Foreword

This article is an extract from a larger project—it is a glimpse into one of the events I recount in my thesis, *Venerating the Dead: Bisayaship in Contemporary Borneo*, so as to give readers the impression of witnessing the event themselves. Born and raised in Limbang, Iok (aged forty) is a bona fide Bisaya. Her seventy-year old mother, Yadu ("grandmother"), and extended family live in Limbang, East Malaysia (Borneo).

"Grave-visiting, Spirituality and Animistic Beliefs amongst the Bisaya of Rural Borneo"

Alice Cottle

"All Bisaya, living and dead, are cousins. We are one" - Iok.

Cultures across the world have displayed a host of ways for remembering the dead through grave-visits. Some bring flowers, others, food. A gravesite has, for many, a magical agency: a space that provides a platform for strengthening social ties between the living and the dead, on the one hand, and amongst the living, on the other. The sense of communality is such that one cannot exist alone in one's grave. On the morning of the first grave-visit, it was time to "go see Yaki" ("grandfather"). With machetes, bags of food and alcohol in hand, fourteen members of my host-family set off, by canoe, upstream. The first gravesite we reached was that of Yadu's ("grandmother's") lineage.

During the times before, and following, the ceremony, the gravesite is overgrown and desolate: a place rarely visited and, in fact, forbidden. The gravesite's location, a fifteen-minute canoe ride away from kampong, reinforces this prohibition. Locals say that the gravesites are close enough to kampong to be accessible, but not too close, for the forest is believed to be perilous. In order to access a gravesite, "group clearing" must, therefore, take place. "Clearing" the site is a particularly significant activity because it requires collective effort and it is the only means by which we could gain access. For this reason, the grave-visit is only carried out once a year and the prohibitive condition is temporarily reversed: the site is made joyful and welcoming.

Upon our arrival, Bisaya men and women, of all ages, were already busy clearing individual graves. There were about two hundred tombs[1] at the matrilineal site. Each one contained up to twenty generations, but it was difficult to know precisely how many, as names are not typically recorded. Some of the tombs had low shelters, and others, a tombstone or crucifix to mark them. Aside from honouring the dead, Bisaya circulate the grave-site to greet other living community members, who are engaged in similar tasks. After locating Yadu's deceased husband's (Yaki) tomb, each member of the family began to clear the remnants of last year's gifts, and other debris, to be replaced with new gifts.

The women in each house prepare a food offering for the dead. The eldest sister had cooked Yaki's favourite *nasi* curry the night before. A small cup of soya juice was poured and placed at the foot of Yaki's tombstone, next to a few cigarettes, a bottle of Scotch whisky and some Pringles crisps. These were said to be some of Yaki's guilty pleasures. In a similar fashion, Cannell (1999) observed the same practice amongst the Filipino Bicolanos:
"The precise nature of the offering depends upon whom it is intended for" (1999: 158).

Once the food was served, all the family members grouped around the tomb and ate the leftover food that was not served to Yaki, the idea being that the gift must be shared with Yaki as though he were still alive. Beer cans were cracked open and handed around the group, each taking a sip[2]. The remaining beer was then poured onto Yaki's grave.

Iok, and her sister Latipah lit long candle sticks and stuck them along the top of the earthen tomb with some Chinese incense sticks. Together, the children in the group were handed wads of toy money. One by one, they laid the notes beside the tombstone, and set them alight. I noticed, too, that several copper coins had been glued on to the base of the tombstone. Iok referred to them as Yaki's "pocket money". The toy money is burnt so that *symbolic* wealth may cross over to the spirit-world. The copper coins, however, represent a wealth "*transfer*" to the spirit-world. Both materials are symbolic, but the pennies have actual, though small, value and are treated accordingly. Above Yaki's tomb dangled a

[1]Tombs differ from graves: tombs are the 'site' of a family's burial. Wooden coffins are placed into those tombs and these are referred to as 'graves'.

[2]This process reminded me of Christian Holy Communion, and the idea may well have been adopted, or forged, during the missionary period.

weathered travelling bag. Iok explained that, when Yaki was buried, they dressed him in his best pair of khaki trousers and Hawaiian t-shirt, as though anticipating an important journey. To traverse into the afterlife, Yaki needed his travelling bag: this contained clothes, a passport, two tin openers and a machete for protection. These preparatory acts can be seen as a gift or tribute to the dead person (Cannell, 1999:164). The offerings which are made on the day provide an opportunity for the living to continue to make gifts to the dead. When Yaki was buried, the spirits would need to work out his identity, since he was buried with his mother-in-law instead of his own patrilineal group. According to Iok, Yaki would have had to introduce himself to the spirits on arrival. She described the spirit-world:

"When people die, they mostly die at home...if they are lucky. It we foresee the death, those who are far away get sent for... and the house becomes full! When Yaki died, he went "somewhere", wherever he went... he was in a good place. At school this was called heaven and hell, I am not sure if that is the place my ancestors knew. We call it the 'spirit-world'."

