Blood, Thunder, and Mockery of Animals
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The departure of the ethnographical field worker from the scene of his observations will not find the existing culture change situation unaltered. The anthropologist, as participant in this process, is in a position to exert far-reaching influence on the natives as well as on the resident authorities, and since both parties must continue to co-operate in the future, the nature and extent of this influence must be realized. Dangerous and harmful is, for instance, encouraging the practice of former rituals, when the violation of local prohibitions is thereby involved. On the other hand the interest shown in the history and life of the tribe may increase its self-respect and strengthen the cultural pattern. A border-line case exists with the collection of artifacts, which driven beyond a certain point may jeopardize the basic substance of the culture.

Blood, Thunder, and Mockery of Animals

By Rodney Needham

To the memory of C. G. Jung

This paper attempts, in a preliminary and limited fashion, the investigation of problems posed by a practice common to the Semang of Malaya and the Penan of Borneo*.

I

Maxwell reported nearly a century ago that thunder is greatly dreaded by “the wild tribes” of Perak. “When it thunders the women cut their legs with knives till the blood flows, and then catching the drops in a piece of bamboo, they cast them aloft towards the sky to propitiate the angry deities” (1879, p. 48). This custom has since been

* The research on which this article is based was conducted among the Penan in 1951-52 with the aid of a Senior Studentship. Apart from an unpublished doctoral thesis, “The Social Organisation of the Penan” (1953), there exists no general account of the Penan.

I revisited the Penan in June-September, 1958, with a Research Fellowship generously awarded by the Cultural Relations Programm of S.E.A.T.O., but at that time the issue discussed here had not struck me, and I did not take it up again among the Penan. I was re-reading Evans on the Negritos of Malaya, and only when I came to the passages on blood and thunder did it occur to me that I had some notes on similar matters among the Penan. Hence the partial and inconclusive character of the investigation made here.
firmly ascribed to the Negritos (Semang, Pangan), and has acquired a fair prominence in the ethnographic literature on Malaya.

Skeat and Blagden write that "during a storm of thunder and lightning" the Semang draw a few drops of blood from the shin-bone with a knife, mix it with a little water in a bamboo receptacle, and throw the mixture up to the sky, shouting "Stop!" (Skeat and Blagden, 1906, vol. II, p. 204). A woman was the only person actually seen to perform this rite.

Schebesta makes extensive references to it. In the first incident described it is a woman who stabs her shin with a "splinter of bamboo" during a violent and prolonged thunder-storm: she wipes the blood into a bamboo filled with water, sprinkles a little on the ground, and then throws it into the air, first towards the direction of the thunder and then to "every quarter of the heavens", shouting "Go! Go!" (1929, pp. 87—88). In another place he writes that at the sound of thunder "every adult" conscious of misdoing will snatch up his knife and perform the blood-sacrifice (p.192), implying that men as well as women do so. The thunder is a sign of the displeasure of Karei, the god of the Semang, at certain transgressions known as lavaid karei; these include playing noisily and roughly, lewd language, adultery, playing with animals, burning a leech, mocking a monkey, killing hornets and certain birds, sleeping too close to one's child of the opposite sex, incest, disrespectful address to relatives, open demonstration of joy at a reunion, drawing water with a rusty black pot or a burnt bamboo, looking at oneself in a mirror in the open air, and murder (Schebesta, 1929, pp. 96, 97, 109, 189, 190, 191—192). The aim of the sacrifice is said to be "expiation" (p. 221); when Karei receives the blood, he anoints his chest with it (p. 192). If it were not given, the consequences would be terrible; Karei would tear trees up by the roots, floods would burst out of the ground, and everybody would be washed away (p. 192). The hala, or shaman, however, does not practise this blood-sacrifice (p. 258).

According to Evans, Karei makes thunder and punishes for sins, but his wrath can be averted by a blood-offering (1937, p.152). Animals are men who did not perform this rite (p.161). The blood is drawn from the outer side of the right shin; a little is poured on to the earth and the rest is thrown up towards the sky (p. 171); one informant said that it was thrown with the left hand (p. 172). The photographs (facing pp. 180 and 184) show a woman drawing blood, apparently with a bamboo, and casting it aloft with her right hand. The shaman (halak) is a "very child of the divinity" and does not offer blood-sacrifice when others do (pp. 207—208).
Williams-Hunt says that the blood is taken with a sharp bamboo, caught in a leaf, and then thrown into the sky; heavy thunderstorms are punishment by Karei for "sin" (1952, p. 75).

