

Ordeals Today
Accusation of Sorcery and State Power among
the Kalis of West Kalimantan

Katsumi Okuno

Visiting Research Fellow

Institute of East Asian Studies, UNIMAS

Abstract

This paper describes and analyzes a case of an accusation of sorcery and the performance of the “*bapak*” ordeal to determine who sorcerers are, in August 1995 among the Kalis. The Kalis are some 2000 shifting cultivators living along the Kalis River and surrounding areas in the Upper Kapuas Regency in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The “*bapak*” ordeal is sometimes conducted to know God's will by seeing if a stone can be picked up from boiling water. My goal here is to analyze the ordeal in relation to Indonesian state power.

I.

The Kalis are some 2,000 shifting cultivators living along the Kalis River and the surrounding areas of the Upper Kapuas Regency, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Among them, I undertook anthropological research for twenty-four months between 1994 and 1995.

In August 2005, an ordeal called “*bapak*” was conducted to determine who sorcerers were. I use the term “sorcery” as a technology or method to magically cause harm, by using tools and/or words learned or obtained from others, following E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s tradition. In this paper, I briefly depict the details of the ordeal and then analyze it in relation to Indonesian state power.

II.

Here, I briefly sketch the process of the ordeal.

Iman (a Kalis male, 50 years old) long suffered from insanity (*rao-rao*). One day, *Saung* (*Iman*’s neighbor, a Kalis male, 40 years old), reported to *Onyang* (a male village head, 55 years old) that *Iman*’s insanity had been caused by sorcery. According to *Saung*, the sorcerers were *Timbang* (a Kalis male, 45 years old) and *Aga* (a Malay male, 45 years old).

I first describe the investigation of the sorcery site performed just before the ordeal, by *Daniel* (Director of the nearby police station at Nanga Kalis), government officers from Nanga Kalis, *Onyang* (a Kalis village head), *Tangkiling* (*Temmungung*, a customary chief along the Kalis River), *Saung* (the prosecutor), and other village members excluding *Timbang* and *Aga*. Some 30 people came to the assumed sorcery site, which was *Iman*’s temporary house for cultivation (*anak langko*) the previous year.

Iman a Kalis male who long suffered from insanity

Saung *Iman*’s neighbor, the prosecutor

Timbang a Kalis male who was accused of being a sorcerer

Aga a Malay male who was accused of being a sorcerer
Onyang a Kalis village head
Daniel Director of the police station at Nanga Kalis
Tangkiling a customary chief along the Kalis River (*Temmungung*)

In response to a request from *Daniel* and others, *Saung* orally depicted the procedure of the sorcery that he witnessed and that in part he assisted in. According to *Saung*, one afternoon, he was visited by *Timbang* and asked to help him. *Timbang* and *Saung* went to their community's cemetery. They plucked out two "threads from the death flag" (*papanji*) and then picked up "a wooden nail (*pasak lungun*) from the coffin." *Saung* was ordered by *Timbang* to pull out a "thread from *Iman's* cloth" after returning to the village. *Saung* realized that *Timbang* had a wicked plan, but he was at the same time threatened by *Timbang* that if he did not help he would be harmed. *Saung* said he stole a thread from *Iman's* trousers the next day. Several days after *Saung* passed a thread of *Iman's* trousers to *Timbang*, both *Timbang* and *Aga* came to ask for further help from *Saung*.

The three visited *Iman's* temporary house when *Iman* was away, and *Saung* was then ordered to burn the three items: "the threads from the death flag," "the wooden nail from the coffin," and "the thread from *Iman's* cloth." After *Saung* did this, he was ordered to put the ash into a ceramic pot that had been placed in the room to make "salted boar meat (*jukut*)." *Saung* remembers that *Aga* whispered something unknown to him for a few minutes behind the house.

