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Notes on the Edible Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)

—5. SEMAH Ceremonies, 1949-58.

by

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One of the principal annual occasions in south-west Sarawak is the *Semah* ceremony held on Talang2 and Satang Islands, where an average of over a million eggs a year are collected under the Turtle Board. *Semah* is a widely used Malay term, to cover rituals connected with seasonal, fertility or broad propitiation phenomena. The basis is, in Borneo, often pre-Islamic; this is especially so in the Turtle Semah, which at Talang2 Besar is actually conducted by Selakau (Land Dayak) people from Mt. Poi on the mainland and which contains distinctly Hindu elements, among others.

Some years ago I published a fairly full, illustrated account of the *Semah* (in the *Journal of the Malayan Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, 1950, XXII No. 3), based on 1949. Since then the *Semah* has grown in popularity and is now attended officially by leaders of the Malay religious community, the Majlis Islam, and by the leading Sarawak Malay, the Hon'ble the Datu Bandar, Abang Haji Mustapha, C.B.E., the Datu Abang Haji Openg and others.

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1957 Semah was held May 11-12 on Talang2, May 12-13 on Satang; 1958 May 17-18 and 18-19. That is, 2-3 weeks after the end of Ramadan or Bulan Puasa, which is marked by the festival of Hari Raya, very warmly observed in Sarawak. This is about the "best" date to meet the need of having the ceremony: after the monsoon (*landas*) ends, but before the big summer rush of turtles begins. Perhaps at this stage it will refresh the visualisation of the turtle scale involved if we record here the total eggs laid and registered on the island of Talang2 Besar—where the main rites take place—for the first six months in recent years:

TURTLE EGGS on Talang2 Besar (gross collected)

Month	1954	1955	1956	1957
January	7,690	7,543	1,882	11,123
February	5,879	6,754	1,342	8,434
March	6,567	12,429	1,417	12,547
April	9,998	22,760	1,437	21,465
May	26,210	52,360	4,965	49,830
June	65,798	103,643	18,248	103,126

There is a further rise in July and peak in August. Although there are very wide annual variations—compare 1957 and 1956 above,—in aggregate number, the *comparative* trend within any one year conforms closely. For instance, the least eggs are laid in February at the height of the monsoon; and how the great beasts manage to get ashore at all onto these wave-lashed beaches then is amazing. The upswing "always" starts in March. May "always" at least doubles up on April. And so on.....

In 1956 the aggregate of the upswing was so slow that there were not enough eggs to feed all the guests—a most embarrassing unpropitious event, happily far from repeated in 1957 and 1958. This factor, one has to take into account in date planning; but it could only have been met that year by an equally unpropitious, indeed impossible, delay into mid-summer, by which time it would be too late to propitiate the fertile turtle anyway.

Of course, in one aspect *Semah* is an exercise in eating, a glorified picnic. Eggs are also needful in the big egg battle on Talang2, described in the earlier paper. This represents the contest between the old year, the stale land lot, on shore and the new, up and coming, fresh from the sea, turtles of the new season landing and driving the others back right off the beach. Here a notable change since 1949 is the growth of rougher tactics in recent years. The up and coming generation, youths of 18 and 19, who mount most of the assault, are rougher, wilder, in a way

perhaps more vicious. Two tactics in particular have been developed to the stage where we may have to start to make rules and have a referee—a ludicrous contradiction to the spirit of the affair. One trick is for two or more to attack one person and simultaneously hurl with full arm throw at his face. The eggs are soft shelled and break readily. But the mere impact, with that force and range, on the face is unpleasant and it is only luck that no one yet had an egg full in the eye-ball—which is also soft shelled and breaks readily.

The second egg-battle trick is to remove the contents of the egg and replace them with sand. This gives a deadly missile. I got one in the kidneys this year; I am unashamed to say that I thereupon lost my temper, caught the lad concerned and pounded him one back with a handy piece of wood.

The changing attitudes of the post-atomic generation are also exercising a vaguer influence, negative in character, on the ceremonial side of *Semah*. The same men, Nimbong on Talang2, Mail on Satang, are the main performers as before; they belong to the old school of belief, take things seriously, put up a good show. NOT necessarily so their supporters and acolytes, who each year become more and more dilatory in the observances. Originally it was regarded as essential that drum, gong and other music should keep up *unbroken* all night—a form of spirit negation. This year, they were entirely geared to suit the various forms of dancing and dancer. Once Nimbong fiercely protested a lull and the girls, who do all the drumming, resumed. Next time they stopped, no one said anything.