To judge by Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, with their great range of reported custom, and by general reading and enquiries, this rite is singular to the Negritos. It is, however, practised by at least one group of Penan in middle Borneo.

II

At Long Buang, on the left bank of the middle Apoh River, a tributary of the Tutoh, which itself flows into the Baram, there is a small longhouse inhabited by a group of settled Eastern Penan. The Penan are traditionally, and for the most part still are in fact, forest nomads subsisting on wild sago and game, but a few groups such as this have settled. The Penan of Long Buang, however, still spend long periods away in the forest, hunting and working sago, using their house as a base, and they are in relatively frequent communication with various groups of related nomads. It is in this group at least that a blood-offering, taken from the leg, is made to a god at the onset of thunder.

I observed it in 1951 (when I had been only about five months among the Penan), during a sudden and very noisy thunder-storm. When the thunder began to crack, two youths, Lingai and my namesake Lidem, with whom I had been in lively and jocular conversation, immediately took their knives, distended the joint of the right middle toe, and tapped lightly with the tip of the blade until blood came; then they scraped off the blood with the edge, held it in the rain dripping from the eaves, and flicked the mixture of blood and water out of the house. As I recollect, the blood was definitely not thrown downwards, and it could not have been cast directly up into the sky, given the overhang of the roof, but was shaken outwards with an underhand motion.

This rite is called menyat apun, to beg pardon, or menyat kesian, to beg pity or favour. (*Apun* is clearly related to the Malay *ampun*, pardon; *kesian*, to the Malay *kasehan*, pity, kindness, compassion.) The blood-offering was followed immediately by the action of *motong bok*, to burn the hair of the head. This consisted in seizing a strand of hair from the fringe hanging over the forehead, singeing it with a glowing brand from the fire, and throwing the wood out into the rain. This rite does not absolutely require an invocation but may be accompanied by the following words, uttered very rapidly and in a monotone:
Iteu, bok na’ ngan ko, Baléi Liwen.
Maneu tong tilo, tong bona.
Bé’ pu’un amé ngeliwen ka’au,
keja’au laka mutan, keja’au laka tevengan,
é’ pelike’
tong gien, tong gaten.
Bé’ irah pu’un salu’ wang ko ngan, belalang latéi, semuhei.
Ma’o la keh liwen la’a.

This may be translated:
Here is hair (of the head) that we give to you, Baléi Liwen.
Apply it to the genitals.
We are not laughing at you,
as big as the laka mutan, as big as the laka tevengan,
folding up quickly at the stimulation (tickling).
We are not laughing at your belalang, at the earth-worm, at
the semuhei-snake.
Let there be no more [thunder].

Bono is said to have no everyday meaning; it is ha’ baléi, spirit-
language, and is used here simply to “balance” (cf. Elshout, 1923,
p.122) tilo, genitals. Ngeliwen is the only word to occasion any real
concern about the meaning of the invocation. It was explained to me
as laughing (mala’), or joking, talking playfully (ha’ seminga’); but
among the Western Penan the word means to take fur from monkeys
and other non-terrestrial animals, burn it, and throw it aloft, as a
concluding part of the funeral ceremony. The Eastern and Western
dialects of Penan differ considerably, and there is no necessity that a
word in one shall mean the same in the other, but it would be more
satisfactory all the same to be surer about the real Eastern Penan
sense. The word looks as though it might be compounded of the verbal
prefix nge-, and liwen, the name of the god Baléi Liwen, and thus
mean something like to invoke that god; grammatically, it is rather
more probable that it may be formed from a word keliwen, but I have
no such word in my vocabularies1. The word ja’au, in keja’au, may
have the meaning here, as in other contexts, of “respected”. The laka
mutan is a creeper which I have not seen; it is viscous and like a
sundew, perhaps Drosera indica (Ridley, 1922, vol. I, pp. 687—688) or
some such plant, for it is said to catch and devour insects. Laka
tevengan is said to have no meaning, but to balance laka mutan; gien,
similarly, balances gaten, to itch or feel an irritation. Wang balances
belalang, which is described as a small furless animal (not be found in
Banks, 1949), about six inches long, living underground. The latéi was
described to me as a small snake, but I later discovered that among
the Western Penan at any rate it is an earth-worm; it is not an omen-

1 A descriptive vocabulary of Penan is in an advanced stage of pre-
paration and will be published in due course.
animal. The *semuhei* is an omen-snake; probably, if the Penan name is related to the Kenyah word rendered as *semoi* by Haddon (1901, p. 384), *Doliophis bivirgatus* (*flaviceps*).

