

Traditional Circumcision Rites in Patani and Kelantan

WAYNE A. BOUGAS

ABSTRAK

Upacara berkhatan di Patani dan Kelantan dilaksanakan dengan secara lebih meriah daripada di negeri-negeri lain di Semenanjung Tanah Melayu. Keadaan ini mungkin disebabkan oleh keadaan di mana semasa Islam diperkenalkan di kawasan ini, sudah ada upacara lain dari tradisi pra-Islam yang hampir menyerupai upacara berkhatan. Upacara pra-Islam ini kemudiannya diserap menjadi sebahagian daripada upacara berkhatan. Penulis artikel ini mengusulkan bahawa penggunaan kenaikan seperti burung, perahu atau binatang-binatang lainnya adalah diwarisi daripada adat resam dan amalan dalam tradisi Hindu-Buddha.

ABSTRACT

Traditional circumcision rites in Patani and Kelantan were more elaborate than those found in the rest of Peninsular Malaysia. This elaborateness may stem from the fact that, when Islam was introduced in the north of the Peninsular, it encountered there several very important festivals that were accepted as analogous to circumcision – the Brahmin tonsure ceremony and Buddhist ordination rites – and elements of these life-cycle rites were initially incorporated in the circumcision ritual. The article suggests, for example, that the use of huge, processional vehicles in the form of birds, other animals, or boats, which so characterized northern circumcision rites, originated in Brahmin and Buddhist ceremonies.

Circumcision is not mentioned in the Quran, but according to the Hadith, it was among the practices of Muhammad, who himself was born circumcised (Woodward 1989 : 270). In Patani and Kelantan it was at one time perhaps the most important event in a man's life other than marriage. There it was known by the term *masuk jawi* – 'entering Malayhood'. A boy was normally circumcised between the ages of twelve to fourteen. The ceremony, however, was often delayed until the sixteenth or seventeenth year for a raja's son. The rite symbolically marked the transition from childhood to adulthood. During the ceremony, a young man wore traditional ceremonial dress including a keris. He looked like and was treated as if he were a prince. These garments as well as the keris

indicated that the young man was no longer a boy but a man and that he was now expected to dress and behave like one. Most importantly through circumcision he became a full member of the Islamic community. He now, for example, regularly attended Friday prayers and was also expected to fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

Traditionally, in Patani and Kelantan a number of boys were circumcised at one time in order to minimize the cost of the celebrations. On such occasions, the son of the sponsor was treated as if he were a king, while the other boys played the part of attendants.

Circumcision ceremonies normally began with a procession. The boys to be circumcised were carried around their villages or town and were eventually taken to the house where they would be circumcised. The manner in which the boys were conveyed was determined in part by their social status and wealth. A poor boy might simply ride on the shoulders of a family member or a friend, called his 'elephant', perhaps a substitute for real elephants used by more affluent families. Large processional vehicles were also constructed for a raja's son. A *perahu* or boat was, for example, fitted with a super-structure resembling a mosque which could hold up to six boys (Mustafa bin Ibrahim, 1989). The bows of such craft were also beautifully carved in the shape of a *naga* (a mythological aquatic serpent) or a bird's head. Royal children were also sometimes transported on huge processional cars built to resemble a bird. Processional birds were used in royal circumcisions in Kelantan in 1923 and 1933. These birds were so large that over one hundred men were required to carry them. The heads and tails of such creatures were kept and preserved for generations. They were reassembled with a new body when the need arose. One of the most beautiful birds to survive is an exquisitely carved creature, painted red and gold, recently discovered at the former royal court of Nongchik in Patani.

Birds were normally named after the animal vehicles or mounts associated with the Hindu gods. The bird used at the royal circumcision in Kelantan in 1923 was, for example, named *Pertala Indera*, 'the flying mount of the Hindu king of the *Pertala Indera* gods, *Indera*'. Other birds were associated with the mythological bird, known as *Jentayu*, which assisted King Rama in the great Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, in his efforts to rescue his wife, Sita, from the demon, Rawana. These processional birds then may have originally evolved from ancient traditions in which the kings of Langkasuka or Patani were identified with Hindu divinities.