Saung said that on their way home, *Saung* heard *Timbang* and *Aga* referring to magic called "isin gila isin budu," which was believed to make people insane (*gila*) or foolish (*budu*), by invoking phrases from Chapter 38 of the Koran while placing

magical devices in appropriate positions. The sorcery (Malay magic) is thought to be originated from Malay Muslim tradition. Arriving at the village, *Saung* was told not to say what he saw and did that day to anyone.

If *Saung*'s statement is true, *Timbang* and *Aga* lead the sorcery together with *Saung*, expecting magical influence on *Iman*. However, as stated below, whether the action of sorcery was factual or not was disputed at the moment of investigation. *Timbang* and *Aga* were not present at the site because they completely denied the fact. In this sense, the description above comprises details of the sorcery constructed by *Saung*. In addition, investigation of the site is not necessarily required in customary Kalis procedure. An investigation is currently being added by *Daniel*.

III.

Here, let me depict the background of the sorcery using data obtained from *Iman*, *Onyang* and *Daniel*. I mainly interviewed these three persons. (My request for interview was refused by both *Timbang* and *Aga*.)

The three persons talked to me about the details from their individual perspectives. I feel that their perspectives were hypothetically shared by the majority of the Kalis village members before the customary meeting.

First, *Iman* was asked by *Onyang* to take the position of sub-village head (*Kepala Dusun*) about one year before the ordeal. It was said that *Timbang* expected to assume this position. *Iman* found that this arrangement made *Timbang* envious of him, at which point he heard *Saung*'s accusation of sorcery.

After *Iman* became sub-village head, a housewife living next to *Iman*'s house was found to have committed adultery with *Aga* when her husband was away from the

village. *Aga*, a Malay Muslim of Nanga Kalis, stayed temporarily in *Iman*'s village to help with his elder brother's carpentry work. Later, *Aga* was obliged to pay a fine to the wife's family after *Iman* and others settled the case.

Just after the customary decision, *Iman* became sick and depressed. He sometimes surprised his family by brandishing swords and sticks. *Iman* felt as if someone was attacking him at night. His family thought he was going insane. He was sent to the hospital for medication several times, but his condition did not improve at all. *Iman* remembers that he heard *Timbang* whispering to someone else, "I am glad our father became ill (*panyanyam-nyanyam ama ta*)," when he defecated in river before dawn. *Iman* is *Timbang*'s father in their fictional family relations.

Second, *Onyang* explained to me that *Saung* frequently visited *Iman*'s house because of his close relations with *Iman*'s family. *Saung* was afraid of *Iman*'s insane behavior because *Iman* often attacked him. *Saung* felt that the power of sorcery must be reduced before it harmed him. At last, he made the decision to confess to sorcery.

One day after *Onyang* accepted *Saung*'s confession of sorcery against *Iman*, he drove a boat with outboard engine to Nanga Kalis for half a day, and then reported the accusation to the police station. He asked *Daniel* to settle this case. It is worthwhile considering *Onyang*'s judgment and action, because such cases are unexceptionally left to customary authority, which I discuss later.

Third, in response to *Onyang*'s request, *Daniel* called and inspected *Saung*, *Timbang* and *Aga* individually. *Saung* stated that he was forced by *Timbang* and *Aga* to assist in the sorcery. *Timbang* and *Aga* never admitted this. *Daniel* concluded that the police authorities could no longer research this case, not only because material proof was lacking but also because sorcery is not scientifically proved. He did not think that this case of sorcery was equivalent to other criminal cases. At last, *Daniel*

decided to leave this case to Kalis customary authority, while he organized government officers at Nanga Kalis (the police, the Indonesian army, District Office and Department of Religion) as “observers” to witness the customary solution. The case of sorcery was returned to Kalis customary authority.

IV.

The customary meeting was convened in the framework of *Saung* accusing both *Timbang* and *Aga* of being sorcerers. It started the evening after the “observers” from Nanga Kalis arrived at *Iman*’s village. At the very beginning, *Daniel*, introduced by *Onyang*, summarized the details of the incident and then explained their presence not as government officers but as “observers.” *Tangkiling* as a customary chief of the Kalis River then asked *Saung*, *Timbang*, and *Aga* about the incident, but the three only repeated what they had already said.

