

Some villagers stand next to their family's bone repository.

# Borneo Families IN THIS LIFE AND THE NEXT

*Adherents of Kaharingan  
among the Ngaju Dayaks*

BY ANNE SCHILLER

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**A**FTER DAYS OF hard travel on a weather-beaten boat named *Font of Prosperity*, I was happy to arrive at the upriver village of Kuala Kurun, deep in the rainforests of Central Kalimantan Province in Indonesian Borneo. I had come to conduct interviews with native peoples about their traditional religion, Kaharingan. Although I was based in another village, I had heard that Kuala Kurun was home to an especially active group of traditional religious practitioners, and I hoped to meet many of them.

My first acquaintance was an elderly gentleman who introduced himself as “Grandfather Pim.” He was clearly an adherent of Kaharingan as indicated by the unmistakable signs of faith—the dracaena plant in his front yard and the altar with hornbill feathers above his front door. I felt fortunate that he had reached out to me—literally and figuratively—when my boat tied up at the dock. Merely four months into my first fieldwork, I had no friends or contacts who lived that far upriver.

We spoke in the national language, Indonesian, as I could not yet communicate well in the local one, Ngaju. I told Grandfather Pim that I wanted to learn more about Kaharingan so I could share it with people who might never be able to visit. He brightened.

## BORNEO



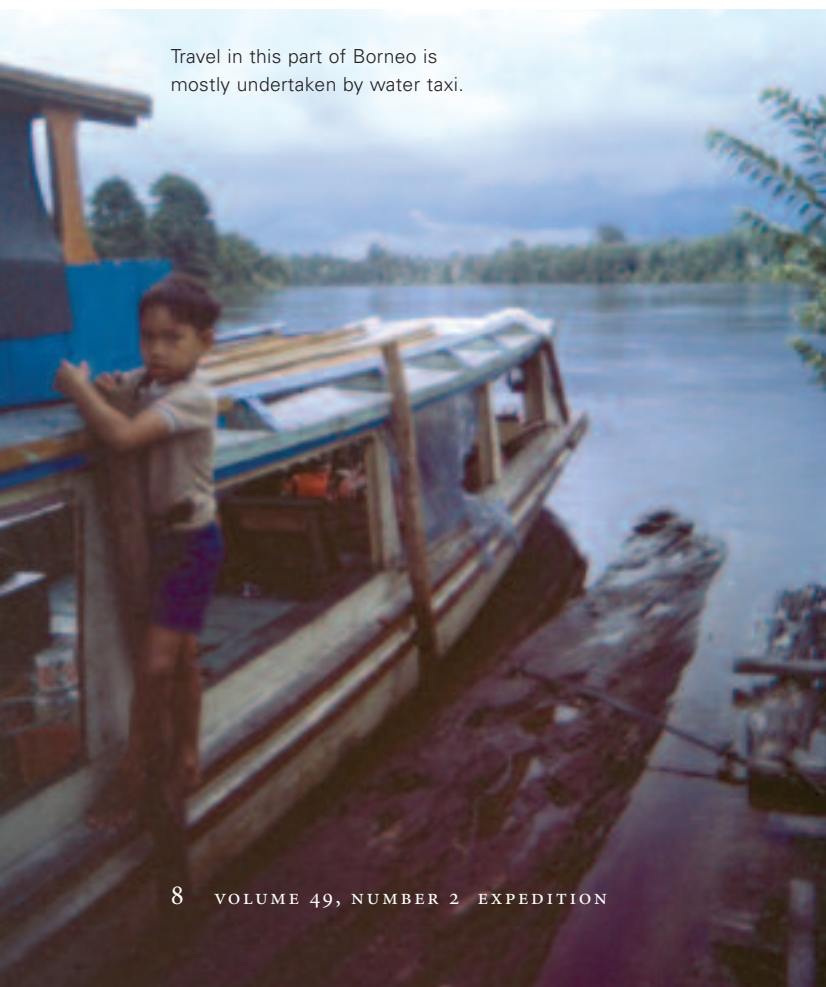
“The first thing you need to know is that, in our religion, families remain together forever. I was born here, in my great-grandparents’ house, as were my children, and some of my grandchildren.” Then he added, “But now I’m getting ready to move.”

When I expressed surprise, he offered to show me where he was going. We walked along the riverfront, with chickens scattering at our approach and children rushing to join us. A dozen yards away, I spotted a large, ornately carved bone repository, the final resting place of adherents of Kaharingan. These repositories, known as *sandung*, often resemble brightly painted houses with pointed roofs, windows, doors, and miniature stairs. Already a connoisseur, I noted that this one was especially splendid. It stood on thick ironwood pillars and was about as big as a full-size refrigerator. The sun was painted on one side, the moon and stars on another. Sunlight reflected in its tiny glass windows.