The spirit-world seems to set itself apart from Christian ideals of *heaven* and *hell*. Christianised Bisaya remain relatively indifferent to ideas of *heaven*. Perhaps the fact that the spirit-world is described as "somewhere" other than "here", and the fact that *heaven* is under-emphasised, not only suggests the ambiguity of Bisaya afterlife, but also shows that Bisaya and non-Bisaya understandings of death may still be in conflict. Further, this may suggest a connection to the history of Bisaya colonialism, from which these ideas may have been derived. The Christian emphasis of heavenly spaces does not deny that other cultures formed similar ideas. For example, Yadu's generation still characterises death as either "*good"* or *"bad*". It is difficult to decipher what are new concepts and what existed prior to contact with missionaries. From Iok's perspective, the Bisaya spirit-world, an imagined parallel space that mirrors the living world, is neither necessarily "*up*" nor "*down*", but an analogous cosmos.

"Frank...he is with us" - John

The following morning, the same group trekked uphill to the patrilineal gravesite, repeating the process of the previous day. The tomb in which Iok's great-grandfather was buried was similar to Yaki's tomb, although the gravesite was on a higher hilltop. Since Bisaya are usually buried with their parents, Iok's grandfather was buried with a number of

patriline descendants. Next to the tomb, however, was a half buried lid-less ceramic pot. Iok's cousin John introduced me: "This is my uncle, Frank". Reaching his hand inside, John pulled out a wet skull covered in black hair, followed by a femur and forearm. Frank was buried in the pot nearly seventy years ago. Rainwater (*hasam)* collected over time had preserved the bones, and the hair on Frank's skull. Ceramic pots were used during a period when coffins were difficult and expensive to acquire. Although the pot contains one individual, it is buried next to a relative's tomb and in the same earth[3].

Water has a particular significance to the Bisaya. The river is an invaluable source of water since Yadu's home has no access to water-mains. For the most part, water tanks are used to collect *hasam*. As it falls, *hasam* enters the domestic sphere, where it is collected, filtered and ingested. Moreover, *hasam* falls in its purest form, between the sky and the house and so is deemed clean and good for cooking *nasi*. Limbang River is still crucial to daily life: for washing, fishing and cooking, "It is our life-stream" (Joseph).

Frank's pot-opening allows *hasam* to enter directly, so as not to let his body "dry-up". Sisters, Dayang and Latipah, took turns to pour the water from the pot onto my face, hands and feet. As they poured, I was instructed to pray for "good fortune". In the same way that it preserved Frank's skull, *hasam* had the power to cleanse us from "bad", allowing us to wish for "good" and, perhaps, more significantly, to be at one with the ancestors. *Hasam* had passed from Frank's body to us, connecting the living agent to the soul of the dead. The *hasam* that preserves the dead is the *hasam* that provides for the living. Frank's potent *hasam* was, therefore, charged with life, wisdom and the possibility of bringing me good fortune in the future. As we left the site, relatives said goodbye: "Yaki, bring us good fortune". The fusion of the desire for good *futures* and good *fortunes* was strongly articulated.

At the closing of the grave-visit, the village space, the wilderness, and the restored barrier between the two, become real and meaningful (Astuti, 1995:118). The description of the grave-visit, and the connections within, whilst subjective, are only one aspect of Bisayaship. In observing the formalities of the visit, I intend to treat these connections as

[3]According to Iok, this burial practice was incorporated, as late as the 19th century. It is possible, but unverifiable, whether this practice was adopted from China.

key symbols that lie within the process of self-construction, at both individual and collective level. To quote Victor Turner, symbols are the smallest units of ritual behaviour (1967:19).

"We don't cut flowers, we plant them!"- Iok

The Bisaya have traditionally believed in mighty beings beyond human power; a supreme God to whom Bisaya often refer as prelapsarian *Ala Talaq*, "the most dependable patron". The omens of animals and birds (*memanukangai*) are also respected. Certain bird species (e.g. *Spiderhunter*) and snakes (Python: *Bondolon*) are treated with trepidation as messengers of God. Iok's cousin, Joseph, described how beliefs are shaped by the interactions with non-human substances, such as animals, plants and material objects[4]:

"*If a Sasat bird chirps...on the left or right side of the road...no harm is thought to come to the traveller. All omen birds flying from left to right, however, are considered bad omens*[5]." – Joseph.

Hence, Bisaya cosmology is strongly influenced by the environment. Living in co-existence requires the Bisaya to maintain a *balance* with *all* beings. This is because all "things" are believed to have souls (*lingu*).