Saung finally proposed the undertaking of an ordeal to determine who was responsible for *Iman*’s insanity, if *Timbang* and *Aga* insisted on denying their involvement. The “*bapak*” ordeal is a sacred means of finding those who are innocent by whether the examinee can pick up a stone from boiling water and raise it over his/her head without being scalded. On the other hand, if the examinee cannot do it or is scalded, it is assumed that God judges them as guilty. “*Bapak*” means “boiling water” in the local language. *Aga*’s brother asked why *Saung* did not try it. An old Kalis man answered that it was because *Saung* as an assistant of sorcery would be surely scalded.

The next day, the “*bapak*” ordeal was performed. The investigation described above was held on the morning of the “*bapak*” ordeal. Before the ordeal, a paper

document named “the decision of the Kalis customary chief” was typewritten by Kalis members in the Indonesian language without the assistance of the “observers” from Nanga Kalis, which described the customary decision after the case had been settled.

The existence of a written document is very exceptional, because a customary decision is ordinarily orally (in the Kalis language) handed down to the people concerned at the end of the customary meeting. In addition, the document was typewritten just before the “*bapak*” ordeal. It is also important to note that the Indonesian language was used in the meeting in consideration of the “observers” from outside the Kalis area, which I shall return to later.

After *Saung*, *Timbang* and *Aga* signed the document in *Iman*’s house, they all moved to the front garden of his house. There was constructed a ritual space, in the center of which water was boiling in a large Chinese cooking pot on a fire. A small stone was put in the pot. A male referee was called into the ritual space by *Tangkiling* to confirm God’s will.

First, *Aga* was invited to the front of the boiling water immediately after the referee asked various Kalis deities to give them the truth, by chanting, scattering rice and dropping palm wine onto the ground for about ten minutes. Shortly after, *Aga* put his right hand into the pot. He could grasp the stone in the boiling water for a moment, but he then dropped it to the ground. It was clear to everyone that had *Aga* failed.

Second, *Timbang* entered the ritual space after the rite. Before trying, he prayed in a loud voice, “Nah, punish me if I am responsible for my father’s insanity. If I did not do anything, don’t scald me! God witnessed it!” He immediately grasped the stone from the boiling water and then held it over his head. *Timbang* put it on the ground and then returned it to the pot. He shouted with joy, and then rushed to his house.

People were confused because *Aga* had failed but *Timbang* had succeeded. They

were talking about the results when *Timbang* ran back to the ritual space from his house. The referee immediately asked *Timbang* to show him his right hand because he wondered why *Timbang* had run to his house. The referee pointed out that he tasted salt after he licked the back of *Timbang*'s hand. The referee declared in a loud voice that because *Timbang* had been scalded, he needed to return home for medication.

All of sudden, *Daniel* entered the scene and ordered the referee, "Don't make things worse!" The referee asked *Daniel* to lick the back of his hand. *Daniel* did this and then left the scene without a word. *Daniel*'s action clearly confirmed the referee's judgment.

About an hour later, *Tangkiling* convened another meeting. The focal point of the discussion was whether *Timbang* had succeeded or not in the "*bapak*" ordeal. God's will was left to the people's discussion. Suddenly, behind the house, *Iman* broke into the meeting room and rattled away.

"What is the decision? Who failed? Who was scalded? I won't stand any more! They didn't say anything at all. Rubbing the hand with salt is a proof of failure. Are you responsible for my killing people? I will kill you before I go totally mad. Please kill me. My life does not deserve anything. *Aga*, you paid a fine as a result of adultery. Did I order it? It is I that told you to take a wife in appropriate way. That's why you did this to me. *Timbang*, I know you envied me because I was selected as sub-village head. Rubbing salt is very ugly. Let me drive you out of this village. I am not getting much money after I became sub-village head. You don't know how painstaking the work is! You, *Aga* and *Timbang* did this to me because you are angry with yourselves! I didn't confuse you!"