The size and composition of a procession varied according to an individual's wealth and social rank. A simple procession might consist of the following components: a group of individuals marching at the head of the parade armed with sham wooden weapons, a group of musicians playing music to accompany, *silat* demonstrations (the traditional Malay form of martial arts;), a number of *rebana*, drum players, a small group

of individuals carrying cones of glutinous rice locally known as *nasi semangat* or 'rice soul', and keris (the traditional Malay dagger) bearers. Sometimes the procession was closed by a man carrying a branch of a tree known in Malay as a *buah sepuluh* (Mustafa bin Ibrahim, 1989). This branch was decorated with different types of traditional Malay foods and fresh fruits. A royal circumcision parade was truly impressive. Mubin Sheppard describes the circumcision parade put together for Tengku Mansur, the heir to the Kelantan throne, in 1933:

On either side of the prince's platform young men demonstrated *silat* A short distance to the front, following nineteen other groups, some of which were forty strong, a succession of five portable platforms could be seen. Each was ten by eight feet and on them stood dancers, actresses, clowns, and magicians. Two of the platforms also supported performers of *Mak Yong* and *Menora* ancient forms of traditional dance found in Kelantan (Sheppard 1972 : 1).

When a procession finally arrived at the site of the ceremony, normally a mock combat of some sort began. Annandale describes how men with their keris drawn three times repulsed the bearers of a processional bird and that the raja's son was only allowed to enter after his bearers had exhibited their ceremonial caps and established their rank (Annandale 1902 : 69).

Skeat describes a group of young princes enthroned on a dais specially constructed for their circumcision:

Each candidate was attired in a jacket and a *sarong*, the oldest being distinguished by the addition of a long and richly woven cloth (*kain lepas*) worn loosely over his other garments. All the boys wore gold bracelets and bangles on the sleeves of their jackets, together with a gold waist cord and having a belt buckle of the 'pending' type and gold breastplates, forehead plates, and ear ornaments. Finally a head cloth and keris completed the picture (Skeat 1953 : 80).

The *nasi semangat* or 'rice soul' was now placed in front of the candidates. Under the supervision of a *bomoh* (a ritual specialist and traditional healer) each ate a handful of the glutinous rice. It was once believed that by eating this rice an individual's *semangat* was strengthened. *Semangat* was the soul substance that Malays believed animated all living creatures. During particularly trying situations such as life-cycle rites, the *semangat* was thought to be weakened and vulnerable to spirit attack which could eventually lead to illness. The *nasi semangat* was believed to attract *semangat*. By eating the rice the circumcision candidate was able to internalize the *semangat* of the rice and hence strengthen his own *semangat*. Eating of the rice soul was also believed to tell each individual boy's fortune. If a boy took rice from the top of the rice cone, it was believed that he would be an important man someday.

Rice taken from the bottom of the cone indicated a poor future and a youth was normally asked to select a new portion of rice.

Circumcision celebrations normally lasted several days. The circumcision itself was performed on the last day by a circumcision specialist known as the *mudin*. Annandale notes that the operation was more severe in Patani than in other states, a far larger piece of skin being severed:

A boy was usually seated astride a banana trunk and after he was drenched with cold water, the foreskin was pegged down in the front on the soft trunk by means of a cleft stick, and then the operation was performed (Annandale 1902 : 66).

The foreskin was sometimes thrown away, or it was plugged into a banana trunk. Sometimes it was kept and was later used to prepare a special brew to increase a boy's potency once he had married.

Circumcision rites in Patani and Kelantan were more elaborate than those conducted in the southern part of the Malay Peninsula. It has been suggested that the elaborateness of circumcision rites in Patani and Kelantan may be due to the fact that when Islam entered the Peninsula, it encountered in the north at any rate a very important festival that was accepted as analogous to circumcision – perhaps the Brahmin/Buddhist tonsure ceremony – and that elements of this life-cycle rite were initially incorporated into the circumcision ritual.

The tonsure ceremony for Thais in the past like circumcision marked the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The core of the rite focused on shaving off a tuft of hair on the crown of the head known as a topknot. Only after this ceremony was completed might a young man be ordained and enter the monkhood. The growing of the hair in a special lock and its eventual cutting originated, the Thais believe, with the Hindu god Shiva. In Thailand, a royal tonsure ceremony was actually considered a reenactment of Shiva's shearing of his own children's hair. The Thai king assumed the role of Shiva and the ritual was acted out in a special pavilion which symbolized Mount Kailasa, the god's abode. The tonsure ceremony was the second most important state ceremony in Thailand, the first being a royal coronation.

In Patani, circumcision's links with the tonsure ceremony are revealed by the fact that in the past young men there had their heads shaved as part of the circumcision rite. The presentation of public entertainment may also perhaps be associated with the tonsure ceremony. Thai kings normally hosted acrobats, dancing girls, sword tossing, music and Chinese dragon plays for their sons' tonsure. The use of processional vehicles in the form of a bird can also be traced back to Thais. Bird vehicles, for example, are still used today by Thais in the northern part of Thailand during cremation rites.