Lamatai and Lingu

Based on karmic principles, any mistreatment of a human or non-human invites mishap, thus risking harm to one's inner *lingu*. The distinction between *soul* and *spirit* is difficult to make. *Lamatai* can be any form of ghost or evil-being and, in Limbang, they are generally described as "unappeased soul-spirits". *Lamatai* are considered dangerous because they can take on any form, including the role of a woman who died during child birth or as headless ghosts. These spirits may cause a number of illnesses for the living, even death. Souls of the dead, on the other hand, may also be referred to as *lingu*.

Lingu are not *directly* harmful; they are soul-spirits which exist in the living and depart from the material body at death. Further, the term *lingu* is ascribed to the souls of

[4] For instance, the contents of Yaki's travelling bag.

[5]Signals in nature are a major aspect of how Bisaya navigate the wilderness, e.g. falling branches tend to be a 'sign' of danger.

the living *as well as* the souls of the dead. There is no distinction between the two. In some instances a *lingu* might wish to assist a living relative. Visits from such *lingu* cannot be prevented and often, too, are believed to be potentially dangerous and cause sickness. *Lingu's* ultimate destiny is to rise to *pagun lingu* ("home of the soul"), a place believed by Joseph to be behind the sun[6].

Nasi and Hasam

Nasi (rice) is Malaysia's staple food. The Bisaya cultivated both swamp and hill *nasi* using knowledge adopted from centuries of practice. The planting season was kept in synchronisation with the North-Eastern monsoons. Nasi-fields were adjacent to the gravesites and crop-clearing usually took place in June, in conjunction with the grave-visit. For this reason, *nasi* is believed to come from the sacred realms of the wild. Once *nasi* was severed from its roots, the grain was transferred into the domestic sphere. However, since the exploitation of oil and gas in the 1970s, the community has virtually abandoned farming but this has not shaken the cultural significance of *nasi*.

As *hasam* (rainwater) is collected for domestic use, *nasi* is brought from the wild to be cooked: the intersection between the two spheres collapses. *Nasi* becomes domesticated through the process of acquisition but finds its way back into the wild, as a gravesite offering. The intermediate space, between the *domestic* and the *wild*, is the gravesite. The visit to the grave is an epigrammatic process of negotiation, between the living and the dead. Just as when a deceased *lingu* undergoes a transformation, from the domestic to the wild, this is not a definite transformation. The elements of the wild, by contrast, are "tamed": brought into the domestic space to be managed, but equally brought back into the wild upon request. Likewise, parturition is owned by the wild: only after forty days can the mother and baby re-enter the greater familial space, re-emphasising ideas of *separation* and *unity* through *space* and *agency*.

Just as *hasam* waters the nasi-fields, *nasi* is cooked with *hasam*; that *nasi* is fed to the soul-spirits. *Nasi* and *hasam* sustain the material bodies of the living and the dead. The

[6]In the past, Bisaya culture was governed by rituals under the customary law of *Adat*. Today this idea is not homogenous, hence the ambiguity of Bisaya afterlife.

combination of substances here is critical to the flows and dynamics of life in Limbang. *Nasi* and *hasam* are products of work, nurture, and integral to the sacred veneration of ancestors. Bisayaship could, therefore, be said to be dependent on these two elements. Iok explained that, although Bisaya reside in a "home" space, "*the jungle is where we come from*!" The domestic and the wild are not bounded but indistinguishable and overlapping, as one enters the other.

Separation and Unity

Kampong, and the houses it contains, is described by the locals as the *domestic* body. By contrast, the forest is an ominous and uncontrollable space, where nothing is shared and anything is possible. All that it contains belongs to *lingu* of the dead. Whilst the format of burial is under their control, the permeable barriers between the living and the dead are unpredictable. This is specifically emphasised when the dead visit the living, and potentially harm them:

"We don't just go into the forest. We need to be granted permission, a reason... Steven once went in and got lost. The spirits were definitely playing with him. The trees didn't help; they just kept sending him back to where he started!" – Iok.

Further, the acknowledgement of being *practical* (in the context of grave-visiting) is an inherent act of self-protection. Visiting the gravesite outside the ceremony will invite harm. Similarly, if the dead, "pity" the living, this can submit one's *lingu* to illness. "Pity" for the dead is equally dangerous: the dead may avenge the living. Hence, the Bisaya concept of *jelama si'a* suggests that by "doing good", no "bad" should happen, and by inviting "bad", one is inflicting danger upon one self and one's family. Not only do feelings of "pity" bring bad luck, but they are also counter-intuitive to Bisaya rationale: *"We don't pity people- we are practical, we don't even have a word in Bisaya to express sorrow*" –Iok.