Iman's speech showed briefly and clearly the reasons that *Timbang* and *Aga* envied *Iman*. *Iman* disappeared from the scene after this powerful performance. The tone of the meeting suddenly changed, and there was an atmosphere in which both *Timbang* and *Aga* were assumed responsible for *Iman's* insanity. *Iman's* family asked *Aga* if he knew how to cure *Iman*. He answered, "It is difficult to say... I'd like to try. But if *Timbang* doesn't want to, I am not sure..." Then, *Timbang* spoke in a lower voice, "If you all say I was mistaken, I was mistaken." He continued to say, "If *Aga* says he can cure him, I can do it, too." These words of *Timbang* marked the end of the customary meeting. *Timbang* and *Aga* were customarily judged as sorcerers responsible for *Iman's* insanity.

V.

In the following, I analyze the "*bapak*" ordeal not in itself, but in relation to the broader framework of Indonesian state power. The discussion is divided into three points.

First, I discuss an issue related to the re-marginalization of the Kalis.

Indonesia has been aiming at national integration, by spreading the Indonesian language to marginal communities through the school system, teaching *Pancasila* as a national ideology to every pupil, making everyone express their individual belief in God (*Kepercayaan Terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*) and issuing identity cards (*Kartu Tanda Penduduk*) to the whole population. As a result, the Indonesian state has so far made people construct themselves as citizens subject to the state to a considerable degree.

Indonesia as a modern state creates “homogeneous Indonesians” throughout the Archipelago by denying differences within the state. However, on the other hand, the Indonesian state reaffirms the marginal status of indigenous peoples by legitimizing cultural differences. What does this mean in a more concrete context?

The Indonesian administration has sets *Temmungung* as a customary chief in interior regions and has him settle land disputes, cases of adultery or any other local issues. In other words, the state gives local people their autonomy to resolve internal problems by themselves. The Indonesian state arranges a mechanism by which the Kalis people can resolve local issues in their own independent way.

Apart from this autonomic appearance, the story of the “*bapak*” ordeal described above is circulated in different shapes, especially outside the Kalis River. A common expression heard in town is, “In the interior Kalis River, things are still like the past.” Such rites as the “*bapak*” ordeal become good examples for substantially differentiating indigenous peoples from the modern state. “Primitive” or “unscientific” peoples are culturally and politically reconstructed.

Let me give a few examples. On the way back from the ordeal site, one of the “observers” (himself a policeman) laughingly spoke to me behind the Kalis saying, “You see, their solution is always like that!” These remarks by administrators or town residents to refer to such rites as the “*bapak*” ordeal in the interior region are typical.

When I went to *Putussibau*, a central market town of the Upper Kapuas Regency one week after the ordeal, I heard many townspeople talking about the recent “savage” or “strange” judgment held in the Kalis River. Even Kalis members realize this because nowadays they frequently go to *Putussibau* for many reasons.

“In the Kalis interior, people still perform sorcery. The suspects must pick up a stone from boiling water to determine whether he is a sorcerer or not.” “The Kalis still

perform the unscientific ordeal of boiling water to disclose a sorcerer even today when people can enjoy the technology of cars, TV and telephones.” This kind of discourse circulates images of Kalis backwardness or primitiveness in the town and its surrounding areas. I argue that this may re-marginalize the interior Kalis people.

As seen here, the Kalis, on the one hand, are requested to be and are treated as “homogeneous Indonesians,” while on the other hand, they are differentiated as “primitive” or “unscientific” people because images of Kalis backwardness circulate in the town and its surrounding areas. The cultural image of marginality circulates intertextually apart from its own context. Through this process, marginal peoples are re-marginalized. The Kalis, therefore, may be in a double bind whereby they try to become subjects whose difference is denied, and at the same time, they are required to remain as alien subjects.

