

CERAM CULTURE

The myth of Hainuwele is the creation story of the Alifuru people, who make up a number of tribes in the interior country of Western Ceram. Even though most of the native religion has been destroyed by colonialists and their Christian or Islamic beliefs, many of the original customs were preserved in the local 'adat'. Adat is the unwritten cultural law which still has a strong influence on Ceram society.

LOCATION

Ceram (also spelled Seran, or Serang) is located in the center of the Maluku cluster of islands in present day Indonesia. The area covers 17,148 square km of land and has a population of about 132,900. The landscape contains mountains and rivers that are partly navigable by small boats during the rainy season. Because of a hot climate and heavy rainfall, Ceram is covered with lush tropical forests. The coastal areas of northern Ceram have many coral reefs that are rich with marine life such as squid, octopus, sharks, tuna and yellowtail fish.

HISTORY

Since the 16th century the Maluku islands were called the Spice Islands, after spices such as clove and nutmeg. These spices only grew in that region, and they created tremendous wealth for the Portuguese and Dutch colonial empires. The spices of Maluku were the most important reason why the Europeans came to this part of the world. The Dutch presence on the islands lasted for 350 years until Indonesia became independent in the 1950's.

The people of the Maluku islands come from many different races, speak many different languages, and practice a great variety of religions. Most of the Alifuru cultural and religious practices were destroyed before the First World War during Dutch efforts to create peace in the region. At this time, native Alifuru Protestants (who had been converted 400 years earlier) began to explore the remote tribal villages deep in the forests of Ceram to convert them to Christianity.

After 1945 when Indonesia struggled for independence from Dutch colonial rule, many of the Maluku people remained loyal to the Dutch, while the peoples on the greater islands were fiercely defiant. This caused a deep divide among the people that can still be felt today. Today the Maluku have active independence movements and many Indonesians still tend to view the Maluku people as disloyal and violent barbarians who are skilled at black magic.

RELIGION

The most important concept in the Alifuru religion was fertility. This is closely tied to the belief that all living things are produced by death, as is shown in the Ceram creation myth. That is also why the practice of head hunting was common among the people living in Ceram's rainforests. They believed that the life force of their enemies could make them stronger. Most of this life force, they thought, was inside the human head. By acquiring the head of an enemy, they would enhance the fertility of their people, plants and animals. Even cutting someone's hair was considered to be his or her symbolic death. Hair in general was a sign of strength; the more hair someone had the more life force was inside of him.

The Alifuru worshipped a whole range of gods, spirits, and divine creatures. People believed that spirits were present in animals, plants, rocks, but also in man-made artifacts. Wedding gifts, such as plates, gongs, and spears, were believed to have a spirit that would benefit fertility. One could hear the voice of the spirit by, for example, tapping against a plate. Spirits were (and still are) such a common part of life in Ceram that people claimed that they saw them during rituals or in their dreams, and ran into them in the forest.

One of the reasons why the world of the Alifuru was so rich with spirits is that their dead never left this world. After death people's souls went to live on the mountain Salahua, on West-Ceram. Spirits could be good or bad and behaved a lot like the living; some could even go back and forth between being a spirit and a person.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

The Ceram have a nationally developed foresting industry as well as oil supplies. There are a few coffee and tobacco plantations and spices such as cloves and nutmeg continue to be grown here. People hunt wild pigs, python, and other small animals. The most important crops are root vegetables such as yams and taro, sweet potato and manioc. Tubers are the staple food of the Ceram. People also grow bananas, sugar cane, chili peppers, eggplant, peanut, millet, tomato, papaya, and tobacco.

The traditional structure of the Ceram was based on the clan. Each clan was divided into two sections, each with a headman. Local decision makers were clan headmen and the council of male initiates. Nowadays there is also a village headman who is chosen by the government. During the colonial periods, much of the Ceram land was taken away from the people. Today they are trying to claim their land back. Most of these claims are not considered legal by the Indonesian government, since the Ceram rarely have the official documents to support them. Since the Ceram lands are rich with important natural resources, such as oil and forests, they have a hard time taking it back from the government or large investors.

CULTURE

The Alifuru tribes are the descendants of Melanesian and Papua immigrants, which can be seen in their facial features and relatively dark skin color. Mixed marriages with other ethnic groups on the island are very rare. The two most influential tribes in the Ceram areas are the Wemale and Alune. Their language was not written and it is closely related to the indigenous language of Ambon.

The practice of headhunting was a defining aspect of the Alifuru culture. During the 19th century the Dutch colonists even abused this gruesome custom by using these headhunters to suppress rebellions on the islands of Ambon and Lease. A successful headhunter was called a tulale, meaning rooster. Warriors had to make careful preparations and practice various rituals before going on a headhunt.

Boys and girls in Alifuru society had to go through initiation rites before they entered adulthood. When a boy was ready to become a man, usually around age 15, he was taken into the mountains for five days where he had to kill several animals, such as a pig and a deer, with his spear. Upon his return to the village a daylong ritual welcomed him to adulthood. The party included the cakalele war dance and another performance called the maku-maku.

A girl's initiation was a more private affair. When she began her first menstruation, the girl was taken to a little shed where, naked and smeared with ashes, the young woman was taught the traditional rules of how to conduct herself during her period. The Alifuru, like many other cultures, consider women's monthly periods as unclean. While she was in the hut, the girl could only eat boiled food and bananas. Once her period was over, she returned to the village, dressed in beautiful clothes and was celebrated as a woman who was ready to marry.