As the invocation makes plain, the blood and hair are offered to the god Baléi Liwen. His body is of stone, and it is with this that he makes thunder. He is not, however, a spiritual personification of thunder, in which case his name would be Baléi Nekedo, but a god whose attribute is thunder. The only explanations of the custom that I recorded are that he does not like to see people enjoying themselves, and therefore emits thunder; and that he will not permit people to mock the creatures named in the invocation. If he is really angry he fells trees and casts thunder-bolts. The blood-offering will usually appease him if made by only one or two people, but if the thunder continues and everybody then offers blood or burns hair it will surely stop. I do not know whether any category of person is exempt from this ritual duty.

**III**

I much regret that I did not pursue any more detailed or useful enquiries into this practice among the Penan; I never observed it again among Eastern Penan, and the Western Penan do not make this blood-offering. It should prove helpful, nevertheless, to examine its elements in relation to other Penan usages and beliefs. We shall confine ourselves for the most part to evidence also recorded among the Penan Buang.

There is, so far as I am aware, no other occasion on which one's blood is offered to a spirit. The only times at which a man will let his own blood are at the contraction of a blood-pact (Needham, 1954), when the exchange of blood is presided over by the bamboo-spirit (Baléi Bolo among the Eastern Penan, Baléi Lēpek among the Western Penan), who is represented by the bamboo knife with which the incisions are made (the name of the pact itself means "to incise"); and at the piercing of the glans penis for the insertion of the penis-pin\(^2\), or of the ear for the insertion of a leopard fang or an ear-ring, which are not rituals and are not accompanied by an invocation or witnessed by any spirit. Tattooing, which punctures the skin and causes slight bleeding, is not practised by the Eastern Penan. The Penan, indeed, are very much concerned about any shedding of human blood, particularly of an untoward kind, and they make a great fuss when someone is cut and there is any considerable effusion of blood\(^3\). Scars, correspond-

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\(^2\) An ethnographic and historical comparative monograph on this device has been in preparation for some years, and is intended to be published when the press of other concerns abates.
ingly, are regarded with a mixture of intent if covert interest and disquiet. Penan were obviously and intensely curious, for example, about a rather extensive scar on my leg, but nobody ever asked me what caused it or even alluded to it in any way; yet when one day I asked a man what had caused a severe gash in his forearm (in fact, the tush of a charging boar, a common source of injury), they instantly and eagerly seized advantage of my indiscretion to put the same question to me. Their reaction was one of demonstrative horror at the contemplation of the scar (as if they had never seen it before), and of great relief at being able to talk openly about the gravity of the wound and the loss of blood.

Another incident concerning human blood is of special interest here. I was travelling with Penan in the area at the headwaters of the Paong river, on the western slopes of Mount Kalulong. There are countless leeches in these high rain forests, and within minutes of starting a march one can have scores of them on one's body. This area was particularly thick with them, and at the end of the day we sat around the fire removing them from our feet and legs. The Penan did so mainly by running the edges of their knives down their legs and then flicking the squirming mass of leeches from the blade backwards into the surrounding forest; leeches in the groin or other crevices were picked out by a firm pressure between the thumb and forefinger and were similarly flung into the vegetation, from which the nearer ones would begin a new progress back towards us. No attempt was made to kill or injure them, though there is no express prohibition on doing so, e.g. by cutting them in two. After a considerable time at this tedious and rather exasperating task, I plucked a particularly large and swollen leech from between my toes, and, on impulse, cast it with some satisfaction into the fire. At once there was a vehement expostulation from one of my companions, telling me not to do so. Another man placatingly suggested that it did not really matter so much, but the former nevertheless snapped "I don't like it" (yeng akeu k̄l̄u), and continued a muttered grumble for a little while. It is particularly to be

3 Cf. "The Kenyah is ... very afraid of blood, which is the reason that haematemesis is regarded as an especially severe illness, and that persons who die from bloody injuries are also treated as bad corpses", i.e. they are thought to die bad deaths condemning them to become malicious ghosts (Elshout, 1923, p. 128). The vomiting of blood (haematemesis) is a dreaded divine punishment, e.g. for breaking a blood-pact, in the eyes of both the Penan (Needham, 1954) and their cultural congeners the Kenyah.

