

# Sound And Celebration of Death: Gong Ensembles in The Secondary Mortuary Rituals of the Jarai (Central Vietnam) Compared with Those of the Dayak Benuaq (East Kalimantan, Indonesia). Do They Originate from the Dong Son Culture?

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## ABSTRACT

The Jarai people are an Austronesian language speaking group living in Central Vietnam. They reached mainland Southeast Asia from Northern Borneo, or possibly from the Malay Peninsula, around the 5th century B.C. as part of the more general migratory movement that took the Austronesian people from Formosa to Madagascar, westwards, and to Easter Island, eastwards. The *Pa thi* ritual is one of the most remarkable of the many ceremonies celebrated by the Jarai, in terms of its magnificence and the complexity of the elements involved. *Pa thi* (the “tomb abandonment”) is a secondary mortuary ritual that allows the spirits of the dead to reach their final destination. When the ritual is held, the tomb, carefully decorated with symbolic elements, becomes the centre of a sumptuous feast, lasting three days, which includes gong music, dances and buffalo sacrifices.

The aim of this paper is to analyse some features of the *Pa thi* ceremony and to compare them with some of the scenes depicted on the Dong Son bronze drums (Heger I type). In fact, as many scholars such as Goloubew (1929) and Bemet Kempers (1988) have pointed out, there is a connection between the people of Dong Son and “men who might be the more direct ancestors of the Indonesians we know from the archipelago”. As evidence of this connection, these scholars explicitly mentioned the culture of the Dayak people of Borneo and the mountain populations living in Central Vietnam. In addition to my analysis of the Jarai ritual, I will give a few comments on the *Kwangkai*, the secondary mortuary ritual of the Dayak Benuaq people (East Kalimantan, Indonesia). Rather than attempting to provide a definite analysis of the bronze drums, this paper intends to open some new perspectives for a better understanding of the scenes depicted on the bronze drums as well as giving an interpretation based on the comparison with living rituals.

## INTRODUCTION

In his monumental work on the bronze drums, Bemet Kempers (1988: 132), commenting on the scenes represented on the tympanum of the Dong Son bronze drums, stated:

“The people in the figured bands obviously transfer us to an ‘Indonesian’ atmosphere - not a primeval Indonesian, ‘Austronesian’, and thus Neolithic kind of population, but of men who might be the more direct ancestors of the Indonesians we know from the archipelago in more recent times, Bronze Age people who lived on the mainland, for a certain time in northern Vietnam probably, before they migrated to insular Southeast Asia.”

This hypothesis was not completely new, as Goloubew (1929: 39) had already considered a possible connection between the “people of the bronze drums” and the Dayak people of Borneo, also proposing a link with them and the people living in the highlands of Indochina.

*“Ainsi, le tambour de Hanoi avec sa riche décoration figurée serait le témoin d’une civilisation primitive dont il subsiste encore des traces chez les Dayak de Bornéo. Il en est de même quant aux bronzes sortis des fouilles de Dông-son. Le fait n’a rien qui puis se nous surprendre. Les travaux de H. Kern ont démontré depuis longtemps la proche parenté entre les Malayo-Polynésiens et certaines races de l’Indochine. D’autre part, on a trouvé des crânes à affinités indonésiennes dans les provinces de Ninh-binh et de Hoà- binh, et même au Nord du Delta tonkinois.”*

Also Coedès (1966: 18) made a similar hypothesis, regarding the Indonesian identity of the Dongsonianians:

“Were the Dongsonianians Indonesians? It is tempting to suppose that they were, and to regard them as latecomers in the later stages of the Indonesian migration from the continent to the islands, and the ancestors of the backward peoples of Indonesian type who inhabit the Vietnamese mountains.”

Calo (2009: 159-161) has more recently reaffirmed this connection, adding new elements borrowed from Blust’s linguistic analysis:

“What I propose is a possible Austro-nesian influence resulting from the contact between the settled population of north and north central Vietnam, speakers of an Austroasiatic, or perhaps a Daic language, with new settlers from southwest Borneo, speakers of an Austronesian Chamic language, who reached central and north Vietnam in the second half of the first millennium B.C. [...] The region of north-central Vietnam, just to the south of the Dong Son region, or perhaps the Dong Son region itself as suggested by Blust (1984- 1985), could have been reached by the progressive settlement of Austronesian Chamic speakers from Borneo. Hence, it is possible that the settled Austroasiatic Mon-Khmer, or perhaps Daic, speaking peoples of north Vietnam, with knowledge of bronze technology, and the Austronesian speaking new settlers, bearing their own set of cultural traits, would have come in contact with each other. The extended contact would have lead to a series of mutual exchanges in which exotic Austronesian traits would have been absorbed and elaborated in their new context by the settled population».

