



PAGAN RITES OF *BISINGAI* BIDAYUH

PUBLIC TALK by Prof. Andrew Alek Tuen¹ and Boniface Dowell²

13 August 2016, 3pm, Old Court House, Kuching

The pagans believed in the divine presence in the natural environment surrounding them and therefore are generally ecologically friendly. In the olden days the *Bisingai* (people of Mount Singai) were pagan, they were followers of “*adat sumuk babai*” (a system of belief handed down by their ancestors) in which the spirits of the land played an important role in determining the success and failure of their daily activities. Mount Singai and the surrounding lowland provided everything the people needed for daily living. It is hardly surprising therefore that their ceremonial rites and rituals, handed down orally from their ancestors, focuses on conciliation and appeasement of the spirits of the land and those of their ancestors.

The central activity of the *Bisingai*, as of other Bidayuh tribes in Sarawak, is padi farming. Their “*adat sumuk babai*” require them to appease the spirit so that it is safe to farm the land, make the harvest bountiful by getting rid of pest and disease not only to the padi but to the people that work the land, and giving thanks to the spirits for the bountiful harvest of padi. Padi planting have many stages: “*ngawah*” (selecting the land to farm and whether or not it is OK to farm the land), “*nou-nobong*” (clearing the forest first by clearing the undergrowth followed by felling the larger trees), *nyouh* (burning the cleared land), *nuruk* (sowing the padi seeds), *nyobu* (weeding), *ngutuom* (harvesting). Each of these stages has an accompanying ritual – *gawia* “*bipisa tana*” (to find out whether the spirit allows the farmer to farm that particular piece of land), “*gawia rakang*” (after clearing is completed), “*gawia oran*” (to appease the spirit of the land, especially the land enroute to the farm so that they don’t destroy the farm), “*gawia pinuruk & sirangan*” (calling the spirit of their ancestor to assist in the planting, blessing of the seeds to rid it of disease and pest so that it flourish and yield bountiful harvest), “*gawia bikarak*” (when the padi plant is bearing grains) and finally “*gawia pinonguh*” (harvest festival, done at Singai during the period between harvesting and next selection of farm land). Some of the *gawia* are done at the farm, along the route to the farm or in the village at Mount Singai. The various rituals associated with these *gawia* have their own rites and this talk focuses on these rites and their meaning.

The speakers

Dr Andrew Alek Tuen is a professor at the Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. He grew up within a pagan environment and was converted into Christianity in 1973 after his parents became Christian. His mother was a priestess (*dayung boris*) of the old religion as was his eldest sister.

Mr Boniface Dowell was a radio broadcaster with RTM Sarawak, now a research officer with Majlis Adat Istiadat. During his career he made numerous tape recordings of pagan rituals and rites, some of which has been transcribed. His mother was a senior priestess and his sister was also a priestess of the old religion.

¹ Kampung Tanjong, Singai

² Kampung Bobak, Singai