4 I recount these details because the leeches were plump with human blood, as was obvious from the stained blades where they had been cut, and our concern here is with the behaviour of the Penan with regard to this fact.

5 Perhaps because it was I who did it, and not a Penan.
Rodney Needham
deplored that I did not, as seems so obvious now, try to get to the bottom of this incident⁶, for here too we have an intriguing parallel to a Semang idea. We have already seen above that among them it is a “sin against Karei” to burn a leech (Schebesta, 1929, p. 189); and according to Skeat and Blagden, among the Semang again, “if forest leeches... are pricked from the person and burnt in the fire outside the shelter, tigers will be sure to scent the burning of the blood and will hasten to the spot” (1906, vol. II, p. 223)⁷. From the precision of the description, viz. that the leech is picked from the body and that the tiger smells the burning blood, it seems clear that the defining factor is the presence of human blood in the creature, not the nature of the leech as such⁸.

Menstrual blood, not surprisingly, is believed by the Penan to be dangerous to men, and there is a strict prohibition (kilin ja'au) on incurring any contact with it; to do so would cause fever and ill fortune (sa'a' urip).

Blood, though not human blood, is sometimes offered to the spirits in other circumstances than at thunder. If a man commits adultery, he has to give his wife, who is believed to suffer sickness because of the wrong done to her, a jungle-knife, a cooking-pan, and a hen⁹. The knife is to cut the throat of the hen, the blood of which is drained into the pan and then thrown into the forest, where the spirits (baléi) drink it and will then no longer afflict the wife.

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⁶ I can only plead that I was too weary, almost exhausted, by long and fast marching in this steep country, to do so at the time; and I must suppose that I forgot to bring it up later. Certainly, I had quite forgotten the Semang report, and, especially since I behaved myself afterwards, this was the only such event that I observed.

⁷ The Behrang Senoi, also in Malaya, believe that to burn a leech entails being struck by lightning and destroyed by the storm; and the Ulu Kampar Sakai similarly believe that “to pull a jungle leech off the body and burn it in the fire” will cause a disastrous storm (Evans, 1923, pp. 199, 201). It is to be noted that these peoples are not Malays, and that although they are not Negrito either they speak, as do the Negritos, languages which are closely related to Mon-Khmer.

⁸ The leech may nevertheless have a special significance in Borneo, for among the Bahau of the Apo Kayan it is used as an art-motif in company with such important representations as the naga, the lizard, the dog, and masculine and feminine genitalia, and is freely used on sword-scabbards (Nieuwenhuis, 1900, vol. II, pp. 362, 365; cf. Plate CV, Fig. 1, No. 6).

⁹ The Penan do not customarily keep hens in the forest, and do not eat them or their eggs, but they can obtain them (delaying the ceremony, if necessary) from their Kenyah and other trading-partners when they take their forest products down to the longhouses. Pfeffer reports of one group of “Punan”, actually Western Penan, living west of the Bahau, that they made no blood-sacrifices but took a cock with them wherever they went in the forest and plucked feathers from it to place as offerings in the usual cleft stick (Pfeffer, 1963, p. 130).
Hen-sacrifice is also practised in consulting the thunder-oracle. Baléi Liwen, the thunder-god, can be asked about the future during a thunder-storm, e.g. about whether a man's sick wife will live or die. The hen is sacrificed (pelitwa) and the god is questioned: if the woman is to die the thunder continues, if she is to live it ceases. If, as will typically be the case, the Penan are in the forest and have no hen, the feathers of a hen can be used instead; and it is of special interest that the feathers, symbolising blood, are dipped in rain-water and then thrown into the air.