Circumcision ceremonies in Patani and Kelantan might also at one time have incorporated elements from Buddhist ordination rites. Ordination may, for example, account for the huge variety of processional cars once used in Patani and Kelantan. Ordination is actually a reenactment of Buddha's renunciation of his kingdom and his family and his setting out on the path to enlightenment or *nirvana*. A Buddhist novice, dressed as a king, was traditionally carried in procession to the temple where he would be ordained; here he discarded his royal garb and entered the monkhood leaving the material world of man – his family and worldly possessions – symbolically behind. A novice was traditionally carried to the temple on the shoulders of a friend or in a processional car often constructed in the shape of an animal. In the past, the type of mount a novice rode was determined by the year in which he was born. Each year of the Thai twelve year, animal cycle was associated with a particular creature.... the Year of the Ox, the Year of the Naga and so on. A novice, born in the year of the Cock, would, for example, mount a processional car shaped like a bird during his ordination. The twelve year, Thai animal cycle accounts for the processional horses used in circumcisions as well as the naga and bird motifs. The use of boat vehicles in circumcisions may again be attributable in part to ordination practices. When Theravada Buddhism was introduced into Peninsular Thailand via the southern Thai town of Nakhon Sri Thammarat, monks were then commonly ordained in boats as was the practice in Buddhist Sri Lanka.

The bird and boat symbolism associated with circumcision in Patani and Kelantan may also be very ancient and in fact may have preceded the introduction of Hinduism and Buddhism there. Malay shamans were believed to travel to the spiritual world in bird decorated boats. The dead were sometimes buried in boat-shaped coffins in which, it was believed, they would be transported to the heavens. Ships and birds may then have been associated with transition in general and used in life-cycle rites long before Patani and Kelantan were converted to Hinduism and Buddhism. Every life-cycle rite is, in fact, a symbolic death. The individual symbolically dies and is then reborn into a new stage of life. The transition from boat coffin to general life-cycle vehicle is plausible. After converting to Hinduism and Buddhism the Northern Malays may have associated Hindu and Buddhist boat and bird motifs with these earlier indigenous symbols.

Ordination may also account for the ritual Combat encountered in circumcision. Traditionally, when a novice was about to enter the monkhood, he was waylaid by friends at the temple's gate before he was allowed to proceed. These actions symbolized Buddha's triumph over the demon Mara.

The small branch, decorated with fruits and sweets, probably symbolized the famed Buddhist 'wishing tree'. This tree was formally a symbol of fertility and prosperity. Here, it most probably symbolized transition and rebirth into a new stage of existence. Eating of the fruits and the treats hung on the tree symbolized the destruction of the tree or its death. But the tree like other plants will eventually be regenerated. The circumcised boy symbolically died during the rite, but he was reborn as a man and a complete member of the Islamic community.

The candidates' eating of the nasi semangat was also a traditionally important feature of circumcisions. An individual's semangat had to be strengthened during transitional and especially dangerous stages of life. The practice of fortifying the semangat probably predates both the introduction of Indian religions and Islam into Patani and Kelantan. The effort to divine the boy's future is, however, typically encountered in Hindu rites.

The mock combat, the silat demonstrations, the wearing of the keris, as well as the blood letting associated with circumcision also suggests that a very ancient rite may once have existed in Patani which focused on the initiation of young men to the status of warrior. This rite may have eventually been replaced by the tonsure ceremony, ordination, and subsequently circumcision.

Today, circumcision rites have been greatly simplified in Patani and Kelantan. The rite now centers on the Islamic element of the ceremony – the actual cutting of the foreskin by an Islamic specialist. Processions, nasi semangat, and traditional entertainments associated with circumcision have all but disappeared.

REFERENCES

- Annandale, Thomas Nelson. 1904. *The Customs of the Malayo-Siamese. In Fasciculi Malayenses*. University Press of Liverpool.
- Gerini, G.E. 1976. *Chulakantamangala: The Tonsure Ceremony as Performed in Siam*. Bangkok: The Siam Society,
- Mustafa bin Ibrahim. 1989. Adat Berkhatan. In *Warisan Kelantan*. Kota Baru.
- Skeat, W.W. and Laidlaw. 1913. The Cambridge University Expedition to Parts of the Malay Peninsula; 1899-1900. *JMPRAS* 36 (4), December.
- Sheppard, Haji Mubin. 1972. *Faman Indera*. Kuala Lumpur.
- Woodward, Mark R. 1989. *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

P.O. Box 1533
 Ujung Pandang
 90600 Sulawesi Selatan
 Indonesia