Grandfather Pim stopped in front of it and chuckled. “This is where I’m moving. You can see that it’s not very far.”

I left Kuala Kurun a week later, traveling on to other rainforest villages. I never saw Grandfather Pim again, but over many years and many trips to the field I have continued to learn about Kaharingan and have come to understand that relocation to a bone repository is only part of the journey that adherents expect to undertake at the end of their mortal lives. Their final destination is at once close and far, and many years may elapse before they arrive. Their bones must be purified by

Travel in this part of Borneo is mostly undertaken by water taxi.



earth, fire, and prayers and be placed in repositories with those of other ancestors. Their souls must traverse the heavens, ferried on invisible ships to a “Prosperous Village” where they will dwell in the spiritual essence of that repository—the family’s home in the afterlife. However long it takes to reach this “Kaharingan Heaven,” when the journey ends, the faithful will be once again surrounded by their relatives. In this way, Grandfather Pim explained that day in the cool shade of his own *sandung*, families can remain together forever.

## KAHARINGAN FAMILIES AND KINSHIP TERMS

In the West we often hear people suggest that the meaning of “family” has changed and that the concept is broadening. Among adherents of Kaharingan, however, ideas about family seem to have remained fairly constant. These longstanding notions continue to be expressed and affirmed through particular religious rituals, and clues to their conception of family

Right, this bone repository, or *sandung*, is decorated with stars and the moon.

Below, a villager stands next to his family’s bone repository.



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can be found in the importance that they place on kinship terms and the details of genealogies.

A good example of how the concept of family operates in everyday life (and in death) is found among the Ngaju Dayaks. The Ngaju are the largest indigenous group in Central Kalimantan Province, where they live in small villages along rivers in the rainforest, farming, fishing, and hunting wild game. Although most of them today are Christian and a few have converted to Islam, a proud minority continue to practice their traditional faith—Kaharingan—which involves belief in a high god with male and female dimensions, as well as a host of other good and evil supernatural beings.



Small canoe-like boats are used for travel between homes and rice fields.

Many rules govern how adherents of Kaharingan should behave toward relatives and how they should address them. For instance, they consider it a sin to use an elder’s personal name, whether speaking to them or about them. To avoid doing so they use a system of naming known as “tekonomy.” This requires one to refer to an older person by his or her relationship to someone else, such as “the father of Tom.”

When I met Grandfather Pim I suspected “Pim” was not his actual name but rather the name of his eldest grandson. When he introduced himself as “Grandfather Pim” I knew that he expected me to call him “grandfather” in acknowledgment of the difference in our ages. I never learned his given name, and younger members of his family may not have known it, either.



Another rule suggests that it is good manners to use kinship terms with non-relatives, a practice called “fictive kinship.” For example, a younger person might be called “son” or “nephew” by an older person, or someone your own age might hail you as “cousin.” When I met Grandfather Pim he called me *eso*, which means “grandchild.”

Within Ngaju extended families, the same kinship terms are often applied to people whether they are related by blood or by marriage. Thus “aunt” may refer to one’s mother’s sister or to an uncle’s wife—just as in American society. But in Borneo the correct use of kinship terms is actually very important because it reinforces a strict code of proper intergenerational conduct. Adherents of Kaharingan say that supernatural beings hand down punishments when someone uses an incorrect kinship term.

I learned this one day when I unwittingly broke the rules. I was hiking through a swamp with my close friend, a Kaharingan priest named Mantikei. Impatient to get to our destination, I began to tease him about how slowly he was walking through the muck. “Let’s go, Grandfather,” I urged.



Kaharingan priests chant to transport the soul of the deceased to the Prosperous Village.

“No, don’t call me grandfather, even when you’re joking,” Mantikei scolded. “Something bad could happen.” In short, keeping track of to whom one is related—and how—is crucial to adherents of Kaharingan.

Knowing the importance of genealogical details cannot be overestimated, especially when the moment comes to choose a husband or wife. The ideal is to marry your cousin, and preferably a first or second cousin on either side of the family. The reason is simple: if you are not related to someone by blood you cannot be completely sure they are human. He or she may be a revolting type of supernatural being which disguises itself as a human to infiltrate and destroy families.

This threat can also occur in the afterlife if the bones of such evil beings are inadvertently placed in the family repository, allowing them to torment ancestors’ souls. To safeguard against this, the bones of people who are not related by blood may not be placed in the same *sandung*. Thus, while kinship terms like “grandfather,” “son,” “aunt,” or “cousin,” are widely used even for non-relatives, when the moment comes to place an ancestor’s remains in a repository, the question of who is, or is not, related by blood is the deciding factor.