Beliefs about rain and wind in general, i.e. not thunder-storms, are not particularly revealing, but they nevertheless have some significance. A charm (sihap), made of stone, wild rubber, or anything that certain spirits (ungap) direct, is used to subdue or reduce a storm or high winds (matang kepu, magen kepu); and if a light brisk shower of rain falls through the sunlight, this means that spirits are descending to look at men's doings. There is thus a spiritual aspect to these aerial phenomena as well as to thunder9a.

The related, and ritually equivalent, ceremony of burning the hair at the crash of thunder has not such suggestive parallels as we have established for blood. The hair of the head (bok) is the seat of one of the three "souls" (sahé) which the Penan Buang recognise. Clippings of it, taken from the right (not the left) side of the head of certain relatives, are ritually deposited near the grave after a funeral, and a fire is made nearby; the shade (ada) of the hair is employed by the deceased as cane in making a shelter in the afterworld, and that of the fire becomes the hearth-fire. As for the burning brand, this is also used in seeking an omen (amen); it is thrown to the right after dark, and if a spirit (ungap dau merem, in this case) replies from the forest, in one of the numerous voices that it may assume, the question is answered.

This brief survey of certain other usages does not yield an elucidation of the blood-sacrifice to the thunder-god, but it does suggest a collocation of mystical ideas which, taken together, provide a background to the rite. Blood is clearly an important symbol, not efficacious in itself, by the possession of some inherent virtue or power, but because it establishes a relationship with the spiritual world. It is evidently valued partly for itself, however, by Baléi Liwen, who applies the (blood or) hair to his genitals, and by the spirits who consume it, and it is accordingly offered as a prestation to them. This, presumably, is the prime reason that it is forbidden to burn an engorged leech in a fire, for one thereby not only misapplies but

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9a Cf. Zeus descending on Danaë in a shower of gold, this being interpretable as a thunder-shower falling upon the earth.
destroys what is proper to the spirits or to the blood-pact which they assure. Thunder is also a means of communication, from the spiritual world to men; it is a message, either of adjuration or of forewarning, and the latter can itself be elicited from the thunder-god only by means of other spiritual agents. Hair, which is singled out (unlike blood) by the belief that it has a "soul", is also a prestation to the spiritual world, both to gods and to spirits of the deceased. Finally, fire too effects communication between spirits of various kinds, not only the thunder-god, and mankind. But all this adds up to no more than the wholly expectable conclusion that the offering of blood or hair, and the ritual employment of fire, are not isolated or singular acts but form part of a body of general conceptions about the relations between the spiritual world and this.

IV

The comparative issue may best be posed by the following table of parallels between the Semang and the Penan customs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semang</th>
<th>Penan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. blood taken from the leg</td>
<td>blood taken from the leg (foot)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. mixed with water</td>
<td>mixed with water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. thrown upwards</td>
<td>thrown outwards/upwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. offered to thunder-god</td>
<td>offered to thunder-god</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. to expiate transgression</td>
<td>to beg pardon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. mockery of animals</td>
<td>mockery of animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. blood applied to god's body (chest)</td>
<td>hair/blood applied to god's body (genitals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. god uproots trees if unappeased</td>
<td>god uproots trees if unappeased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. prohibition on burning leech/blood</td>
<td>prohibition on burning leech/blood.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By the common conditions of their forest life, the Semang and the Penan exhibit certain general similarities in their social forms (size of group, paucity of formal institutions, segmentary association, range of social contacts, etc.), but in every other respect there is the extremest difference between them. The Semang are Negritos, speaking a Mon-Khmer language, and are entirely distinct on both counts from their Malay neighbours. The Penan are mongoloid in physique, speak a Malayo-Polynesian tongue, and are culturally almost identical with their settled neighbours such as the Kenyah. The Semang and the Penan do not share a common Indonesian tradition, and in any case the rite is not performed by the Malays or other related peoples, but to judge by the literature is performed in Malaya only by the Negritos. There is just no connexion, historical or cultural, between the two peoples. Whatever can the reason be, then, for such a striking parallelism of rite and belief? If, as cultural anthropologists, we have any
specific competence at all, we surely ought to be able to say something about this quite remarkable concordance.