Second, I focus on the social significance of Kalis behavior during the ordeal in relation to Indonesian state power.

It could be argued that *Daniel* and the “observers” from Nanga Kalis affected the progress of the meeting. *Daniel* added the dimension of investigation to the customary process, which constituted an important spectacle, giving some 30 participants a clear display. Moreover, *Daniel* played an essential role in showing *Timbang*’s fault by leaving the ritual space without saying anything after tasting the back of *Timbang*’s hand. His action worked to ratify the referee’s judgment.

“Observers” influence on the ordeal is not limited to such performances. During the customary meeting, the Kalis made an attempt to identify themselves as Indonesians, with too much consideration for the presence of Indonesian state officers. First, the Indonesian language was used throughout the meeting and ordeal except for

the ritual occasion. Using Indonesian is very exceptional on such occasions. Second, a paper named “the decision of the Kalis customary chief” was typewritten in Indonesian, just like documents handed down from governmental offices. As stated earlier, the existence of a written document contrasts with the fact that decisions are usually orally handed down in the Kalis language.

In this sense, the existence of a typewritten document in the Indonesian language shows the Kalis mimetic desire for Indonesian bureaucracy, in response to the presence of governmental officers. However, the hasty drawing up of the document seems to lack consistency regarding several points.

For instance, one can read in the document: “60,000 Rp. has to be paid as a fine for the intrusion into *Iman*’s house without permission.” It is strange that an article concerning someone’s intrusion into *Iman*’s house is included in advance in the decision paper.

In the document, one can also see the premise that *Iman* is a victim of sorcery. It seems that the drawing up of the document started from this premise before the case was examined through the “*bapak*” ordeal.

This kind of inconsistency creates another inconsistency. If it was assumed beforehand that *Iman* was a victim of sorcery, when *Timbang* and *Aga* succeeded in picking up the stone in the “*bapak*” ordeal, only *Saung* would have been responsible for sorcery. This conclusion is strange enough.

Another odd expression in the document is a declaration: “We will take all responsibility for *Iman*’s insanity because we put magic poison into his food.” This assumes that *Iman*’s insanity is caused by sorcery. Was it necessary to elucidate this point in the “*bapak*” ordeal? *Saung*, *Timbang* and *Aga* naturally signed the declaration.

I assume that these inconsistencies in the document mainly stem from the unskillful efforts of the Kalis to write down all the necessary articles by imitating Indonesian bureaucratic documents.

As seen here, the Kalis made a gesture of identifying themselves with the nation as a whole, by using the national language and drawing up documents resembling state bureaucratic ones. However, they failed in this mimetic process, because their documents resulted in the inclusion of a number of inconsistencies.

Following postmodern discussion [Loomba 1998, Bhabha 1994], only perfect mimicry by a minority becomes a threat to state majority power. In this sense, the Kalis attempt could not uproot the dominance of state power, since they failed in this mimetic process. In other words, Kalis behavior during the customary meeting brought the difference between the Kalis and the Indonesian state to the surface, resulting in a strengthening of the dominance of state power.

Third, I highlight the negotiation process between the Kalis and the police authorities.

In scientific terms, the cause of insanity may never be explained by sorcery. *Daniel* faced this sort of difficulty when the issue was brought to the police station by *Onyang*. As described above, the Kalis people finally resolved the issue by handing the issue over to Kalis customary authority. Here, I focus on interpreting details of the negotiation process between them.

First, I need to know about *Onyang*'s behavior in reporting the issue to the police station at Nanga Kalis. As explained earlier, in Kalis villages, land disputes, adultery cases, theft and other criminal matters are unexceptionally left to customary authority at first. *Onyang*'s action shows a sharp contrast to the normal procedure.

Why did he do that? He explained to me that he felt urgent action was needed so that they would not get into more serious trouble. His explanation was not clear on this point. My supposition is that *Onyang* as a village head had a rough idea of reporting this serious issue to the government authority.