In short, according to these scholars, there seems to be a close connection between the “people of the bronze drums”, the Dayak people of Borneo and the

mountainous populations of Central Vietnam. This paper will not attempt to definitively **solve the** problem of the meaning and origins **of the** bronze drums, and I do not intend to discuss the issue of their origin, whether it be “Chinese” or “Vietnamese”. Instead I will make a comparison between the Bronze Age culture of Dong Son and the living culture of the Jarai and Dayak Benuaq peoples. I will comment on the Jarai and Dayak Benuaq secondary mortuary rituals and I will try to establish that the scenes depicted on the bronze drums of the “Heger I” type represent this kind of ritual.

### **The Dong Son Bronze Drums**

However, before analyzing secondary mortuary rituals, I would like to briefly refer to the Dong Son culture and their bronze drums. Dong Son is among the main Bronze Age sites of Southeast Asia, which flourished between the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. This site is known worldwide for its production of bronze artifacts, including the unique bronze drums. I will only refer to the bronze drums of the “Heger I” type, an example of which is the “Ngoc Lu” drum. These drums are carefully decorated with many scenes, themes, and motifs, the interpretation of which has always been controversial. I shall start with the description of the most relevant scenes.

The tympanum of the bronze drums is the part where most of the scenes are depicted, in a series of concentric bands. The main scene is the so-called “parade of the feathered men”. These men dressed in feathers seem to be warriors, as they brandish weapons such as spears and clubs. They seem to dance or stride in parade, moving in an anti-clockwise direction.

In the other scenes that appear in the same band as the parade, there is a house within which a person is using sticks to play what seems to be a *bonang*-like instrument, a gong- chime. Then we see a woman shooing away a bird and two people beating large pestles in a mortar. Next to them, we have a scene that is rather difficult to interpret. Two people are inside a house, on the roof of which there is a bird, or in some cases two. It is not very clear what they are doing, but I think it is probable that they are having sexual intercourse. This interpretation is supported by the bird on the roof, which I interpret as a symbol of fertility. On the right we can see people sitting on a platform with what looks like some large jars underneath.

Many animals such as birds, deer, frogs are shown on the decorations of the “Heger I” type bronze drums. The most remarkable animals are certainly birds, as such a great variety of different kinds of them are depicted. What appear to be storks or herons fly around the tympanum, in the same direction as the parade of the feathered men. But there are also peacocks, pheasants, hornbills, etc.

At the very center of the tympanum there is a central star, perhaps representing the sun, around which everything moves.

On the mantle, on the sides of the drums, there are boats that are supposed to transport the souls of the dead to the Afterworld. The soul is accompanied

on its journey by the boat's crew, who hold various weapons. One of them is presumably a *psychopomp*, who guides souls to their final destination.

### **The Jarai**

I would now like to briefly refer to the Austronesian linguistic family, to which the Jarai and the Dayak Benuaq languages belong, and to the Austronesian colonization of Southeast Asia and beyond. Linguistic evidences show that the island of Formosa was the starting point of the migratory movement of the Austronesian peoples. From here they initially travelled south to the Philippines and then to the Indonesian Archipelago. Others travelled from one island to the next until they reached Madagascar to the west and Easter Island to the east. The Jarai people – an Austronesian speaking group now living in the Central Highlands of Vietnam- may have originated in Northern Borneo and reached mainland Southeast Asia as a part of this migratory movement, probably in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

Let us now focus on the Jarai secondary mortuary ritual, called *Po thi*, or “tomb abandonment”. *Po thi* is a secondary mortuary ritual, which allows the spirits of the dead to reach their final destination: the “Village of the Spirits”. The Jarai believe that when somebody dies, his or her soul leaves his or her body but remains in this world. It is the duty of the living to take care of the spirits' needs, by bringing food, water, and various offerings to the tomb. After a few years, they decide to celebrate the *Po thi* ritual in order to finally free the spirits of the dead from all earthly attachments. At this time the tomb is decorated with statues, paintings and carved friezes. After the ceremony has been held, the tomb is abandoned and left to decay naturally.

The ceremony lasts for at least three days and is attended by many people from all the nearby villages. The cemetery becomes a joyful place, crowded with people playing gongs and dancing. Buffaloes and oxen are sacrificed, as every guest has to join the sacrificial meal as well as drink the ritual liquor, a rice wine fermented in a jar. The Jarai have various kinds of gong orchestras; the one I'm referring to is called *Cing Arap*, or *Cing Ceng*. This ensemble consists of bossed gongs, or *Ceng*, playing the accompaniment, and flat gongs, or *Cing*, playing the melody. It is completed by a drum (*Hogor*), and by a pair or more of cymbals (*Sang Sar* - idiophones that are rubbed or scraped together). Each person holds only one gong and the music produced is the result of an intricate polyphony, which can be defined, taking the term from Lomax (1968), as *interlocking*.

There is a difference between the music played by young people - more linear and with more regular patterns - and that played by older people, which is more evanescent, mysterious, and less regular or rigidly defined. The Jarai believe that the sound of gongs summons the spirits, which should be informed of all important events within the living community. The dance, which is called *Soang Arap* or simply *Soang*, is performed by both men and women. Both the gong-players and the dancers move in an anti-clockwise direction, which is the direction of death.