Blood is an archetypal symbol, variously employed but universally attributed with a special significance; hair has attracted a similar symbolic attention (cf. Wilken, 1912); and fire has a mystical importance comparable to that of blood. The general prominence of these elements in the situation can therefore be readily appreciated.

Thunder, both in Malaya and in Borneo, is an appalling natural phenomenon, seeming to crack and reverberate menacingly on the very surface of the forest canopy and shaking the guts of the human beings cowering underneath. Falling trees, brought down by storms, are a grave danger to the Penan, and I have reports of at least two families almost obliterated by trees falling on shelters and crushing the occupants. (If merely heard toppling heavily in the far distance, the long tearing sound of their descent muffled by the forest, they are an inauspicious omen.) It is therefore little to be wondered at that the Semang and the Penan should both assign a special place to thunder in their religious beliefs, and that both peoples should say that their god uproots trees in his anger.

The matter of mockery of animals might be thought of less consequence, in one respect, since what is of first importance is the common rite, performed similarly in expiation or propitiation, and what the particular transgressions related to the rite may be is secondary, but the prohibition on this odd offence among both Semang and Penan is nonetheless intriguing. The best example of this idea elsewhere that comes to mind is the concept of djeadeja held by the Ngaju in southeastern Borneo, a people of very different cultural tradition and historical connexions from the Penan. Djeadeja are words or deeds which offend the gods and which are punished, significantly, with death by lightning or by petrifaction in a storm; they include incest, calling people or animals by inappropriate names or saying things about them which are contrary to their true natures (e.g. that a louse dances or that a rat sings), and burying an animal alive while declaring that one is burying a human being (Hardeland, 1859, p. 25, s. v. badjea). The word is related to hadjadjea, which actually means "to

10 Perhaps it should be made explicit that this is no mere supposition. I have not only marched through Malayan forest as an infantryman, but have in fact travelled in Negrito territory, on the slopes of Gunong Tahan, in search of a group of Negritos (Needham, 1960 b, pp. 67—68).

11 M. Pfeffer was himself very nearly killed in this way, the tree landing only a few yards from his shelter (Pfeffer, 1963, p. 233).

12 Not to speak of other peoples, living in far less hazardous circumstances, throughout the world (see the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Index, s. v. "Thunder").
mock" (verspotten). Schärer characterises “mockery of animals dedicated to the godhead”, together with incest and adultery, as a “severe offence”, entailing calamity for the individual and his whole community. The thunder-god, Nyaro, is angry and darkens the sky, and a great storm breaks. The village, it is believed, used to be washed away and all its inhabitants turned into stone in the river. Even today, floods or droughts ruin fields and crops, and the transgressor himself dies “like a tall tree in the forest cracked by the storm” (Schärer, 1963, p. 99).

The parallels of concept and imagery seen here between Semang, Penan, and Ngaju are indeed striking. Their effect is scarcely diminished by the consideration that the Penan and the Ngaju live in Borneo, for these peoples are widely separated by some of the most accidented terrain in this vast island, and they are culturally very distinct from each other. Among both of them, nevertheless, connected with mockery of animals, we find thunder, stone, flood, and falling trees, an impressive concatenation of symbols and mystical ideas to be expressed by such separate peoples. The central concept among each, however, and one probably to be traced among the Semang also, is the social value of order and the total disapprobation directed at any confusion of categories. This is a structural feature of other mystical ideologies also, far removed from this part of the earth, and has to do with general characteristics of human thought. Our attention reverts, therefore, to the congruence of imagery among Semang, Penan, and Ngaju, and the high interest of this remains. It might somehow be possible to infer elucidatory connexions, however tenuous, between the Penan and the Ngaju, but it seems quite out of the question plausibly to conceive any concurrence in the pasts of the Ngaju and the Semang.

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13 Other examples are reported by Evans from the Dusun of north Borneo, a people culturally very distinct again from either the Penan or the Ngaju. The Dusun are much afraid of thunderstorms, which they ascribe to certain spirits; dressing up a monkey, dog, or any other animal, brings on a “punishment storm”. The people of one village are related to have dressed up a frog and a green lizard, and to have made them dance; for this, they and their village were turned into a boulder. Thunder, lightning, and floods are brought by a “punishment animal”, the mondau (a mythical tiger-like creature), which hates people to “torture or burn jungle leeches”; one reason for this “thunder tabu” is that leeches become annoyed by the smell of their burnt companions and attack the mondau, which is thus provoked to punish their persecutors. One Dusun man explained that “jungle leeches that are sucking, or have sucked, our blood must not be burnt in the fire or with a cigarette end, because if we do this we are burning our own blood”. (Evans, 1953, pp. 26, 145-147.)