For Iok, the spirit world is a mirror of the living village, where negotiating Bisayaship is as significant for the living as it is for the dead. Bisaya emphasise togetherness through collective burial, yet maintaining a separation between the living and dead (rather than *between* the dead) is important. These two communities exist in parallel and re-assemble when the living pays homage to the dead. This separation, of life from death, is critical to

grave-visiting, but does not deny the continued power of *lingu* over the living. Astuti (1995) found that Vezo are often faced with the dead who feel a longing for the living: "This is a very dangerous kind of longing, which may prompt the dead to come back to trouble their descendants, causing them to die" (1995:124).

"Working for the dead"

Part of the process of Bisayaship involves a particular kind of relationship. This requires a young Bisaya to enter and maintain a relationship with senior relatives, the kind of relationship that eventually provides the junior with the possibility to *grow* (in mind, body and *lingu*). Lauterbach identifies this as the "apprentice-mentor" relationship (2010:274). For the Bisaya, this relationship is two-directional: the first being vertical, between a junior and an elder, culturally-knowledgeable person, whereas the latter set of relations is horizontal, between contemporaries. The two sets complement each other in the sense that the reciprocity and the "training" by elders are supplemented by the creation of some sort of achievement of independence for the youth. However, these are not the only relations involved. Moving beyond Lauterbach's model, I feel that *lingu* of the dead, too, act as mentors, and there are consequences if one does not engage properly with their wishes.

The possibility of death, and the power of *lingu*, was further reinforced during a discussion with Yadu about her dreams. Yadu did not attend the grave-visit this year. She excused herself, because she claimed her *lingu* was weak and that, by attending the grave-visit, she risked other spirits inhabiting her. This seemed bizarre at first:

> "Every morning at dawn, Yadu prepares the daily pot of *nasi* in time for lunch. The *nasi*, however had begun to spoil before midday. Yadu bought a new *nasi* pot, but the *nasi* continued to spoil. She claimed to have dreamt about Yaki's *lingu* eating the *nasi* in the kitchen. Through a process of deduction, Yadu felt that the *nasi* had been spoiling because Yaki was expressing his hunger to her. She had subsequently dreamt that she had visited the grave site to feed Yaki, on three consecutive occasions. The local doctor said she may have been poisoned by

> Yaki's attempts to express his distress, which had caused her loss of appetite." – Field notes.

Astuti's theory, of "working" for the dead, is critical here: the efforts to which the living go in feeding and tending the dead are not just simple ways "of showing that they remember and honour them, but [...] a means of appeasing, if only momentarily, their longing for life and for their living descendants" (1995:124). Astuti illustrates the image of the "shadows of death on life", of which, for living Bisaya, transpire through dreamtime. The image also emphasises a *crossing over* of the barrier that divides the living from the dead: "Although far from the village and its inhabitants, the dead are not indifferent to life; they still feel a strong longing from within the cemetery for their living descendents..." (1995:156). The dead demand to be remembered and looked after by the living; they demand to be brought food and, in a sense, brought back to life once a year "to be entertained [...] and drink amidst a large and undifferentiated crowd of descendants" (1995:156).

As living Bisaya entertain their ancestors at the graves, through gift-giving, the dead are brought back in contact with life, as though they never *truly* die. It suddenly becomes unclear as to who possesses control: the dead retain control over the living, through dreams, and the living retains a level control over the dead through entombment and gifting. What differs from Astuti's findings is the transition of Bisaya from life to death[7]. Instead of "losing an identity" with death (Astuti, 1995:155), the *lingu* actually re-assert their Bisayaship: it is negotiated beyond the grave. The dead must continue to "*do"* in order to maintain their Bisayaship, in joining the living at feasts, entering their dreams, sending messages and maintaining a level of *power* over the living.

From inside the tombs, the deceased not only wish to be remembered, and fed by the living, but also wish to take part in life itself. When the living bury the dead, they effectively *re-assert* an identity *for* the dead: the tombs are the creation of the living, "a form of *individuation* through descent" (Astuti, 1995:155). As much as the dead assert their power over the living, they also depend on the living to bury them. The tomb represents

[7]As previously discussed, living Bisaya do not "co-exist" with the dead, but believe that souls actively reverse death by re-entering the village space.

perhaps *permanence* that underpins a certain order, where descent and locality are merged: when you live with your close kin in the household, and when you are buried, you remain physically close. It seems that Bisaya tombs function as material referents, both in terms of a permanent order and representative of amaranthine lineage, and, therefore, play a role in perpetuating lineal descent.

The idea of "working" for the dead is also reflected in how the Bisaya believe in *jelama si'a*. For Iok's family, morality, doing "good" affects one's social relations, health, feasting, and finally, to one's death and afterlife. Simply "doing bad" implies that all the negative aspects of death are therefore accorded a prominence, which is hard to erase (Bloch & Parry, 1982: 18). To navigate carefully the dynamics of *"give and take"*, (described by Iok), an important Bisaya doctrine, is a lifetime commitment and part of *being* Bisaya.

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