

## Pelatou: a Joker in the Neuro- anthropological Act

### Abstract

*Pelatou* is a traditional Melanau ritual carried out by a specialist *a-bayoh* (shaman) in the aftermath of a death. However, the multi-faceted nature of *pelatou* - part séance, part healing, part drama and entertainment, part play, part burlesque - makes it difficult to categorize within the boundaries of other Melanau rituals and ceremonies concerned with death. The paper draws on Turner's concept of "play" (1987:167-170) to analyse the nature and significance of what takes place in *pelatou*, and argues that it is the collective act of "performing" - rather than belief in the performance itself - through which *pelatou* works its effect.

### Introduction

Melanau funeral and mourning rituals and ceremonies are framed within the terms of a paradox: the bonds of relationship by which Melanau identity is defined and comes into being also have disabling and destructive potential. This paradox is particularly apparent in *pelatou*, a traditional *a-Likou* Melanau performance carried out by a specialist *a-bayoh* (shaman or spirit medium) in the aftermath of a death.<sup>1</sup>

*Pelatou* is part séance, part healing, part drama and entertainment, part play, as well as a context where the reality of the afterlife and its connection to the living is made visible.<sup>2</sup> As a metaphor, it mediates between the two worlds (this world and the afterworld), with the broad aim of reassuring relatives and restoring community equilibrium in the wake of the social rupture and insecurity wrought by a death. The approach is two-pronged: the *a-bayoh* returns with news of the deceased for his/her family (he/she often makes contact with the relatives of other people in the audience as well); at the same time the *a-bayoh* brings back healing *pijer* which he "implants" into the relatives of the deceased to strengthen and heal them.<sup>3</sup> By this process, any souls which have been enticed away or followed the deceased are enabled to return to their true owners.

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<sup>1</sup> Not all *a-bayoh* are able to conduct *pelatou*; the task calls for a psychopomp - a specialist in contacting the dead.

<sup>2</sup> I use the word "play" in the same sense as Victor Turner: "as a dialectical dancing partner of ritual" or a "joker in the neuroanthropological act", because it is concerned with possibilities - "the domain of 'as-if' rather than 'as-is'" (Turner 1987:167-170).

<sup>3</sup> *Pijer*: healing and strengthening flowers and stones from the world immediately above this one (Morris 1997:364).