These girls, too, have changed their tempo in the past decade. They are much less shy — or pseudo-shy. This year, the Dayak ones nearly all had their fine long black hair cut short and frizzed up, quite unsuitably. Nearly all had replaced their *sarongs* and other such clothing with sometimes hideous one piece "costumes"; or (better) a skirt (often in flaring magenta) with white or buff buttoning bodice.

But if there is a tendency to drift away from the old custom on the one hand, on the other there are visible signs of an increase in more strictly Malay and Mohammedan emphasis. For the past three years have seen public prayers offered by leading Malay divines on the sand at sunset. This is as it should be, since the profits of the egg business go the Turtle Trust for the support of Malay Mosques and related religious activities.

The economics of *Semah* have altered appreciably, too. I published a list of the items purchased for this purpose in 1949. Today we could not afford, on the money allocated for *Semah*, to buy like that. Sarawak has been caught in the world price trend. By the same token, turtle eggs, which in the pre-Japanese long ago sold at one cent each, now wholesale at six. That is, we sell them to dealers at six cents. Despite a theoretical retail price and profit control, turtle eggs are hard to get into the home for eight cents, often retailing readily at ten.

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There is one aspect of Turtle *Semah* I barely touched upon in the earlier study: what happens *after* the singing, dancing, egg throwing and caffeine is over. In 1957, for the first time, I stayed on (Satang) during the period of tabor, *pantang*, seclusion, which follows the departure of the guests in a flurry of launches and small boats. I had not realised before that the Turtle Board's watchers attach especial importance to this period of three days when no one must leave the island or come in from outside. That, I now see, is one of the symbolism of the flags put all round the beach, a sort of sea fence. Further, the turtles themselves, having been shaken by the uproar and disturbance in these normally quiet waters, should not come on either. Actually, during the *Semah* night one incredible lady did try to get up on Talang2, to the amazed delight of a hundred onlookers. But she could not get through the flag-sticks—let alone the ladies sleeping, dancing and arguing upon the beach itself. This appears in a sense to be a function of the flags. They prohibit any living for three days. The year is over. Another has been begun. This is the virgin interregnum. (The idea is familiar, of course, from many parts of the world and in other ways).

This attitude is expressed, also, in treatment of any turtles who do recover from the 24 hours uproar by land and sea, to come up and lay the next night or so. The nests are not collected, but left in situ. At least, this is so in theory. In practice, if a watcher (staff is 5 on Talang2 Besar, 4 on Talang2 Kechil, 2 Satang, on all night) has happened to see one in, the nest will be dug out *after* the prohibition period. There is no prohibition on that; you may either ignore incomers or hold their eggs in suspense. Such entries are made possible because the flags soon subside in sand and tide, leaving gaps. And on Satang, where the beach is 700 yards long, the stakes are far enough apart to admit turtles easily—and getting further apart every year, by the negative process of careless acolytes and neglect of detail already mentioned.

There is very strong feeling indeed, among the resident staff, about violating the placidity of this post-festival period. It is not only that they need a rest. They feel the whole place needs and must have a rest. The mere suggestion that one might go *from one island to the other* on the second day causes a kind of panic. No: not even on urgent business or by a non-Malay.

Each evening at sunset the head watcher on each island walked round the beach at high water mark, carrying a slung basin of smouldering wood on which burned Indian aromatic gum (purchased in Kuching). This gave off clouds of sweet smoke blowing out to sea, was then put down to burn out on the beach. The idea here is to summon up the turtles, by "making the beach warm" and the air and water taste sweet. The day after the three day taboo period was over I went back to Talang2. Headman Nondin, a sophisticated Malay (ex-policeman), was still doing this at sunset, *after* the statutory period.

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(This note is the 6th in a series; previously published are:

1. Breeding Seasons ... .. S.M.J., V, 3
2. Copulation ... .. S.M.J., VI, 4
3. Young Turtles ... .. S.M.J., VI, 6
4. Growing Turtles ... .. S.M.J., VII, 7
5. Tagging Turtles ... .. S.M.J., VII, 8.)