I would now like to focus on the Jarai tombs. There are about 300,000 Jarai people, spread over a wide region. Thus there are some differences between the tombs of the different Jarai subgroups but, for the sake of simplicity, I will analyze only the most magnificent type of tomb, in the southern or northern Jarai territories, as they are decorated with basically the same symbolic elements.

The statues celebrating the beginning of life are an important feature of Jarai tombs. This category of statues concerns fertility, which is the prerequisite of pregnancy. This is made possible by sexual intercourse. Child nursing and nurturing are then the consequences of pregnancy.

Then there are statues depicting daily activities, such as cooking, beating in a mortar, collecting water, sewing, and so on. In the same way, the category of modern themes represents aspects of the Jarai life as it is lived nowadays, consisting of soldiers, guitar players, soccer players, motorbike riders, and so on. These two categories represent the central stage of life.

The secondary mortuary ritual itself is also represented. People are represented dancing, playing gongs and drums, drinking rice wine from jars, riding elephants (which was once a feature of the *Pa thi* ritual), and so on.

The final stage of life -death- is represented, together with the tomb itself, by *Kra Kom*, literally: "the monkey who cannot act". This is a statue of a figure squatting on its heels and holding its face in its hands. Its expression is sad and disconsolate as after the *Pa thi* nobody will take care of the tomb anymore. The Jarai refer to it as a "monkey" as they believe that everything in our world turns into its opposite in the Afterworld, and so every statue representing a monkey will become a human in the "Village of the Spirits".

Animals incarnate many qualities; for instance, elephant tusks are a symbol of strength, and peacocks are a symbol of beauty. Birds have a very particular symbolic meaning, as they are believed to have special relationships with the Afterworld, both good and bad. It is believed that a vulture is the king of the "Village of the Spirits", and a monkey is his deputy. Birds are seen as supernatural creatures that enable men to contact the Afterworld and sometimes that can transport the spirits of the dead there.

I would now like to refer to the roof of the tomb. Its meaning remains controversial but it very closely resembles the shape of a boat. Its protruding elements on each side resemble the prow and the stern of a boat.

On the top of the boat-like roof, we can see one or sometimes two high poles or boards. This pole - carved with many different elements, such as flowers and geometrical motifs - represents what has been defined by anthropologists as the "cosmogonic tree", which is a microcosm of life. Birds and other animals are sometimes painted at either side of it. At the top of the tree are the sun, the moon and the stars. I particularly want to bring your attention to the sun, the generator of life. It often appears alone, in the middle of the "boatlike" roof, and its counterpart -the moon- is usually represented on the side of the tomb, in order

to complete the dualistic unity. The sun is a key symbolic element in the Jarai culture, depicted in many important contexts, such as on the top of the sacrificial pole and of the communal house, as well as on tombs. Stars are also depicted on the top of the roofs of tombs, but are always represented in pairs.

### **The Dayak Benuaq**

Now let us turn to another secondary mortuary ritual, the *Kwangkai* of the Dayak Benuaq people (from East Kalimantan, Indonesia). This celebration is the last of three rituals, performed in order to help the spirits of the dead to reach their final destination in the Afterworld. It is a very elaborate ritual, so I will give comments only on a few of its elements.

The *Kwangkai* ritual lasts for at least 21 days (three times 7, the number of death). The Dayak Benuaq call the spirits of the deceased three times a day in order to give them offerings, spend time with them and dance with them. Gong music is played in order to summon the spirits as well as to make the music for dancing with the spirits themselves. The ensemble consists of a *bonang*-like instrument, called the *Kentangan*, seven suspended gongs, called *Gningt*, and three long drums, called *Prahi*. The evanescent sound of the idiophones, accentuated by their irregular rhythm, creates a magical and mysterious atmosphere.

The dance, as well as the piece which is played for it, is called *Ngrangkau*, and it is performed by both men and women in turn. The dancers dress up like warriors wearing special hats, and they move slowly in an anticlockwise direction. They dance around a box, where the bones and the skull of the deceased are kept. The box hangs on an elaborate structure symbolizing the “cosmogonic tree” upon which wooden models of birds as well as various kinds of offerings for the spirits are hung.

The *Kivangkai* is concluded when a boat, dug out of a single tree-trunk, is brought to the house and a ritual symbolizing the journey to the Afterworld is celebrated.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Now let us examine the main question of this paper: Do the secondary mortuary rituals of the Jarai and the Dayak Benuaq people originate from the Dong Son culture? I have showed you a few elements of these rituals that seem to correspond with the scenes depicted on the bronze drums. The anti-clockwise motion of the dance, the gong-chime instruments, the symbolism of the birds, boats, and the cosmogonic tree, are all elements shared by the Jarai and the Dayak Benuaq. Certainly, at the present time one can only formulate hypotheses about the Dong Son culture, but are many evidences to suggest that there is a connection between these three cultures. As Bernet Kempers (1988: 136) stated, «there are many points of contact and closely comparable scenes that cannot be called ‘coincidences’ or ‘elements that are shared by all kind of popular art’, and therefore cannot be disregarded».

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