Bone repositories can be thought of as a physical expression of the Kaharingan concept of family. This was illustrated for me—literally—when I offered Ngaju children paper and pencils and asked them to draw a picture of their village for me. In a number of drawings, a large *sandung* was placed in the middle of the scene, even when there were no centrally located bone repositories in that particular village.

### PROVIDING FOR FAMILY MEMBERS IN THE AFTERLIFE

Kaharingan death rituals are very complex and involve secondary treatment of the dead—a practice also found in other parts of the world such as Greece and Madagascar. They begin with the burial of the deceased in the earth while priests chant to conduct the souls of the dead to a waiting room located close to the moon. Then, many years later, the dead person’s family hosts another death ritual, which involves unearthing the loved ones’ remains, cleaning their bones, and placing them in the *sandung*.

The Ngaju call their rituals of secondary treatment *tiwah*. All the relatives of the deceased, newborns included, are expected to attend a *tiwah*. During this ritual, the souls of the deceased are invited back to the village for a final visit and are given provisions such as cooked food, sacrificial animals, and money to carry with them to the afterlife. Priests then perform more chants to transport the souls of the dead to the family home in the Prosperous Village. Finally, the relative’s bones are



Top left, Mantikei, a Kaharingan priest, observes *tiwah*. Middle left, a family displays its ancestors' exhumed bones during *tiwah*. Below left, during *tiwah*, women dance around a sacrificial animal. Above, three siblings clean exhumed bones. Below, before placing them in the bone repository, the family prepares a loved one's bones.





placed in the family's bone repository, which usually already contains the remains of many of his or her ancestors.

While observing and discussing *tiwah* over many months, I discovered that only the bones of people who were related by blood may be entombed together in a repository. This realization helped me understand why it is common to see small repositories next to large ones. These smaller *sandung* house the remains of people who married into the family—such as a husband or wife who was not a cousin—or those of close friends who resided in the village and had not been claimed by their own natal kin.

Over time, as a result of my own special relationship to Mantikei's family, I was adopted into his family through a ritual that required the exchange of blood. This led some villagers to draw conclusions about the future disposition of my own remains. Once, when I was helping them celebrate a *tiwah*, a villager who knew about our ritual relationship remarked that I must be very happy that my own bones would eventually rest in Mantikei's family's *sandung*.

The final placement of family members' bones in repositories parallels what villagers believe are the housing arrangements enforced in the Prosperous Village. In the Kaharingan afterlife, ancestors are reunited across generations in the spiritual essence of the *sandung* that their descendants have built for their bones on Earth. There the ancestors fish, tend fowl, and herd livestock that the living have sent to the beyond, and they hold feasts and celebrations just as we do. I was also told that although we dwell among our ancestors when we reach the afterlife, our souls also catch glimpses of other souls in their respective houses nearby. The ancestors apparently enjoy visiting their neighbors' houses just as we like to visit our neighbors here on Earth.

According to Kaharingan thinking, it is the surviving relatives who make a loved one's journey to the Prosperous Village possible. This contrasts with many societies where the determination of who reaches Heaven depends upon how people behaved while they were alive. Among adherents of Kaharingan even the souls of good people can go to the afterlife only if their descendants have held a secondary mortuary ritual on their behalf.

The dead look forward eagerly to taking up residence in the Prosperous Village. If the time between their death and their *tiwah* goes on too long—a situation that arises while the family accumulates the resources needed for the *tiwah*—the souls



This small repository was for a family friend.



A medium, possessed by his supernatural guardian spirit, approaches Mantikei to predict his future.

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of the dead may become peevish about their postponed trip to the afterlife. Therefore, to allay a dead relative's impatience, descendants sometimes visit their gravesites to pour out a glass of brandy and apologize to the deceased for the delay in their secondary mortuary ritual. Some even attempt to establish more dynamic relations by using mediums to communicate with the deceased.

Among the Ngaju, both men and women can become mediums, and according to those I have interviewed, most mediums acquired their abilities early in life after a supernatural guardian visited them in a dream and offered them special powers in exchange for offerings. During special ceremonies, these mediums go into a trance and ask their supernatural guardians to predict the future, to diagnose illnesses, or to serve as intermediaries in conversations with the souls of the dead.

### FAMILIES IN THE FUTURE

Although the notion of family has not changed for many Kaharingan practitioners, ideas about what constitutes a religious community have. In the past, participation in death rituals was largely limited to groups of kinsmen related by blood or marriage. Today, however, Kaharingan activists like Mantikei are working hard to encourage their co-religionists to join forces when they perform *tiwah*. By holding secondary mortuary rituals for several families at the same time, work can be shared by non-kin neighbors and the economic burden can be lessened for each family. This is an important consideration since Kaharingan is sometimes perceived as an expensive faith, in part because it requires the erection of complex ritual structures and the employment of several traditional priests at large rituals. Activists hope that this strategy will help ward off conversion to religions such as Christianity and Islam, where death rituals are considered less expensive. A further benefit of a large village-sponsored *tiwah* is that it can be advertised as a tourist attraction that can generate income to offset its cost.

