9</sup> This ethnography identifies the interviewees by their personal names and the locations of their temple because my informants are community leaders who want their work to be acknowledged. My interviewees are people who engage in office or practise their religion publicly. The mediums operate out of temples that are open to all. Only where my informants have asked for confidentiality, have personal names been avoided.