14 This topic will be found elaborated at some length, with regard to the whole South Borneo grouping of cultures, in a forthcoming monograph on Ngaju symbolic categories.
which could account for the symbolic complex, prominent among them both, of thunder-stone-tree-incest-mockery of animals.

The further appearance of stone, however, in these mystical contexts (it will be remembered that the body of Baléi Liwen is of stone, and the thunder-bolts that he casts are believed to be of stone) brings us to the most general issue raised by such ideas. Stone has an ancient and secure place in the symbolisms of mankind, to the extent that we may claim that it has an efficacy, a power over the mind, sufficient to accord it also (together with, e.g., blood, fire, water, tree) the character of an archetypal symbol. When we find these symbols associated, therefore, we are not confronted with a special problem, for by their very essence this concomitance is what we should expect or at very least be perfectly prepared to encounter. Yet this generality itself conflicts with everything that we have been accustomed to think about an irreducible opposition between nature and culture; for here we seem to have what we may call “natural symbols”, whereas it is precisely the defining characteristic of culture, in complete contrast to nature, that it is symbolic.

What is meant here by the word “natural” is that certain things in nature seem to exert an effect on the human mind, conducing to symbolic forms of the most general, and even universal, kind. They seem, namely, to make a primordial impress on the unconscious mind of man as a natural species, producing an affective response which is as natural to the organism (to its distinctive brain) as the motor language of bees or the phototropism of marigolds is natural in other realms of life. This response, when translated (however variously) into language or ritual, constitutes a universal symbolism15. Now if we accept that the universal is the criterion of nature, and that the rule (including the rules of communication governing any symbolism) is that of culture, then we have in such symbols further examples of the kind of conceptual “scandal” which Lévi-Strauss has pointed to in the case of incest (1949, p. 9). On the one hand, that is, certain symbols seem as natural to mankind as are, for instance, the rules of logic which it

15 Cf. Bosch: “... The appearance of tree-conceptions with various peoples on earth has been greatly influenced by the tendencies of human genius, universally alike ... The intricacy of Indian tree-symbolism in the later stages of its development should not blind us to the fact that the original idea was simple and natural. ...” (1960, p. 248). See also Needham, 1960 a, p. 31.

Lévy-Bruhl refers to such creatures as the eagle, lion, tiger, and crocodile as “natural” symbols of power, not arbitrarily chosen but offering themselves as direct representations of the force which they embody. He wishes, however, to make a distinction between a Western view of them, according to which they are the expressions of an abstractly conceived quality, and that of primitives, who are held to sense their inherent quality and to feel a “participation” (1938, p. 174).
everywhere recognises, while on the other hand symbols are regarded as by definition exclusively cultural. It is in this context, it might be concluded, that the Semang and the Penan usages have to do with what has been called “the central problem of anthropology, viz., the passage from nature to culture” (Lévi-Strauss, 1962 a, p. 99); and this, indeed, is exactly what is made clear to us by the Semang belief that animals are men who did not make the blood-sacrifice. But the opposition nature/culture is as aptly to be established within man as between him and the rest of creation, and the present investigation, to the converse of the customs with which it deals, may rather be taken as a minor and laconic contribution to the task of “reintegrating culture with nature” (Lévi-Strauss, 1962 b, p. 327).

We may be persuaded to conclude that such considerations, combined with the natural circumstances of life for the peoples concerned, provide us with some understanding of the grounds for the practice of blood-sacrifice to a thunder-god in Malaya and in Borneo; but if the symbolic values involved are in fact so general, and the effect of thunder so palpable, why is it only the Semang and the Penan who make such an offering — and why, in any case, is the blood taken from the leg? Or, to stretch out this cryptic matter to a new extent, what did Hamlet mean when he charged it to Ophelia, as an offence in women, that they did “nick-name God’s creatures”?

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Synopsis

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