But even though villagers may celebrate a secondary death ritual together, they still claim that the deceased live in the afterlife only with one's blood relations. This belief has led to tension within and among families who have seen some members convert to Christianity or Islam. When such individuals die they are interred in Christian and Muslim cemeteries and their remains are not transferred to the family's bone repository. Since most villagers believe that the members of different faiths do not meet again in the afterlife, the decision to convert or remain an adherent of Kaharingan requires that one consider carefully with whom one hopes to share eternity. This decision is not made lightly, and the consequences of this idea of family relations will be fascinating to explore in the future. I suspect that inter-religious relations in larger Indonesian cities will eventually set a tone that even those in this remote corner of the country will follow.

### TWO FAMILY REUNIONS

A few years ago I traveled back to Central Kalimantan to attend another secondary death ritual sponsored by my friend, the priest Mantikei. It was the largest *tiwah* in living memory, held jointly by families on behalf of nearly a hundred departed souls. Nine buffalo, ninety pigs, and countless chickens were sacrificed to provide food for mourners in this world and for

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This grandmother was transported to the *tiwah* celebration by her grandchildren.





New bone repositories are constructed.



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**For Further Reading**

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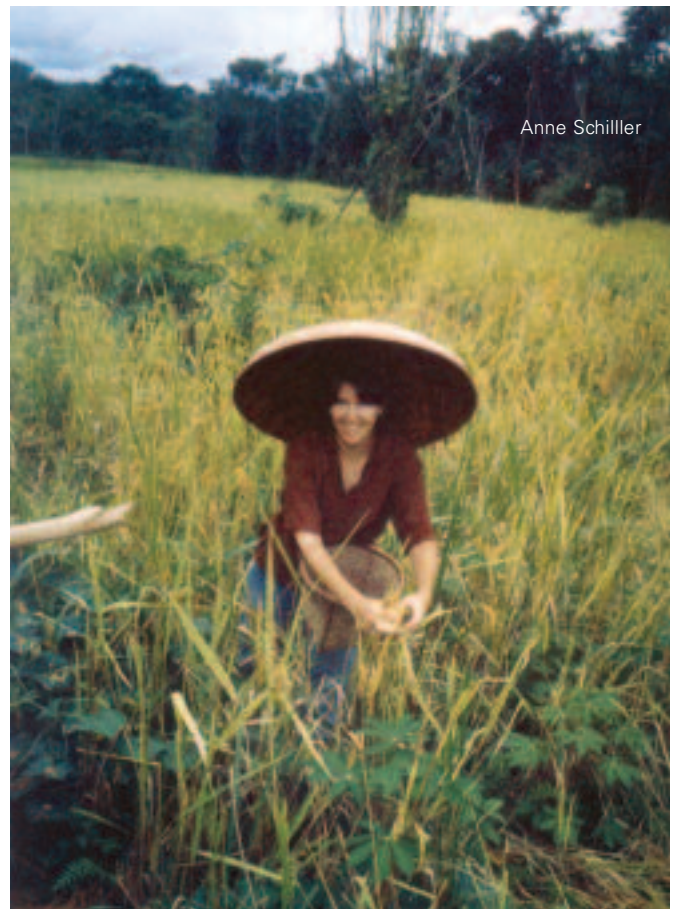
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the souls in the next. Mantikei's father's bones were to be interred in a newly built repository that would serve his descendants for generations. Other families had also constructed new repositories or moved old ones to a common spot for this occasion. Finally, after a month of sorrow and celebration, we spent a last afternoon strolling among the tombs. The odor of animal blood that wafted from the trammeled earth was cut by the fragrance of incense burning in small offering bowls.

Happy to be part of this exhilarated meandering crowd, I dodged laughing youngsters chasing one another among the houses of the dead and shared fried bananas with my Kaharingan friends. For a little while I forgot that I was doing fieldwork and simply enjoyed being a guest at this impressive family reunion. Then it occurred to me that perhaps more than one family reunion was taking place that day. Later, when I asked, my friends assured me that I had been correct—the dead were having their own reunion too. Most importantly, the family reunion that was taking place during those very moments in the Prosperous Village of Souls was at least as joyful and festive as the one that we were attending here on Earth. 🏠

**Acknowledgments**

This research was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Fulbright-Hays Foundation, and the National Geographic Society.



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