The local government recently started development in Kalis areas from the 1980s on. After the national army's assistance in rural development (*ABRI Masuk Desa*) and a program for the most isolated villages (*Inpres Desa Tertinggal: IDT*) were implemented in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. At that time, villages along the Kalis River became substantially mapped on the political and economic geography of Indonesian State. The Nanga Kalis police station began to have five or six officers during this period, and then obliged interior village heads and sub-village heads to report rural events and occurrences to them.

Considering this, *Onyang's* action in reporting the issue to the police station, an end office of the government, as a village head, is more understandable. *Iman* told me that he was surprised at *Onyang's* immediate report to the police station, because he thought the issue would naturally be left to the customary chief.

Second, I would like to know *Daniel's* speculations. I argue that *Daniel* expected the Kalis to search for a solution by mobilizing their own institution. *Daniel* left the issue to the Kalis themselves as he (himself an *Iban*) learned of the "bapak" ordeal through interviews with *Saung*, *Timbang* and other Kalis.

The police cannot deal with magic (sorcery) under current Indonesian criminal law (*Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana*). The Indonesian legal authorities, however, can deal with magic (sorcery) if it is connected with the crime of disturbance. This shows that the legal authorities may tackle magic (sorcery) if they rearrange it in another form. A disorder caused by the rumor of sorcery was once handled by the

police in a Kalis village.

Daniel did not choose this direction. I assume that he may have considered Kalis understanding, in that they would not consent to such a rearranged solution. In fact, in the rearranged solution, *Iman's* cure could not have been suggested. I remember *Daniel's* words at the beginning of the customary meeting, "I made the decision that you can settle this issue by yourselves. I am sure that will be the best way."

As seen here, Kalis customs including the "*bapak*" ordeal were utilized as a proper institution for providing a solution to an accusation of sorcery. If this is true, this Kalis institution was brought into a broader framework of the Indonesian state system by *Daniel*. Cultural difference seems to be exploited by the Indonesian state legal authorities.

VI.

In the first part of this paper (II – IV), I briefly described a case of an accusation of sorcery and the execution of the "*bapak*" ordeal, observed in 1995 among the Kalis of West Kalimantan. The "*bapak*" ordeal is sometimes performed (once every three or four years today) when God's will needs to be known.

In the latter part of this paper (V), I analyzed details of the "*bapak*" ordeal, in relation to Kalis society and its broader framework of Indonesian state power. By this, I showed a view of the ordeal in Kalis society today.

The Kalis are, on the one hand, incessantly requested to be "homogeneous Indonesians," but, on the other hand, they are differentiated as an indigenous people. Images of Kalis backwardness tend to be circulated outside the Kalis River. They are therefore in a double bind.

During the customary meeting, the Kalis failed in their mimetic desire for Indonesian state bureaucracy. Following postmodern discussion, they have not uprooted the dominance of state power. Their behavior during the customary meeting brought the difference between Kalis and Indonesian state authority to the surface. The Kalis' mimetic performance seems to strengthen the dominance of state power.

The accusation of sorcery was returned to Kalis customary authority by the police authorities. The “*bapak*” ordeal was used to provide a solution to the issue. Through this process, a Kalis institution was brought under Indonesian state authority.

After the “*bapak*” ordeal, *Timbang* and *Aga* as the “sorcerers” started to pay a fine and take responsibility for *Iman*'s cure. *Iman* was brought to several Malay healing specialists in *Aga*'s natal village, who are believed to cure mental disorders caused by Malay magic (sorcery). The costs were paid mainly by both *Timbang* and *Aga*, and in part by *Saung*, following the decision paper signed by the three.

Nine years after this episode, I revisited Kalis villages. I did not have the chance to meet *Iman*, but I heard that he had recovered from insanity.

References

Bhabha, Homi

1994 *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Loomba, Ania

1998 *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. New York and London: Routledge.

